

Asian Futures

Convenors:

History: Ritu Birla (primary convenor), Tong Lam, Ken Kawashima
Anthropology: Tania Li (primary convenor), Joshua Barker, Jesook Song
Geography: Katharine Rankin (primary convenor) Alana Boland, Rachel Silvey

If we are to believe the current pundits of globality, it seems that Asia will shape the future of global capitalism and culture. In the nineteenth century, the foundations of what we now call world history coded Asia as ancient and lost in its past, and located it spatially as a periphery. Today the popular press and expert policy think-tanks are shifting the centre of the world to "Asia," a geographic locator for a space-time that is at once a home to time-tested "Asian values" and to an untested capitalist future. Indeed, if "globalization" can be posed as a keyword for the last decade of the twentieth century, "Asia" seems to have become the name for the future of the globe in the first decade of the twenty-first.

US President Barack Obama offered one iteration of the Asia-as-future discourse in his November 2009 tours to China, India, Japan, South Korea and Singapore, when he declared himself "America's first Pacific president" and asserted that the future of the US economy relies on Asia (Washington Post, Nov 14, 2009). Other writers describe Asia as the "emerging hemisphere" [Kishore Mahbubhani] and the home of the "post-American world" [Fareed Zakaria], offering analyses of the future monopolized by economic concerns. In such analyses, it goes without saying that "the future" refers to the future of capitalism. It is ironic, of course, that the future is also the seat of capitalism's troubles: it was addiction to speculation that produced the financial crisis and rendered the US debtor to China. Strikingly, it is these same uncertainties that evoke predictions about capitalism's future that draw attention to timeless Asian cultural values. In short, in discussions about the next century as Asia's century, temporality has been subject to economic logics, while spatiality has been subject to essentialist/culturalist ones that reiterate orientalist themes and treat culture/s, and indeed comparative studies of culture, in functionalist terms.

Our hypothesis is that there is a distinctive element to contemporary discourses about Asian Futures. Imagining Asia as the global future represents a radical shift from the situation just two decades ago, when to be born in Asia was to be cast as an "other," often characterized as backward, culturally exotic, and lacking in modernity. For a person born in Asia today, in contrast, there is an opening to imagine oneself as part of an enterprising and innovative globalizing culture that will remake the world in the years to come. When people stop thinking of themselves as being part of a backward economy or culture, they change the way they think about the future, and are encouraged to participate in the

making of that future. This hypothesis needs to be tested empirically, by the careful comparative examination of the changing discourses of Asian futures, of the spatial scope (and limits) of an empowered sense of future-making, and the more (or less) profound effects that the latest discourse on Asia's global future is having on the lives of people across this highly diverse region of the globe.

Drawing on the extensive area studies and social science knowledge of an established core group of scholars at the University of Toronto, our seminar sets out to locate *Asian Futures* empirically by placing imaginings of the future generated from within Asia at the center of our inquiry. At the same time, we want to build critical theoretical frameworks which examine how transnational popular and policy discourses reproduce economic and culturalist scripts. At the core of our seminar is the following question: How is the future imagined by, and for, emerging generations of people born in Asia today? And in turn, we also ask how the global future is imagined *as* Asian. Just as Benedict Anderson showed for the imagining of nations, we argue that the way the future is imagined is consequential: it shapes shared horizons, constitutes subjects, and influences practical matters such as development plans. Imagining the future involves specifying a mode of economic life, a mode of social and political interaction, and a mode of subjectivity.

Significance

The topic of Asian futures demands that we read globalization from new perspectives, both spatial and temporal. Contemplating a global future from the point of view of what has been understood as a periphery, our seminar will break new ground in conceptualizing globalization, supplementing the project of "provincializing Europe" by delving into the meanings of Asia as center. At the heart of our inquiry is the relationship between culture and economy, the key social imaginaries and sites for subject-formation in contemporary globality.

