

Recentring Asia

Histories, Encounters, Identities

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INTRODUCTION

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Whether in terms of economics, geopolitics, environmentalism, tourism or trade, Asia plays a role like no other in our contemporary age of globalization. Though sometimes overlooked, Asia's past eras of geopolitical, scientific and cultural importance have shaped and continue to shape this contemporary role. With the rise of modern nation states, political democracies and influential military powerhouses, the adoption of capitalism and rapid economic expansion, Asian places, histories and cultures increasingly resonate around the globe and affect the lives of many far removed from its regional geographies. Recognizing Asia's rapid return to its former global pre-eminence, many have hailed the dawn of a new Asian century.

But what does recognition of Asia's renewed centrality entail? *Recentring Asia* brings together essays on current and relevant Asian topics in a range of scholarly fields to address just this question. Together, these essays argue that recentring Asia necessitates a revision not only of notions of Asia but also of the centre itself. On the one hand, recentring Asia asserts the centrality of Asia, especially overlooked Asian histories, encounters and identities, to world history, culture and geopolitics. The essays in this book recentre Asia in this sense by asking the reader to look at various—often surprising—Asian locations as centres for and microcosms of transnational and global phenomena. On the other hand, the concept of *recentring* provides a way to address and rethink the concept of the *centre*, a term critical to Asian Studies, area studies and, more broadly, to the study of globalization, postcolonialism, diaspora, modernism and modernity. Drawing on new approaches in these fields, *Recentring Asia* forces the reader to rethink the centre not as a single site towards which all is oriented, but as a zone of encounter, exchange and contestation.

A number of the essays in this book combine these two senses of recentring. They show how redefining centres as zones of transnational encounter enables the identification of new kinds of centres in unexpected locations. In ““The Dark Passage”: History, Piracy and the Melaka Strait”, for example, Barbara Andaya considers Melaka as a

centre of global trade and international piracy in ways previously overlooked. Andaya asks us to see this centre not as a monolithic structure but as the product of multiple histories, peoples, encounters and exchanges. Likewise, in 'In Interesting Times: Northeast Asia's Tipping-Point and its Implications for the Southern Hemisphere', Tessa Morris-Suzuki argues that, rather than being merely an empty battleground for great powers, the Korean peninsula occupies a central position in East Asia historically and today. Morris-Suzuki unsettles conventional notions of centres and peripheries within East Asia that have broader international resonances (the parallels with Poland or the Congo, for example) and implications. In particular, her recentring of the Cold War on Korea allows us to consider that we might not be in the post-Cold War era many of us take as a given.

The concept of *recentring* builds on important developments in transnational modernist, literary and cultural studies within the Asian context (and elsewhere) that stress the need to get outside the local/global and centre/periphery binaries and instead see how modernisms and modernities are 'relational' rather than 'nominal' phenomena, mutually constituted, rather than distributed outwards from a centre.¹ By arguing for alternative, previously ignored centres and by rethinking the notion of the centre itself, the book develops Eric Hayot's argument that literary studies, 'even in a single national context, requires an attention to the transnational contexts and flows that shape and define the relationship between literature and nation'.² *Recentring Asia* also draws on similar insights from literary and cultural studies of diaspora, such as those put forward by Rey Chow, to show how alternative diasporic centres unsettle notions of a single homeland, national centre, nationality or nation state.³ In applying these insights from the study of literature and culture to area studies, *Recentring Asia* equally engages in a disciplinary recentring. The collection puts into practice the call made by Chow for alternatives to the 'world target' approach to non-Europe in area studies.⁴ It resists the narrow framing of Asia around geopol-

¹ Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Periodizing Modernism: Postcolonial Modernities and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies', *Modernism/Modernity*, 13, 3 (2006), pp. 425–43.

² Eric Hayot, 'Modernisms' Chinas: Introduction', *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 18, 1 (2006), p. 4.

³ Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

⁴ Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory and Comparative Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

litical and economic interests, demonstrating instead the centrality of historical, literary, cultural studies, sociological and anthropological approaches to Asia today.

