IMAGINING ASIA(S)

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IMAGINING ASIA(S)

Networks, Actors, Sites

EDITED BY

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ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE

Published in Singapore in 2019 by
ISEAS Publishing
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614
E-mail: publish@iseas.edu.sg
Website: <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Names: Acri, Andrea, 1981–, editor. | Ghani, Kashshaf, editor. | Jhā, Murārī K., editor. | Mukherjee, Sraman, editor.
Title: Imagining Asia(s) : Networks, Actors, Sites / edited by Andrea Acri, Kashshaf Ghani, Murari K. Jha and Sraman Mukherjee.
Description: Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019. | Series: Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Series ; NSC29 | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: ISBN 9789814818858 (paperback) | ISBN 9789814818865 (PDF)
Subjects: LCSH: Asia--Civilization.
Classification: LCC DS12 I31

Typeset by Superskill Graphics Pte Ltd
Printed in Singapore by Mainland Press Pte Ltd

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INTRODUCTION

Andrea Acri, Kashshaf Ghani, Murari K. Jha
and Sraman Mukherjee

This edited volume stems from the conference "Imagining Asia(s): Networks, Actors, Sites" held at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in October 2016, jointly organized by the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre (Singapore) and Nalanda University (India). This event, bringing together fourteen scholars from various countries, constituted a landmark for the collaboration between the two institutions and, we believe, also a gesture towards the academic and intellectual "rapprochement" between two regions of the world—South and Southeast Asia—whose deeply connected histories have been forgotten for a long time, and need now, more than ever, to be (re)conceptualized as an integrated phenomenon. Indeed, the intellectual agenda driving this conference has been an engagement with the idea of "Asia" in the frame of Area Studies scholarship and, at the same time, a commitment to the study of Intra-Asian networks and connections that has been the hallmark of recent scholarship, including the very series in which this volume has been published.

Asia has long been perceived as a clear and distinct geographical unit. As a continent lying to the east of Europe, it has been malleable to different imaginations and politics. Area studies scholarship, for example, has carved Asia into the seemingly self-contained regions of West and Central Asia, South and Southeast Asia, and East Asia. These regional configurations reflect more the changing (geo)political and economic interests in these areas rather than any of their historical or cultural roots. Recent scholarship, however, has presented Asia as a cultural entity produced through political imaginations located in specific historical contexts, and

revealed the arbitrariness of the Area Studies divide.[1] More importantly, it has advanced the question as to what Asia is, and as to whether there existed one or many Asia(s).[2]

Following the lead of such scholarship, this conference sought to explore Asian societies as interconnected formations through trajectories/networks of circulation of people, ideas, and objects in the *longue durée*. Moving beyond the divides of conventional Area Studies scholarship and the arbitrary borders set by late colonial empires and the rise of post-colonial nation-states, this conference mapped critically the configuration of contact zones in which mobile bodies, minds, and cultures interact to foster new images, identities, and imaginations of Asia. Offering some historiographical reflections and, at the same time, presenting novel research trajectories, the conference addressed such questions as: When does the idea of Asia (and regions) come into being, and how far back in time can we trace these spatial imagination(s)? What are the logistical aspects governing the routes—overland and maritime—that linked up different regions of Asia? What roles did imperial formations (old and new, European and non-European) play in shaping Asia? Do ideas of nationalism and post-colonial nation-states fracture Asia?

The ancient Greeks employed the term Asia to denote the eastern inhabited world in their spatial imagination. More than being a geographic region located on the map, Asia is a broad concept that can meaningfully be understood to shed further light on the processes of globalization that signify the growing interconnections among regions, cultures, ideas, economies and polities. Prasenjit Duara (2010) and other scholars have highlighted the richness and polysemy of the category of Asia and its potential for understanding the contemporary world. Just as "Asia"—and its subregions of South, Central, Southeast, and East Asia—are construed as conceptual categories, a similar case can be made for the terms such as "Indies" or "East Indies" (*Oost Indiën*) often employed since the early-modern period. The term "India" or "Indies" covered many regions to the east of the Persian Gulf and included the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian Archipelago.

