Studying Asian Imagining

By Frits Staal

Andy’s prediction is relevant to the future of Asian Studies because power and technology depend on basic scientific knowledge, not only of mathematics and physics but of languages, civilizations, and values. Asians have long believed that studying such topics is part of Euro-American culture, which they supposed to be superior to Asian traditions in these respects. But history shows that most of these disciplines originated and flourished in Asia long before they reached Europe, not to mention the Americas. Is the ascent of Asia perhaps a simple return from what was a temporary detour?

At Berkeley, I have seen it coming: a steady increase in the number of Asian Studies students. Almost all of them return home if only because American regulations make it impossible or unbearable for them to stay. In Europe, students in the basic disciplines have also become rare and there are few Asians to take their place. The Dutch Academy of Sciences has reported that mathematics is declining in the Netherlands even faster than elsewhere. While Asians are progressing, Euro-Americans are sliding down, which is tantamount to sliding back. It is inevitable that technologies, economies, and all that depends on them will follow.

Reversals and asymmetries

It has not always been like this. During the Renaissance, Europeans were eager to learn ‘Arabic’ in order to update their meagre understanding of mathematics and astronomy. The trend has since reversed: Asians began to absorb Euro-American knowledge and Euro-Americans ignore Asia in spite of Asian Studies. Asian-Americans are equally uninformed about Asia. My postal clerk, who is Indian, believed that Tokyo was in China. And ignorance is compounded by inconsistencies: Why is ‘Oriental’ prohibited when Tokyo was in China. And ignorance is compounded by inconsistencies: Why is ‘Oriental’ prohibited when Tokyo was in China? Bernard Lewis disdains his readers when he writes: ‘until a comparatively recent date, there were no Occidentalists in the Orient.’ Lewis fails to mention that there were scholars writing in Arabic, such as al-Biruni, who were Orientalists; availing is Ille. Lewis restricts his Orient to the Middle East, as did Said. But the greatest Occidentalist of Asia were Chinese, Japanese, Javanese, Khmer, Koryan, Tibetans, and other Buddhist monks who translated Sanskrit sources from the Indian subcontinent, which was situated to their west. In quality and quantity, these contributions are on a par with the translations from Greek and Latin, sometimes via Arabic, into the modern languages of Europe. The texts were similar insofar as they were not restricted to Buddhist matters but included astronomy, grammar, logic, medicine, and other scientific disciplines.

Clashes with modernities

Bernard Lewis’ What Went Wrong: The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East is strikingly relevant here. Modernity is a trendy concept, but the term modern is used in the customary manner: it refers to progress when the event has just occurred and is, therefore, a relative term. Prior to Islam, there was a clash between Christianity and modernity that thwarted scientific progress and is not quite over. Progress in astronomy, for example, stopped around 1540 AD when the most advanced worldview in existence was that of Ptolemy. The Chinese continued to work, however, and a millennium later, were vastly ahead of Europeans. Some setbacks – such as the Swedish resistance to the use of Indian numerals – are of short duration. Others are a more serious threat. In the nineties, the Hindutva government of India ordered ‘Vedic mathematics’ to be taught in all schools. It affects hundreds of millions of children, not counting future generations for we do not know how long it will last once the tradition of teaching modern mathematics has been destroyed. All Indians who can afford it now send their children to private schools. It restricts progress once again to the wealthy who are least hungry or ambitious.

‘Vedic mathematics’ is neither Vedic nor mathematics. It is not Vedic because Vedic mathematics consisted of geometry, in many respects similar to the ancient Greek variety. In Europe, it lasted until Newton; in India, it was replaced by trigonometry and algebra about a millennium earlier. It is not mathematics as explains T. F. Layaracha, a theoretical high-energy physicist working at the Institute of Mathematical Sciences of Chennai, by telling the story of a book that was written by the Shankaracharya of Pur, the pontiff of a Brahman sect who died in 1966, and was posthumously published in 1970. His Hindus claimed that his book, called Vedic Mathematics, was based upon an appendix of the Atharvaveda that no one had ever heard of. The text consists of simple or fast ways of dividing, multiplying, and factoring numbers and other tricks that appeal to children. ‘The claims made on its behalf are astounding. Government officials declare: whatever is very ancient in India, that precisely is most modern for the world.’ Some say that the introduction of ‘Vedic mathematics’ into the curriculum is a deliberate effort to keep people uninformed and to keep a political party in power after which India’s progress will come to a full stop and make it dependent on foreign imports, as it was during the colonial period.

