Commentary

Inter-Asia, Intra-Asia, and Asian Anthropologies

Hyang Jin Jung
Seoul National University, South Korea

The article by Beng-Lan Goh provokes hard thinking about current affairs and possibilities regarding de-centered anthropological knowledge production. For the purpose of endorsing “pluralized world anthropologies,” she looks to the critical “inter-Asia discourses” that have developed for the past two decades or so by the Consortium of Inter-Asia Cultural Studies. According to Goh, the consortium is “a loose collective of largely but not exclusively cultural studies scholars working on East, South, and Southeast Asian societies” and stands as the new “cultural left” in Asia. Despite the inter-Asia discourses’ insistence on “intractable Asian differences,” Goh argues, they contain “ethical and original dimensions” that warrant the attention of those who aspire to the vision of world anthropologies.

Her central concern is to reconcile cultural incommensurability and alternative knowledge making—or to balance between relativism and universalism in a project of knowledge production whose very foundation lies in claims of (radical) cultural differences. Centering on the works of Kuan-Hsing Chen and Prasenjit Duara, core members of the inter-Asia movement, Goh critically examines major theoretical and methodological innovations of inter-Asia discourses to salvage “inter-Asia as method” from the discourses’ relativist impasse. That is, she appreciates inter-Asia as an epistemological practice that aims to de-center and thus democratize knowledge production. Yet, in her view, there is a danger of reifying the cultural difference between Asia and the West, or perhaps more precisely in this case, Asia and the rest of the world. Goh claims that in order to avoid the risk of “reinventing Asia as the new place of power,” inter-Asia discourses need to engage with “other critical imaginaries emanating from outside the region,” as exemplified in Joel Kahn’s intercultural scholarship on West European and Euro-American Gnosticism and Indonesian Sufism. Goh’s call for cross-cultural translation beyond Asia is persuasively backed up by her recent observations in Southeast Asia, particularly the spread of alternative Islamic imaginaries that commonly reject dominant ethno-religious dogmas.

Overall, I found it extremely enlightening to read through Goh’s critical assessment of inter-Asia discourses, in which she problematizes the premise of cultural incommensurability and the implicit imperialism of Asia-centeredness. While I emphatically second her call for linking Asian alterity to broader cross-cultural thinking, I would like to pause to rethink Asia and inter-Asia for the purpose of world anthropologies with the possibility of “a new enriched universal” in mind. When we use inter-Asia discourses as a platform for alternative knowledge production, as a project for knowledge production, Asia itself appears to be a singular entity composed of more or less the same (Asian) modules rather than plural realities. Goh made a pointed critique that Chen’s inter-Asia referencing tends to reify incommensurability between Asia and the West, and that Duara’s reconstituted notion of Asian alterity as part of global history does not provide a means to understand it outside regional cultural lenses. I would further argue that in order to realize the critical vision of inter-Asia discourses in anthropology, there need be more intra-Asia (rather than inter-Asia) intellectual dialogues and knowledge exchanges. Inter-Asia discourses, as political and intellectual engagement, seem to promote a pan-Asian identity by way of interreferencing with which to fight the hegemony of the West. Such mobilizations may be helpful to some degree. Yet in the process they may play down the varied realities of Asian communities and historical and emerging tensions in the region, the very things that inter-Asia discourses aspire to address. This is to say, instead of inter-Asia, we need more explicitly intra-Asia work to contribute to critical intercultural awareness and translations beyond Asia.

My proposal for anthropology in Asia is to start in Asia, rather than center on Asia, in achieving “a new enriched universal,” or a “pluriversal,” by mutually building Asian anthropologies. Although there are networks and regional conferences among anthropologists based in Asia, Asian anthropologies are seriously lacking in mutual recognition and interreference. Even with its own limitations, the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies movement is far advanced in terms of its efforts to cross-reference Asian scholarship and thereby utilize them as epistemological foundations and resources in de-centered knowledge production. In the spirit of critical inter-Asia discourses’ commitment to democratic and democratized knowledge production, we need to promote Asian anthropologies, not Asian anthropology. The discipline’s perpetual dilemma of the “insolvability of relativism and universalism” may prove fruitful after all, for “a pluriversal” is something to be built out of a dialogic process between the two epistemological frames. In de-centering anthropological knowledge production, we may also bear in mind that the West itself has never been a seamless entity. In a more democratized space of anthropological knowledge production, varied realities in the West would not only be placed on the same anthropological horizon as such others in the Rest but also studied by anthropologists from the Rest as well as the West.