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Beyond the culturalist problematic: Towards a global social science in the Asian Century?

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Introduction

This volume engages with debates about research and study on Asia and engaging with the knowledge produced in the Asian region in the next few decades.¹ My argument is simple: the advent of the so-called Asian Century is not simply about making us knowledgeable about Asia or developing institutional capacities for such knowledge. Rather, it also challenges some of the fundamental assumptions of the social sciences. This has become problematic for some of the key assumptions driving Asian studies. It has also become problematic, in the Australian context, for some of the public policy assumptions about 'Asia literacy', or 'Asia capability' as it is called in its latest incarnation (Asialink 2013; Department of Education 2014; see also Heryanto in this volume). In turn, this has a number of implications for the way we do research on Asia as well

¹ As noted in the introduction to this volume, the terms of debate shift between focusing on 'Asia', the 'Asia-Pacific', the 'Indo-Pacific', the 'Pacific' or the 'Pacific Rim'.

as broader public policy implications for research investment—particularly in which research programs to invest, as well as the kinds of skills and expertise we need to ‘study Asia’.

In short, my argument is not about how we respond to the Asian Century, but more about the way the Asian Century challenges us to move beyond some of the defining assumptions of mainstream social sciences as well as area studies. In the Australian context, if we want to make the study of Asia central to our basic research mission in the social sciences, we have to transcend the modernisation framework and the culturalist problematic that have been the basis of so much of the public policy discussion of social science and area studies. The key question is not about producing knowledge about Asia, but how, and in what way, the study of Asia can contribute to determining the parameters of a truly global social science. I argue in this chapter that the rise of Asia poses the possibility of building a ‘global social science’, but constructing this requires more than adding Asia to the social science pot. Building a global social science requires us to transcend some of the fundamental assumptions that have guided social science and area studies in Australia and elsewhere (see also the introduction to this volume and chapters by Connell and Patel).

The culturalist problematic is central to the way in which area studies have been conceived and organised. The area studies paradigm incorporates a configuration of research problems based on an attempt to understand a particular geographical ‘area’. It lies outside the conventional discipline-centred perspective of academia. It is defined in terms of the distinctive characteristics and circumstances of the area itself. Even postcolonial or postmodernist responses—such as the search for alternative pathways of modernity (Gaonkar 2001)—are trapped within these unhelpful binaries of the West and Asia.

I will come back to this point in relation to Australian public policy on research and teaching on Asia, but there is a broader point to be made about the dominant ways of understanding Asia. Here, the implicit assumption of much of the social science research on Asia and various area studies work is that ‘Asia’ is benchmarked against European experience, whether in terms of being exceptional or deviant, or of replicating some kind of previous social, political and economic trajectory in Western Europe or North America.

There is now a discussion about the future of area studies, and Asian studies in particular. In the United States, of course, the emergence and growth of area studies were marked by the Cold War (see also Chapter 7 in this volume). The end of the Cold War has not seen the end of area studies, but there is an epistemic anxiety about ‘what it is’ and how and what we should do, even as the emphasis has shifted to studying Asia for trade and economic reasons. As I argue below, such an area studies focus has had a particular resonance

in Australia. It has been based on an underlying assumption that Australia needs to be literate about the region ‘out there’, which at the same time helps to reproduce a cartographic boundary.

In this chapter, I identify and contextualise the key elements of this culturalist problem. I argue that this culturalist paradigm has shaped public policy strategies structured around notions of Asian literacy and capability. In the final section of the chapter, I chart a new problem-oriented strategy that avoids some of the pitfalls of the culturalist problematic, and that responds to the changing social and political circumstances that have made the Asian literacy model increasingly ineffective in the Asian Century. Such a problem-solving approach offers us a path towards building a global social science.

