WORLD ANTHROPOLOGIES

Foreword

Possibilities Out of Impossibilities: Foreword to the June 2019 World Anthropologies Section

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This issue's World Anthropologies section features an essay by our colleague Beng-Lan Goh. We were also glad to receive thoughtful commentaries on Goh's essay by Hyang Jin Jung, John Gledhill, Shu-min Huang, Andre Gingrich, and Hylton White. In her essay, Goh takes on epistemological hierarchies, discussing the limitations and possibilities of projects to de-center or decolonize knowledge production, namely, inter-Asia discourses and interculturalism. Goh highlights Joel S. Kahn's attention to intercultural similarity as opposed to alterity and proposes this approach as a third way of knowing, one that might lead to a multipolar pluriverse of anthropological knowledge production.

We especially admire the clarity with which Goh sets forth the complexities of a problem that productively vexes this section of *American Anthropologist*. Goh writes:

> the quest for equality and diversity within the discipline is fraught with tensions generated by relativist and antirelativist/universalist stances on alterity . . . . Yet both relativistic (plural) and universalistic (singular) readings of cultural alterity are inevitably double-edged. On the one hand, the retention of a single universalist frame of reference across plural practices may make for disciplinary coherence but is in peril of reinstating Western European and Euro-American predetermination. On the other, the insistence on incommensurability and plurality may lead to conceptual innovations, but has the attendant risk of falling into radical relativism and closing off all translatability.

In her commentary, Jung helpfully suggests that this opposition need not be overcome but that its tension can dialogically produce "pluriversality." On the other hand, Huang challenges the idea that this is a true opposition because cultural relativism can be a methodological strategy in some ethnographic research and is not (necessarily) a moral stance (and we think it can be both).

The commenters also offer several critical perspectives on the West/Rest dichotomy, which Goh seeks to deconstruct. Huang suggests that Goh's use of the West/Rest division is already reproducing Western ways of knowing as "it is the West that begets the Rest, not the other way around." Goh would likely disagree, as she proposes that "they may actually constitute each other." Jung points out that the dichotomy may falsely represent the West as more monolithic than it is, ignoring its many "seams" and "varied realities." Huang, however, notes that the Rest is "fundamentally elusive," while it is "relatively easy" to point a finger at the United States, Great Britain, France, and some smaller Western European nations. We think these observations are not mutually exclusive, although they challenge one another in certain important ways.

For Huang, the elusiveness of "the Rest" and the epistemological continuity and power of "the West" make a liberatory project of knowledge production very difficult. The hegemony of the English language, Huang points out, is very real—"material," writes Huang—for many scholars. It is a boon to some of us, a "haunting challenge" to others, but its ubiquity in scholarship that travels and that is trendy imposes a limit and a hierarchy on all knowledge production. The hegemony of the English language alone is too great to overcome for the time being, he laments. That, coupled with the compulsoriness in scholarship of the European scientific method, will make epistemological revolutions almost impossible. Jung is more hopeful. She imagines that a more democratized knowledge production would place the heterogeneity of the West on the "same anthropological horizon" as that of the Rest and would be "studied by anthropologists from the Rest," too (not only by those from "the West"). Gledhill offers measured hope. On the one hand, he wonders if community activists are not already practicing the kind of interculturalism that Goh wants scholars to attempt. On the other hand, he wonders what evidence exists of how transformative these practices have been for those communities.

Goh's discussion of inter-Asia discourses inspires White to reflect on movements in African thought, which today tend to be "embarrassed" by tradition because of the abuses of the concept by nativists and exoticists. But, White worries, this makes contemporary African scholarship in this vein dangerously ahistorical and siloes much of the rich resources in African civilizational spaces away from public or scholarly discourse or the "correspondence and linkage," as Gledhill puts it, of Kahn's interculturalism.

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Gingrich and White both leave us with searching, provocative questions, in keeping with the spirit of Goh's essay. Gingrich asks how we might inculcate an "inter-Asian" practice that transcends empirical regionalism. Goh's piece provokes questions relevant to anthropologists as well as scholars from other disciplines working from any position on the globe about how to decolonize our own production, if we can. If we can't, then we must ask, as White does, what current historical forces prevent us from doing so.

The Question of Cultural Incommensurability: An Intercultural Interpretation Arising out of Southeast Asia

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Critical inter-Asia discourses about alternative global futures provide us with an opportunity to rethink unresolved dilemmas about the reconciliation of cultural incommensurability. Inter-Asia discourses use Asian societies and their regional histories and ideas as resources for alternative revolutionary knowledge making. Such regional convictions—which grew out of the Orientalist critique of area studies—have yielded claims of distinctive non-Western methodologies and rationalities. A consideration of the transformative power of inter-Asia discourses must not only consider their epistemological persuasions but also the institutional mobilization of these ideas. A wide range of scholarly-cum-activist networks advocating inter-Asia perspectives have sprung up in East, South, and Southeast Asia over the past two decades. Indeed, the application of inter-Asia ideas—obviously boosted by the rise of a supposedly "Asian century"—gains meaning precisely at the historical moment Eurocentric knowledge is undergoing a crisis of critique associated with the triumph of neoliberal capitalism.

Yet inter-Asia discourses insist on intractable Asian differences. This insistence has further entrenched critical divides over the insolvability of relativism and universalism in the adjudication of radical differences. A knee-jerk dismissal of inter-Asia discourses may, however, be too hasty as there are ethical and original dimensions to this body of scholarship. Rather than a wholesale rejection, there is a need to understand grounds, innovations, and limitations of inter-Asia representational strategies in bringing forth ontologies and rationalities that do not fit with Western European precedents. After all, inter-Asia discourses emerged as a response to an unwitting reinstatement of Western European norms even in the most progressive of postfoundational developments in the humanities and social sciences. In a multipolar world experiencing a dearth of critical options, alternative critical arsenals cannot be dismissed, especially those that arise from, and are responsive to, complex realities other than those of Euro-American experiences. Inter-Asia discourses, hence, warrant our attention.

Indeed, inter-Asia discourses are relevant to anthropology, a field long concerned with the possibility of alternatives to Western European or Euro-American rationalities. Deeply implicated by colonialism, anthropology has had to rectify its own Eurocentrism since the Orientalist critique first put forth by Edward Said (1978). Still, the quest for equality and diversity within the discipline is fraught with tensions generated by relativist and anti-relativist/universalist stances on alterity. These tensions are played out in the debates between a single world anthropology and pluralized world anthropologies. In this sense, inter-Asia discourses may find sympathizers, and even theoretical-political allies, among anthropologists who endorse pluralized world anthropologies.

Yet both relativistic (plural) and universalistic (singular) readings of cultural alterity are inevitably double edged. On the one hand, the retention of a single universalist frame of reference across plural practices may make for disciplinary coherence but is in peril of reinstating Western European and Euro-American predetermination. On the other, the insistence on incommensurability and plurality may lead to conceptual innovations but has the attendant risk of falling into radical relativism and closing off all translatability.

In such a context, how might we negotiate the difference in what counts as otherness in relativistic and universalistic positions while remaining true to the commitment to de-center knowledge production? Would non-European schemas and ideas be accepted into dominant conceptions even if this ultimately means a complete overhaul of Euro-American practices and reason? Could variations and coincidences of representational strategies produced in relativistic and universalistic viewpoints be productively drawn upon in order to generate a new enriched universal—what some might call "pluriversal" (Mignolo 2011)—understanding of human diversity and fulfillment? Such a reconciliation of the relativist–universalist divide, and the related struggle over (in)commensurability, could lay the foundations for a view of the region and the world, of the inside and the outside, and of "the West and the Rest" as coeval, simultaneous, and interdependent.

