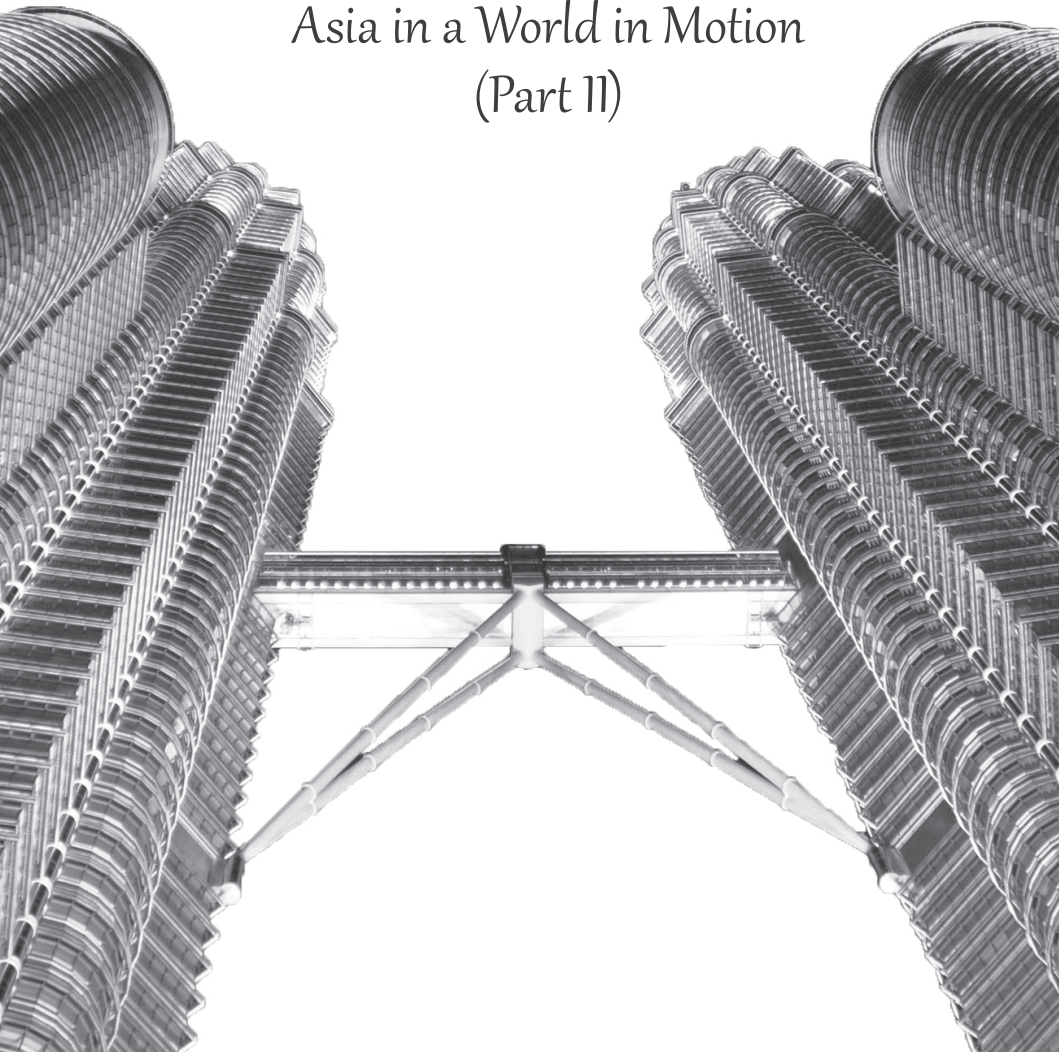# 2

Asia in a World in Motion
(Part II)

