Asian Networks vs. Asian-Studies Networks: On Reflexivity and Generational Tensions in Western Academe

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Introduction

In newly-industrialised Europe, thinkers like Max Weber and Karl Marx cited Confucianism as the one single factor responsible for holding East Asia back economically.[1] Then in the 1950s, Karl Wittfogel blasted what he saw as a region afflicted with "Oriental despotism".[2] In the early 1990s, following the Tiananmen Massacre, Bill Jenner described Chinese society as groaning under "the tyranny of history".[3] Broadly speaking, Confucianism was associated in the West with particularism, stifling orthodoxy and nebulous family business networks; it was seen as suppressing the emergence of civil society.

Yet, more recently, the very same buzzword – Confucianism – is suddenly bandied about by best-selling authors and some scholars to explain the phenomenal growth of the East Asian economy in the 21st century. Confucian business networks, we are told, nowadays actually account for the dynamism of the Chinese diaspora in South East Asia, and the provisions of *guanxi* ('connections') underwrite the PRC's rising private sector.[4] The water is muddied furthermore, as many countries in the region have themselves joined the chorus of these Western academics, shedding various Western 'isms' for 'Confucian values' as the binding narrative of East Asia's tilt at economic supremacy.

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[1] Marx (1867); Weber (1922).
[2] Wittfogel (1957).
[3] Jenner (1994).
[4] See, e.g.Redding and Witt (2007); Hamilton (2006).

ISBN 978-1-74076-225-0 http://www.aust-neth.net/transmission_proceedings

ASIAN NETWORKS VS. ASIAN-STUDIES NETWORKS: ON REFLEXIVITY AND GENERATIONAL TENSIONS IN WESTERN ACADEME

In this brief article, I would like to broach the obvious: the notion of 'networks' as being particularly Asian, or Chinese, is misguided. So is the overemphasis on 'networks' in much of the academic literature on China's rise. Drawing on observed phenomenon in American and Australian academe, I will try to sketch out why networks -- or 'circles of esteem' -- are significant everywhere; where and how they occur in Western academe, and by implication – how they pervade and compromise academic recruitment and research excellence.[5]

Fairbank the Mortal

Let me begin by pointing to none other than the late John King Fairbank (1907-1991), perhaps the most venerable Western expert on China in the 20th century. Aspiring graduate students were often referred by supervisors to his countless monographs Chinese history. For some this deference was about elementary education and inspiration – an effort to winkle out the ins and outs of the field. Placed as they were at very bottom of the academic food chain, a good many of these students might have also combed books and journals for hints as to precisely how and why Fairbank achieved intellectual stardom. But hints about Fairbank the mortal, unless one had particularly well-informed supervisors, were not forthcoming.

Today, such hints are only marginally easier to find because academics, who are ordinarily quite adept at deconstructing external structures of authority, still avoid by and large critiquing the dynamics of their own field in broad daylight. Having recently stumbled over one of these rare hints, I would like to share it with readers, because what subsequently emerges is that 'Confucian paternalism' has not merely served as distant observers' jargon in Sinology but could, to some extent, also characterise the inner dynamics of the field itself.

Now-retired prominent China historian John Israel, upon recalling Fairbank as his supervisor, has told an interviewer in a moment of candour:

[5] On 'circles of esteem', see Cribb's path-breaking study (2005).

> Fairbank was extremely Chinese in his view that the teacher-student relationship didn't end with the granting of a degree but continued over a lifetime. As a 50-year-old professor, I still counted on John (as I finally managed to call him) for fellowship recommendations. My [second] book, which materialised several years after his death, would never have been published without his encouragement and prodding.[6]

Our conference theme was transmission of academic *values* in Asian Studies, but discerning "early-career" Academics – some, at this day and age, having landed their first casual position at 40 – might think Israel's remark actually invites a frank discussion about the transmission of academic *power*. The 'values' underlying the sort of common student-supervisor relationship described above bespeak decency on a personal level but -- on an impersonal level -- are suggestive of the significance of client-patron pacts in the field.

We find such pacts not just in academia of course but, strangely enough, they endure in academia much longer than in many other walks of life. In other words, academics who usually view themselves as critical, open-minded human beings seem to accept that when it comes to scoring fellowships and getting research published, who you know is often more important than what you know , and that propitiating 'circles of esteem' (i.e. 'networking') is inevitably the cornerstone of an Early-Career Academic's life; that research excellence is not so much a function of one's talents, inquisitive mind and hard work but of the Elders one aligns oneself with in the corridors of academic power or over conference drinks.