[1] See, e.g., Ali (2009), Bose (2006), Chaudhuri (1993), Subrahmanyam (1997), Frank (1998), Lewis and Wigen (1997), Noor (2016), and Singh and Dhar (2014).

[2] Among the most recent contributions are Duara (2010), Subrahmanyam (2016 and 1997), Acharya (2013), Milner and Johnson (2001), and Frey and Spakowski (2015).

"India", and the phrase "the countries of the sea", were already employed by the Persia-based seafaring community of Nestorian Christians in the first millennium CE (Colless 1969, pp. 21–22). If Asia can be perceived as a hallmark of interconnections at multiple levels throughout eastern Eurasia, the East Indies can be understood as one of the core regions where such processes unfolded during the pre-modern, early modern and colonial periods. Historians of the Indian Ocean such as K.N. Chaudhuri (1985), and more recently Michael Pearson (2003) and Sugata Bose (2006), have shown how the Indian Subcontinent and the adjoining regions constituted the fulcrum around which much of the economic, cultural, and political contacts gravitated between East Africa and the China Sea.

Rather than giving primacy to an arbitrarily defined geographic category, Asia can be visualized as a zone or discursive field of intensified interconnections intertwining almost every aspects of human society. Any attempts to chart out an imagined geographical construct such as Asia inevitably "also make manifest the impossibilities and potential of mapping Global Asias, that conceptually determined site that insists on its own indeterminacy and plurality as much as its global expanse." (Chen 2017, p. vii). Conceptual impossibilities aside, a working geographical construct of Asia may be defined as including the continental landmass between "the Pontic Steppe, the Mediterranean Sea and the Sinai Desert in the West; Japan, the Philippines, and the Pacific Ocean in the East; the Arctic Sea in the North; and the Indian Ocean and Indonesian Archipelago in the South." (Fairey and Farrell 2018, p. 6). While this vast swathe of geography can be taken as indicative of the heterogeneity that the region recognized as Asia signifies, an exciting line of enquiry is to look for translocal phenomena including parallelisms, synchronisms, and processual continuities, or, to say it with Andrew Abalahin (2011, p. 664), to reframe "a series of world-historical developments that bring together histories that have customarily been viewed apart".

At our historical juncture characterized by growing globalization and regional integration, and at the turn of what is regarded to be the "Asian Century", scholarship is increasingly formulating alternative configurations to conceptualize Asian spaces and phenomena that are not bound to a static geographical model, let alone geopolitical contingencies, but that are rather the expression of dynamic processes of transfer through networks of human agents, flora and fauna, material objects, etc. Research focusing on such translocal relationships is not a new phenomenon: novel conceptualization of macro-regions, spaces, or cultural phenomena spanning across (and beyond) Asia that transcend the boundaries of the Area Studies paradigm

have been developed on the basis of old ideas, namely the overland and maritime Silk Roads (von Richthofen 1877; Chavannes 1903), Monsoon Asia (Mus 1933), or Eurasia (McNeill 1963; Goody 2010); new or fine-tuned models include Sino-Pacifica (Abalahin 2011), Zomia (van Schendel 2002), Maritime Asia (Guillot, Lombard and Ptak 1998), and the Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere (Gupta 2005), to name just a few. Innovative scholarship emphasizing a comparative perspective has also focused on social dynamics and their relationship to the human and natural environments, namely borderlands vs. centres, maritime and coastal communities (or "water civilizations") vs. highland communities, Insular vs. Mainland, state spaces vs. stateless peoples, etc.; the circulation and appropriation of languages and body of texts across Asia, such as the Sanskrit Cosmopolis and Vernacular Millennium (Pollock 2006), the Islamicate and Persianate worlds (Ho 2006), Sinosphere and Indosphere (Matisoff 1990); religious phenomena, such as the Axial Age (Jaspers 1953), the Śaiva Age (Sanderson 2009), the Pali Cosmopolis/Buddhist Ecumene (Frasch 2017), and the Demonological Cosmopolis (White 2012); the Indian Ocean (and the sea in general) as an unifying factor in Asian history (Chaudhuri 1985, Pearson 2003); and other historical dynamics such as networks and synchronisms (Lombard 1995), "strange parallels" (Lieberman 2003, 2009), convergence (Kulke 1990, 2014), etc. Also notable is the recent resurgence of temporal categories such as the "Medieval" and the "Early Modern" as tools to elaborate new models for global history (see, e.g., Holmes and Standen 2018; Strathern 2018), which are especially relevant in bringing out the interconnected and dynamic nature of Asia across time.