Not so Asian values

‘Vedic mathematics’ is one of the mythologies that are sometimes referred to as ‘Asian values’ by politicians who have other motives up their sleeves. Malaysia’s former prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, did much for his country in his younger years. He wrote together with Shintaro Ishihara, now governor of Tokyo, that Asians need not bow to Americans and that the future belongs to Asia – a thesis largely in tune with what I am presently writing. A few years ago, Mahathir declared homosexuality a decadent Western vice that contradicts ‘Asian values.’ It has enabled him to put his rival Anwar Ibrahim in jail on unsubstantiated charges, following anti-homosexuality laws that were abolished long ago in Britain and only very recently in all the states of the USA. All Asian countries that have made homosexuality illegal either belonged to the British Commonwealth or instituted Islamic laws. In all these regions, homosexuality prospered in the past. Mahathir ignores these facts and does not seem to know that Chinese literature has referred to homosexuality as ‘the cut sleeve’ since the first
century BC, when a Han Emperor whose male lover was sleeping on his sleeve, cut it off in order not to wake him when he needed to get up himself. A Singapore lawyer, Philip Jayaratnam, sums up the situation: during the last 150 years, Asia has abandoned, due to ‘Western’ influence (to which he might have added ‘partly’), the burning of widows, foot binding, the caste system, slavery, and concubines; and adopted its most backward notions, hatred and fear of sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular.

Area studies

We need entomology, meteorology, semantics, and area studies; but we need more, and Obeyesekere explains how: ‘Areal barriers can be broken only by comparative analysis and theoretical thinking.’ The present difficulty is that most scientists use thematic and disciplinary distinctions that are based upon Euro-American categories. In India, guna may be the same as village, but karma and dharma are more adequate categories than religion, philosophy, or ethics. Areas, moreover, differ not only in character but also in size. Robert Cribb may be right that the idea of ‘Southeast Asia’ is running out of steam. The terms South, Southeast, and East Asia themselves have remained unintelligible to the world outside.

Asian Studies. They resulted from American post-Second World War politics, chiefly based upon a desire not to offend and thereby offending without discrimination. But we are scientists, diplomacy is not our business and reality should be our guide. Why not redress the balance and leave it to Asian scientists to evolve new terms and concepts?

Asian Studies can help answer the question that is now before us: what went wrong with the Euro-American tradition? Will the answer pave the way for a more even-handed presentation and evaluation of Asia, or will there only be a shift in the contexts between nations? And why single out Asia? We may answer these questions after all claims of superiority on behalf of this or that territory or system of values have been abandoned, and humanity is contemplated within the context of the non-human universe of which it is a minute spark – if that.

Students of Asia may assist in doing something more practical as well. Perhaps it is they who should initiate it. I believe that Asian and non-Asian scientists and scholars should cooperate closely to create reliable introductions, curricula, and websites that explain the main facts about the universe, life, human language, and the world’s civilizations, societies, and values. They should be translated into numerous languages and made freely available to every citizen of the planet.

Bibliography

- Bharati Krishna Tirtha Maharaja, Shantakaracarya of Gaurishvara Matha, Puri, Vedic Mathematics or sixteen simple mathematical formulae from the Vedas (for one-line answers to all mathematical problems), Varanasi: Banaras Hindu University (1955).
- Thapar, Romila, Early India from the Origins to 700, Berkeley etc.: University of California (2002).
- www.imsc.res.in/~jayaram/Articles/firstline/firstline.html

Professor Fritz Staal is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and of South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of California at Berkeley. He is currently teaching a course on the History of Buddhism at Leiden University and is an IAS affiliated fellow. His interests include Sanskrit, logic, linguistics, ritual, and the history of science.

See http://philosophy.berkeley.edu/staal/fstaal@socrates.berkeley.edu