Asian studies is changing. The fundamental conditions for Asian studies in the era of “area studies” have changed and the new conditions are emerging. This essay takes an overview of this change, then it considers the prospect and what we should prepare for the emerging new “style” of Asian studies.

It should be noted at the outset here that several phenomena, conditions and changes mentioned in this essay may not be applicable to Japan for reasons that I shall discussed briefly in this essay. Despite that, the global change in Asian studies is undoubtedly relevant to Asian studies in Japan as well.

**Asian studies so far**

Let me begin with an overview of the paradigmatic changes of Asian studies as a field of knowledge in modern scholarship. We may say that Asian studies so far have been developed mainly in the European and American academia. (This is not to suggest that there was no studies of Asia at all in other countries and academia, but these latter ones were not as influential beyond a country’s own academia.)

The European “Oriental studies” thrived under colonial conditions. The American “area studies” under the Cold War. Each of these two traditions or “styles” entails a certain definition of “Asia”, certain emphases on subjects, sub-fields, and disciplines. Needless to say, each reflects certain politics of knowledge. Under the colonial ideology that claimed the European powers as the rescuers of ancient civilizations, Oriental studies paid attention to the classical subjects such as philology, epigraphy, archaeology, art history, ancient history and classical literature. The American area studies, on the other hand, emerged in the context of the Cold War agenda to fight communism. Responding to the demand for knowledge for counter-insurgency and for economic modernization, area studies including Asian studies paid more attention to social sciences and the related humanities namely political science, anthropology, modern history and literature.

The notion of “Asia” for European scholars was shaped by their various colonial experiences with the region. The Indo-Aryan or Sanskrit and the Chinese “Far East” civilizations drew the Europeans’ scholarly interest to Asia, added by the interests in their respective colonies, such as India for the United Kingdoms, Indochina for France, and the East Indies for the Dutch. The “Near East” and Islam were also a prime “Otherness” of Oriental studies, as Said has demonstrated decades ago. “Asia” for the American area studies, on the other hand, has been constructed primarily by geo-politics of the Cold War in the US perspective. Hence, the regional division of Asia into the East, South, Southeast Asia and the “Middle East” instead of the “Near East”. The studies of discrete nation-state also become more prominent in area studies than in the European scholarship.

The notions of Asia and the disciplinary attentions are among the scholarly fundamentals that produce certain styles or traditions of Asian studies. Needless to say, the prior knowledge, conceptual paradigms, available research methods and tools, and so on, and the non-scholarly factors—politics, economy of scholarship, funding, and the conditions of the academies were also
important in the production of knowledge about Asia. The point to emphasize here is that Asian studies have been shaped fundamentally by these different “ecology” of the European and American academies.

**Current ecology of Asian studies**

But the contextual conditions for these European and American styles of Asian studies have fundamentally gone! Colonialism and the Cold War have gone for many decades. Asian studies that we are now practicing and living with is the legacies of those past conditions.

Indeed Asian studies today has fundamentally been under the different condition from the ones of the past styles. Several trends in Asian studies in recent years reflect the changes in one way or another, although the emerging shape may not be clear yet. There have been enormous discourses on the post-Cold War, globalization and the globalizing nation-states, new regionalism of various kinds, the rise of Asia, and so on. These are all the new environments for Asian studies, not only in terms of new geo-politics, but also new agenda, questions, and politics and economy of knowledge.

I would like to point out only a few structural changes in the global academia in this new environment that would shape the emerging, new style of Asian studies. I pick out these few points as they are important to the discussion further below, and because they have not received much attention from the practitioners in the field.

With increasing economic power, the “rise of Asia” is also true in higher education in Asian countries, both in quantity and quality. Higher education in almost every country has expanded dramatically in recent decades, thereby the increasing number of scholars, predominantly the native ones, and their research outputs about their respective countries. The numbers of new programs in Asian studies, new journals based in Asia, and professional organizations are also up. Interestingly, the programs and scholars in one Asian country who study another Asian country or region also increase visibly. The landscape of knowledge production in Asian studies has transformed and this trend is not over any time soon.