The culturalist problematic and Asia literacy and capability

While notions of Asia capability or Asia literacy central to Australian educational strategies are carefully framed in technocratic policy language, they carry the cultural binaries of Western and non-Western societies (Mamdani 1996). The implicit ‘modernisation’ framework and the associated binaries are what account for a surprisingly resonant culturalist definition of the region that is visible in so many public policy attempts to invest in research and engagement on Asia. This culturalist understanding is evident in the White Paper *Australia in the Asian Century* released by former prime minister Julia Gillard (Commonwealth of Australia 2012). This report—though written by a formidable team of technocrats—adopts the notion of Asia capability to explain how the public sector, including universities, and the private sector can drive engagement with the region. In this context, the report recommends significant investment in five priority Asian languages. It is not language training per se that is at issue here but the way these public policies reinforce a particular culturalist understanding of the region. While this report has been placed in political cold storage since the election of the Abbott Liberal government, some of its underlying assumptions continue to frame current government policies, particularly in relation to the ‘New Colombo Plan’ to facilitate Australian student mobility in Asia (see also the introduction to this volume).

Culturalism in this context refers to a set of institutional and intellectual practices that separate the cultural process from underlying social and political relationships. The cultural process is then reduced to a set of abstract traits (linguistic, religious, and so on), which become, in turn, the basis for understanding the social and political processes in a particular geographical area. It is useful, I think, to view culturalism as a kind of problematic that we

are able to understand in a range of different and often diverse approaches to the region, not in the form of their content, but in terms of the presence of a set of underlying problems that these approaches attempt to resolve. These problems often revolve around explaining why a particular culture or area is not like 'us', thereby producing a very specific problem of 'literacy'. At the core of this 'culturalism' is the way that social and political relations—issues of power and conflict—are displaced or replaced with cultural understandings of political and social problems. Nevertheless, the crucial point here is how non-material ways of understanding social and political change come to dominate the study of Asia in ways reminiscent of what Sternhell (2009) has recently illuminated as a powerful strain within conservative and liberal strands of counter-Enlightenment political theorising.

It is in the social sciences and area studies that these notions of culturalism have had a deep impact on the study of non-Western societies and, in particular, the study of Asia. In fact, the culturalist problematic continues to impact on the way social sciences are organised in the region. Patel (2006; and in this volume) has argued that these notions of culturalism have roots in colonial practices of rule—defining and ordering notions of custom that lent themselves to a technology of rule that extensively utilised notions such as 'caste' and 'tribe' for organising political rule—a point that is central in the work of scholars such as Mamdani (1996) and Dirks (2001). In the post-World War II period, these culturalist understandings emerged in the guise of modernisation theory—an emergence that has now been well documented (Higgott 1983). Moreover, these culturalist ideas have continued to resonate in the development and organisation of social sciences in postcolonial countries where Orientalist 'binaries were now reframed to incorporate the traditional-modern dichotomies and legitimize the colonial project of modernity that divided the peoples of the world into two groups, the traditional and the modern' (Patel 2006: 388).

The influence of this culturalism is felt not just in mainstream social sciences but also in various postmodernist guises. In an insightful analysis of the influential work of Ashis Nandy, Bonnett (2011), for example, argues that Nandy's notion of authentic tradition—as a site of political resistance—is paradoxically framed by a notion of Occidentalism that in turn diminishes the critical potential of this notion of tradition as political resistance. The point is that, even though the Orientalist boundaries that we have identified earlier might change, situating the problem in terms of the 'resistance of tradition' is still within the culturalist problematic. An analysis of this tradition of work is beyond the scope of this short essay, but the broader argument is that even some postcolonial theories frame questions of social and political transformation in terms of conflict over 'cultural' stakes and boundaries, with 'the cultural' having its own distinctive set of dynamics.