Sub-themes

(1) Old and New Asian Futures

In the new discourse on Asian futures we are invited to envisage a world in which the appearance of "the new" is increasingly located not in Europe or in North America but in Asia. For icons of urban modernity we look to Shanghai and Mumbai instead of Manhattan or London; for new forms of transnational capitalism, we look to Bangalore and Hong Kong rather than to Detroit or Mexico; for emerging forms of democratic politics we look to Indonesia, Nepal and India rather than to the United States; and for the latest advances in digital living we look to Japan and Korea rather than to Canada or Sweden.

Our first and broadest theme examines past discourses on Asian futures as a means to shed light on the history of the current discourse and on its novel features. During the last two decades of the twentieth century scholars of Asia published a wide array of studies investigating how orientalist discourses came to shape understandings of Asian cultures, economies, and societies. These studies focused primarily on the discourses that were dominant at the level of nation-states, many of which had genealogies that could be traced back to colonial times. Thus, we learned how “India” and “Java” came to be constituted as objects of a colonial gaze, and how this gaze helped to constitute what it meant to be born as an “Indian” or a “Javanese” person in the late-twentieth century. We also learned how the many varieties of orientalism came to shape both scholarly and popular understandings of the cultural dimensions of government, economic development, and social organization. Broadly speaking, and with important exceptions, the image of Asia that came through in these studies was of a place that was underdeveloped, mired in tradition, and insulated from the outside world.

When placed against the backdrop of these earlier discourses, the current discourse on Asian futures could be seen to represent a radical departure for how we think about Asia’s role in the world and its role in history. Our seminar will examine the degree to which it is indeed a departure from earlier ways of thinking, or on the contrary, whether it is merely an inversion or modification of these earlier ideas. Our aim is not only to compare the new orientalism to the old, but also to highlight the interactions between them.

(2) Spatial and Temporal Unevenness

In the nineteenth century, as we noted earlier, "world history" coded Asia as ancient and lost in its past, and located it spatially as a periphery. It was against this backdrop that Asian elites often sought to constitute themselves as modern by defining regional or domestic "others" as backward. In so doing, they appropriated and reworked the logic that mapped hierarchies of space (centres, peripheries) onto temporal sequences (modernity, backwardness). In the early twentieth century, for instance, China was being imagined as Japan’s "Orient" by Japanese empire-builders. During the postwar period, East Asian societies were in fierce competition with each other in measuring their economic success using the benchmark defined by the developmental model. In China, minorities have been imagined as backward by the ruling Han majority who regard themselves as the vanguard of progress. Similarly, in Indonesia under the late colonial regime and still today, the densely populated island of Java and within it, the city of Jakarta, came to define the geographic centre of modernity, against which the "outer islands" were viewed as deficient.

Our project examines the extent to which these familiar and well-studied national and regional hierarchies continue to define visions of Asian Futures, lining places up along a neat and predictable hierarchy from the most to least modern, or whether new elements have been injected that rework these spatial and temporal imaginaries in sometimes surprising ways. As an example of such a reworking, it is striking that some

influential metropolitan voices in India envisage Shanghai as their future, while members of the Chinese middle class use images of old and idealized European pasts to construct their sense of being sophisticated and modern. Thus in a suburb of Shanghai, Albert Speer, the son of Hitler's favorite architect, was hired to build a gated community that is supposed to exemplify the German Romanticist ideal of harmonic space *vis-à-vis* the dangerous and rapidly changing outside world.