Situating itself within this intellectual agenda, the present volume challenges the set boundaries of Area Studies and sets out to explore Asian societies, cultures, and identities as interconnected formations through trajectories of circulation of people, ideas, and artefacts in the *longue durée*.

CONTENTS OF THE VOLUME

The collective body of work presented in this volume includes select papers from the conference, as well as two papers from invited contributors (Kooria and Rosa). Part I, "Conceptualizing the Region: Past and Present", groups three chapters setting the intellectual stage of the volume through a consideration of relevant theoretical and historiographical issues foregrounding the scholarly (re)conceptualizations of Asia on the one hand, and discussing the idea of Asia in the context of key events and cultural

trends of the twentieth century that have had an impact on subsequent geopolitical and socio-cultural developments on the other.

Chapter 1, "Locating Asia, Arresting Asia: Grappling with 'the Epistemology That Kills'" by Farish Noor problematizes the modern and contemporary political boundaries of Asia drawn in the nineteenth century and appropriated by post-colonial states. In unpacking the issues of naming, identity, modernity, and postmodern global capitalism in the context of framing and imagining Asia(s), Noor reminds the reader of Todorov and Cohn's warning about the workings of an epistemology that kills and arrests, and the investigative modalities that have been used to fix the meaning of signifiers. Modern Asian history is as much a history of modernity as it is a history of Asia, and scholars cannot hope to situate themselves radically outside the discursive economy of modernity, despite the fact that today we are all too aware of the pits and traps that lie within its regulated parameters. The chapter suggests a possible way to discuss the meaning of Asia, and locates that object of discussion without locking it permanently within a grid of determined meanings and values that reduces and essentializes.

Chapter 2, "Imagining 'Maritime Asia'" by Andrea Acri tries to reconceptualize (i.e., reimagine) geopolitical configurations of Asia as framed by the current Area Studies paradigm though the prism of the socio-spatial construction of "Maritime Asia". Acri advocates a borderless history (and geography) of the largely maritime and littoral swathe of territory from the Indian Ocean littorals to the Western Pacific in the *longue durée* that takes into account long-distance connections and dynamics of religious interaction. Having surveyed the genealogy of the expression "Maritime Asia", Acri describes this dynamic macro-region of intersecting discursive fields across which networks of cultural brokers travelled since time immemorial, regarding it as forming—just like Eurasia—one interconnected network with a shared background of human, intellectual, and environmental history. The chapter then applies the concept of Maritime Asia to the study of the genesis and circulation of Sanskritic Buddhism(s) across the region from the third to the fourteenth century and beyond, and offers some concluding reflections situating the concept in the intellectual trajectory of such terms as "Eurasia", "Monsoon Asia", and the "Indian Ocean World".

Chapter 3, "In Search of an Asian Vision: The Asian Relations Conference of 1947" by Gopa Sabharwal captures the idea of Asia set forth at the 1st Asian Relations Conference that took place in New Delhi in March–April 1947, as a non-political and non-official event. The objective of the conference, attended by 250 delegates from thirty-three countries,

including such leading personalities as Mr Gandhi, Pandit Nehru, Dr Sutan Sjahrir, and Mrs Sarojini Naidu, was "to bring together the leading men and women of Asia on a common platform to study the problems of common concern to the people of the continent". This was the first attempt in modern times of the countries of Asia to come together, and therefore all the speeches echoed the coming together of Asia.