Certainly, modernisation has been challenged by the rapid social and economic transformation of Asia, but culturalism as an intellectual and institutional practice remains a powerful influence in both area studies and social sciences. It is especially pronounced in the analysis and understanding of the rise of China, which is often seen in terms of notions of a return to civilisational practice. To take an example from international relations, Kang (2007) has contested—in my view, persuasively—the idea that Asia will mirror Europe's past. He then, however, reinserts an essentialised notion of East Asian history to explain the rise of China in terms of Asia's cultural past. According to this view, the rise of China needs to be understood in the context of the East Asian version of informal and hierarchical relationships between states. The Asian Century heralds a return not just to China's past, but also to a past seen in terms of a reassertion of underlying cultural practices. Social and political processes—in Kang's case, the relationships between states—are understood in terms of the unfolding of a set of non-material values. It is this culturalist glue that binds older strands of modernisation theory with notions of Chinese or East Asian civilisational practice.

In an illuminating article, Callahan proposes what he terms a new 'Sino speak'—reflected, for example, in the work of Kang or the more popular writing of Martin Jacques—which frames the arguments of several public intellectuals and scholars working on China. This is, of course, a strand of work on China and is not meant to include the whole body of social and political studies of Chinese social and political transformation. Nevertheless, it is a vein of thinking that is particularly influential within policymaking communities. On this basis, Callahan argues that Sino-speak is founded on the idea that 'China' is exceptional, and is therefore forging an alternative modernity shaped by its distinctive cultural trajectories. Sino-speak, Callahan notes, employs 'a set of distinctions—convergence/divergence, East/West, tradition/modernity, civil/military and inside/outside—to make sense of China's future and the world's future' (Callahan 2012: 36). This depoliticises the material context of social and political transformation to privilege a particular form—to use Mamdani's words—of 'culture talk'.

Australian public policy and the culturalist problematic

These culturalist ideas have had a distinctive impact on Australian public policy strategies for teaching and research on Asia. The decision to invest a substantial multi-million dollar award to the China Studies Centre at The Australian National University neatly illustrates this argument. Geremie Barmé (2005),

the Director of the China Studies Centre, has sought to articulate what he calls 'a new Sinology' as a mode of managing Australia's engagement with a rising China and, indeed, with the broader Sinophone world. This approach affirms a conversation and intermingling that also emphasise strong scholastic underpinnings in the classical and modern Chinese language and studies. In line with the culturalist problematic that we have identified, in this new Sinology, Barmé emphasises the distinctive cultural foundations—in almost Orientalist fashion—on which we need to engage with a newly ascendant China. It follows that understanding and engaging with this cultural distinction requires the development of 'cultural competence'. In fact, the politics of engagement is seen in terms of a broader transcultural civilisational dialogue between Australia and the Sinic world. Obscured in this culturalist analysis is the fact that Chinese 'modernity' is shaped by its engagement with the global capitalist economy and forms the foundations of its compressed capitalist development.

The more significant feature of this new Sinology is the way it fits with the broader thrust of Australian investment in research and teaching in Asia. The China Studies Centre at The Australian National University was the beneficiary of a generous research grant from the Commonwealth to pursue its research agenda. There is a link between the politics of Australian engagement with the region and the public investment in teaching and research on the program of 'cultural' literacy. The implicit rationale of many proponents of increased research investment in the region is underpinned by an amorphous notion of Asia literacy linked to an engagement with, and an understanding of, the distinctive cultural and civilisational foundations of Australia's key neighbours—such as Japan, Indonesia, China and India—depending on the flavour of the era. Accordingly, this logic suggests that in order to engage more effectively with the region, we need to become more Asia literate. As such, this Asia literacy strategy for building research capacity implicitly favours an area studies approach with an emphasis on the importance of language and culture. Centres for Asian studies, as well as more specific country-oriented institutes, are creatures of the political and institutional circumstances that led to their establishment in the past few decades.