In the sphere of economic development, the old, assumed trajectory of transition within one country - from agriculture to industry, from country to city - is increasingly out of touch with the new spatiality of unevenness. Although the World Bank in its 2008 report *Agriculture for Development* confidently described most Asian economies as "transforming," and expects them to move, sooner or later, down the well-trodden transition path, imagining transition in national terms is deeply misleading. India's remarkable growth over the past decade has focused on elite, English-speaking service sector positions, powered by the expansion of the financial system, which has produced a celebrated growing middle class. Nevertheless, this remains only a quarter of India's population. Tens of millions of rural people ejected from the countryside to make way for commercial agriculture and industrial estates will not be absorbed into new enterprises, which require very little labour. In Indonesia, manufacturing is chronically outcompeted by China. The new rural industry - oil palm - is absorbing tens of millions of hectares of land, but it requires very little labour - much less than the old estate crops, rubber or tea. Thus modern Shanghai, or Jakarta, or Bangalore, take shape in the midst of a "planet of slums" and rural hinterlands in which the old temporal vision that consigned rural people to the waiting room - and consoled them with the argument that their turn would come - is increasingly implausible. Our pluralization, *Asian Futures*, points towards our exploration of the shifting temporalities and the spatialities of the future for differently situated Asians, and our intention to explore how unevenness is experienced and shapes peoples' imaginaries, practices, and plans.

Under this theme, we also want to examine how the technologies for bringing desired futures into being are being realigned along novel pathways. The contemporary, foreign architects who view China as a place to implement their utopian dreams conceive of China as a laboratory for the future in a way that is strikingly similar to how American social engineers viewed China as the "laboratory of modernity" in the early twentieth century. Their early social engineering projects, coproduced by American and Chinese social experts, eventually became part of the theoretical foundation for developmental projects all over the world in the postwar period. In Indonesia, transnational programs for conserving nature envisage one kind of modernity, while transnational agri-business envisages another - monocrop oilpalm spreading out for mile upon mile; and leaders of newly decentralized local governments imagine shaping ethno-territories in their own ways. In Nepal, meanwhile, radical left forces are taking their cues from Maoist orthodoxy to mobilize peasants and workers around claims for redistributive justice and 'civilian supremacy'. In each of these settings, actors bring a particular kind of technology to bear on shaping the future within a given territory, but their jurisdictional boundaries overlap. There are multiple parties making multiple futures across different spatial scales. As with the other themes under consideration, our sense of what is novel in

the contemporary moment will be informed by a careful scrutiny of older visions and pathways for making the future, with the aim of enhancing our understanding of both the present and the past.

(3) Social imaginaries and subject formation

A striking feature of the new discourse on Asian Futures is its conviction that the future will be capitalist, and its subjects - Asians - will be market subjects first and foremost. The "Asian values" that have attracted interest from the region and beyond are those values assumed to be functional for capitalism. But is this the way Asians imagine their own future? Is the technology for producing market subjects upmost in the mind of Asian leaders or planners? Or do they have quite different priorities and concerns? Under our third theme, we want to take a close look at how social, cultural, economic and political imaginaries are currently being constructed, and how subjectivities and citizenry are forged materially and institutionally in everyday life. What are the circuits of communication - through media, advertising, film, architecture, urban design, education, sports events, travel, unions, political parties, activist groups, religious or ethnic networks - that shape peoples' sense of their current and future place in the world? How are people mobilized to participate in future-making, and who mobilizes them?

As with our previous themes, a comparative lens will help to sharpen our focus on what is distinctive about the present. For much of the twentieth century, socialist futures were prominent elements in discourses about Asia, and in the imagination of many Asians, as the future to be sought, or the evil to be prevented. These experiences left strong and distinctive traces in the different nations of Asia: in China, a history of communism; in India, the continuing presence of a strong state despite liberalization, and the sometimes nominal, sometimes powerful influence of communist political agendas; in Indonesia, the palpable absence of the organized left in public life, following devastating massacres of half a million alleged communists in 1965, and the silencing of left and populist politics thereafter; in South Korea, the Kwangju massacre and uprising in 1980 and so on. Strong nationalisms, sometimes fascistic, were also prominent elements in the constitution of subjects during the twentieth century and their traces still remain. Prominent today, alongside capitalism, cosmopolitanism and consumerism, is a renewed emphasis on world religions - especially Christianity and Islam- each with their own circuits for communication and subject-making. There is also a renewed emphasis on sub-national ethno-territorial identities, as erstwhile minorities (like the Uighurs in China, or Indonesia's and Nepal's "indigenous" people) revisit histories of internal colonialism and rediscover transnational flows of people and ideas that offer quite different perspectives on the past, and visions for *their* Asian Futures.