To some extent, Israel's remark also suggests that the notion that our field Elders have lived through harder times does not always ring true. Technological advances mean that typing away a thesis is perhaps easier than it used to be, but the job market battles facing Early-Career academics seem – all other endowment factors being equal – much more difficult nowadays. The universalisation of tertiary education has over the last three decades brought to the market more PhD holders, but has not created a commensurate

[6] Lu (2009), p. 106.

number of permanent research positions. Concomitantly, academic wages in the West have seen considerable decline as compared with other sectors, particularly in the UK and Australia.[7]

Australian PhD students struggling to put together a thesis in three years with pitiful travel and fieldwork allowances, might be interested to know that in Israel's generation "[b]ecause American graduate students were so few in number and because our scholarships placed us in the upper echelons of Taiwan's underdeveloped economy, we gained admission to social circles otherwise inaccessible to the humble graduate student".[8] In other words, up until the late 1970s many Western PhD students undertaking fieldwork in Asia actually had an easier ride: they had enjoyed greater purchasing power and more esteem in the society they observed. The flipside was, to be sure, that those with keen interest in China could only go to Taiwan for political reasons.

In private, some retired or nearly-retired Asianists would admit that their juniors are on the whole much less fortunate than they were. Some would offer consolation by pointing to cyclical nature of the job market, although a downturn in academic work conditions and pay has not been interrupted since the 1980s. Equally important, teaching workloads, job insecurity and voracious demands for external funding and publications are all on the rise. In popular literature, Baby-Boom professors' antics and privileges are lampooned, but in the corridors of academic power one is more likely to hear professors complaining about the outrageous sense of entitlement Generation X displays.[9]

'Theory' and 'Reality'

The reluctance of Professors to say formally that theirs was an easier professional journey is symptomatic of the widening gap between private and public discourse in the field. It is a mystery to me why so

[7] Stevens (2004).
[8] Lu (2009), p. 109.
[9] For a pertinent overview of this generational conflict, see Davis (1997); Alsop (2008). The divisions here seem, by and large, to cross traditional political prescripts.

many Asia scholars of deconstructionist, post-modern and post-colonial bent switch off their hyper-sensitive semiotic antennae when it comes to generational power struggles: perhaps it is 'politically' safer to ruminate in public about well-tried paths like 'class struggle', 'alterity' or the 'neo-colonial' exploitation of third-world countries. Such terms would certainly chime with the sanctimonious, left-of-centre proclivity of many fellow academics in the humanities.

While so many of us are jostling to speak for the 'subaltern' and are obsessed with themes of Asian submission, millions of young students from once-colonised parts of Asia are taking to Western university education, and are ably and rightfully exercising their right to compete for academic jobs there. Analysts tell us Asia itself will, before long, reclaim its historic role as the centre of gravity of the world economy and fountainhead of technological advancement. It seems we live in the twilight of Western hegemony, whereas many of our Elders have not yet intellectually recovered from the Vietnam War. By the time they sober up from their stupor of anti-Americanism, they might realise the new World Order, albeit led by regimes that once had the sympathy of many in the humanities, is not the one they had hoped for.

Western politicians of all political persuasions have realised the complexity of Asia's resurgence and its far-reaching implications for countries such as Australia, but discourse in the humanities is increasingly removed from most people's lives. This is perhaps because 'reality' itself has become subject for academic derision in this age of cultural relativism. Thus, engaging in historical 'imaginaries' pays more dividends than no-frills historiography; 'interpellated' ideological constructs are exposed in seemingly harmless and readily available texts; they immediately grab academics' attention while data gleaned and analysed over many years of archival research are brushed aside.

It seems a big part of the problem is the premium we place in Western humanities on theory itself, and the contempt some feel for our 'positivist' colleagues in Asian universities. Historic 'imageries' are thus upstaging history itself; syntax and metonym are overshadowing events; and 'narrative' is supplanting evidence in some of the most

prestigious English-language journals of the field. Prominent Yale historian Jonathan Spence's observation is valuable in that regard:

> "[M]y personal opinion is that [any] kind of overstatement of a theoretical approach is somehow limiting. We know from experience, or just from history, that most social science theories are quite fleeting. They were quite transitory. They were taken immensely seriously by scholars of the time. But very occasionally you have someone like Marx or Weber. Most of the others might have a strong impact more recently, but usually did not last for very long. And to simply impose a social science analysis would not be appropriate, whatever it might be – whether it is deconstructional, or post-colonialism, or post-modernism, or subaltern studies, or the 'public sphere'. Most of these are already passing us by."[10]

Spence's observation seems to suggest that social-science theory is, to some degree, a fad. Often, it does not genuinely reflect intellectual innovation or novel way of thinking about the world but a calculated bypass of arduous archival research or protracted fieldwork exploration.