In this respect, anthropological studies of modern Southeast Asia that strive to articulate regional alterities and use them to reconstruct intercultural conceptions of the universal may contribute to an intellectual exchange that returns us neither to local exceptionalism nor to Western European and Euro-American predetermination in the resolution of social-cultural incommensurability.

In this essay, I will explore these and related questions by bringing area study revisionisms and intercultural anthropological innovations in the study of (Southeast) Asian societies into comparison. I do so as an anthropologist studying Southeast Asia who, until recently, was located in an area studies department at the National University of Singapore (NUS)[1]—a well-resourced regional intellectual hub with ambitions to bridge Asia and the world. My reflections below are shaped by my own investment in the pursuit of a synthesis between anthropology and area studies revisions, particularly in the field of Southeast Asian studies. I seek to understand local everyday political expressions in and on their own ethical terms in the belief that they bear value to the future of radical politics in a de-centered world. I see promise in bringing area studies and anthropological innovations into mutual competition so as to democratize adjudications of cultural irreducibility and make radical differences conveyable outside the local context as a basis for a more inclusive intercultural vision of human diversity and possibility.

In what follows, I first consider contributions but also constraints of inter-Asia discourses in the quest of Asian alterities. I highlight the context of institutional, disciplinary, and theoretical politics about discarding Eurocentrism and their overall impact on regional area studies practices. I do so by drawing on two works that consolidate and bring forth inter-Asia arguments to wider global attention: Kuan-Hsing Chen's (2010) *Asia as Method: Towards Deimperialization* and Prasenjit Duara's (2015) *The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future*. I then consider anthropological studies of the region that seek new resolutions to the problematic of cultural irreducibility in terms of interculturality and interdependency. For this, I draw on my own research on everyday expressions of "mindful" politics in contesting ethno-religious bigotries in Malaysia as well as Joel S. Kahn's (2015) *Asia, Modernity and the Pursuit of the Sacred: Gnostics, Scholars, Mystics and Reformers*. Finally, I consider how divergences but also coincidences between different but related critical frameworks contain a promise to break down dichotomous thinking to facilitate a rethinking of Asia as well as the rest of the world. I aim to demonstrate that far from being discrete, there is a close interdependence between irreducible cultural and political differences.

INTER-ASIA DISCOURSES: INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS AND POLITICS

Chen's (2010) *Asia as Method* and Duara's (2015) *The Crisis of Global Modernity* are at the forefront of critical inter-Asia discourses. Inter-Asia discourses have emerged as one of the most established brands of critical scholarship seeking to jettison Eurocentrism and bring discrete Asian social and ideational worlds to global attention in the making of the "afterlives" of area studies in a post–Cold War era.[2] For more than two decades, inter-Asia discourses have been predominantly propagated by the Consortium of Inter-Asia Cultural Studies—a loose collective of largely but not exclusively cultural studies scholars working on East, South, and Southeast Asian societies.[3] Incidentally, Chen is one of the founding members of this consortium.

Standing as the new "cultural left" in Asia that emerged from Marxist/New Left/International Socialist traditions,[4] the consortium is a scholarly initiative but also has a strong activist dimension. The consortium organizes a mixture of academic, publishing, and other pedagogical activities that bring together scholars, cultural activists, artists, and filmmakers across the Asian region.[5] The activist dimension of inter-Asia discourses is a continuation of a leftist legacy of socially engaged scholarship that created a regional phenomenon of "public intellectuals," particularly in the Southeast Asian subregion (Budianta 2010, 174).

Conducted largely in English, inter-Asia scholarship is marked by strong efforts to disseminate ideas in regional languages. Efforts to promote inter-Asia ideas are most organized in places where core members of this consortium reside, namely, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Republic of Korea (commonly called South Korea), India, Indonesia, and Singapore. At my former university in Singapore, an Asia focus can be said to have begun in the new millennium with the formation of the Asia Research Institute (ARI), a university-level institute focusing on Asia research that seeks to make NUS "a place of encounters between the region and the world."[6] Interestingly, both Chen's and Duara's works were "principally written" while they were at ARI.[7] Inter-Asia discourses are institutionalized in the form of graduate training and research programs.[8]

Despite their problematic restriction to Asia as the only basis for knowledge production, inter-Asia discourses appeal to regional scholars on at least two grounds. First, they provide an avenue for critical exchanges and convictions on issues that are of concern to the region even if they may not be of concern to those outside the region. Second, regional networking enables scholars to band together to struggle against nationalist and other dominations within and between countries. As a result, a variety of scholarly-cum-activist networks facilitating exchanges within Asia have sprouted over the past two decades or so. Some examples are the Asia Public Intellectuals (API) fellowship program,[9] the Consortium of Southeast Asian Studies,[10] the Asian Conference for Young Scholars of Southeast Asia, and numerous regional conferences in fields such as Asian cinema and Asian cultural studies.

These developments do not mean that there is no resistance to inter-Asia discourses within the academy in the region.[11] As I have noted elsewhere, the rise of cultural studies (out of which sprang inter-Asia discourses) seeking to replace a presumably outmoded area studies model is in line with Euro-American disciplinary politics. It literally freezes area studies in its Orientalist/Western European and Euro-American origins and ignores alternative intellectual trajectories outside the North Atlantic that are embedded in their own temporalities (Goh 2011, 7–9). A focus on Asia

wrought by inter-Asia discourses risks submerging unique regional models of area studies that focus on the study of cultural communities, countries, and subregions like Southeast Asia, which offer different types of critical interventions. Such alternative models remain relevant today as it is always within local sites that people create meanings out of their experiences. Moving knowledge frontiers of a vast and multifarious region like Asia would require scholars to be open to all kinds of institutional practices and intellectual categorizations from the past and the present and both within the region and outside it.

Institutional politics aside, existing models can still benefit from the ingenuities and limitations of inter-Asia discourses.

INTER-ASIA AS METHOD: DISCIPLINARY AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL ENCUMBRANCES AND BREAKTHROUGHS

Although they have different thematic interests, Chen and Duara share substantial theoretical-methodological innovations. Drawing on inter-Asia connections and political enactments, Chen and Duara challenge us to see "Asia"—and by this, they specifically refer to East, South, and Southeast Asia—in a new light. They view this part of the world as a geographical region defined by interdependence and as an imaginary resource for radical possibilities that could inculcate ethical selves and collective transformations not only in Asia but also in the world at large.

A central contribution of Chen's *Asia as Method* is to show that decolonization can happen without obsessing over Western Europe and Euro-America and thinking of them as "the West," as well as by referencing across Asian societies that share similar historical and material realities. He prescribes "inter-referencing"—a process of recognition, elaboration, reiteration, and competition of multiple regional elements within a shared/related social phenomenon across Asia—as a methodology of decolonization (see Chua 2014, 274). Harboring the ambition of not only redefining Asia but also the world, Chen argues that multiple references better facilitate the de-centering of Western European and Euro-American societies and that it also de-centers nationalist sources of the Asian self so that new ways of imagining global history that avoid binary oppositions with "the West" can emerge. Yet, as we shall see below, Chen's methodology of using Asia as an analytical-cum-political category tends to reify incommensurability between Asia and "the West" rather than help resolve the conundrum of cultural difference.