The Asian Century White Paper (Commonwealth of Australia 2012) is preoccupied with a broad-ranging interest in the institutional and governance reforms of public as well as private institutions for the Asian Century. This is the rub: governance reform is seen in terms of the technocratic engineering of governing institutions to make them more capable of competing in the region. This capability, however, is seen in cultural terms. For example, the White Paper advocates getting senior executives of public and private institutions to speak an Asian language. The report recommends an extensive program of student mobility—a policy adopted by both the Gillard–Rudd governments and the

Abbott government—but this mobility is seen in terms of expanding the cultural competence of Australian students. In essence, the White Paper argues that the crucial problem lies in building a set of cultural capabilities that it deems as Asia capability—a concept influenced by the business-backed Asialink centre at the University of Melbourne. The White Paper argues for an increase in ‘the number of workplaces that can attract, use and retain Asia-capable talent—people who have the “knowledge, skills and mindset” for successful engagement in Asia’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2012: 180). The report suggests that, in tandem with this rationale, public investment in teaching and resources is governed by these Asia capability objectives.

None of this is new in Australian public policy. This ‘culturalist problematic’, as Walker (1999), Jayasuriya (2010) and Beeson and Jayasuriya (2009) have argued, has a much longer provenance in twentieth-century Australia. A consistent theme running across various mission statements and public policies has been the idea of Asia literacy on research and teaching of Asian studies dating from the Auchmuty Report (Auchmuty 1971), followed by those of FitzGerald (1980) and Ingleson (Asian Studies Council 1989). Aligned with the broad thrust of the Garnaut Report on Australia–Asia relations (Garnaut 1989), this led to repeated calls for research capacity to help Australia understand the distinctive cultural and social characters of the region as part of its engagement strategy.

In fact, notions of Asia literacy have been prevalent for much of the twentieth century. For example, this culturalist problematic found a sympathetic reception within the Institute of Pacific Relations (IPR) based in the United States, with branches in New South Wales and Victoria (Akami 2002). A notable work of the IPR was the study by Jack Shepherd—an Australian based at the IPR in New York—entitled *Australian interests and policies in the Far East* (1939). In some ways, this remarkable work foreshadowed the Garnaut Report (1989) in highlighting Australia’s emerging role as a Pacific power in a culturally distinctive East Asian region with growing developmental potential. Like many others in the IPR, Shepherd sought to understand development and international relations through newly emerging social science techniques. The work of those such as Shepherd reflected an attempt to understand economic development in non-European contexts, which in some ways anticipated the modernisation theories of the 1950s and 1960s, albeit without the Cold War underpinning. These early studies sought to understand economic development as an experiment in how ‘to secure cultural integrity while also engineering economic modernity’ (Brown 1990: 81). Hence, the Asia-Pacific region provided some clear lessons for Australia’s own political and economic development. Another key intellectual in the IPR in the interwar period was Frederic Eggleston, an influential public intellectual and politician who played an influential role in the formation of the

Research School of Pacific Studies (later the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies) at The Australian National University (Akami 2001: 101–31; see also the introduction to this volume).

It is evident that this culturalist problematic has had considerable impact on shaping public policies towards the study and teaching of Asia. How, though, do we explain the relationship between public policy on Asian engagement and this culturalism? One reason for this relationship is that there is a curious symmetry between the technocratic politics of engagement and culturalism. The Garnaut Report and the Asian Century White Paper were both strongly influenced by the idea that Asian engagement needed the right set of economic policies, but the extra economic dimensions of the engagement were often seen in cultural terms. There is much in the White Paper about the need for productivity and growth in order to compete in the Asian Century, but these objectives are seen in depoliticised terms as requiring the right ‘cultural fix’. On this basis, the politics of engagement is dislocated from the economic and social relations of power and conflict. Consequently, when the White Paper grapples with the key problem of institutional collaboration and partnership of business and government—which it sees as vital for engagement—it frames these problems as one of developing the cultural skills, such as language, which are seen as essential for collaboration. Institutional reform, in this view, is depoliticised in favour of a narrative of cultural engagement divorced from the messy political and social conflicts of institutional transformation in Australia.