However, in fairness to our field Elders, it should be said that younger scholars seem more prone to such bypasses, perhaps due to the unique pressures they face. Thus, our understanding of history is adulterated by inter-generational tensions. For example, "repliement" (namely, state inertia) was the catch-phrase used to essentialise Chinese late-Imperial history in Spence's generation. Historians of the next generation – now already Professors – turned their back on it *en masse*. According to prominent China historian Pamela Crossley, scholars nowadays:

> "...tend to see Ming and Qing commercial development as so intense that it drew trade toward itself, fueling a revolution in global trade and finance. In this view, late imperial China was expansive and colonial—on the land, which was China's ancient and always urgent strategic

[10] Lu (2004), pp. 141.

> frontier. The foreign relations of the period were driven less by peculiar, isolationist, 'sinocentric' (Fairbank's neologism) motives and more by the rational strategies of a revenue-hungry and security-conscious state. ...As today's scholars move toward a recharacterization of Ming and Qing China, we will be tempted to regard lightly the Weberian and Hegelian concepts that shaped European and American views of China from the middle of the 19th century to the end of the 20th."[11]

But has sufficient quantitative-comparative evidence emerged to shatter our view of China's late-imperial economy, and overturn Weber or Spence lock, stock and barrel? Or is this just a question of a younger generation of scholars anxious to stamp their mark on the field primarily -- but not only with -- fresh theory?

Academics Observed

We, practitioners of the field in the West, are enamoured of grand judgements when speaking of the region: "disrespect for human rights", "lack of transparency", "cronyism". But we all too often hush-hush what the field itself is ultimately about: tenured jobs. In order to wear the scholarly mantle, and be able to opine about the region, one has to first land an academic job. Are we certain cronyism does not interfere with recruitment and promotion in our neck of the woods? If so, what mechanisms do we have in place to promote transparency?

Academics in the humanities are inherently (and justifiably) suspicious of Big Business, the tabloid press and the political establishment. Canberra was subject to intense scrutiny and condemnation by the academic establishment particularly during the Howard era. Now that so many of the Howard Government initiatives to do with academia (or many other policy areas for that matter, including immigration and citizenship) have been quietly embraced by the Rudd Government – should we as a collective be focusing on denigrating the Howard legacy, or look to the future and apply the same rigorous standards of scrutiny to the incumbents? What

[11] Crossley (2009).

mechanisms do we have in place to ensure pluralism in academic debate, to protect 'dissidents', and to constrain tenured members of the academic establishment form replicating themselves through recruitment of favoured early-career candidates?

This is not a trivial question because the tenured jobs at stake are, to a great extent, publicly-funded. Yet senior academics are far less accountable than the public servants they so often ridicule: I know for a fact some university professors consistently ignore email requests for feedback on recruitment rounds; these recruitment rounds themselves are quite nebulous. By contrast, the selection process for even the most junior appointments in the Australian Public Service (APS) is, in my experience, more transparent.

Another duplicity more pertinent to Asian Studies has to do with language skills. Each year, tens of thousands of prospective international students are required to front up at IELTS test centres around the world in order to demonstrate their level of English-language proficiency, but academic appointments here are made without any recourse to uniform language testing. Similarly, thousands of Asian students pay a fortune to train for NAATI tests every year so that they have a better shot at Australian Permanent Residency, but Asia specialists in senior publicly-funded academic positions are simply assumed to have command of the language spoken in the countries they study by virtue of landing the job. The point here is not merely about the validity of one's proficiency – most of us are proficient beyond doubt – but the sheer lack of language-skill benchmarking when multiple candidates for a single position in Asian Studies are assessed against one another.

Language skills aside, some participants in our conference railed against the application of benchmarking ('metrics') in the assessment of research performance. Granted, metrics can be used or abused when consistency and meritocracy are not the overriding consideration. In my view, the situation at present is such that benchmarking has not yet been made consistent enough. An absolute negation of the benefits of benchmarking will result, in turn, in widening the already-excessive discretionary powers, which Professors wield in academic appointments.

The reason why networking is so pervasive in academe, as compared with other sectors, is precisely because of these excessive discretionary powers. In the absence of a transparent, quantifiable, verifiable, and uniformly-applied benchmarking system -- professors may be at liberty to appoint and promote 'disciples' and sycophants over innovative researchers. The latter may inevitably be ejected from the field, with some giving up on the prospect of an academic career altogether as they scramble to reconcile non-academic or para-academic teaching day-jobs with the voracious demands of quality research, let alone family life.

