

# Knowledge on the Move Relations, Mobilisations and Translations in and beyond Asia

## Editorial

Claudia Derichs, Riho Isaka

In recent years, scholars have begun to look critically at the hegemonies in the generation and dissemination of “knowledge” in and on Asia (for more details see Brosius / Pfaff-Czarnecka 2019). This IQAS issue on “Knowledge on the Move” embraces this critical stance and seeks to learn what kind of knowledge circulates where and when, and why and how it does or did so. It addresses the dynamics of and within global epistemic frameworks by focusing on intellectual problematisation as well as sites of knowing in everyday life. It embraces intellectually oriented understandings of epistemology as well as knowledge systems that inform and connect people in their daily life across nations and regions. The feeling of being connected – including the notion of “belonging” – accrues from various reasons: shared beliefs and identities, intergenerational ties, emotional affinities, historically grounded resonances and the like. Ontological elements of different knowledge systems often translate into guiding concepts and principles for people’s decision-making in daily life, their normative horizons and behavioural protocol. The cosmological order being reflected on earth as a political (administrative) order, is a historical case in point.

The authors in this issue discuss the “knowledges” that inform and facilitate connectivities and the limits thereof across borders – historically as well as in the present day. Connectivities may engender a sense of unity, but also evoke ruptures, disconnections and frontiers that emerge through the forming of in-groups and out-groups – those who share a certain knowledge and those who

Claudia Derichs, Transregional Southeast Asian Studies, Institute for Asian and African Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany; claudia.derichs@hu-berlin.de. Riho Isaka, Modern South Asian History, Department of Area Studies, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, The University of Tokyo, Japan; isaka@ask.c.u-tokyo.ac.jp.

do not. The identification of “ontological ecologies” that stretch beyond national – sometimes regional – borders and their meaning for human interaction becomes increasingly important against the backdrop of an ever more dynamic shift between the physical (territorial, maritime) and emotional geographies of people’s everyday lives. Faith and religion are obvious cases in point for human’s spiritual and emotional connectivity. Notions such as kinship serve understandings of family, care, and the policies related with it (e.g. social welfare). Consequently, connectivity through shared knowledge is what this two-part special issue seeks to debate.

The articles assembled in this special issue are part of a larger network initiative entitled “Shaping Asia”.<sup>1</sup> With regard to political, social and economic disparities within Asia, this network reminds scholars of the importance of (critically) reflecting upon the concept of “Asia”. It traces what we call emotional geographies (Derichs 2017) and ontological ecologies across Asia. Particular attention is paid to the relations between people that have emerged because of the sense of belonging to certain communities or the sharing of particular interests and identities, whether spiritual, religious, experiential, ideological, gender-based or issue-related (i.e. rooted in shared concerns). Such relations may span huge distances and thereby transgress the territorial and maritime boundaries that usually serve to designate and demarcate “areas” (as in “Area Studies”).

Parts of Asia have seen intensive efforts at indigenisation and circulation of knowledge across the region – in past and present alike. While the study of local and indigenous knowledge has become an established theme in the humanities and the social sciences (and beyond), the travel and circulation of knowledge within Asia still receives relatively little attention.<sup>2</sup> This issue thus intends to address the movement of knowledge in Asia by looking at exemplary fields of circulation. Making knowledge “move”, however, is ultimately bound to the translation of concepts and must, consequently, render translation productive for conveying meanings. While a number of concepts that originated in the West/global North have been introduced in Asia over centuries and decades via translation, much criticism in the field of knowledge production, dissemination and circulation has been directed at the bias in global academia towards this rather unidirectional flow of theories, methods and concepts. Without doubt, there are numerous concepts that derive from Asian contexts. Not only does their very existence merit attention, but also their meaning and relevance, which are subject to social and political dynamics in their own particular contexts. The authors in part I and part II of this special issue discuss examples of such dynamics and of the repercussions of change in the broader sense: social, generational, political, economic and ideational.

1 See <http://shapingasia.net/> (accessed 3 June 2023).

2 A recent work by Nile Green is one of the pioneering works in this field (Green 2022).

## Moving knowledge

The individual articles of part I and II speak to each other by way of the messages they put forward. One cluster of contributions concentrates on the geographical region of South Asia. Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka's study of the language of ethnicity, for instance, draws insight from long-term observations and empirical work in Nepal. Examining ethnic activism and local particularities, Pfaff-Czarnecka's inferences tie neatly into Katsuo Nawa's account of the discourses on minority populations in West Nepal. Both studies touch upon the political dimension of local knowledge – the transformation of ethnic activism into a mobilising force through the creation of a distinctly political language on the one hand (Pfaff-Czarnecka), and the role of national Indian and Nepalese political frameworks for ethnic self-identification of borderland inhabitants on the other hand (Nawa). Nawa's findings remind us of the limits of struggles for ethnic and socio-cultural unity across nation-state borders: the knowledge about shared feelings of belonging on both sides of the border, as it were, does not automatically translate into cross-border ethno-political activism. Several concepts, such as nation and indigeneity, but also *janajāti*, feed into the notion of ethnicity, which then nurtures the language and ultimately the politics of ethnicity.