The chapters of *Recentering Asia* are grouped in three main parts: (1) Place and History; (2) Encounter and Displacement; and (3) Representation and Identity. Engaging with piracy, nuclear proliferation and other such topical issues, the essays recentre Asia through a rich range of Asian histories, encounters and identities. In Part 1, Asian histories provide new, unexpected perspectives through which to view regional and world history, while their erasure or contestation richly demonstrates the problematic nature of the notion of the centre. Similarly, in Part 2, instances of cross-cultural encounter furnish an alternative paradigm for the centre as a microcosm of the forces of transnational exchange and globalization. Encounters and histories are increasingly mobilized in the assertion and contestation of identities. Part 3 shows how identities provide orientating frameworks—or centres—in a world where the relationship between place and identity is complicated by multiple histories of migration and diaspora, and by transnational encounter and exchange.

Part 1 takes a broad view of Asia as a centre (or centres) by focusing on the contemporary reading of Asian history and the political importance of the displacement of that history. These essays indicate the importance of history to contemporary social, cultural and political spaces, demonstrating how ignored, repressed or contested historical narratives shape Asia and Asian centres today. The historical recentering of Asia through movements of people and changing conceptions of space and heritage is a recurring theme, which Andaya takes up in the first chapter through an examination of the history and present-day practice of piracy in Asia. Piracy is a prominent topic in the international media today. The problem of software and video piracy has long been a concern for multinational companies and Asia has frequently been singled out as the place where much of this illegal activity occurs. Recent events off the coast of East Africa involving the piracy of oil tankers reverberated in the global media when oil reached record prices. In this context, Andaya's chapter looks at history, piracy and the Melaka Strait. This part of Southeast Asia connects Africa, India and China through maritime trade and has historically been an economically important part of the world, for the West and for Asia. In recent times, an estimated fifty thousand ships per year pass through the Melaka Strait. This sea-borne commerce has attracted piracy both

in the past and today. Andaya illustrates the importance of the Melaka Strait as a space in terms of Asian piracy, particularly with regard to its geographical environment, local societies and the growth of regional and global sea-borne commerce.

The recentring of Asian spaces is the focus of Morris-Suzuki's chapter on Northeast Asia. Morris-Suzuki places contemporary political events and conflict within a wider historical framework. Interrogating the relationship between the Korean Peninsula and its powerful neighbours, China and Japan, Morris-Suzuki reconceptualizes the space labelled 'Northeast Asia' and considers how that space was constituted and reconstituted during successive eras. She writes the 'First Korean War' of 1894–1905 instead of following the convention of dividing this regional conflict into the Sino-Japanese War (1894–5) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5). Her renaming of this conflict links the First Korean War with the Second Korean War and contemporary developments in Northeast Asia. It also places the Korean people and their suffering at the centre of the region's military history and emphasizes psychological divides as much as divided spaces. The chapter argues that from an Asian perspective the Cold War has never ended and that it will never do so until the last Cold War dividing line, bisecting the Korean peninsula along the 38th parallel, disappears. The inevitable opening up of the movement of people, goods and ideas will see a new peninsula, but Morris-Suzuki questions whether the outcome will be a blessing, a curse or a mixture of both for the people of Northeast Asia. There are also profound implications for the countries of Southeast Asia and the Pacific, as their economies and security are entangled with those of the near north.

Chapter 3 continues the theme of using history to recentre peoples and places by exploring the movement and recentring of diaspora. It has been suggested that South Asians spread more dramatically around the world than more substantial diasporas, such as Jews, Chinese, Africans and Europeans.⁵ With the exception of Fiji, there is comparatively little awareness of South Asian diasporas in the South Pacific. Jacqueline Leckie explores the complexities and differing waves of South Asian diaspora in not only Fiji but also Australia, New Zealand and other Pacific islands. The South Asian presence has a long history in the region

⁵ Colin Clarke, Ceri Peach and Steven Vertovec, 'Introduction: Themes in the Study of the South Asian Diaspora', in *South Asians Overseas*, eds Colin Clarke, Ceri Peach and Steven Vertovec (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 1.

with well-established communities of several generations. Indian settlers, whether indentured labourers in Fiji or independent migrants in New Zealand, long ago recentred Asian identities to the Pacific. Despite hardship and opposition, they played an important role in the formation of modern nations in the region. Ironically, issues of nationhood and belonging also precipitated later diasporas, such as the flow of Indo-Fijians to New Zealand and Australia. Leckie shows that, as with global South Asian diasporas, the flow was not unidirectional, but involved continuous re-negotiation of identity, place and heritage. Moreover, a new wave of migrants from South Asia to the South Pacific since the late 1980s has produced radically more heterogeneous South Asian populations than before, especially in New Zealand and Australia.