For an aspiring outsider, the only way to land a job in this field is publications –these often take years to mature, and require many resources. In the meantime, professorial discretionary powers can kill off any challenge to protégés by denying promising researchers with a budding record a shot at postdoctoral fellowships. White noise can be created, for example, in selection criteria in order to drown out outsiders' potential. Distractions are relatively easy to create because publication output and quality are *not* genuinely measured relative to opportunity and available funding. If they were, I suspect taxpayers might be astonished to find out that, without a cent from the public purse, some outsiders manage to produce more quality research than few of the most generously-endowed and teaching-exempt professors in the field.

Publish or Perish?

We all seem to be progressive and environmentally conscious, yet most of us seem to be sentimentally attached to printed books, which consume Tasmania's trees, are prohibitively expensive and not easily accessible to the public. Yet the wacky finance of academia is such that there will always be some university library that will purchase whatever printed material, and therefore some pseudo-academic publishers will print whatever manuscripts or hastily cobbled-up conference papers that come their way. With knowledge becoming so specialised, is the monograph still viable in the 21st century? Are not

rigorously-refereed downloadable journal articles a better gauge for one's singular contribution to knowledge?

In our 'publish-or-perish' world, if we ourselves do not properly differentiate between an original singular contribution to knowledge, based on prolonged fieldwork or painstaking archival analysis to op-ed pieces (such as this) or re-hashed observations based on secondary material – can we rightly complain about the infinitely bigger impact that sensationalist non-academic work on Asia makes in the public domain?[12]

The Australian Research Council's rationale for allocating early-career funding is the facilitation of potentially path-breaking research. The criteria purportedly boil down to one's publication track record. But the question begs itself: whose record – the applicants' or their (former) PhD supervisors'?

When it comes to Asian Studies, can the ARC Discovery fund live up to its stated objective of producing original research output, whilst incentivising applicants to hitch their wagon to that of more senior scholars in the form of joint projects? Is it not the case that ARC mechanisms and politics subjugate early-career applicants to the research agenda of their supervisors? Is it not the case that the ARC Discovery program ends up entrenching academics' preoccupation with networking, and promoting conventional-wisdom?

In a recent scathing critique, Law Professor Jeffrey Goldsworthy of Monash University has charged the Council with creating superfluous and costly red-tape, and with eroding academics' writing energies; with encouraging universities to value fund-raising excellence over research excellence; with diverting public funds from young promising applicants, who desperately need them, to senior scholars who have much less need of them, and who often leave them to lie fallow; as distorting individual research agendas in the humanities in favour of a cross-institutional 'linkage' model blindly borrowed from the sciences.[13]

[12] See, e.g., Menzies (2002); Chang (2005).
[13] Goldworthy (2008).

Would it not make sense to use some of the money bankrolling the ARC bureaucracy to simply create more post-doctoral openings for young academics with a small but proven record of quality publications? At last, there may be signs that the ARC might soon review its early-career programs. It has, to some extent, realised that reliance on peer-review is problematic when the reviewers are invariably established academics of the same generation and of the same tightly-knit fields.[14] But what the ARC is yet to realise is that assessment of research quality should be truly at arms' length. For example, the ARC is not doing enough to seek advice from overseas experts. It is relying instead on a single-blind assessment process with all but meaningless feedback to unsuccessful applicants. Worst of all, its current credit-point system attaches the same weight to publications in bottom-tier Australian journals as in internationally-refereed top-tier journals.

Conclusion

While the discourse of Asian Studies in the West has associated 'networks' with Chinese business practices, it has not sufficiently explained why and how these may be different to similar societal constructs in the West. Worse still, it has not reflexively considered the pervasiveness of such 'networks' in the field of Asian Studies itself.

This paper argued that these shortfalls are symptomatic of a broader lack of transparency and accountability in some quarters of the humanities; it is also indicative of the reverse ageism that exists in academe perhaps more than in most other occupations.

Certainly, some Asia specialists still seem all too happy to frame countries in the region in terms akin to the 'Oriental despotism' paradigm. As a collective, we do not seem to show sufficient reflexivity and fibre in identifying how networks (and what in extreme cases can amount to intellectual despotism) pervade the inner dynamic of our very own field. This is perhaps one reason why

[14] Trounson (2009).

the countries of the region often dismiss our criticism as hypocritical.[15]

Although it was interpreted in that way by some during the conference, this paper did not argue Australian universities, or Australian society for that matter, are any less transparent than in Asia. On the contrary, I believe universities in Australia are at the forefront of the thrust toward global academic transparency in some respects. To be sure, Australia's parliamentary democracy is to my mind one of the most open and efficient, and has historically set an example for many other countries to follow.

Rather, this paper was motivated by the notion that transparency can only flourish in a state of flux, and that complacency, blinkered partisanship and self-righteousness contravene the dissemination of democratic ideals. The thrust toward greater transparency is incremental and by no means irreversible. It should not be taken for granted anywhere.

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[15] See, e.g, Onuma (1999).

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