Mid-twentieth-century Japanese and Chinese thought on Asian civilizations as well as subaltern/postcolonial ideas form the basis of Chen's investigations into intraregional enactments of histories, ideas, and subjectivities as sites of critical decolonized knowledge production. Focusing on inter-referencing across Taiwan, South Korea, China, Japan, Hong Kong, India, and Singapore, Chen seeks to showcase original ways and spheres of politics beyond the usual tripartite struggle between the state, civil society, and capital in Euro-American political models. One of radical things that Chen insists is that a necessary first step toward transforming Asia, and thereby the world, is to liberate the Asian self from the trappings of colonial, Cold War, and nationalist ideologies. He introduces a new concept, "critical syncretism," for liberating the self. This concept draws on Edward T. Ch'ien's (1986) concept of syncretism, which refers to a syncretic consciousness that arose from a mixture of elements from Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism to combat the orthodoxy of neo-Confucianism in the late Ming era in China (see Chen 2010, 98–99). For Chen, critical syncretism denotes a highly conscious self, one that is aware of one's own limits. It is a selective mixing of insights from multiple sites and sources outside one's limited frame to "generate a system of multiple reference points that can break free from the self-reproducing neo-colonial framework that structures the trajectories and flow of desire" (101). Such self-liberation, according to Chen, "can be a painful process involving the practice of self-critique, self-negation, and self-rediscovery" (3). In Chen's definition, a critical syncretic capacity differs from hybridity, which he takes to be a mere product of colonial assimilation (98). Rather, in Chen's terms, critical syncretism helps move self-identification outward with the intent "to become others, to actively interiorize elements of others into the subjectivity of the self so as to move beyond the boundaries and divisive positions historically constructed by colonial power relations in the form of patriarchy, capitalism, racism, chauvinism, heterosexism, or nationalistic xenophobia" (99). By pushing for the necessity to see diversity or alterity within oneself, Chen offers a new lens with which to see the subjectivities of self and other as simultaneous, overlapping, and even fused rather than as separate or dichotomous categorizations.

In the case of Duara's *The Crisis of Global Modernity*, the question of irreducible Asian difference is resolved by elevating it to a matter of a global, if not planetary, history of survival. A historian, Duara turns to Axial Age debates to recover a relationship between "circulatory history" and "dialogical transcendence," a form of "non-worldly *moral authority*" outside of state powers that has long circulated and inspired resistance against domination in the Asian region (Duara 2015, 3, 4; emphasis in original).[12] Duara engages with major (German) theorists, such as Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Georg Hegel, Karl Marx, and many others, and shows how their renditions of historical sociology have left out Asian experiences of the relationship between "circulatory history" and "dialogical transcendence." Building on the circulatory flow of history, where ideas spread from one location to another only to return to their original source, Duara argues that the contemporary crisis of environmental unsustainability provides conditions of possibility for the re-emergence of Asian practices of dialogical transcendence. These, he argues, can renew and rescue human societies from the threat of destruction. The radical promise of dialogical

transcendence lies in its ethic of accommodating diversity. According to Duara, "dialogical transcendence" is "*a way of human knowing* based upon an inscrutable yearning or calling with several attributes that coexist in varying degrees" (6; emphasis in original). This ethic, he argues, arises from the region's religious traditions, such as Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, folk religions, and other faith-based cosmologies, which have long inspired the "discipline of self-formation or self-cultivation and the methodologies of linking the self to locality, community, environment and the universal" (2). There is a physical aspect to attaining this spiritual ethic. Dialogical transcendence is accessed via bodily practices whereby the body is "both the map and the means of salvation" (150). To substantiate the force of dialogical transcendence in transforming and renewing Asian societies across time, Duara refers to a variety of historical and contemporary examples. Among these he includes redemptive societies, regional spiritual environmental movements, such as forest monks in Thailand and Cambodia, the transnational Taiwanese Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzuchi Foundation, and an assortment of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and environmental nongovernmental organizations (ENGOs) engaged in sustainability efforts to salvage the world from destruction.

While Chen's and Duara's statements about the ongoing relevance of traditional ethics may not amount to a clear categorization of values, it is possible, nevertheless, to discern a number of norms and principles central to their recovery of Asian alterities. Chief among these is a simultaneous, interdependent, dialogical, nonbinary, and nonlinear logic at work in the reformulation of the Asian self and community. For Chen, a set of inter-Asia ethics that facilitates the ability to see interdependent, overlapping, and contemporaneous subjectivities and social categories is essential to de-centering colonial imaginaries and rearticulating new, more democratic ones. For Duara, it is the principle of dialogical transcendence that directs self and collective moral responsibility toward the achievement of ecological equilibrium. It is one that imbricates diverse human, material, and spiritual forces. For both, an aspect of bodily or experiential knowing is important. For Chen, it is the self—or more specifically, self-critique, self-negation, and self-discovery—that acts as a conduit of knowledge formation. For Duara, it is the body that acts as a powerful vessel of knowledge transmission; embodiment, discipline, immersion, ritual participation, and other bodily practices work as important mediums bridging the worldly and nonworldly to enable transcendent ethical inculcation (Duara 2015, 149–55).

It should be noted that Chen's and Duara's definitions of tradition are not reinventions of pristine pasts. Rather, their projects are comparable to ontological anthropology in their desire to articulate regional ontological and ideational differences. Similar to ontological anthropology, Chen and Duara locate tradition as a residual category that is not subsumed by modern exchanges in which radically different logics, temporalities, and social categories specific to the region are contained. In both their works, traditional thought-worlds are interactive as well as resilient and autonomous categories that do not fit within the ambit of the modern, despite their imbrication with modernity. They share with ontological anthropology an insistence that turns normative conceptions of tradition or the nonmodern on their heads. That is, tradition in their work is not a lack of or a lagging behind the modern but rather a dynamic flow of autonomous conceptual frames understandable to local communities who use them to mediate opposition to oppressive forces (see Blaser 2013). In other words, the *politics* of ontological and spiritual difference articulated by inter-Asia methodologies straddles the constructed nature of difference and an enduring yet dynamic ethical inheritance that is comprehensible and distinctive to regional communities.

All in all, Chen's and Duara's resolutions of the theoretical divide over cultural difference offer new ways of conceiving power and change in terms of "critical syncretism," post-civil-society political configurations, and "dialogical transcendence." These ethical traditions carry with them alternative logics of power and change that are not mutually exclusive, static, or hierarchical. They bear promise for providing a "third" way of reconciling radical differences whereby continuity and change, Asia and the West, the universal and the particular, and the inside and outside need not cancel each other out but coexist in fusion, complementarity, and instantaneity. Yet despite epistemological ingenuities, Chen's inter-Asia referencing has the unintended consequence of reinforcing relativism. In Duara's case, Asian alterity is resolved by reconstituting it as part of global history and highlighting its role in rescuing us from planetary annihilation. Yet this resolution does not provide a means to convey Asian alterities—that is, its peculiar ethics and methodologies of knowing—outside regional cultural lenses. If the goal of inter-Asia knowledge paradigms is to inspire a better global future, an epistemological revolution in delineating incommensurability is not sufficient. There is a further need to close the wide gaps of misunderstanding between Asian ways of thinking and doing and those of the West/world.

If nothing else, contemporary global realities, focusing on hard-line politics over irreducible cultural differences, make this urgency clear. In many parts of Southeast Asia, ethno-religious conflicts have explicitly taken on the rhetoric of East–West cultural divides as new orthodoxies operating at both the state and everyday levels hijack "anti-Western" discourses to vilify, exteriorize, and paralyze their opposition as proxies of "Western neoliberal" designs. If commonality of meaning or standards of judgment across differences are no longer possible, then critical scholarship must find ways to create possibilities out of impossibilities. Here, anthropological investigations into the broader politics of cultural-religious differences in Southeast Asia, where I do my research, raise the question of translatability and political action.

THEORETICAL POSSIBILITIES FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA? ETHICAL TRADITIONS AS RESISTANCE

A quick survey of a subregion of Southeast Asia, Indonesia and Malaysia, points to a similar turn to practices of spiritual and cultural traditions, and, I would add, even simple human compassion. In these two Muslim-dominated yet plural societies, resistance is growing against narrow varieties of Islamic orthodoxies that have created deeply bifurcated civil societies. In response to an incapacitated, highly charged public sphere, political critiques have turned to new subterranean and everyday spaces. They take the form of a quiet spread of alternative Islamic imaginaries not in accord with dominant conceptions. For instance, there has been a revival of Sufism—a mystical practice emphasizing personal, humanistic, fluid, and compassionate dimensions of Islam as resistance against the growing strains of dominant Islam in these countries (e.g., see Fauzi Abdul Hamid 1999). In a previous study, I showed how an urban revival of a local Muslim guardian spirit, the *keramat*, which incorporates a syncretic mixture of Islam, Hindu-Buddhist, Sinic, and animistic cosmologies, defies the orthodoxy of mainstream religious definitions and offers a further example of spiritual resistance (Goh 2012).