In the same geographical area of South Asia, Éva Rozália Hölzle examines the intergenerational transmission of knowledge in a case study of betel leaf production in Bangladesh. Addressing the temporal dynamics of knowledge, Hölzle emphasises the importance of intergenerational knowledge transmission. Her intensive case study of betel leaf production reveals that both the intergenerational transmission and practical knowledge of how to take care of the betel are important. Passing on this knowledge to future generations is, however, becoming increasingly difficult due to various influences, including globalisation-induced socio-cultural changes and imaginaries of livelihood. By employing the perspective of temporality, Pfaff-Czarnecka, Nawa and Hölzle show the situatedness of knowledge (Haraway 1988) over a timespan of several decades.

The cluster of discussions that draws its insights from empirical case studies in South Asia illustrates the multi-dimensionality of knowledge, the importance of its translation into language, and the relevance of its transmission via human interaction as well as oral and written tradition and documentation.

## Crossing borders

The transgression of borders in passing on knowledge is another trait of the papers of this issue. Focusing on the mobilisation of activism in the pursuit of citizen and/or migrant rights in the early twentieth century, Kaori Mizukami traces

the routes of both Indian immigrants and the knowledge they utilised to obtain entry permits into North America. The special twist of Mizukami's study lies in its focus on manifestations of multiregional relations, such as the role played by ports of call and the positions of the British and American home countries and colonies in that time period. Protests of Indians in Canada, the United States and the Philippines against the denial of entry into North America relied to a considerable extent on actors possessing the power and courage to mobilise these protests across regions. Transmitting the knowledge of effective strategies for awareness-raising through public media and knowing how to frame an issue in order to make protest productive, were fundamental ingredients in movement mobilisation. (The same holds true in contemporary times, as Emi Goto's research note shows.) Mizukami's study convinces in claiming that it is necessary to consider the multiregional relations of the time when trying to grasp the full picture of Indian protests against the denial of entry to North America.

Moving towards education in general, and higher education in particular, in Southeast Asia, Noorman Abdullah asks the crucial question of how the designation of "relevant" knowledge comes about. What drives the engine of knowledge production and circulation within academic cultures of learning and teaching, i.e., within those spaces and places that claim to generate relevant knowledge? The author claims that the main criterion is marketability. What sells, so to speak, enjoys priority over problematizing the issue of relevance from the situatedness of the particular settings in which knowledge is conveyed. Hence the need to attend to "alternative discourses", Abdullah reasons, in view of (Southeast) Asia as a setting of knowledge production and circulation. Such alternative discourses may evolve through "the teaching of a social science tradition created and expanded by scholars who are guided by the selection of problems and relevance from within" (see Abdullah in Part I). From the relatively abstract level of reflection, the paper delves straight into the empirical field of curriculum design and ponders how to implement the commitment to alternative discourses in daily academic and educational practice, i.e. in teaching and pedagogy. With his thorough investigation into the actual implementation of a context-sensitive teaching of social science, Abdullah tackles the above-mentioned problem of globally dominant epistemic and ontological frameworks. He offers ideas of how to depart from them, make the notion of the "local" meaningful and translate intellectual insights into daily life.

From yet another vantage point, but with a similar impetus, Shiho Maeshima's article illustrates how marketability and ideologised normative frameworks informed the genre of journal publication in 1930s Japan. Maeshima examines representations of "Japan" and "Asia" that surfaced in the photo reporting of an influential magazine of the time. Her extremely profound inspection and investigation of contemporaneous photographic reports discloses the mediated knowledge and the (latent yet discernible) techniques and mechanisms of Othering

they conveyed. It uncovers the underlying understanding of photographic images, which trained and disciplined readers' visual perception, i.e. their way of reading photo articles in advance of the rise of war-time photojournalism. While the paper is based on completely different source material than Noorman Abdullah's study, both authors pin down a similar *problematique*: global as well as local power relations that influence the appropriation and dissemination of knowledge. Authoritative powers motivated by particularistic interests (normative-ideological, economic, political, etc.) are capable of manipulating the media of public information and educational curricula. Yet again, the metrics and framing of political language pervade the ethics of knowledge production and circulation.

In the same vein of political language and the politics of framing, Emi Goto's research note brings a fine piece of empirical observation to our attention. Goto analyses the trajectory and the framing of the conceptual term "sexual harassment" in three different spatial settings – the United States, Egypt and Japan. Tracking the movement of the concept from the US to the other countries, her exploration impressively illustrates the dynamics of discursive engineering in the process of importing a concept from one empirical site to another. Targeted mobilisation and advocacy for a particular comprehension of the term sexual harassment have had considerable impact on its reception in the "importing" countries. However, the same goes for the lack of effective advocacy, as shown in the case of Japan.

The articles in the two parts of this issue present a rich basket of research results from scholars of several parts of Asia. They provide important insights into what kind of knowledge circulated / circulates where and when, and why and how it does or did so. They also demonstrate how the feeling of being connected was and is re/constructed across regions in and beyond Asia. Based on these findings, we hope that this issue will further invoke many discussions on the movement of knowledge in Asia and furthermore the concept of Asia itself.

## References

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