Part II, "Conceptualizing Asia through the Prism of Europe", discusses the perception, and constitution, of Asia and ideas about Asia as formulated in European intellectual circles of the early modern and modern periods.

Chapter 4, "In Pursuit of Knowledge from Asia: François Valentijn on the Hindu Social Divisions in the Coromandel Region, c. Seventeenth–Eighteenth Century" by Murari K. Jha discusses the knowledge transfer between Asia and Europe along the trade networks of the Indian Ocean operated by the Dutch East India Company. More specifically, the chapter pays attention to the Western European curiosity to know the Eastern world and society. In post-Enlightenment Europe, such curiosity for the knowledge about Asia was deployed to understand and redefine the European self in contrast to the Asian Other. In doing this exercise, and by focusing primarily on the work of François Valentijn, Jha examines the activities of the Europeans to dig deeper in generating knowledge about the southeastern Indian society and how such knowledge was transferred to the European reading public.

Chapter 5, "British Romantic Poetics and the Idea of Asia" by Anjana Sharma explores how the "discovery" of Asia in the eighteenth century by the British forever altered the cultural and political aesthetics of writers, thinkers, philosophers and poets who began to constitute the Republic of Letters in Great Britain. As the British imperial juggernaut rolled on it sought to erase ancient civilizational pathways and began to very consciously recast Asia in terms of its own cultural, literary and political referentiality. Ideas of Asia took shape and were transmitted from imperial sites and were circulated transnationally. Consequentially, what emerged in the nineteenth century British imaginary was an Asia that was defined by geography yet transcended borders: an Asia that was fundamentally displaced from its core principles of cultural syncretism that coexisted within its robust multiple philosophical and literary traditions. Discussing key literary works, such as Coleridge's iconic *Kubla Khan*, the Bryronic "Eastern" tale *The Giaour*, Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, and Keats unfinished *Hyperions*, Sharma argues that the afterlife of the Romantic endeavour still shapes the idea of a monolithic Asia in global literary

studies, despite the significant inroads made by Edward Said and others who have interrogated and dismantled these (mis)readings.

Part III, "Networks of Knowledge Across the Indian Ocean", groups two papers focusing on the fluid contact zone including the countries around the Bay of Bengal, which can be analysed as the theatre of cultural and material transfer since time immemorial. In so doing, it delineates a more coherent geography of knowledge transfer across geographical, ethnic, and linguistic boundaries. This perspective further highlights that post-war truncation of Asia into the area studies divisions such as South Asia and Southeast Asia is problematic and least useful for historical enquiry, as much as an arbitrary and reified distinction between "Asia" and "Europe".

Chapter 6, "An Indian Ocean *Ribāṭ*: War and Religion in Sixteenth-Century Ponnāni, Malabar Coast" by Mahmood Kooria explores the concept and practice of *ribāṭ* to understand the ways in which the Muslims perceived and conceptualized their conflicts in the sixteenth-century Indian Ocean. *Ribāṭ*, a term and concept originally derived from the central Islamic lands and texts, was used by the authors of jihadi-treatises in Malabar to identify their physical struggles as well as their locatedness in Islamic history. Based on treatises written in Arabic, Kooria examines how such a "peripheral" Muslim community imagined itself and its worldviews while living under non-Muslim rulers, the Zamorins, and cooperating with them in the warfront. Describing the concept of *ribāṭ* and its applicability to a non-Middle Eastern Indian Ocean context, and focusing on one particular and important micro-region within Malabar called Ponnāni, the author suggests that concepts like "frontier zones" do not make justice to the nuances of the coastal communities who fought against the Portuguese intrusions without being part of a larger frontier to an imperial centre.