More recently, my research has focused on creative resistance in artistic practices and grassroots initiatives by private citizens in Malaysia. Case studies include artistic practices and cyber networks perpetuating urban *keramat*,[13] Sufism and alternative religious communes, such as Kerajaan Langit (Sky Kingdom).[14] The articulation of basic human decency and compassion is especially visible in the artistic satire of puritanical Islamic hypervigilance of the body, social conduct, and religious morals as portrayed, for example, in Malaysian contemporary art and street art. Similarly, it is observed in the practices of a variety of civil initiatives that include interfaith dialogues and events. One such event was the "I Want to Touch a Dog" event at an urban park outside Kuala Lumpur in 2014 in response to the arrest of a Muslim dog trainer for "wounding religious feelings" after a video of her bathing her dogs (proscribed animals in Islam) circulated on Facebook.

While seemingly disparate, these occurrences are united by a rejection of ethno-religious dogmas and use of a particular mode of protest. These protests combine social media and reclamations of alternative spiritual, moral, and humane traditions through a play of form and images. These configurations involve curious "political" actors and alliances: property developers and petty entrepreneurs, urban dwellers, religious leaders and followers, artists, and concerned citizens. Occurring away from a highly charged public sphere, these innovations stimulate new and open ways of interrogating, expressing, blurring, and minimizing ethno-religious differences. Importantly, their alternative ethno-religious representations—which are either directly expressed in or find their way into cyber networks—strike powerful chords with, and are easily understood by, fellow Malaysians who are cognizant of these humane, less judgmental, and more tolerant and fluid understandings of Islam with historical roots in the Southeast Asian region.

These everyday pursuits of intercultural logics and creative modes seeking to transcend and rethink ethno-religious differences in Malaysia provide us with grounds to understand the generation of dialogical spaces that open new understandings of mutuality and interdependence. They suggest that in a society where ethno-religious bigotries have invaded private identities and eradicated meaningful public debate, the seeds of revolutionary change may have to first take root in people's everyday mindful self-transformations and the convivial spaces generated.

Next, I turn to Joel S. Kahn's (2015) *Asia, Modernity and the Pursuit of the Sacred* to explore the possibility of shared universals between Asia and the world that Western Europeans made.

CANONICAL CHANGE: THE INSEPARABILITY OF ALTERNATIVE AND UNIVERSAL KNOWLEDGE

Joel S. Kahn, an anthropologist who researched Southeast Asia for more than four decades, always insisted on the inseparability and coeval standing of Western European/Euro-American and Southeast Asian modern thought and history. He also insisted on the need to recognize the universalist significance of elided regional narratives. He argued that this could transform prevailing Eurocentric definitions of the modern. Kahn's brand of intercultural scholarship provides a useful resolution of the problematic of cultural difference. Committed to bringing anthropology and critical theory into critical review, Kahn's last work, *Asia, Modernity and the Pursuit of the Sacred*, pushed his intercultural approach to a pretty radical conclusion. In it, he offered a way to move beyond the relativistic and universalistic impasse.

In this work, Joel Kahn confronted the ethical and methodological questions related to understanding the irreducibly different metaphysical and ontological worlds of Indonesian Sufism. Kahn prescribed engaging with, rather than provincializing, Western European and Euro-American knowledge as the means to restore Asian authenticities. He argued that regional variations must be brought into conversation with conceptions of the religious that arise in Europe so as to reinstate elided narratives. Kahn insisted that only by bringing differing narratives together that confront one another can we build a new universality of religious meanings that recognizes the inseparability and interdependency of secular/rational and sacred/"irrational" logics.

To achieve his goals, Kahn brought interwar Western European and Euro-American Gnostic and Indonesian Sufi ideas and methodologies into conversation with debates on the "sacred" in the natural and social sciences. Kahn's critical comparative project reveals the striking universalism inherent in both theological and scientific intellectual endeavors. That is, both of these enterprises seek to build history—transcending knowledge of the world and of human's place in it—even as their methodologies differ sharply. Kahn revealed the inability of both the natural and social sciences to

engage directly with supernatural claims in and on their own terms. He argued that there was a tendency to "bracket" out these aspects of life by explaining them in social-political, cultural, linguistic, psychological, performative, bodily, or even neurological terms. He wrote that such analyses were problematic on at least three grounds. First, he argued that they merely render the "irrational" in rational terms, leaving the differences at stake unknown. Second, he argued that they call into question the democratic nature of our scientific projects since knowledge produced is only meaningful to the researcher and not to practitioners. Finally, he argued that the rational-critical frames of knowing applied to understanding religious otherness are themselves steeped in theological meanings, making the refusal to engage seriously with the religiosity of others ironic, if not hypocritical.

Given such limitations, Kahn suggested that it may benefit social scientists to open themselves to other ways of engaging otherness beyond the boundaries of secular–critical–rational frameworks. In other words, secular/rational and sacred/"irrational" epistemologies need to be brought into conversation.

It is in this spirit that Kahn turned to interwar Gnosticism as an available intellectual and cultural resource for understanding Indonesian Sufi beliefs and practices. For Kahn, interwar Gnosticism provides an example of an interreligious project situated in both Western European/Euro-American worldviews as well as Asian ones. The knowledge produced this way—that is, by the methodological intervention of Gnosticism in the study of Indonesian Sufism—speaks of and to the worlds of the researcher as well as the Sufi practitioner. Kahn argues that the experiential and contemplative methodologies adopted by both Gnostics and Sufis offer a promising platform from which to understand and embrace cross-religious understanding. In contrast to the abstract reasoning of much of the social sciences, Gnostic and Sufi ways of knowing are at once ideational and practical. Beyond abstract knowing, otherness, he argued, is also accessed through ways of living, ways of being as well as contemplative and bodily practices. In Sufism, this is characterized by the intentional impulse to seek openings into the "unseen" and even "impossible" worlds. This helps to bring encounters and understanding of the "sacred" from within the self to merge with the unseen or impossible worlds. The ability to step into or merge with religious otherness helps people arrive at a renewed understanding of the coexistence and interconnections of religious differences.

While religious modes of knowing are often disparaged for their esoteric and apolitical nature, Kahn showed otherwise. The experiential and contemplative orders of knowing among the Gnostics and Sufis provide scholars and scientists with grounded, direct engagements with totally alien forms of metaphysical and ontological claims. They offer an alternative logic by which different ideational and ontological worlds are simultaneously perceived as contemporary. Such a logic of complementarity posits differences, dualities, or contradictions as integrative rather than as oppositional. This is in sharp contrast to hierarchical, dialectical, and binary modes of comprehension that produce systems of opposition that have dominated modern Western European and Euro-American thought in the recent past. Far from apolitical, Kahn's study showed that sacred forms of knowledge are characterized by the quest for openness, responsibility for others, nonviolence, and respect of the natural world—ideas that are much needed in the contemporary world.

Kahn's distinctive set of critical strategies is a useful one. In developing it, he produced genuinely intercultural scholarship that provides a way out of the relativism holding back assertions of Asian alterity.