Of crossroads and the Future: Southeast Asia in an Asian Age

Goh Beng-Lan

One of the most striking features of contemporary Asian visions of a regional world order is a strident rejection of Western values, modernity and universalism that is shared by both conservative and progressive circles. That an anti-West critique is employed for both hegemonic and liberating purposes is indicative of the ambiguities, contradictions and perplexities that have plagued Asian imaginations of self-autonomy over time. History has shown that progressive and exclusionist versions of Asian critiques of the West, constituted by colonization and decolonization, have persisted alongside each other since the late 19th century. Mixed bags of counter-Western regional imaginations can be traced through modern history, among which include: pan-Asian conceptions of decolonization at the end

of the 19th century which drew upon both universalist as well as ethno-nationalist imaginings; the Japanese imperialist vision of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere during the Second World War; the independent and non-alignment spirit of the Bandung Conference after the Second World War; and more recently the ASEAN Way of non-interventionism. The continued survival of Asianism even at a time when the world is hailing the arrival of an Asian century can be interpreted in two possible ways: First, that, the problem of disparity, or coloniality, if you like, at least to Asian countries, has not disappeared in a global capitalist age; and second: that the rejection of the West, which is a search for equality with the West, remains an uncompleted project. The arising question is then whether an Asian century will provide conditions and opportunities for a more equal, just and convivial global future?

Before the future can be contemplated, it is first necessary to take stock of current state-of-affairs in Asian societies. An assessment of current precedents may be helpful for us to speculate on the promises, ambiguities and perils of an Asian Century. As Asia is not monolithic, in this paper I will use Southeast Asia—a region where I come from and in which I live and work—as a microcosm of contemporary Asian transformations to ponder on the prospects of an Asian century when seen from this region. Inevitably, my thoughts are shaped by my encounters with social realities as well as my personal political-theoretical commitment as a Malaysian academic based in Singapore who teaches and researches on Southeast Asia.

Since their universal integration into the global economy, Southeast Asian countries have by and large pursued counter-cultural modernization paths using a concoction of capitalist growth supported by top-down dictated nationalism and cultural authenticity, among which include Asian Values and Islam, which act as bulwarks against Westernization. Nonetheless, like elsewhere, Southeast Asian societies are as much spurred as they are also pulled apart by capitalist pursuits and cultural divides in the course of their modernization. At one front, unrelenting capitalist development and political domination have created social-class differentiations, a host of environmental problems and political upheavals. At another, these societies are under serious threats of being torn asunder by ethno-religious and nationalist rifts. Arguably, the fragmenting state of Southeast Asian societies today is a tell-tale sign of the untenable state of current nationalist and capitalist frameworks of growth. Clearly while current paradigms have produced economic growth, they have also created fragmentation, inequality and power abuses. In the anticipation of an Asian Century, the questions at stake would be whether conditions will facilitate a re-imagination and re-organization of national societies and economies and the kinds of alternative arrangements that will be produced?

I propose a glimpse of the future by examining alternative socio-political and ideational formations emerging from current disputes over the contradictions of capitalist and nationalist frameworks of growth in Southeast Asian

societies. My discussions will focus on three growing nascent phenomena: 1) political checkmates arising from capitalist entropies; 2) alternative political practices and their alternative imaginations of community and society; and 3) a transnational "Critical Asian Studies in Asia" movement and its promise for yielding epistemic dissent that can better effect changes in knowledge cannons. The constraints and opportunities of the imaginations produced as well as types of agency and actors implicated in these emergent practices will be useful to illuminate the uncertainties, perils as well as promises of an Asian century.

Capitalist and State excesses: political backlash

As Southeast Asian economies reinvented themselves and prospered under global conditions in the new millennium, the long tails of their economic successes are hitting back, creating swift changing political and social landscapes. Southeast Asian states appear to be at crossroads over how to strike a delicate balance between economic openness and protection and between inclusionary and exclusionary growth. These states, renowned for their brands of soft authoritarianism, are quickly discovering that the thinking, doing and desiring of their people have changed tremendously and that the promise of political stability and material comfort alone are no longer sufficient to pacify their citizenries. The days where they can push their citizens too hard and too fast may now be limited. With or without the states' blessings, creative and flexible frame-

works of growth are now in the making as existing frameworks of economy and society are bursting at their seams.