Even in North America, the number of scholars from Asia or the ones with Asian heritage who do Asian studies has increased rapidly and steadily in recent decades. For these people, Asia or the “Orient” is not the Other of the West as it may have been the case in the past according to Said. Rather, they study their home country or their heritage. In case of those who study another Asian country, their position to Otherness would not be the same one as Orientalism—the Other of the West. I believe a similar trend is also true in European countries. As a matter of fact, given the expansion of higher education in Asia especially the international programs, nowadays scholars from the US and Europe who do Asian studies are everywhere in Asia too.

Given these structural transformation in the global academia, at least two significant changes in Asian studies must be noted: one on the production of knowledge, the other on the notion of Asia.

**Notable Changes (1): Sites of knowledge production**

While the American area studies remains influential, or still dominant, the sites of productions of Asian studies knowledge become more diverse. Particularly, it shifts to Asia. The programs and scholars in many Asian countries as mentioned above are productive and more visible. The voices of the “home” scholars is louder and likely to be more so in years to come.

Some of these programs are trying to find their “niche” or their comparative advantages to produce a distinctive brand of Asian studies. In Singapore, for example, some programs take
the location of the country as a prime asset in building Asian studies that emphasize the trans-Asian connections and the interactions between the Indic and Sinic worlds. To them, Asia is premier and global, not marginal or “third-world” like in the past Asian studies. As Thailand tried to position itself as the hub of the regional economy and transportation across mainland Southeast Asia, in the past twenty years, several programs for Indochina and Mekong studies were created particularly at universities in the north and northeast. Some scholars, not institutions, have suggested the need for a new style of Asian studies which is not defined by the geopolitical premise, but based on something else such as the post-colonial popular culture or religious traditions.

The networks of scholars in Asian studies so far have been mostly located in Europe and North America. Asia is the site for field research, informants and partner scholars to the “northern” world. Increasingly and rapidly, networks of scholars of Asian studies are now formed across countries in Asia. Apart from the ones mentioned above, several institutions in Asia that provide the opportunity for scholars from other Asian studies to meet, such as the Southeast Asian Studies program at Chulalongkorn University, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies and other programs at Kyoto University, and many more at institutions in Tokyo. Non-institution-based such as the Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange Program (SEASREP), Asian Public Intellectuals (API), and so on, contribute to the expanding intra-Asian networks of Asian scholars. In Southeast Asian studies, the first Asia-based Consortium for Southeast Asian Studies (SEASIA) was established recently and its first conference in December 2015 in Kyoto looks to be a special event in the history and the global landscape of Southeast Asian studies. They do not have to connect via the “north” (i.e. the West). The inter-Asian or intra-Asian scholarly networks are common nowadays, although the extent and to what effects are yet to know.

In this new context, we can say that the location and position of the producers of knowledge in relations to the subject of their studies is fundamentally different from the previous Asian studies under the colonial and American traditions, hence the power relations between the subject-object of knowledge, thereby their perspectives too.

**Notable change (2): Spatial notions of Asia**

The academic critique of nation as a modern construct and the globalization in the world context together help to undermine the notion of “Asia” in the American style of area studies. As a consequence, the spatial conceptualization of Asia has been rearticulated and emerging in many ways different from the concept of Asia according to the Cold War geo-politics.

Although the country studies remains strong and is still the basis of most Asians studies today, nation studies and methodological nationalism have been heavily criticized in the past few decades. Not only are they unsuitable to economic globalization, but their limitations also become obvious for their inability to deal with any cross-country phenomena from natural disasters to terrorism, cultural and information flows. The rethinking of area studies as the whole and of the space of Asian studies in particular has been in vogue in recent years (Miyoshi and Harootunian 2002).