CONSOLIDATING CROSS-CULTURAL TRANSLATIONS BEYOND ASIA

Although exhibiting considerable methodological ingenuity, inter-Asia efforts to center knowledge production in Asia create their own sets of limitations for a true transformation of knowledge. For one thing, inter-Asia discourses risk reinventing Asia as the new place of power. In order to convey the significance of alternative Asian bodily and contemplative methodologies and logics, inter-Asia discourses need to engage with coincidences but also divergences in other critical theoretical advancements that are equally productive in rethinking cultural irreducibility. Doing so would better bring Asian differences to bear on broader cross-cultural thinking. It would better illuminate correspondences as well as diversified linkages between irreducibly Asian and other worlds. It could rectify epistemological and cognitive hierarchies so as to free knowledge production from the forces of standardization, inequality, and dehumanization.

Joel Kahn's intercultural intervention is only one case in point. Other recent reinterrogations of history and critical theory may help consolidate inter-Asia articulations of regional methodologies and rationalities. The rethinking of universal history provides an impetus for inter-Asia discourses to further trace how distinctly different "Asian" and "Western" methods and logics of knowing are, or at least how they may actually constitute each other. Susan Buck-Morss's (2009) *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History* provides an inspiration. In this work, Buck-Morss seeks to reconstruct "universal history" by restoring silenced historical interconnections between the French Revolution and the Haitian Revolution via her inquiry into Hegelian thought. At stake in this work is the democratization of knowledge production. It shows how the Haitian Revolution had a central role in shaping the thought of the defining philosopher of the nineteenth century, Hegel, who introduced the notion of dialectical thinking (*Phenomenology of Spirit*), which inspired the dialectics of Marxist materialism. Another example is Lisa Lowe's (2015) study of the historical intimacies of Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas in shaping an inherently heterogeneous and entangled genealogy of modern global liberalism. Akin to Kahn's insistence that we bring Euro-American and Asian narratives into comparison, Lowe's work shows how dominant, residual, and emergent configurations of modern

liberalism are nonetheless inevitably imbricated, simultaneous, and commensurate with each other.

Similarly, developments in critical philosophy/theory that have shifted scrutiny away from dialectical, transcendental, deconstructive, and humanist orientations toward new subtractive, relational, immanent, and posthumanist (vital materialist) analytical procedures share coincidences with, and may help enrich, inter-Asia articulations of non-Western methodologies and rationalities.[15] Just taking the new operations of subtraction in continental philosophy as one example, Iveković (2010) has suggested that the undoing of divisions of the mind in Asian philosophy may share ideas with the operations of "subtraction" by continental European philosophers like Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Subtraction, a new critical premise advocated by continental European philosophy in the hope of recovering a universality of political action across spatial and temporal differences, situates political agency in a recognition of gaps, noncoincidences, or inconsistencies within the self, not unlike Chen's and Duara's assertions of the radical possibilities of self-negation and self-discovery. An alliance with recent critical revisions may be useful to help inter-Asia discourses develop grounds to reinstate mindful self-transformations that do not fit neatly into what the European and Euro-American social sciences consider to be politics. This has the potential to be a legitimate form of radical politics in the current historical milieu. It can transform all those deep political deadlocks over ethno-religious-cultural differences that have often incapacitated resistance.

CLOSING

Critical openness is vital at a time when the world is heading into unchartered waters of social-political and cultural transformations and conflicts. In a relentlessly divided world unable to get past differences, the burden of facilitating cross-cultural understanding lies in the hands of all scholars, whether they work in uneven and emergent fields or are located in the Global North or South. A critical intellectual project on Asia by Asian scholars will remain incomplete without a change in Western European and Euro-American thought, which needs to accept that there can be no singularity of progressive thinking in the world today. Yet Asian scholars also need to break out of relativism to bring their ethical politics to bear upon cross-cultural political thinking. Only by also engaging with other critical imaginaries emanating from outside the region can Asian scholars bring their alternative regional convictions to rectify knowledge hierarchies and force a rethinking of the region, and also the world, and of the mutual integration and interrelationship of their converging and contrasting political projects, as well as projects of self and of living.

I have argued in this essay that parallels and divergences in area studies scholarship, anthropological work, and other critical rethinking contain a promise for a fruitful conversation and that this can give rise to a new enrichment of contrasting critical ideas about human diversity and fulfillment in a globalized world. This could unsettle once and for all the simplistic binaries and hierarchical conceptions of the universal and the particular, the inside and the outside, and the West and the Rest. In a multipolar world, the critical decolonization of knowledge requires us to begin on a completely new slate, where we need to see, think, do, and sense complex realities around us in totally different terms from what we have been used to until now. Recognition of the inseparability, interdependence, and mutual constitution of irreducibly different ways of living, doing, and thinking may be the first step toward freeing ourselves from the iron cages of modern epistemology and cultural exceptionalism. Instead, we must train ourselves to see the simultaneity and interdependence of irreducibly different forms of social ontologies and rationalities.

NOTES

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1. I was an associate professor at the Department of Southeast Asian Studies in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the National University of Singapore from 1998 to end of 2018.
2. Another project still in its infancy (but with potential influence for the future) has emerged from the "One Belt One Road" (now called "Belt Road Initiative") economic project launched in 2013 by the People's Republic of China. Inspired by the history of the Silk Road, this initiative aims to foster interconnectivity of infrastructure, trade, and ideas across West, Central, South, East, and Southeast Asia, as well with Europe and Africa.
3. For a chronology of this movement, see Inter-Asia Cultural Studies (2010).
4. Chen was a member of a leftist-cum-activist network, the Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives (ARENA), established in 1980 by Southeast and East Asian intellectuals.
5. The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Consortium publishes the *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* journal, holds an annual conference, and organizes workshops, forums, and an annual summer camp for young scholars, researchers, and social-cultural activists.
6. ARI was established in 2001. See https://ari.nus.edu.sg/Page/Vision-and-Mission.
7. Chen wrote his book while he was a visiting senior scholar at ARI from 2004 to 2006, and Duara wrote his when he was director of ARI from 2011 to 2015.
8. These include: a PhD in cultural studies in Asia (since 2009), a PhD in comparative Asian studies (since 2013) at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, and an Inter-Asia Engagement Research Cluster at ARI (formerly known as the Metacluster: Asian Connections), which was established in 2011.
9. API fellowships to promote regional intellectual exchanges began in 2000, funded by the Nippon Foundation.

10. This consortium was established in 2013 through the effort of the Centre of Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University.
11. My engagement with inter-Asia discourses is not immune to criticism such as that mobilized by Syed Farid Alatas (2018), who decried my endeavor as an act of "intellectual imperialism" for "silencing" Malay studies, especially the anticolonial scholarship of its pioneers and Alatas himself. No doubt there are gaps in my work, but Alatas's critique reveals an authoritative claim of Malay studies as the gatekeeper of (Southeast) Asian knowledge. As this article shows, my aim is not to chart anticolonial scholarship but to explore theoretical developments that offer significantly new possibilities for a theorization of (Southeast) Asian incommensurability that does not compel a destruction of the Other (the West or any antimonies) and that radicalizes and democratizes knowledge production.
12. Axial Age debates refer to an era of human mastery over nature prior to Western European and Euro-American modernity whereby spiritual truth-claims were used to solve worldly problems across China, India, the Middle East, and Greece around 800 to 200 BCE (Eisenstadt 1999).
13. *Keramat* is a syncretic Muslim guardian saint cult with deep roots in the Malay world that combines Indian-derived Shia' beliefs, Sufi mysticism (*tasauf*), and Malay animistic notions of souls (*semangat*).
14. Sky Kingdom, a cult that promoted universal unity among all religions by drawing on a mixture of Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian cosmologies, had its beginnings in the 1980s but was destroyed by the Malaysian state in 2005. Fantastic symbolisms and hagiography around its mysterious, now deceased, spiritual leader, have kept this cult alive in Malaysian public and cyber imaginings. There are at least four Wikipedia entries (in English and Malay) and many websites about this cult. There is even an Australian SBS TV documentary on Sky Kingdom.
15. Some examples of these efforts are: Badiou's (2006) *Being and Event*, Jacques Ranciere's (2004) *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Jane Bennett's (2010) *Vibrant Matter*, and Boike Rehbein's (2015) *Critical Theory after the Rise of the Global South*.