Cracks to the founding pillars of Southeast Asian governance and societies due to increasing global capitalist integration are already evident, and are likely to grow in the future. All societies, even the socialist market economies who are late comers to capitalist development, are in one way or another affected by widening social inequalities, rural unrest and a host of social and environmental problems that come with free market pressures. Even Singapore, the politically stable and efficient nanny state, is not spared. In this tiny city-state, an increasingly globalized economy has created social discontent over widening class gaps, unaffordable housing, influx of foreigners and over-strained public amenities and infrastructures. All these have led to an unprecedented unleashing of citizenry frustrations that saw the one party state suffered its first significant political opposition in its last General Elections. This has compelled swift policy changes to respond to citizenry concerns, reinstate social welfare protections and establish more avenues for state-people dialogue. A picture of a state held in check by its citizenry is a new one in Singapore. This political milestone is proudly referred to Singaporeans as their very own "Orchid revolution" (after its national flower). These developments show that flagrant intolerance of political dissent will grow increasingly untenable in the future. Nonetheless the potent role of the Southeast Asian state as the savior of capitalism by simultaneously

acting as facilitator and regulator against complete economic privatization must not be underestimated.

One of the most alarming threats arising from over-accumulative capitalist activities fuelled by corruptive practices in the region is environmental destruction. Recoil from mother-nature may be the last straw that breaks the camel's back. There are already ominous signs of this happening. All over the region, over-development has led to flash floods, air and water pollution, and increasing natural destruction. When environmental destruction becomes a trans-national hazard, the risk of a meltdown is escalated. This is already an actuality in the problem of trans-boundary haze pollution which emerged in Southeast Asia in the late 1980s. This environmental hazard is caused by smoke blown across national boundaries from widespread forest burning due to land clearing for plantation economies. The latest incident was in late June 2013 when populations living in West Malaysia and Singapore were inundated by choking haze due to land clearing for oil palm cultivation in Sumatra. In this latest crisis, the air pollutant indexes reached all-time high hazardous levels. The very air that humans breathe suddenly became a source of danger. It evoked loud public outcries in Malaysia and Singapore demanding that plantation companies and government officials responsible for the haze to be stopped and held accountable for their actions. Compelled to take immediate action, the governments of the affected states began negotiations with Indonesia in a bid to stop the haze. Official Indonesian response however threw the onus back onto its neighbors by pinpointing specific Malaysian and Singapor-

ean companies as perpetrators of the crisis. The companies in turn issued immediate rebuttals denying culpability, arguing that the hotspots identified by meteorological bodies were inaccurate or that they did not coincide with their concession sites. Apart from much finger-pointing, nothing concrete was achieved. Indonesia has after all not ratified an ASEAN agreement on haze pollution which, among other things, requires signatories to prevent burning and monitor prevention efforts.

This event exposed ASEAN for what it is, that above all the rhetoric of regional co-operation it is ultimately nothing more than a veneer for protecting individual capitalist interests. Amidst the standstill, the haze disappeared as swiftly as it descended as the winds shifted direction. As the skies cleared, the haze appears to have been quickly forgotten, at least, until the next occurrence. Nonetheless, mother-earth is unlikely to forget even if human beings have short memories. Trans-national environmental problems such as the haze which threaten the continuation of human life have a real potential for causing a historical and systemic change. Unless, more sustainable developmental paths are adopted, the consequences will be dire. An Asian future obsessed with capitalist success will be a perilous one. The capitalist entropies to come will inevitably compel a search for more sustainable ways of good living which are not singly dictated by capitalist logics alone.

Alongside the risks from capitalist excesses, Southeast Asian societies are also reeling from the disintegration of nationalist frameworks no longer in sync with changing aspirations of people in the region.

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Free radicals: new political imaginings

By the new millennium, public spheres in Southeast Asian countries appear to have lost their role in checkmating state and capital. Civil society, such as the Reformation (Reformasi) protest movement which brought the downfall of New Order government in Indonesia in 1998, is now incapacitated by deep divisions over contrasting imaginaries of national society. As groups within civil society fight among themselves, traditional political boundaries between the conservative and the progressive, the right and the left, the civil and uncivil have become blurred, confused and indecipherable. Dogmatic positions over the nature of public life have generated endless political stalemates. Such fragmentations are found in both Muslim and non-Muslim countries. In Muslim dominated but plural societies such as Malaysia and Indonesia, the entwinement between ethno-religious nationalism with a global web of political Islam has effectively allowed a narrow variety of dis-embedded Islamism the opportunity to claim the moral high ground. This has created polarization within civil society between groups advocating for Islam and those defending a secular public sphere. Against a backdrop of strong civilizational discourses on East-west differences, the struggles within civil society are characterized by orthodox Islamic groups using anti-imperial discourses to vilify, exteriorize and paralyze opposition as proxies of Western designs. What's sinister in this trend is that questions of social equality and justice become increasingly fought out in terms of a binary opposition between Islam/tradition and

