

Asian Studies and the Western Mind: Where do we stand?

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ASIAN studies has constantly been framed by a changing geopolitical context. It is illustrative of how knowledge depends upon, is defined and produced by human interests. Asian Studies has its colonial roots, in Oriental or Asiatic studies.

At a conference in London more than three decades ago — October 1988 to be precise, I asked a British academic who was editor of a social science journal as to why they have been writing and publishing about China, and not about Malaysia, or Southeast Asia.

The journal was relatively new then, first appearing in 1979.

His response was that China (and India) have strategic interest to Britain and the West.

The journal, *Media, Culture and Society*, also gave some focus on Japan viz its media system and the Japanese perspective on communication.

Malaysia and the Malay world were absent, seen to be non-strategic, academically much neglected, in the decades of the Cold War, unlike China.

In that sense, the geopolitical space of Malaysia in terms of media and culture was “out of frame” to British or American-based social science journals then.

Then the Western world was more interested in the Orient — and that Orient was China.

They are correct. It all began with Oriental Studies in Europe centuries before World War II.

What is known as Oriental Studies is generally understood as knowledge of Asian culture, languages and peoples.

Beginning in the late sixteenth century, Oriental Studies meant that European scholars set to study the mind and manners of the East — the Islam and the Arabs in particular, then the Indians, Chinese and later the Malays.

However, due to the overindulgence in cultural relativism and occidental high-handedness in interpreting the orient, Oriental Studies (in general) and orientalist (in particular) were severely criticised.

A shift began to happen after World War II. Oriental Studies morphed into Asian Studies. It was during the Cold War that Euro-American scholars realised that Asia was never a monolithic oriental entity.

It was the Americans, who later joined the league of European scholars, who broke the Anglo-French monopoly and remodelled Oriental Studies to Asian Studies.

The height of the Cold War — in the 1950s through the 1970s, saw the dramatic rise of Japan as a major industrial and economic power. It awakened the Western world, particularly America. Then, the rivalry between East and West began to emerge.

In a paper published in 2018 titled “From Oriental Studies to Asian Studies: The Metamorphosis of the Western Mind”, Maitreyee Choudhury, professor of Strategic and Area Studies at the Centre for Himalayan Studies, Bengal, India, explained that Asian Studies did not emerge from a vacuum.

The Cold War and its fallout, the rise of certain East Asian powers, particularly China, the politics and diplomacy of the West Asian countries and the emergence of terrorism and various nonmilitary threats from the Asian hinterland have necessitated a recasting of the concept of area studies and a relook at Asia.

Owing to historical and geopolitical reasons, as well as academic and institutional traditions, Europe too has been influenced by the American concept of Area/Asian Studies.

This shift must be seen in light of Edward W. Said’s 1978 publication of *Orientalism* — his critique of the Western conception of the Orient.

Said’s thesis was also political. It created an uproar in the Western world — the academia, and among policy and literary elites.

According to Said, Oriental Studies subtly fuelled racism. And since the time of Homer, almost every orientalist was ethnocentric.

Asia caught the imagination of the West for centuries. But it was not strategically important until the midtwentieth century.

Choudhury described this as framing. The traditional practice of interpreting the history, philosophies and cultures of the Orient through the lens of European romanticism was gradually overlaid by newer strata of international relations, politics and economics.

Asian Studies was aided by a multidisciplinary approach. But “who holds the authority to judge and evaluate Asian ways?”. An enormous amount of knowledge of Asia was generated by the West. The tomes on Asia in university libraries and research institutions in the West were the outcome of personal and institutional efforts shaped by disciplinary and geopolitical interrelationships.

The Oriental Studies/Asian Studies debate spawned the “discipline” versus “area” studies approach. That continues to this day. It was argued that Asian Studies gained currency as a constituent of a new paradigm in area studies with the emergence of post-colonial nation states in Asia, liberation movements and new economic grouping.

Accordingly, the Asian Studies proponent would want to understand Asia beyond history, language and culture.

Politics, economics, law, technology and the military becomes the new theatre. The generic concept of Orientalism came to be contested. Indology or Sinology, in the language of Orientalism, fall short of strategy and the geopolitical game.

Asian Studies signal the metamorphosis of the Western mind. There is a new logic and emotion. The easier access for field research have helped Western researchers to redefine their notions and views on Asia.

But having said this, Asians, and the Malaysian academy, are quite underdeveloped in studying ourselves, as Malaysians, Southeast Asians or Asians.

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