Chapter 7, "Travelling Spirits: Revisiting Melaka's *Keramat* from the Indian Ocean" by Fernando Rosa takes a comparative look at *keramat* in Melaka and the Indian Ocean. Rosa uses theoretical insights from comparative religion as well as Indian Ocean histories, especially those connecting South and Southeast Asia, in order to understand local historic structures. In this wide-ranging chapter, he reinserts *keramat*—today seen as Islamic saintly shrines—within the ancient histories of the Indian Ocean and its broad religious networks. He also engages in an extended discussion of the meaning of *keramat* within certain streams of thought in the larger Islamic tradition, especially in the twentieth century. In particular, he examines the work of Abdul A'la Maududi, emphasizing in this way the wider framework of doctrinal objections to *keramat*. Moreover, on the basis of recent path-breaking work, Rosa indicates that the ancient Austroasiatic (and,

perhaps, tantric?) religious and cultural matrix encompassing both South and Southeast Asia is importantly rooted in a shared notion of feminine power and deities. That notion survives in modern Nusantara, as suggested by Braginsky for Sumatra, but in a state of tension with doctrinal forms of Islam. Finally, Rosa suggests that the ancient, deep-rooted histories of creolization of South and Southeast Asia are relevant also as religious and cultural resources for today's predicament of globalized jihadist violence.

Part IV, "Histories and Geographies of Pilgrimage in Asia", includes two chapters exploring the role of pilgrimage in the complex dynamics that shaped intra-Asian connections, which could in turn contribute to question and reorient our contemporary perceptions about socio-cultural, religious, and ethnic identities across the regions of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Chapter 8, "Transmissions, Translations, Reconstitutions: Revisiting Geographies of Buddha Relics in the Southern Asian Worlds" by Sraman Mukherjee traces the circulating lives of Buddha's relics across colonial South and mainland Southeast Asia. The chapter investigates the changing semantics, contexts, and contents of material reconstitution of Buddhist corporeal relics as they travelled from archaeological sites and museums to practising Buddhist temples. It develops around one particular case of a Buddhist corporeal relic and retraces its journey from an excavation site near Peshawar (presently in Pakistan) to its current location in a new relic temple in Mandalay (in Myanmar) in the opening years of the twentieth century. Mapping the changing institutional, cultural, and political locations of this and similar relics, Mukherjee explores how Buddhist corporeal relics accrued certain meaning, value, and visibility through a network of social relations created by gift, exchange, market economy, and political diplomacy. In so doing, he revisits the role of the modern state formations in shaping the domain of Area Studies scholarship.

Chapter 9, "The Politics of Pilgrimage: Reception of Hajj among South Asian Muslims" by Kashshaf Ghani discusses the growing trend among early twentieth-century Bengali Muslims to look beyond their immediate borders in an attempt to connect with Muslim societies in West Asia, particularly with regard to the Ottoman-supported Sharif administration and its policies towards the hajj pilgrims. Ghani looks into the multiple ways such events reflecting the political and religious environment in the Hejaz were being read and interpreted by Bengali Muslims. He argues that the community, though located at one far end of the Islamic world, could not isolate itself from the implications of such political turmoil on the holy ritual of hajj. Changes in the political climate attracted much reaction

from within the community, and Muslim periodicals in Bengali played a leading role in carrying this news to the Muslim masses in Bengal. Two periodicals—*Chholtan* and *Ahl i-Hadith*—are taken into account in the chapter, in an attempt to read trends of transregionalism among Muslims in twentieth century Bengal.

Part V, "Trans-Local Dynamics and Intra-Asian Connections across Space and Time", closes the volume by grouping four chapters devoted to the registers of intra-Asian connections from the perspective of different disciplinary foci, such as religious studies, philology, history, art history, and archaeology, and marrying micro- and macro-historical analysis.