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Commentary

Inter-Asia, Intra-Asia, and Asian Anthropologies

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The article by Beng-Lan Goh provokes hard thinking about current affairs and possibilities regarding de-centered anthropological knowledge production. For the purpose of endorsing "pluralized world anthropologies," she looks to the critical "inter-Asia discourses" that have developed for the past two decades or so by the Consortium of Inter-Asia Cultural Studies. According to Goh, the consortium is "a loose collective of largely but not exclusively cultural studies scholars working on East, South, and Southeast Asian societies" and stands as the new "cultural left" in Asia. Despite the inter-Asia discourses' insistence on "intractable Asian differences," Goh argues, they contain "ethical and original dimensions" that warrant the attention of those who aspire to the vision of world anthropologies.

Her central concern is to reconcile cultural incommensurability and alternative knowledge making—or to balance between relativism and universalism in a project of knowledge production whose very foundation lies in claims of (radical) cultural differences. Centering on the works of Kuan-Hsing Chen and Prasenjit Duara, core members of the inter-Asia movement, Goh critically examines major theoretical and methodological innovations of inter-Asia discourses to salvage "inter-Asia as method" from the discourses' relativist impasse. That is, she appreciates inter-Asia as an epistemological practice that aims to de-center and thus democratize knowledge production. Yet, in her view, there is a danger of reifying the cultural difference between Asia and the West, or perhaps more precisely in this case, Asia and the rest of the world. Goh claims that in order to avoid the risk of "reinventing Asia as the new place of power," inter-Asia discourses need to engage with "other critical imaginaries emanating from outside the region," as exemplified in Joel Kahn's intercultural scholarship on West European and Euro-American Gnosticism and Indonesian Sufism. Goh's call for cross-cultural translation beyond Asia is persuasively backed up by her recent observations in Southeast Asia, particularly the spread of alternative Islamic imaginaries that commonly reject dominant ethno-religious dogmas.

Overall, I found it extremely enlightening to read through Goh's critical assessment of inter-Asia discourses, in which she problematizes the premise of cultural incommensurability and the implicit imperialism of Asia-centeredness. While I emphatically second her call for linking Asian alterity to broader cross-cultural thinking, I would like to pause to rethink Asia and inter-Asia for the purpose of world anthropologies with the possibility of "a new enriched universal" in mind. When we use inter-Asia discourses as a platform for alternative knowledge production, Asia itself appears to be a singular entity composed of more or less the same (Asian) modules rather than plural realities. Goh made a pointed critique that Chen's inter-Asia referencing tends to reify incommensurability between Asia and the West, and that Duara's reconstitution of Asian alterity as part of global history does not provide a means to understand it outside regional cultural lenses. I would further argue that in order to realize the critical vision of inter-Asia discourses in anthropology, there need be more intra-Asia (rather than inter-Asia) intellectual dialogues and knowledge exchanges. Inter-Asia discourses, as political and intellectual engagement, seem to promote a pan-Asian identity by way of interreferencing with which to fight the hegemony of the West. Such mobilizations may be helpful to some degree. Yet in the process they may play down the varied realities of Asian communities and historical and emerging tensions in the region, the very things that inter-Asia discourses aspire to address. This is to say, instead of inter-Asia, we need more explicitly intra-Asia work to contribute to critical intercultural awareness and translations beyond Asia.

My proposal for anthropology in Asia is to start in Asia, rather than center on Asia, in achieving "a new enriched universal," or a "pluriversal," by mutually building Asian anthropologies. Although there are networks and regional conferences among anthropologists based in Asia, Asian anthropologies are seriously lacking in mutual recognition and interreference. Even with its own limitations, the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies movement is far advanced in terms of its efforts to cross-reference Asian scholarships and thus utilize them as epistemological foundations and resources in de-centered knowledge production. In the spirit of critical inter-Asia discourses' commitment to democratic and democratized knowledge production, we need to promote Asian anthropologies, not Asian anthropology. The discipline's perpetual dilemma of the "insolvability of relativism and universalism" may prove fruitful after all, for "a pluriversal" is something to be built out of a dialogic process between the two epistemological frames. In de-centering anthropological knowledge production, we may also bear in mind that the West itself has never been a seamless entity. In a more democratized space of anthropological knowledge production, varied realities in the West would not only be placed on the same anthropological horizon as such others in the Rest but also studied by anthropologists from the Rest as well as the West.

Commentary

Reworking the Universal in an Interconnected World

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Goh combines arguments about how scientific knowledge(s) can only be made more universal by being made more inclusive, not simply in the academic but also in the social sphere, with the hope of renewing the ethical bases of radical politics throughout the world. In doing so, she begins with a critique of critical inter-Asian discourses in cultural studies and history that addresses a fundamental issue for those who advocate "pluralized world anthropologies." How can we avoid a universalism that reinstates "Western European and Euro-American predetermination" without falling into the "radical alterity" relativism that "closes off all translatability" of cultural difference? One of the anthropologists from whom Goh derives inspiration is the late Joel Kahn, who insisted that "the world which anthropologists seek to study is a world not of discrete and isolatable other cultures and societies, but a world of 'intercultural' or 'intercommunal' relationships" (Kahn 2003, 406). Because this has been true since the dawn of European colonial expansion, the intellectual and epistemological issues also run wider than anthropology, but what is ultimately at stake for Goh are the political implications, because she insists that understanding "local everyday political expressions, in and on their own ethical terms" can "bear value to the future of radical politics in a de-centered world."

Elsewhere in the paper, however, she describes our world as "multipolar." I do not think that this distinction is trivial. There are cross-regional similarities in the ethical bases of radical politics and activism, in terms of asserting humanistic values of tolerance, care, and respect for others and for nature and nonhuman species. These are matched by similarities in the ways in which states and capitalist corporations address the challenges that these movements pose to the accumulation process, even as different centers escalate their antagonisms. New forms of politics may be springing up everywhere, but the greater plurality apparently offered by digital capitalism not only empowers some far-from-humanistic ideas and values but also remains a field of political expression in which money and organizational resources still count in terms of getting messages across. We also need to understand "local political expressions" in terms of the complex and often contradictory responses of socially heterogeneous actors to the dilemmas posed by their everyday conditions of life as well as their ethical sensibilities and ideals, including the guardianship of nature, to which people may subscribe in principle but not conform in practice. This means doing ethnography of less-positive cases, paying attention to how and why acquiescence and accommodation may prove more attractive than "resistance," and looking at the forces that determine whether localized cosmopolitanisms or ethnic violence and xenophobia prevail in particular places at particular times.

In her discussion of two key figures in critical Asian discourses, Chen and Duara, Goh emphasizes that the Consortium of Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, of which Chen was a founding member, was an activist as well as scholarly initiative. From the description provided, it seems to parallel the kind of fusion of academic and artistic activism that the Brazilian ultra-right denounces as (globalized) "cultural Marxism." Goh's critique is that the movement not only restricts itself to Asia but also flattens the perspective on different subregional models. Nevertheless, both Chen and Duara are outward-looking in positing a distinctive future world-historical role for Asia, based on the reformulation and renewal of the Asian self and community and an embodied ethical practice that Duara hopes will save the world from ecological catastrophe. Yet although these Asian public intellectuals provide concrete examples of a "politics of ontological and spiritual difference," demonstrating "an enduring yet dynamic ethical inheritance that is comprehensible and distinctive to regional communities," Goh also notes that "in many parts of Southeast Asia, ethno-religious conflicts have explicitly taken on the rhetoric of East–West cultural divides as new orthodoxies operating at both the state and *everyday* levels hijack 'anti-Western' discourses to vilify, exteriorize, and paralyze their opposition as proxies of 'Western neoliberal' designs" (my emphasis). This leaves us with questions about the force and scope of the "activism" in question not simply in terms of the role of states but in terms of understanding how far it is really resonating among different segments of society.