As new regional blocs are formed to deal with the global economy, ideas of new regionalism, are emerging in Asian studies (Duara 2013, Acharya 2011). Very strong in the rethinking of Asia is the ideas of maritime networks and connectivity, such as the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea (Reid 1988 and 1995, Wolters 1982), and the ideas of the zones of common economic life or civilization (Warren 1985, Walker 2009, Ho 2006). Cultural and spiritual connections across time and space of Asia become more visible once the nation-states no longer block our views. Even in the land mass of Asia, we realize now that most histories we have
learned are the ones of the lowland civilizations, while the upland and highland massif of Asia have been neglected (Scott 2009). Our knowledge of the central and inner Asia, which is probably the cradle of world history, has been lagged behind partly because these areas have been regarded as marginal in the colonial and Cold War geo-politics (Ooi 2014). Definitions of a region also change over time such as the mainland Southeast Asia before the Ming (Wade and Sun eds. 2010). Last but not least, one of the most productive fields of scholarship in the past few decades once the national boundary was problematized is the border studies, i.e. the studies of phenomena and issues across national borders, from ethnic minorities and settlements across borders, economic transactions and border trades, migrations and other forms of transnational mobility of humans (labors, exiles, etc.), to the border-less flows of popular cultures, media, information, and so on. Border studies is a huge industry in Asian studies today.

The changing spatial conceptualization has far and deep implications for Asian studies. Not only issues or subject of studies, but methodology too, need to change or calibrate. Not only can a nation not be the reliable basis of a study, but perhaps any single or inflexible spatial conceptualization is inadequate for a complex and interconnected subject. This is true to Asian studies and beyond.

How to engage in the formulation of the future Asian studies?

I by no means could comprehensively propose or foresee the emerging new style of Asian studies. I also believe that it is still being formulated by all of us in the profession. The prospect of the new style of Asian studies is up to us. The various contributions to Asian studies, either intended for the future of the field or not, with visions and without, knowingly and unknowingly, successful or otherwise, would help formulate the future of the field. Perhaps more time and inputs are needed for it to become visible. Perhaps it takes time for us to understand how it looks. Perhaps there will be no dominance of a single tradition; rather, a new landscape of multiple styles of Asian studies in the marketplace of knowledge. Perhaps the intellectual flows and transactions across academies, including the various styles of Asian studies, might become a new norm.

The prospect of Asian studies is up to all of us.

Nonetheless, if we who do Asian studies as our profession and as our labor of love want to involve or to be an agency of change in Asian studies, how should we engage with it? How do we play a role in shaping Asian studies under the new conditions into the future? In my opinion, at least two things are needed.  

1. Given the multiple sites of knowledge production, we should understand better the different “ecologies” of the academia in Asian countries. There are so many elements that shape a country’s academia. History of higher education in many Asian countries is a very important factor. A partial account of it would suffice to understand how significant it is to the ecology of the academia. Unlike the Euro-American ones, most modern academia across Asia, except Japan but not except Siam, were developed under colonial education and they still live with some lasting legacies. The mission of colonial higher education was to produce the skilled personnel as demanded by colonial bureaucracy and economy. Its emphasis was on the applied and “useful” knowledge. The less “useful” knowledge was less relevant, such as the humanities. Besides, also due to this history, most institutions of higher education in Asia are primarily teaching ones, with limited and underdeveloped research
infrastructure and culture. Except Japan, research has not been strong. Interests in the humanities research are stronger only recently particularly in those wealthier countries.

The style of research and scholarship produced in these academies is therefore shaped by this background. As a result, in contrast with Asian studies currently in the Europe and North America, scholarship produced in Asian institutions is relatively stronger in social science and in the application-oriented and policy-oriented fields, but it is relatively weak in the humanities. The benefits and shortfalls, or the better and the worse, of this style of knowledge compared to the Euro-American one, are beside the point. But they are definitely different. Suppose that, we may say for the sake of argument, this style of scholarship becomes dominant in Asian studies tomorrow, the field of Asian studies will emphasize contemporary issues, social science, and technical and applied knowledge, far different from the classical subjects of the Oriental studies and different from the American style area studies nowadays which is strong in the humanities.