Chapter 10, "Sanskritic Buddhism as an Asian Universalism" by Iain Sinclair explores the ways in which Sanskritic Buddhism—a nontheistic, nonessentialist religion of universalist orientation—marked out its own distinctive territory across the parts of the world now called South, Central and Southeast Asia. Sinclair argues that regional expressions of Sanskritic Buddhism are much more weakly tied to parochial institutions than other forms of Buddhism, which follows from the fact that its canonical language, Sanskrit, is also a nonsectarian language that is standard across nation-state boundaries and is used for purposes other than religion. As Sanskritic Buddhism takes part in a technical discourse (*śāstra*) on semisecular subjects such as medicine, grammar and literary composition, it tends to coexist and be in dialogue with Brahmanism, without being predicated on it, and shares in the socio-religious milieu of Hinduism. However, its geographic extent far exceeds that of Hinduism, covering much of the Sino-Tibetan world and its diaspora, while at the same time, the unitary transnational character of Sanskritic Buddhism has often been obscured by the nationalist priorities of colonial scholarship and its globalist successors. The chapter highlights various stratagems used to construct a Buddhist transsectarianism on the discursive level.

Chapter 11, "Interconnectedness and Mobility in the Middle Ages/Nowadays: From Baghdad to Chang'an and from Istanbul to Tokyo" by Federica Broilo maps the active networks of circulation and exchange during the middle ages, arguing that cultural systems of the Abbasid Caliphate of Baghdad and Tang China were not inserted in sealed boxes. Chang'an and Baghdad were at that time two of the biggest cities in the world, marked by strong rule, successful diplomatic relationships, economic expansion, and a cultural efflorescence characterized by a cosmopolitan style. The comparative methodology of the chapter describes both entanglements and contacts among artistic and architectural practices belonging to different cultural systems that appear distant on the geographic chart, but are

actually much closer than originally thought. The adoption of models moving within the broad borders of Asia is relevant to our days, when read together with other contemporary phenomena that are now affecting Asia again, such as the use of distinctive architectural icons coming from a specific part of Asia like Turkey into newly constructed buildings in Japan. Broilo engages in a comparison between those phenomena searching for a key to read them as part of the same process of interconnectedness and mobility from West Asia to East Asia and back.

Chapter 12, "Connecting Networks and Orienting Space: Relocating Nguyen Cochinchina between East and Southeast Asia in the Sixteenth and Eighteenth Centuries" by Vu Duc Liem examines the geographical configuration of early modern Vietnam through the prism of economic networks and political landscapes. It argues that the Nguyen Cochinchina had developed a unique perspective of geographical orientation along the frontier between East and Southeast Asia. The Nguyens were economically directed southward to their Southeast Asian neighbours, but culturally and politically northward to the Sino-world. Cochinchina thus offers a fascinating example of a polity standing at the crossroad of Asian networks, between the two geopolitical entities that we now label as East and Southeast Asia. Anthony Reid recognized that Southeast Asia is a space of "not China, not India", but was unable to precisely define what it is in the between. By following the networks and identifying the spatial aspects of political acclimatization, this chapter engages with the question of who were the agents "in the between", and how they defined identity and located themselves in space.

Chapter 13, "The Highlands of West Sumatra and Their Maritime Trading Connections" by Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz gives a first glimpse into the nature, role, and operations of the settlements in Tanah Datar, the heartland of the Minangkabau community in the highland of Western Sumatra, through a close examination of their material culture from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries. It is now possible to analyse different types of ceramic imports at these sites in the light of ongoing archaeological investigations, and advance some interpretations in connection with other historical and archaeological data on commercial interactions between the highland and maritime regions. The interconnection between the uplands and the lowlands had essential effects on the cultural and socio-economic conditions of the highlands. New excavation finds suggest that the hill site at Bukit Gombak represents the centre of King Ādityavarman's polity, the last Hindu-Buddhist king of Indonesia in the fourteenth century.

In discussing the issues of (trans)locality, mobility, and imagination in Asian contexts through a multi-site, multi-register, multi-actor approach, this volume hopes to contribute to an emerging field of scholarship that has begun to critically examine the framework set by Area Studies scholarship within the field of Asian Studies. At the same time, its wide-ranging historical and geographical approach aims at enriching our understanding of "Asia" as a fluid contact zone shaped by multidirectional circulatory dynamics characterized by connections and interactions.

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