Goh addresses that question by considering the "quiet spread of alternative Islamic imaginaries" that constitute "spiritual resistance" to state-backed orthodoxies in Indonesia and Malaysia. Expressed through social media or performative direct protests, the movements described seem to attract a socially heterogeneous range of participants, and she argues that their more tolerant and humane understandings strike powerful chords with fellow citizens, not only because they have historical roots but because they are also developing new ones "in people's everyday mindful self-transformations and the convivial spaces generated." But we still need to know how powerful these "quiet" contestatory forces are proving.

To complete her argument about the need to radically rework the universal, Goh takes up Joel Kahn's final book, which brought Indonesian Sufi and Western Gnostic ideas into a common analytical perspective. Kahn's argument was radical because it questioned the reduction of epistemologies premised on the supernatural to the terms of "rational"

scientific analysis. In showing that Gnostics and Sufis shared similar forms of knowing whose practical ethical implications seem highly desirable in the modern world, Kahn's interculturalism produced the account of correspondence and linkage across the Asian and other worlds that Goh sees as necessary to transcend the limitations of inter-Asian dialogues through a true decolonization of knowledge production. This process would enable us to explore how different Western and Asian ways of knowing really are, and "how they may actually constitute each other," an issue central to arguments that situate the rise of "modern" liberal societies in the West in the context of the colonial world. Abandoning intellectual self-enclosure would also, Goh argues, enable Asian scholars to relate their ideas to European philosophical ideas about how to redefine radical politics in a way that might recover "a universality of political action across spatial and temporal differences." Yet in doing so, I can't help feeling that they might only be catching up with what some secular and religious community activists have already done in our interconnected world.

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Commentary

Searching for Cultural Alterity: Asia as the Counterpoint?

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How to develop a new epistemology—mundane, as in everyday life; intellectual, as in academic pursuance; and distinct from any from the West—has been a noble yet challenging endeavor for scholars in contemporary postcolonial worlds. Singaporean anthropologist Beng-Lan Goh's "The Question of Cultural Incommensurability: An Intercultural Interpretation Arising out of Southeast Asia" clearly demonstrates the tremendous effort she and others have put into this endeavor. While delving into the possibilities of including enormous cultural diversities, Goh includes the inevitable cautionary note about walking gingerly between cultural relativism and universal humanity—perennial issues among anthropologists. Goh's inspiration derives from her close reading of two Asian scholars: Kuan-Hsing Chen of Taiwan's cultural studies circle and Hindu-American historian Prasenjit Duara. Both advocate a new set of self-elevating modes of living and reasoning in order to develop non-Western methodologies and rationalities. The ultimate goal, in both cases, is to overcome the problem of cultural irreducibility in intercultural discourses while fostering revolutionary knowledge making to de-center Western hegemony.

Chen's formula of "critical syncretism," as summarized by Goh, can be achieved by individual intellectuals through a process of "self-critique, self-negation, and self-discovery" (Chen 2010, 98–99), a set of self-cultivation protocols surprisingly similar to what the Neo-Confucian school proposed (see de Bary 1989). Once accomplished, the said individual could transform him/herself to be devoid of all traps of Western colonialism: patriarchy, capitalism, racism, chauvinism, heterosexism, or nationalistic xenophobia. Chen's strategy is said to be capable of resisting both Western colonialism and narrow-minded nationalism. Duara's magic wand, on the other hand, echoes major South Asian cultural legacies of "circulatory history" and "dialogical transcendence." The notion of a circulatory flow of history is embedded in both Hindu and Buddhist theologies. Dialogical transcendence implies an incessant yearning for knowledge that is based on a person's entrenched cultural upbringing.

As in a kaleidoscope, the multistranded cultural landscapes in Asia allow the reflexive intellectual to develop a new sense of "self" closely compatible with the environment and a new intellectual inspiration that is devoid of Eurocentric trappings. Such a development can be seen in the grassroots self-help associations spreading like mushrooms in contemporary Asia. Using her own research on Sufism in Malaysia and that of Joel S. Kahn's comparable work in Indonesia, Goh argues that it is possible to develop new insights about resistance and orthodoxy through the local lens: "only by bringing differing narratives together that confront one another can we build a new universality of religious meanings that recognize the inseparability and interdependency of secular/rational and sacred/'irrational' logics."

While I appreciate Goh's exploration of the third way of knowledge, I would like to point out some of the seemingly insurmountable difficulties that appear to be overlooked by Goh and the scholars mentioned in this article. The first one involves the basic concepts, vocabularies, methods, and even semantics that we use in academic discourses. Needless to say, all the working terminologies we use in contemporary higher learning circles, both East and West, originated from Euro-American science-based traditions. Furthermore, English as a working language is so ubiquitous in international communications—as are US dollars in international trade—that it is difficult to abandon it or to find alternatives. Let me use an example to illustrate this point. An initiative I made in 2007 was to organize a regional anthropological association in East Asia, supposedly incorporating all five "Sinic"-oriented scholarly

communities of Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, Korea, and Japan. We encountered the first embarrassing moment when we gathered and discussed what languages to use in future meetings. The final result was to use English, even though one of the original purposes of the organization was to rid scholarship of the Anglo-American hegemony.

The same issue appears to haunt the current writers. After all, Chen, Duara, and Goh all write in English for English-speaking audiences and only secondarily to their local readers in Taiwan, India, and Singapore. They acquired academic recognition mainly because they addressed issues that were trendy in Euro-American circles, including critical cultural studies, postcolonialism, and deconstructionism. It is ironic to find that efforts to de-center the Euro-American knowledge system must rely on its expressive mediums for communication and its public forums for discussion. The materiality of communication is no less a haunting challenge than are new epistemologies.

A second challenge for Goh's work is the diffused nature of non-Western knowledge systems beyond the more-or-less coherent Euro-American science-based methodologies and rationalities. While it is easy to turn the concept of "the West and the Rest" on its head to claim the primacy of "the Rest," it is far more difficult to define the Rest and to elaborate on its meanings. Defining the West is relatively easy by comparison, with the implicit finger-pointing at the capitalist United States and its staunch allies Great Britain, France, and other smaller Western European nations. There is a core and there are peripheries, simple as that. But the Rest is fundamentally elusive. Goh's work is supposed to cover Southeast Asia. But in reality, it only concerns the Islamic sections of Malaysia and Indonesia, leaving out the Hindu Bali, Catholic Philippines, Christian Aceh, and animistic Papua New Guinea of the insular Southeast Asia, and the vast continental Southeast Asia of Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar. Finding common threads among these diverse cultural traditions would be next to impossible. When we turn to the epistemological issue of the West versus the Rest, it is the West that begets the Rest, not the other way around.

Last, I would like to point out some of the semantic confusions in this paper. The first one is the concept of "cultural relativism." For anthropologists, cultural relativism is not a moral stance, nor the opposite of universalism, as it is used by critical cultural studies scholars. Anthropologists use the concept to denote a research strategy or methodology—a perspective for an ethnographer to circumvent his/her ethnocentric biases when approaching other realities.