For this reason, there is an affinity between the technocratic politics of engagement or institutional reform and the culturalist problematic. To the extent that institutional reform becomes a central plank of technocratic projects, the ‘extra economic’ problems associated with it are seen in depoliticised terms as failures of cultural adaptation. Stoler (2008) argues that epistemic anxieties arise when technocrats face circumstances and problems for which their analytical skills prove to be a poor fit for the policy or regulatory objectives they seek to manage. In the case of Asian engagement, this failure leads to the use of culturalist frameworks to manage new problems or issues, but in a way that avoids the analysis of political and social conflict. It is this affinity between the culturalist and technocratic analyses that then becomes a significant driver of policy investment in teaching and research in Asia. This is seen in the priority given to language in the White Paper. More generally, it is evident in the general bias towards the humanities disciplines, and the corresponding neglect of social sciences.

The other key issues relating to the relationship between public policy on Asian engagement and the effects of the culturalist problematic are the insulation and demarcation of the region from Australia. Walker (1999) has argued that there is a ‘cartographic anxiety’ in Australian engagement with the region. He argues that

the ‘powerful masculinising and racialising impulse in Australian nationalism would have been a great deal less intense, had it not been for the geo-political threat attributed to awakening Asia from the 1880s’ (Walker 1999: 5). As I have observed elsewhere (Jayasuriya 2010), these cartographic notions of Asian engagement have become central to political projects of economic modernisation after the Hawke–Keating reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. In this political project, ‘Asia’ was seen in terms of the economic benefits—manifested in a growing middle class—that it could provide as the basis of continued Australian prosperity. This would only occur, however, if Asia could modernise and adapt its institutions to take advantage of the region’s economic growth. These politics of modernisation were a core element of the statecraft of the Labor governments. Engaging with Asia is not only central to economic modernisation, it is also related to the social modernisation of Australia—associated with policies of Asia literacy and multiculturalism.

It is here that public investment in the study and teaching of Asia has become a central component of the political project of Asian engagement. This is best summed up by Kevin Rudd, in his first incarnation as prime minister, when he hoped that ‘we become not just the most Asia-literate country in the collective west but also the most China-literate country, because it’s going to be such a huge impacting factor for Australia’s future’ (quoted in Walker 2013: 28). This quote is revealing, in that programs of Asia literacy are core elements not only of the engagement policy, but also of the way in which it serves to demarcate cultural boundaries between Australia and the region. It is for this reason that public investment in the teaching and study of Asia, underpinned by the culturalist problematic of Asia literacy or Asia capability, has been a pivotal component of statecraft projects of economic modernisation in Australia.

Towards a problem-solving approach

These Asia capability approaches propose that it is necessary to become literate about a region ‘out there’ rather than generating an in-depth knowledge of a common set of problems pertaining to the region as a whole. It is not area studies per se that is problematic here but the fact that these approaches are located within an Asia literacy strategy that rests on a particular set of assumptions about the mainsprings of social and political change. These assumptions effectively depoliticise or marginalise economic and social problems, while downplaying the fact that challenges in the region are often of a trans-boundary nature. Consequently, this focus on the understanding of the distinctiveness of cultural arrangements sidelines the analysis of common trends, problems and processes.

To overcome the limitations of the Asia literacy model research strategy, which has been dominant in recent times, I suggest that we adopt a ‘problem-oriented research strategy’ (PORS) based on the new social and political circumstances of the region. This strategy will mould the research around key issues, problems and puzzles of social, economic and political transformation pertaining to the region as a whole. These are rooted in tangible real-world problems, but their analysis has broader theoretical relevance for social science and humanities disciplines. As such, this orientation will enable us to move beyond simplistic distinctions between applied and basic research, and involve the participation of a broader range of actors—stakeholders, if you like—in the research enterprise.