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Western liberalism. Such bifurcation makes it difficult for any nuanced positions to be heard, hence debilitating critical interventions. Hostilities and violence, never witnessed before in these societies have unfolded as a result. Such political *détentes* are similarly experienced in non-Muslim countries. In a prevalently Buddhist society like Thailand, the struggle for political determinacy has turned into a fight over democracy with contending groups claiming their visions of the Thai nation as more democratic than the other. Here the split is between supposedly pro- and anti-monarchy groups, respectively called "yellow shirts" and "red-shirts." Nonetheless this fight is also about different class and urban-rural aspirations over social justice, human dignity and the status quo of Thai society. Overarching aims to protect each of the faction's interests have led to protracted mass street protests and violence. Equally disconcerting in this political deadlock is that both groups are equally dogmatic and unable to reconcile differences. Such hopelessly fractured public spheres have dampened hope in civil society to bring about a more equal, just and humane society. Nonetheless, out of impotence also grew possibilities. The bigotry and futility observed have pushed some to seek alternative political subjectivities.

Rejecting dogmatic extremes, many younger Southeast Asians have sought to articulate alternative aspirations of community and society at other subterranean arenas. This is observed in a quiet spread of alternative commentaries on society, politics and humanity in new social media, popular culture and artistic practices. These nascent practices

point to a new/alternative public sphere in the making in the region. This emerging public sphere has distinct virtual and transnational networking dimensions and involves social actors who are well-networked within and outside the region. Their social imaginaries, which are expressed directly online or find their way into the internet, are often heartening as they represent ethno-religious and ideological divides in innovative, humorous and outlandish ways that either parody their follies or expose erased similarities, shared pasts and affinities. By doing so, these practices help expand on registers of public reasons on religion, equality, justice and humanity in these societies. This is particularly evident in artistic and new media commentaries on the state-of-politics in the region. By changing political engagement away from a highly charged traditional public sphere, artists, for instance, are able to take on tabooed subjects, often producing affronts to normative social conceptions. Some young Muslim artists in Malaysia have, for instance, challenged Muslim traditions by reviving human figures and even portraying the proscribed animal in Islam—the pig—as humane and beautiful in their artworks. Their re-interpretations of the human figure and the pig are potent when understood against the context of dehumanizing tendencies in the fight between Islamist and secularist groups over social justice and human equality in Malaysia. Likewise, an active underground Islamic heavy metal rock scene in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, provides another example which disrupts the binary conception of the West and Islam. Defying sanctions by religious clerics,

young Muslim men and women are known to head bang to-
gether in makeshift concert joints in abandoned warehous-
es and other unlikely venues in these countries. They are
known to insist that their head banging, often with one fin-
ger pointing skywards, should be understood as adulations
of Allah. These young Muslims artists and musical com-
munities are not alone. Critical Islamic art and heavy metal
rock are found in Iran and other Middle-Eastern countries
and are quickly forming an alternative global critical sphere
(see Levine, 2008; Buck-Morss, 2003).

These new social undercurrents are clearly forged by in-
stinctive human reactions against the schisms and constraints
of current nationalist struggles in the region. They produce
clues on how resistant politics may have to change course
in the context of a thoroughly incapacitated public sphere.
These practices may not fit neatly into what social scientists
would usually consider as politics. Neither do these actors
consider themselves to be political. Their actions are not al-
ways collective, consistent, neither are they always radical.
Rather, they are made up of loose collectives of like-mind-
ed young people who come together as and when the occa-
sion requires. Perhaps their actions may be akin to the be-
havior of "free radicals" in human biology which are unsta-
ble but nonetheless havoc wreaking molecules. Their alter-
native imaginations about society, community and humani-
ty however strike powerful cords and are easily understood
by fellow members of their societies. These new politics re-
veal that the sensory, aesthetic and tactile dimensions of hu-
man action as well as the internet—the very infrastructure

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for the spread of financial capitalism—may be more conducive sites for alternative ethical conceptions about society and community in a world corrupt of ideas and critical interventions. They offer hope of alternative political aspirations and human conviviality other than the political extremes found in these societies. The interactive, transient and increasingly virtual nature of such alternative meaning-making in the region, which are equally found all over the world, will require a better exploration of their possible impacts on future social and political arrangements.