Apart from the history of higher education in Asia, there are so many other important factors. To mention a few important one: the relatively strong nationalism as the result of recent history of decolonization and nation-building, the effects of recent (or still in place) authoritarianism, the existing lack of academic freedom and intellectual persecution in many countries. These conditions directly affect what can be said and what cannot, and how to say it to avoid the consequences. Self-censorship in various forms was and is common in Asian academies. The understanding of different academies and their knowledge productions would help us in charting the path for the emerging Asian studies in the new era.

2. Language and academic translation are critical in the emerging era of multiple Asian studies. The following basic conditions regarding language are not going to change any time soon even under the internationalization of scholarship.

English is probably the common currency of intellectual exchanges for the foreseeable future. Hope we learn how to minimize its shortfalls. Among the most obvious ones, English is often unable to convey certain concepts and ideas loaded in the vernacular languages. On a more serious note, as some have pointed out, particular concepts and views come with the use of English which may affect conceptualization and intellectual agenda (Alatas 2006: 113).

Furthermore, given that English is not the primary language in many Asian countries, the predominance of English in global scholarship entails many consequences. First is the relative ability among individual scholars in those countries to access to, and command of, global scholarship. The implications of this factor alone are enormous—from the kind and quality of the scholarly outputs, the networks or intellectual community of those scholars, to power relations among intellectuals who are and are not fluent in English. (This does not necessarily mean the one who is fluent is necessarily more powerful than the one who is not.) The more and less engaged with global scholarship significantly shapes the characteristics of a scholar, institution and the academia or the styles of scholarship. The opposite is also true, that is, international scholars have relative ability to access to the scholarship in vernacular languages. There are so many academic works that are influential or crucial in shaping a society. But they are not necessarily known to the non-native scholars. The result of these opposite sides of the same factor is the gap or differences between the “global” and the so-called “local” knowledge in terms of styles, intellectuals agenda, impacts, influences, quality, and the politics and economy of scholarship.

But the functions of language and translation for the intellectual networking and flows across academies, are paradoxical. On the one hand, academic translation is the necessary mediation for intellectual communication and exchanges, helping us reach across intellectual divides, such as to learn about thinkers and their works, or influential novels and arts that reflect the culture of an unfamiliar society, and so on. Unfortunately, academic translation remains an underdeveloped enterprise in most Asian countries, except Japan and probably China. Even the transla-
tions from English remain inadequate, let alone translation from one Asian language to English or to another Asian language.

On the other hand, simultaneously or in the same moment, they are barriers and the inherent frictions of the intellectual engagement. A foreign language, English and any other ones, could limit the communication and exchanges in many ways. It discourages and reduces the access to knowledge. Cost of books in English and of databases are not equally affordable by individuals or by libraries world-wide. In some countries, as a result, a scholar may spend his entire career in vernacular languages without much engagement with scholarship from the outside world since there is no market for the scholarship in vernacular languages while the domestic market is adequate for them to survive without the needs for, say, publishing in a refereed journals in English. This condition creates an enclave of vernacular scholarship in which scholars and their works need not engage with, respond to, or be tested by any outsiders. They enjoy “intellectual protectionism,” so to speak.

The above discussion is merely on language and translation in the literal sense of the terms. Language and translation in the broader sense, as a particular system of representation and decoding of a cultural fact, is also crucial for the exchanges and flows of knowledge across academies and cultures. But this essay is inadequate even to begin to discuss the broader sense of language and translation.

Some observations on Asian studies in Japan

Asian studies in Japan is very different from the Euro-American one, though not free from the latter’s influences. Not only is higher education in Japan has its own unique history, but Asian studies in particular also has a quite different genealogy from the one of the Euro-American counterpart.