Increasingly, the governance challenges confronting the region, such as the issue of climate change or financial governance, are the same as those confronting Australian policymakers. Clearly, we need to focus much more on confronting and dealing with these common sets of issues that are often transnational rather than national in origin, while at the same time understanding how they are contested within particular contexts. For this reason, it is imperative that we understand the specificities of countries within our region in a way that locates social, cultural and political change in the broader context of capitalist transformation in the region.

One interesting example of such an approach is what the World Bank calls a ‘problem-driven’ approach to governance reform and political economy analysis, where it is argued that studies of governance and institutional reform have much to gain by adopting a problem-driven approach. This approach to governance and political economy analysis ‘focuses on particular challenges or opportunities, such as analysing why reforms in the power or health sector or those aimed at improving urban development might not have gained traction and what could be done differently to move forward’ (World Bank 2009: viii).

Adopting such a perspective enables a specific approach to research on issues of governance reform that focuses on the specific vulnerabilities and problems for reform. This also enables the identification of specific institutional and political economy drivers of both successful and failed reforms. While we may quibble with conclusions reached by this approach—and I certainly do—it has much to warrant serious consideration of a problem-oriented rationale for research on governance reform, and provides an example of a PORS, which differs from the standard approach hitherto operative in the Asia literacy mode of research.

This new approach has a strong trans-disciplinary focus in examining the nature of research problems in its purview. At the same time, it places emphasis on the transnational nature of many contemporary problems, which simply cannot be dealt with in Asia literacy research models. While I do not intend to buy into what has come to be known as the broader debate on Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge, the PORS advanced here clearly has affinities with the so-called

Mode 2 forms of knowledge production that emphasise real-world problems and notions of trans-disciplinarity (Gibbons et al. 1994). Mode 1 knowledge is discipline-based in basic research while Mode 2 knowledge places emphasis on problem solving and an inter-disciplinary approach to knowledge production.

The recent emphasis on the Asian Century coincides with this significant shift in the sites and forms of knowledge production. In contrast with the discipline-based focus on knowledge in Modes 1 and 2, knowledge is not rigidly limited to academia, but is located in various webs of strategic alliances and collaborations and includes multiple stakeholders. The crucial point here is that this approach deals with problems within a ‘specific and localised context’ (Gibbons et al. 1994: 3). While it may be stretching this shift towards a new form of knowledge, it may be useful to consider this as a shift in the balance between Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge within the social sciences.

It is clear that the preoccupation with Asia literacy or Asia capability fails to recognise the broader shifts in the nature of social science knowledge. Indeed, the failure of some of our main social science organisations to recognise these shifts has meant that they have not been able to present a persuasive case for the importance of investing in social science research as a means of dealing with pressing social and economic problems in the region. A striking contrast here is the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) in the United States, which has been active in promoting the kind of problem-solving strategy advocated here. Nevertheless, the rationale advanced here for a PORS does not depend on arguments about changing notions of knowledge production. Neither do we argue for abandoning country-focused studies or area studies—an expertise that is also crucial to our strategy. These are situated, however, within an orientation that departs from outdated notions of Asia literacy.

Key features of this approach

Let me summarise this model. The key features are:

- an issue or problem-oriented strategy that bypasses the country-focused or area studies Asia literacy models
- a research enterprise that gives weight to the transnational and trans-disciplinary nature of contemporary problems such as inequality or climate change and, as such, calls for work across the disciplines
- an emphasis on the importance of solving problems as a way of advancing basic social science, and the potential to build partnerships with actors—academic and non-academic—in the formulation and organisation of projects, so that the funding of research needs to be couched in non-instrumental ways.

No doubt, this approach is not devoid of problems—such as issues of academic autonomy—which will need to be properly managed and organised. There is also a serious danger of research becoming instrumental and driven by short-term considerations. In thinking about these issues, however, we need to connect the idea of problem solving with a more general concern about the challenges of providing funding and distributing public and collective goods. The challenge for the social scientist is to conceive of these goods beyond the ‘national frame’ and, at the same time, to consider how to engage with multiple groups and interests in the formulation of these global societal challenges.