This brings us to my last point on the emergence of Asian critical intellectual currents that renders Southeast Asian scholars with a collective platform to share concerns **50** and help define the nuances of ethical-critical thinking from the region so that bridges can be built across polemical differences on humanity both within and between the region and the West.

Critical Asian studies in Asia

In Southeast Asia, the humanities and social sciences have been an important site for the spread of revolutionary ideals as actual ideological opposition has been effectively wiped out during the height of the Cold War. Even though the risk of state co-optation is always present, a strong ethical-critical commitment amongst regional scholars to bring to light subjugated knowledge so as to overturn monolithic statist promulgations of society has remained over time. This has produced a distinct, albeit unevenly spread, phe-

nomenon of Southeast Asian scholars who are engaged in activism and who write in support of social struggles against oppression beyond the academic arena to reach a wider audience. In the 1980s, a regional scholarly network, Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives (ARE-NA)—established by leftist Asian intellectuals who were inspired by the Bandung spirit—came up with the concepts of "concerned-scholar" or "scholar-activists" to emphasize such critical scholarly visions (Budianta, 2011). By the 1990s, another term, "public intellectuals" has gained currency as scholars in the region participated actively in the public sphere to articulate common concerns and propose useful social interventions (*ibid.*).

Although the vibrancy of public intellectualism is to an extent dependent on room for dissent, the real threat today comes not so much from political rule but from economic affluence. The desire to be global players has seen the commodification of knowledge in many of the more economically advanced countries, notably symbolized by institutional participation in global university and publication rankings. This institutionalization of neoliberalism in regional academy has subject scholars to the "publish or perish" culture whereby scholarly activism is not only devalued but becomes a hindrance to success. While a neo-liberal audit culture appears to be most complete in Singapore today, it is by no means an isolated case in the region. The commodification of knowledge is slowly but surely creeping into the region and will eventually lead to a growing separation between knowledge production and social engagement.

Nonetheless, at this point in time, public intellectualism remains alive in the region. Inevitably, the seeming loss of any alternatives to current growth frameworks has compelled regional scholars to search for effective ways out of the social dilemmas that confront their societies. Yet, given the global diffusion of academic ideas, as Southeast Asian scholars take up the challenge to resist regional hegemonies they must also negotiate the "difference'' in what counts as scholarship in regional and international settings. Here, regional scholars find themselves in a double-bind. On the one hand, they are caught in a peril of being easily accused as proxies of either Western or regional hegemonies at the domestic and international fronts respectively. On the other, they are constrained by a lack of concepts which can adequately express regional notions of critical thought which, while different from Western definitions, are nonetheless connected by the same beliefs in human equality, justice and dignity.

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It is hence clear that a (Southeast) Asian ethical-critical project of interpreting experiential differences is at once a regional and global enterprise. Such an endeavour must engage with the simultaneous forces of regional orthodoxies which have effectively hijacked anti-imperial discourses to vilify, exteriorize and paralyze critical opposition as dupes of the West, on the one hand, and continued Eurocentrism in critical thinking whereby the merits of Asian brands of critical thought are not taken seriously and easily dismissed as nativism, on the other. Arguably, the unwitting reinstatement of Western univer-

salism in critical norms may be one of the most stubborn obstacles to overcome. This is because it is always harder to criticize what's prevalently accepted as good/progressive than what's considered conservative/bad. A critique of critical thinking is arduous at a post-foundational stage of the social sciences as knowledge hierarchies have supposedly been democratized and social theorizing has concertedly placed natives and the West on equal footing on a global stage. Despite good intentions, the unspoken politics of critical thinking in Western social sciences, even in the most advanced revisionary stage, still presumes to speak on behalf of some universal and objective standard. It still acts to determine what kinds of scholarship can be regarded as progressive and which relegated to parochial or bigoted forms of knowledge. Attempts at developing Southeast Asian brands of critical thinking are immediately suspect of ethno-cultural chauvinism or partiality to regional hegemonies.