Comparative Framework

Our comparative framework works upon the axes of time and space. On the temporal axis, we propose to compare the emerging discourse on Asian futures with earlier views

of what Asian futures might hold. Our historical comparison uses a three part periodization:

- 1900 to 1960: emergence of nations and nationalisms under colonialism and/or empire building, through independence movements and wars
- 1960 to 1990: state-led development in both socialist and capitalist Asia and civilian resistance movements
- 1990 to the present: global financial capitalism's penetration into nation-state economic development, and renewed attention to "Asian Values"

Comparing old and new perspectives on Asian futures will allow us to identify continuity and change in these discourses; it will also provide us with the opportunity to re-examine past discourses on Asian futures in the light of emergent themes.

On the spatial axis, our seminar will compare the differing ways in which the discourse on Asian Futures is being taken up and applied across the region. Our primary focus will be the five countries most frequently cited in the discourse on Asian futures: China, India, Japan, Korea, and Indonesia. We include Nepal as a point of contrast: Nepal has commonly been cited as a location of stasis and backwardness, but the recent Maoist insurgency culminating in the termination of Hindu monarchal rule and the formation of a secular republic has produced new state forces devising plans for a future that avoids the tortuous development paths other Asian nations pursued, to catapult directly into a radically democratic 21st century modernity.

We use the nation as an important spatial reference, because in all these places discourses about national futures still loom large, and because their twentieth century trajectories were quite distinct. At the same time, we recognize and want to investigate the ways in which the grip of nationalism is loosening, and discourses about the future are being cast either in terms of Asia as a whole or in sub-national terms, or even in terms of particular cities such as Bangalore and Shanghai as beacons of 21st century modernity. Our seminar will identify the points at which the new discourse puts pressure on the framework of national-futures by encouraging us to consider the growing significance of transnational and sub-national discourse networks and units of analysis, as well as the persistence and complexity of the nation-state.

Mechanics

All nine members of the core group have active research programs in Asia closely related to the Asian Futures theme. We are trained in three disciplines, and belong to four departments at the University of Toronto (Anthropology, History, Geography, East Asian Studies). Our group includes a mix of senior and junior scholars. Our geographic expertise is pan-Asian (China, India, Nepal, Korea, Japan, Indonesia), and covers the time period from 1800 to the present. The group has a history of collaboration that began in 2006 when we made a successful application for internal University of Toronto seed-funding to run a two year symposium under the title *Markets and Modernities in Asia*. Through it, we developed a methodology for multidisciplinary intellectual engagement. The key to our approach is to place a strong conceptual theme at the centre of our inquiry,

to enable a productive exchange across disciplinary, spatial and temporal boundaries, and to make the comparative enterprise come alive. The second element is intensity of engagement. Comparative insights require sufficient familiarity with each others' work, which we can achieve through discussions among ourselves and together with visitors who provide stimulus to the group.

The core group has three co-convenors who share the leadership tasks. All members of the core group (9 people) take an active role in planning and running the seminar. Members of the seminar will comprise the core group, and up to fifteen additional faculty and graduate student affiliates, 24 people in all. Affiliates will be invited to join the Seminar based on nomination by members of the core-group. The key criterion will be the relevance of their research to the Asian Futures theme, and their interest in engaging in a multi-disciplinary, pan-Asian debate.