In the final chapter in Part 1, Itō Yūshi explores narratives and commentaries within Ryūkyūan/Okinawan and Japanese histories to interrogate the controversy over the legend of Minamoto no Tametomo. Intellectuals of the Meiji and Taishō eras in both Okinawa and mainland Japan debated the legend that a descendant of the Minamoto clan was the King of Ryūkyū, appealing to the legend in order to assert cultural links between Ryūkyū and Japan. Itō points to the need to embrace differing cultures and heritages and return them to national narratives—again indicating the contestation and recentring of history and spaces in Asia and specifically within the southern Japanese islands. Itō's chapter and indeed all of those in Part 1 indicate a recentring of place and displaced histories in Asia that reaches well beyond the continent's geographical limits.

The five essays in Part 2 address questions of encounter and displacement, historical roots and cultural uprooting, exploring and problematizing notions of Asian identity based on location and culture. Part 2 stresses a recentring of Asia in which historical and contemporary boundaries are challenged and global flows (old and new) demonstrate Asia's multifarious existence. In 'Dislocated Location, Impersonal Autobiography', Jacob Edmond demonstrates how the post-1989 work of Chinese poet Yang Lian provides 'a microcosm through which to recentre Asia'. He examines Yang's writing in exile, especially in Auckland, New Zealand, showing how Yang both resists and invites biographical readings of his work and how this ambivalence relates to his appeals to and complications of the discourse of the local and the global. Edmond argues that Yang's writing 'contributes to a rethinking of authority, autobiography, location—and Asia itself—not as pre-existing objects but as sites of encounter and contestation'.

In the second chapter in Part 2, ‘The City as a Contact Zone: Shanghai as a Crossroad between China and Japan’, Hasegawa Eiko finds a micro-cosm of contemporary Sino-Japanese relations in the city of Shanghai. For East Asia and the world, the rise of China over the last few decades has had a momentous impact on local, regional and global politics, trade and culture. Hasegawa explores the implications of China’s ‘rise’ by focusing on expatriate Japanese women living and working in Shanghai, arguably China’s most global city. Having undertaken field research with a number of Japanese women, Hasegawa discusses how their experiences of cross-cultural encounter and displacement illuminate the politics of memories and borders in a transforming contact zone between China and Japan. She contributes to the remapping of East Asian cultural flows for the twenty-first century, showing how Shanghai itself has helped to reconfigure Sino-Japanese boundaries by facilitating transnational flows and contributing to new bilateral connections.

In ‘From Diasporic Communities to “Abandoned People” (*Kimin*)’, Roman Rosenbaum rethinks how migrants and displaced peoples are sometimes viewed from a Japanese perspective. Migration is often perceived as a type of exclusion, and the term *kimin*, or ‘abandoned people’, was used historically to refer to those who had been excluded by the rest of society. The term is sometimes used for lower social groups or outcast communities. While the world of transnational flows has established and celebrated many cultures the world over, the image of *kimin* is still negatively felt by many in the Japanese diaspora (especially in South America) and by many socially disadvantaged or disenfranchised Japanese ‘at home’ (e.g. the lower classes or even those displaced by natural disasters such as earthquakes). As a general term, *kimin* signifies cultural displacement and marginality and also some cultural and ethnic identities in Japan. Rosenbaum argues that while diasporic communities globally have been reappraised in a new era of cultural celebration, many in Japan never received a positive reconceptualization. Rosenbaum provides a thoughtful and challenging discussion that problematizes the notion of *kimin* for Japan in an age of increased global flows and transnational influences, while critiquing the Japanese government’s failure to address these locally and globally important and sensitive issues.

Anglo-Indians (Eurasians) are the following chapter’s focus. In ‘Hiding behind Ambiguity: Identifying an Ethnicity’, Anthony Shome provides a thought-provoking journey into the Anglo-Indian world of Malaysia and Singapore. Shome situates his discussion in a con-

text where Anglo-Indian identity is challenging and problematic. He explores how Anglo-Indians might best assert their ethnicity, which is often considered ambiguous and is diminishing internationally as Anglo-Indians are increasingly absorbed into mainstream ethnic groups. The author argues that Anglo-Indians are an anachronism, a colonial antiquity, which some long to escape and others prefer to hide behind.