Yet, as Southeast Asian scholars take up the responsibility to explicate lived realities around them, they are often cut back by Western critical discourses. In a recent work I have elaborated on the limitations of Euro-American critiques of area studies when seen from Southeast Asia (Goh, 2011). Young generations of Southeast Asian scholars, now partially trained both within and outside the region, are actively engaged in efforts to decenter knowledge production from regional perspectives. For them, the Euro-American critique of area studies is ironic as it comes at a time when they are just gaining grounds

on rethinking the region based on local critical imperatives. The critical agendas that propelled the attack on area studies in Euro-American settings hence threaten to undermine such promising regional efforts. Such a misfit of timing and agendas reveals that critical interventions, no matter how warranted they might be for a reformation of Euro-American practices, might not be applicable to developments outside the West. Despite entwinements with Euro-American practices, academic models in Southeast Asia, or for a matter of fact, anywhere in the world, are inevitably embedded in different temporalities and will require different critical interventions in response to the politics of knowledge. A direct application of critical imperatives originally aimed at rectifying Western scholastic traditions to external practices is tantamount to freezing knowledge in its Western origins and missing out on alternative trajectories which have developed outside the West that may require different forms of critical interventions.

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In a post-Orientalist era, Southeast Asian scholars are increasingly judicious about taking delineations arising from elsewhere as formulae for defining the region. Contemporary regional scholarship is driven by urgency to fill the gap between theory and social reality. It is not surprising then to see an interest in comparable occurrences in other parts of Asia. This explains an active participation by Southeast Asian scholars in regional efforts to develop critical Asian perspectives on Asia, a development which is boosted by the prospect of an Asian Century. This is marked by their

participation in the establishment of regional scholarly networks by like-minded scholars in the Asian region keen to build relevant critical thoughts on Asia in Asia. Regional scholarly networks such the Consortium of Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, Asia Public Intellectuals (API), Southeast Asian Regional Exchange Program (SEASREP) and not least, the recent founding of innumerous regional conferences in various interdisciplinary fields such as Asian cinema, Asian cultural studies, and (Southeast) Asian studies are some examples of the quests to forge critical regional perspectives.

What is refreshing in current rethinking of Asia is a clear shift away from the preoccupation with the limitations of Western discourse to focus on "inter-referencing," comparing and learning from transnational intersections, interactions, and circulation of history and ideas across Asian societies as a means to decentre knowledge production (Chen, 2010; Hellenbrand, 2010). While Asian history and ideas are acknowledged to originate from and are interconnected to the West, current initiatives are focused on comparative aspects of the specific unfolding of history and ideas across different Asian settings in order to capture analytical registers that have departed from Western trajectories. Such an approach to pin down historical and value difference out of Asian entwinements with world histories and other human aspirations can better distinguish different "structures of feelings," so to speak, produced by political and cultural regimes in the region, and the kinds of subjectivities produced. Clearly, quarrels over different

social conceptions over justice, equality and freedom can never be resolved philosophically and concrete solutions can only be found at the level of social practice. Only when the fine distinctions of human values which reflect local/regional aspirations, albeit their entwinement with larger world histories and human aspirations, are better identified and prevalently understood, will the deceptions of the ideological opposition between local/national and West/outside religious/secular become exposed and better deactivated.

In the eyes of many (Southeast) Asian scholars, such an Asian platform, despite its obvious problematic nature, provides an avenue for exchange of ideas and convictions on issues that are of concerns to the region which may not be to those outside the region. In face of regional conservative forces which are growing ever more sophisticated by the day and deeply divided societies, a collective regional intellectual enterprise to propose creative solutions can lend better support to country-based struggles. Importantly, a critical Asian studies in Asia enterprise can provide more solid grounds to push for epistemic change in knowledge cannons, which until today remains an unrealized project. By advocating comparisons across various spatial settings in the region, more coherent and representative sets of alternative analytical registers on culturally informed conceptions of human justice, equality and dignity can be produced to deactivate and expose knowledge canons emanating from Western contexts for their particularity rather than universality.