Our activities under the seminar will be run over a period of 18 months, from September 2010 to June 2012, and will comprise the following 6 activities:

- 1) A *seminar series* in which we invite prominent international scholars to speak to the Asian Futures theme. These events will be open to the University of Toronto community. We anticipate inviting 6 speakers over the two year period.
- 2) In the afternoons following the seminars, we will hold *workshops* with the external speakers, usually based around recent writing or work-in-progress submitted by the speaker two weeks in advance. These workshops will be conducted in more intimate and informal setting for scholars whose research is directly relevant to the invitees research agenda.
- 3) *Internal work-in-progress workshops* for members of the seminar. These are opportunities for participants to receive critical feedback on current work related to the Asian Futures theme. We anticipate holding 3 one-day workshops, each of which can accommodate 6 papers. They will be scheduled for April 2011, January 2012 and April 2012.
- 4) *Reading group*. This group will be open to all members of the seminar and will follow a program of reading agreed at the beginning of the year. We anticipate 3 meetings per semester. When combined with the seminar series, this will mean 6 events per term.
- 5) *Working Papers*. Participants in Asian Futures will be encouraged to submit work in progress for a working paper series to be posted on-line through the Asian Institute website. This format allows maximum exposure for Asian Futures, while leaving participants free to select the final publication venues most appropriate to their discipline and stage of career. All work generated by the Seminar will acknowledge the support received.

Institutional Context

The University of Toronto is one of the largest public universities in North America; it is located in a highly multi-ethnic city; and its faculty and students hail from all corners of the globe. It has over 100 full time faculty and scores of graduate students whose research is focused primarily on Asia. The seminar receives key financial and logistical support from the Asian Institute, University of Toronto's centre for multi-disciplinary, pan-Asian research (see <http://webapp.mcis.utoronto.ca/ai/>). It is also supported by the Departments of Anthropology, Geography and History.

Brief Bios of Core Faculty

Joshua Barker (Anthropology)

Joshua Barker's research focuses on the techno-political imaginaries of successive generations of engineers, government officials, and "indigenous" entrepreneurs involved in building the many networks that make up Indonesia's telecommunications infrastructure. These networks—in their material form, ownership patterns, regulation, and use—are important domains for struggles over how to organize the relationship between the state, private capital, the market, and society. In examining these struggles, he is interested in the forms that techno-politics take in Indonesia and whether or not "the engineer," that quintessentially modern figure, can be the subject of a radical, globalizing politics.

Ritu Birla (History)

Ritu Birla's research and teaching interests include modern South Asian history and colonial studies; histories of capitalism and genealogies of modernity; legal history; culture, economy, and the social imaginaries of liberal governance; postcolonial intellectual history and historiography; political and social theory in globality. Her widely-reviewed and recent book, *Stages of Capital: Law, Culture and Market Governance in Late Colonial India* (Duke, 2009), charts a new history of market society and the modern subject in India through a study of colonial law and jurisprudence regulating commerce, finance, speculation and charitable gifting. She is currently working on two related pieces for law journals, bringing law and economy studies into conversation with postcolonial approaches to globality. She is also currently the co-coordinator/editor of a series of global discussions on M.K. Gandhi, addressing political theory at the limits of liberalism and ethics in transnationality, under the aegis of the Sister Cities Project of the Society for Transnational Cultural Studies and its journal *Public Culture*.

Alana Boland (Geography)

Alana Boland's research focuses on environmental governance in urban China. Her work engages the nexus of the economy and environment during the socialist period as well as the current era of 'market reforms'. She is currently examining the role of competition and participation in state-led initiatives aimed at improving environmental conditions at multiple scales (e.g., region, city, district and neighborhood). Central to this work are questions regarding subject formation and the governing of spaces associated with the

green developmentalism guiding growth narratives in contemporary China. Her research also engages current and historical discourses concerning the rise of China, particularly in relation to consumption and environmental degradation.

Ken Kawashima (East Asian Studies)

Ken Kawashima is historian of modern Japan and colonial Korea. He has recently published a book, *The Proletarian Dice-box: Korean Workers in Interwar Japan* (Duke, 2009), that analyzes the struggles of Korean surplus populations (as so-called 'precarious labor') against various apparatuses of capture seeking to individuate, racialize, and commodify their labor power into Japan's fascist, multi-ethnic empire. He is currently involved in two projects: a book manuscript on materialism, contingency, and repetition; and an English translation of Uno Kozo's book, *Kyokoron* (Theory of Crisis).