Exploring another instance of cross-cultural encounter in the recentering of Asia, Nanami Akiko examines NGOs that support foreigners in Japan in the final chapter of Part 2. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have proliferated since the 1980s in Japan, and from the 1990s there has been an emphasis on advocacy. Faced with inherent social obstacles that sometimes see non-Japanese as unwelcome guests due to the myth of Japanese homogeneity, Japanese NGOs working in this field in Japan are at the nexus of sometimes highly charged political, social and transnational thought. Japan's population of non-Japanese continues to grow, yet Japanese society and government are still to make appropriate changes to help facilitate the work of these NGOs. Nanami focuses on political and social factors that affect NGO activities and their impact on non-Japanese and Japanese alike, offering insights into the recentering of Japanese society today.

Part 3 examines the vital role that various forms of cultural production play in representing and shaping notions of identity and in challenging the geographical and cultural boundaries of Asianness. Kathy Ooi shows how representations of Chinese men as sexual subjects and objects in New Zealand white settler fiction track the developing relationship between the majority white settler population and New Zealand's Chinese minority, while also providing broader insights into New Zealanders' perceptions of Asia. Ooi identifies the repetition of stereotypes common among European and white settler cultures in the twentieth century, but she also perceptively demonstrates how the range of representations of Chinese men in relation to sex in the latter half of the twentieth century paralleled the increasing orientation of white New Zealand culture towards Asia and China in particular over this period.

Elise Foxworth further unsettles the linguistic, geographic and cultural boundaries of identity and representation by focusing on how Kim Sok Pom's novel *Mandogi Yürei Kitan* addresses the 1949 Cheju Massacre in a transnational context of competing national traditions and the rise of modernity in East Asia. Returning to the theme of modern Korean history in Morris-Suzuki's essay, Foxworth shows how

Kim's novel negotiates and unsettles boundaries between nations and languages and between tradition and modernity, projecting a vision of human dignity while acknowledging the dehumanizing powers to which *zainichi* have been subject. In this way, the chapter concludes on the hopeful notion that forms of identity representation have the power not only to oppress but also to offer new ways of thinking and being.

Leith Morton revises another stereotype, unsettling received views of the unquestioning nature of Japanese wartime patriotism and nationalism through an examination of the popular Japanese *tanka* verse form during the Second World War. Morton challenges the view 'that wartime *tanka* is utterly devoid of literary or artistic merit', arguing instead 'that the verses composed by amateurs convey both the complexity of individual emotion and, sometimes, even a message of protest against the war'. In this way, Morton's chapter also participates in a broader re-evaluation of how the war was perceived by the citizens of one of the major players in this central geopolitical event of the twentieth century.

Katsuyuki Miyahira and Peter Petrucci address the complex roles that identity and representation play in the ongoing imagining of Okinawan identity through an examination of language use at the 4th Worldwide Uchinānchu Festival. They demonstrate how the Uchināguchi language functions as a unifying force for Okinawan and diasporic Uchinānchu in the face of a shared experience of linguistic dispossession through assimilation to another language, be it Japanese, English, Spanish or Portuguese.

The last chapter, by Henry Johnson, offers an analysis of a Japanese *taiko* (drum) group in a tertiary education context in New Zealand. Having a history of nearly two decades, this group has until recently been made up entirely of Japanese students studying in New Zealand, usually for up to three years. Kodama, as the group is now known, offers a unique window on Japanese neo-traditional culture. The group's influence on New Zealand challenges preconceived notions of cultural and national identity, and exposes images of a perceived traditional Japan, for players and audience alike. Johnson also shows that in the New Zealand setting Kodama actually helps construct a sense of Japanese identity for its members, many of whom had not played *taiko* before coming to New Zealand. The group's transnational network of cultural flows contributes to a recentring of Asia in a southern hemisphere context and helps illustrate a rethinking of Asian locality where the non-Japanese geographic dislocation provides a new context for discourse on Asia, challenging boundaries, territories and conceptualizations of Asia's centres and peripheries.

Together, these essays argue that to recognize the centrality of Asia in the world today also means questioning this centre/periphery binary and the very notion of a single centre or unifying idea. As these essays vividly demonstrate, it is neither possible nor desirable to describe the diverse peoples representing over half the world's population according to a single paradigm. The centrality of Asian histories, encounters and identities lies in their diversity. To recentre Asia, therefore, requires a new model of the centre itself—the centre not as a homogenizing, hegemonic force, but as a zone of encounter, exchange and contestation in which the diverse histories, cultures and identities of the region are continuously articulated and transformed.

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