However, a critical Asian studies in Asia project has its myopic dangers if it becomes narrowly bent on Asian

comparisons and obsessed only with debunking Western imaginings. In order to move knowledge forward, a critical regional project has to remain open to learning from all regions of the world and hold no foreclosures to different ways of seeing and knowing. Only by being intellectually curious and open can scholars move knowledge forward. Inter-referencing must not be confined to Asia alone but extended to other non-Western as well as Western parts of the world. Pragmatically, however, the current bid to do critical Asian studies in Asia should begin by building South-South comparisons so as to build alternative critical registers that have global resonance beyond Asia. Such an alternative enterprise must however not forget Talal Asad's (1993) reminder that if scholars were to understand the non-West they would have to first understand the West.

It is clear that the ethical dilemmas over regional interpretations of experiential and value differences will continue to bedevil regional scholars as their societies grow more complex. Even as regional scholars endeavor to relativize the ethical-critical as value expressions of the particularity of time and place, it does not mean that there are no immanent or universal virtues of ethics. The challenge is to compare and reconcile the particular and the universal without subsuming one to the other. There are no easy solutions to these questions. However, a critical Asian studies in Asia projects offers an opportunity for Southeast Asian scholars to better consolidate their efforts to find solutions to these complex dilemmas and to push for more equal comparative intellectual exchanges in the world.

Nothing is less sure about the future but a critical intellectual project on Asia by Asian scholars will remain incomplete without a change in Western thinking to accept that there can be no singularity of critical/progressive thinking in today's world. The onus to enable critical efficacy in Southeast Asian contexts lies not completely on regional actors alone. The socio-political conundrums that we are witnessing in (Southeast) Asia today, and as a matter of fact in other non-Western regions in the world, will require epistemic shifts in the way we think about justice, equality, rights, democracy, freedom, and so on. As a start, the formation and transformation of social and political orders are necessarily informed from the beginning by people's shared histories, emotive allegiances as well as their self-orienting recognition of what counts as justice, equality, dignity, emancipation and so on. Unless alternative theoretical-political logics and rationalizations on social formations and human action, which are different from, yet not unconnected to Western ideas, are acknowledged and reconciled by a diverse project of knowledge, the polemics of West/non-West oppositions so prevalent today will only escalate in the changing stakes of regional power balances in the world.

Conclusion

For Southeast Asian countries, nothing is certain about an Asian century. Seen from this sub-region, the question of finding the right balance to the strategies of growth is a foremost challenge for the future. Current regional frame-

works of growth are buckling under the weight of capitalist entropies and profound political discords. Nonetheless the socio-political impotencies generated have also given rise to possibilities of alternative political practices and societal arrangements. Repulsed by worsening animosities in their societies, ordinary people, especially the young, are counteracting to shake up hegemonic conceptions of society and politics. Likewise, on-going initiatives of building critical Asian Studies in Asia have consolidated the intellectual search for a recovery of ethical-critical agency to disarm dogmatic powers and help build bridges across the perilous quarrels over religion and ideology that have unfolded in the region. These expansions of critical initiatives at the everyday and intellectual levels are aligned to, and strengthened by, regional forces. No clear futuristic paradigms of economy, society and politics have yet emerged. Nonetheless, state, politics and society are all forced into gradual transformations. No dramatic systemic change is likely to come with the exception of a colossal environmental disaster that will threaten human life. However, more sustainable parameters of good lives that are not singly dictated by market logic alone and which are integrative of their citizenries are likely to be generated overtime as long as ordinary people and experts keep alive the struggle against all kinds of oppression. Ultimately the promise of a humane and harmonious future lies in the ability of all human beings to be reflexive about their experiential world and develop a capacity to make sense of the traces of history and use them as a moral instructive to discern sanctioned truths

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about society, revealing their suppressions and exclusions. One thing is certain, Asianist sentiments, in both ethical and grotesque formations, are unlikely to disappear as long as the global system we are in today perpetuates the inequalities and miscommunications between Western and non-Western countries that are observed today.

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