Another semantic issue concerns the distinction between "hybridity" and "syncretism." Insisting on one over the other is verging on splitting a hair by its genomic structure. All colonial regimes develop their unique feedback loops based on practical experiences and experimentations grounded in local conditions. As Terje Tvedt (2011) argues, the feedback loops may even flash back to their "motherland," as the British colonial expansion in Africa witnessed. Tvedt asks why the British marched up the Nile Valley and occupied the region of today's Uganda, Kenya, and Sudan in the 1890s, which led to the partition of Africa. Mainstream colonial theorists argued that it was a defensive strategy used by British imperialists to prevent other colonial rivals, especially France and Germany, from competing with the British interests in East Africa. However, according to Tvedt, it was the realization of the importance of the Nile River as a water source and its great hydrological potential that framed British policy in East Africa and sped up its march up the Nile River Valley in the late nineteenth century. At that time, there was a water shortage in British-occupied Egypt that threatened its cotton production; the country served as a main supplier to the Lancashire textile industry due to the reduction of cotton production in United States after the Civil War. A mixture of diverse factors, including British domestic cotton demands, water needs in the colony, security concerns about water sources, and possible competition from other colonial powers ultimately framed British expansionism in East Africa. Call it hybridity or syncretism, but the end result is inevitably the same: the scrambling of Africa. Perhaps concerned non-Western scholars should place more emphasis on the complexity of colonial histories to disentangle the diverse factors that shape their different outlooks.

While I deeply admire the ambition and empathize with its difficulty, the challenge for a non-Western academic to maintain scholarly autonomy is too great, for to reject Western science-based methodologies and rationalities is to enter an intellectual cul-de-sac. Building a de-centered knowledge system from scratch implies the invention of a new set of vocabularies, concepts, methodologies, and research protocols. It seems no one will be able to launch such an ambitious program, not now and not in the near future.

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Commentary

Advances in Overcoming Obsolete Dualisms

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This paper by Beng-Lan Goh is a well-argued and elegantly composed piece of work, timely addressing the interconnected issues of inter-Asian research commensurabilites and their relations with perspectives in "world anthropologies," or a transnational global anthropology, as well as with dichotomies like universalism versus particularism. The author blends her critical reading of works by Chen, Duara, and Kahn with some of her own research results in order to outline her own persuasive vision for third trajectories as an alternative beyond misleading dualisms.

In certain ways, this further elaborates several epistemological and methodological points that I have attempted to advance in some of my own work (Gingrich 2010, 2012), where pathways toward "weak universalism" were explored together with a critique of hegemonic Euro-American epistemological premises. After all, the problem of "incommensurability" raises questions of comparability that in turn are always connected to wider issues in the humanities and social sciences and in epistemology. Some of them Beng-Lan Goh adequately, albeit not extensively, weaves into her argument. Her outline of inspiring methodological premises in the work of Chen and Duara would have benefited by showing in more detail how this cross-fertilizes with Kahn's approaches. To my mind, this indicates the fuzzy zone of open questions that future debates and research activities might fruitfully engage with.

Some of these open issues include: How do we practice (and define) "inter-Asian" in ways that transcend empirical regionalism? How may we advance these third, nondualist approaches in ways that also adequately include West, Central, and South Asia? How do we best strengthen our methodological tools along lines that enhance practical cooperation while avoiding amateur philosophy?

Very few among these open questions are relevant for sociocultural anthropology alone. In her fine text, Beng-Lan Goh already has adequately addressed epistemological building blocks in the works of three other authors, and how these may be combined with ethnographic endeavors through the example of her own work. Two of the authors she takes her main inspirations from (Chen and Duara) are not professional anthropologists, actually. In that sense, the author also has opened up a highly relevant inter- and transdisciplinary dialogue that perhaps will be equally important as, if not even more important than, intradisciplinary reflections on these issues.

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Commentary

Tradition and Critique

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Beng-Lan Goh's reflections on Asia raise issues that are essential to current thinking about the impasses of the humanities in Africa as well. In my own country, South Africa, this thinking has been stimulated most recently by calls for the intellectual decolonization of the disciplines, originating primarily from a new generation of black university activists. More intensely than in a long time, this has focused attention on what counts as knowledge about the human condition in Africa, a continent still defined in too many ways by the historical marginalization of its people from the circle of humankind. Similar discussions took place on a pan-African scale in the decades around the wave of independence in the 1960s. These have withered since, as regimes of neoliberal austerity and violent predation have left little scope for intellectual activity to have a serious purchase on the public sphere. Perhaps new intellectuals are once again opening the space for a continental discussion along those lines, and Goh's account of critical inter-Asian discourse suggests inspiring examples. What this will require, though, are new approaches that cut through tired debates.

In the middle of the last century, African politicians and intellectuals made the idea of an African humanism central to how they debated the reconstruction of newly decolonized societies. Across the divides between negritude, African socialism, and Nkrumahism, they often shared certain conceptions of what that humanism should imply at that

conjuncture: most saliently, socialism and pan-Africanism. They also shared an overall sense that the humanism of Africa began with affirmative intersubjective relationships instead of the individual instantiation of human nature that informed modern European humanist thought. But they nonetheless staged important, enlivening debates. Most of all, they disputed the nature and sources of this ethical-political orientation. Was it a deep indigenous inheritance, a civilizational resource to be excavated from studies of precolonial societies? Or was it an intellectual tradition transfigured over and over in changing circumstances, including creative engagements with new cultural and political forms from elsewhere? Putting things so starkly runs the risk of oversimplifying the arguments, but it helps us see what a serious interest was taken in understanding the historical lives of African traditions.

Sadly, that serious interest has declined. The trend since the 1980s has been toward a mode of Africanist scholarship mostly embarrassed by what older work described under signs of tradition or a broad sense of African culture. One predominant line of work identifies tradition with colonial caricatures of it, such that the latter becomes the only worthwhile topic of study (e.g., Mamdani 1996, 2012). Other work looks more carefully at African creativity, but seeks it in forms that refuse the weight of the past, precolonial and colonial alike. Either way, tradition appears as sclerotic obfuscation, a fantasy of nativists and exoticists who by definition misrecognize African forms of life by discussing it (Mbembe 2002).

It is hard to imagine how something like Goh's inter-Asian critical discourse could take wing under these circumstances, for instance in a renewal of the transregional debates about African humanism that unfolded in the last century. But what would be needed to shift things? Striking in Goh's account is the forthright confidence she and her colleagues show in refusing to divide the study of intellectual traditions from that of historical processes. In too much work on Africa, to approach the study of thought in a historical way means either debunking claims to historical depth or (what amounts to the same) collapsing ideation into the most immediate limits of the present. It is not too hard to identify the reasons for this cynicism in the long abuse of the discourse of tradition to the most reactionary ends. But it is very hard to see how an unreflexively cynical posture—which is also, of course, profoundly unhistorical—can ultimately contribute much to a discourse on African thought that is both affirmative and emancipatory.

To continue with that latter theme, what also stands out in Goh's essay is the impulse to identify resources for historical critique. This is discourse on civilizational thought not miscast as ossified custom—whether for its critics or its enthusiasts—but grasped instead as a moment of reflection in the process of worldly praxis. As she points out in her reports of her and her colleagues' work, the economic and ecological crises we face now make the need for such reflections very urgent. Indeed, a very great part of our predicament is the absence of thought itself: not because no one is thinking, but rather because it is difficult to identify how a critical rationality could gain purchase on the current course of historical development.

If I were to raise one question in response to Goh, it would thus be to push us to ask why this is the case. In the left traditions from which she tells us this interest in critical inter-Asian discourse has emerged, one of the major concerns of critical theory has been to trace the social sources of historical irrationality. In this framing, the unworldliness of thought, its lack of worldly purchase, reflects a broader estrangement of deliberate human action from the world it seeks to change. Is this perhaps what we also see in the sclerotic image of African tradition I have noted? If it is, then the estrangement of tradition from historical process offers us a starting point for critical social inquiry, rather than a triumph of deconstruction. Why is it that the rich resources for thought that lie in all our civilizational spaces are not being brought in a powerful way to bear on current problems? Is it because they are nativist fantasies, as the cynics would have us believe, or is their very appearance as such a symptom of the crisis in which we find ourselves historically?

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