Tong Lam (History)

His current research focuses on the politics of knowledge-production in the colonial and semicolonial contexts. His forthcoming book, *Seeking Facts from Truth: Social Surveys and the Construction of the Chinese Nation-State* (University of California Press), analyzes the relationship between the rise of social survey research as a new technology of government and China's transition from a dynastic empire to a nation-state in the turn of the twentieth century. He has also started a book-length project on Qing China's attempt to transform itself into a modern colonial power and the lasting impacts of such attempt in the rest of the twentieth century. As well, he is co-editing a volume on the political economy of architectural spectacle and urbanism in postsocialist China.

Tania Li (Anthropology; Canada Research Chair in the Culture and Political Economy of Asia-Pacific)

Her recent book *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development and the Practice of Politics* (Duke, 2007) traced how two centuries of intervention in Indonesia stimulated the production of modern, market subjects while designating particular groups for a “traditional” non-market niche. Her current research concerns the production of “surplus population” in contexts where people are ejected from rural livelihoods, but not absorbed into “modern” sectors of the economy where growth in the past decade has been virtually jobless. She is pursuing this interest through pan-Asian comparative work, and also in detail, through an ethnographic research project under the title “Producing wealth and poverty in Indonesia’s new rural economies.” This project looks at high growth agriculture in a major export industry (oil palm), and in the intensive production of potatoes to meet a domestic demand for MacDonaldis fries. It asks who does the work, who gains and who loses from transformed agrarian landscapes and new production regimes, and what happens to the people who are displaced from the rural economy.

Katharine Rankin (Geography, Director of Planning)

Katharine Rankin’s current Asia research focuses on post-conflict transition in Nepal—with an emphasis on how people envision and perform ‘democracy’ in the agrarian districts that form the grassroots base of recent radical-left mobilizations. Key themes animating the research include the reproduction and transformation of hierarchy and inequality; the relations of trade and migration that constitute agrarian Nepal in relation

to the nation, Asia and the world; and the articulation of the ‘economic’ and the ‘political’ bases for conflict and revolution. Prior work centres on processes of market formation—tracing the ways in which neoliberalizing processes encounter specific social histories, cultural ideologies and subjectivities in Nepal and Vietnam. This work is published in her recent book, *The Cultural Politics of Markets: Economic Liberalization and Social Change in Nepal* (Pluto and University of Toronto Press, 2004), as well as in a series of journal articles on rural finance in Nepal and Vietnam.

Rachel Silvey (Geography).

Her work explores the politics of migration and the geographies of migrant rights. Based primarily in Indonesia, her writing examines the figure of the migrant as emblematic of the tensions of modernity, a subject on whose body are enacted the contradictions of capitalism. Her recent writing on moral geographic imaginaries traces the production and control of migration in relation to changing maps of political and economic “progress” and “crisis.” Her current research centers on the globalization of migrant rights activism, international human rights institutions, and the role of faith-based organizations in advocating for migrant rights claims. With her colleagues from the Fulbright New Century Scholars Program, she has recently co-edited a volume entitled, *Beyond States and Markets: The Challenges of Social Reproduction* (Routledge, 2008), and has published a number of articles in geography journals and interdisciplinary outlets.

Jesook Song (East Asian Studies).

Her book, *South Koreans in the Debt Crisis: The Creation of a Neoliberal Welfare Society* (Duke 2009), maps out the circulation of the imaginaries of homelessness and underemployed youth that affected policy-making during the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s. Her two forthcoming books include a monograph, *A Room of Own: The Spatialization of Liberal Subjectivity in Neoliberal South Korea* (SUNY) that draws lives and housing of young unmarried women in relation to the regulated circuits of financial markets; and an edited volume, *New Millennium South Korea: Neoliberal Capitalism and Transnational Movements* (Routledge) which brings forth powerful inwards and outwards movement of people through their active imagination and replication of “Korean dream” in the last two decades. She is currently conducting a SSHRC research project on mental and psychological health support system in South Korea that focuses on the affective economy in the emergence of professional domains of social work and cognitive sciences.