There are at least three branches of genealogy for Asian studies in Japan. First, at least since the beginning of the twentieth century, the modern scholarship in Japan on “Asia” meant the study of China, particularly Chinese literature and religious traditions. Secondly, during the period between the two world wars, Japan developed its own colonial scholarship, producing knowledge about, and from their research and laboratories in, Korea, Manchuria, Taiwan, and Southeast Asian countries. Works on Taiwan and Southeast Asia was called “Tropical studies”. Thirdly, the influence of the American area studies after the Second World War has been another genealogy of Asian studies in Japan today.

Not less important than the above genealogy is the history of higher education and research tradition in Japan itself. A few point would suffice how it is different from the ones in other Asian countries and from the European and the American ones too. Higher education in Japan, for instance, was modernized independently from the colonial education. It was developed by the strong push for modernization upon the strong Japanese intellectual tradition. As a result, the style of scholarly works in Japan is well known for its very strong and meticulous empirical data. Its conceptual or theoretical aspect is usually not explicit, despite it is well informed. Last but not least, although scholarship remains primarily in Japanese, it always engages with the world through strong academic translation since the late nineteenth century. These are unique characteristics thanks to the conditions unlike anywhere else in Asia.

The emerging Asian studies

It is not clear yet what style(s) the emerging Asian studies would be. Even it is taking shape right now, it is not clearly visible yet. The American area studies remains influential to the
entire field of Asian studies. It is the basis upon which the future Asian studies to be built. Nevertheless, it is likely that contributions from various academies, institutions, programs and individual scholars in Asia, for better and worse, would play increasingly vital roles in the shaping up of the field in the future. Scholars in the profession in Europe and the US recognize this trend and they are trying to engage with Asian academies and scholarship. The other way round is also true.

Perhaps the emerging Asian studies would be full of engagement among multiple sites of production. The engagement with Asia and within Asia could be one of the most important tasks that each academy, institution, and individuals should pay attention to.

Even the word “Asian studies” itself and its regional divisions could soon become limitation and we might need to do away with them. In recent years, amidst the multiple regional platforms in economic and political cooperation among nation-states—ASEAN, APEC, Pacific Rims, and so on—new ideas of regions and regionalism are put forward in scholarship (mentioned above) which seem go beyond a rigid spatial configuration of any kind. Perhaps, if I may wish, scholars should be able to think and design a flexible methodological space according to particular subjects or issues. Academically, the ability to think and define space flexibly should be part of scholarly training of the next generation, not only in terms of scalar space but also multiple spaces at the same time. This ability to conceptualize the flexible space may be part of Asian studies in the future as well.

Notes
1) This essay is based on the address given at the Japan Association for Asian Studies (JAAS) Conference at Rikkyo University, 14 June 2015.

2) The emphasis on social sciences in area studies has been declined approximately around the end of Vietnam War, thanks partly to the end of need for counter-insurgency and the fall of the modernization fever as ways to fight communism, thanks partly to critical scholarship in the Euro-American academia that distanced themselves from policy-oriented scholarship, and finally thanks to the intellectual trends in social science disciplines especially in North America in pursuit of becoming more scientific, resulting in the discard of area studies since they are not scientific. All of these make Asian studies increasingly humanistic in the present day. Membership of the AAS and its annual programs also reflect this change.


4) For example, the Srivijaya-Nalanda project at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (now the ISEAS Yusof-Ishak Institute). It was also an important point of discussion for building Asian studies program at the National University of Singapore. The program at Nanyang Technological University is called Global Asia.

5) There are such programs at Chiang Mai, Phitsanulok, Ubon Ratchathani, Khonkaen, Mahasarakham, and also at Walailak University in the south, apart from the Southeast Asia studies programs at Chulalongkorn University and Thammasat in Bangkok.

6) See Heryanto (2007), and the efforts by Naoki Sakai (Cornell) and the Traces collective (Trace: A Multi-lingual Journal of Cultural Theory and Translation); and the journal Inter-Asia Cultural Studies led by Chua Beng-Huat (NUS).

7) http://seasia-consortium.org/ (accessed on September 26, 2015)


9) As I have explained at length elsewhere (Winichakul 2014) about these two urgent needs, I would like explain them only briefly here.

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