The final advantage of this problem-oriented strategy is that there is much that we can learn from Asia-based social scientists dealing with contemporary challenges and problems that are not simply universal. To provide a few examples: Chinese scholar Cui Zhiyuan (2005) has emerged as one of the key thinkers of the Chinese New Left. We might disagree with the framework he has developed in his writing—namely, to theorise the notion of property as a bundle of rights in Chinese economic reforms. Nonetheless, his framework allows him to move beyond a simple identification of Chinese enterprises as either private or state. He forces us to think about the nature of state enterprise and the possibilities of market reform in a more complex and sophisticated way. This has significant implications for the increasingly hybrid nature of property in the West, as much as in China. It also has implications for Western, including Australian, attempts to regulate foreign investment by state-owned Chinese enterprises. In a different context, Thai scholar Pasuk Phongpaichit has worked extensively on the informal economy—sex work and gambling—and the way it shapes not just the formal economy but also structures of politics (Phongpaichit et al. 1998). Her work on the informal economy is of interest not just in Thailand, but also has wider ramification for countries like Australia, where the gambling and sex industries have become key economic players. One final example: the Indian political scientist Neera Chandhoke has written perceptively and critically on issues of civil society organisation and the state, particularly around partnership with the state. She argues that recent moves towards partnership have blunted the political edge of civil society. This is a point that applies not just to India but also to the broader changes in the relationship between civil society and the state in other countries (Chandhoke 1995).

Conclusion: A global social science?

This chapter has touched on only one dimension—the culturalist problematic—of the difficulty of constructing a global social science. Equally important—and this is really the subject for another essay—is to move beyond the methodological nationalism of the social sciences. Methodological nationalism takes for granted

the nation-state and society as its frame of reference (see also Patel in this volume). Methodological nationalism is ingrained in the social sciences. Certainly, given that the nation-state and society are more visible in the postcolonial era, the process of nation-state formation remains a prominent feature of area studies. Nevertheless, the dominant focus of area studies continues to be territorially bounded within the nation-state and society.

A critical issue relating to methodological nationalism is its failure to recognise that many of the pressing concerns—such as the provision of public goods, inequality and migration—can no longer be isolated within a national context. The source and transformation of global forces have challenged some of these national elements. This clearly suggests that one of the defining features of global social science is likely to be the adoption of a transnational perspective, denoting a close examination of the social and political mechanisms that link various parts of the globe. It is more useful to consider the entanglement of the United States and China in the emerging Asian economy than to concentrate on unproductive debates over the demise of the United States or the rise of Asia. It seems to me that the connections and linkages are precisely what make the rapid capitalist transformation of China more explicable. The fact that party capitalism in China feeds on the debt of private consumption in the United States is just one example of how a focus on transnational linkages enhances our understanding of the great transformation now under way in Asia.

These transnational processes have always been with us, but it is clear that the nature of these interconnections and mechanisms has intensified in a way that challenges some of the methodological, nationalist assumptions of the culturalist problematic. Again, none of this should be surprising for those who study Asia seriously. It needs to be acknowledged that the very concept of Asia itself is a product of these changing connections and networks. Scholars of Asia are ideally placed to exploit the advantages of such a transnational perspective. To this end, however, we need to shift away from the area studies approach that defines so much of the research on Asia.

Finally, and most importantly, this requires building a real set of institutional partnerships and linkages with the rapidly developing social science community in Asia. This illustrates the need for a pivotal shift in the nature of the production of knowledge on Asia that will impact on the methods and priorities of research in countries such as Australia and the United States. No doubt, scholars in Asia, Australia and the United States work within very different political constraints, but here is the opportunity to build a more global as well as a more equitable social science community. All of this requires that we move beyond the culturalist problematic and the associated notions of Asia literacy and Asia capability that have shaped Australian public policy.

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