

The Future of Asia: Cross-cultural Conversations

Scholars who have devoted their academic lives to the study of Asia can play important roles in furthering the vision of universality, partly as researchers whose work can contribute to cross-cultural understanding, but more specifically as teachers of future generations and sponsors and facilitators of student exchanges. The following piece by **Barbara Watson Andaya** is based on keynote speech at ICAS 4 Shanghai in 2005.



Most of us, and particularly historians, are committed to the idea that the past has something to say about the future. Individuals have always played a key role as linguistic and cultural mediators, with far-reaching influence – both positive and negative – exercised by the written interpretations they produced. People who are well acquainted with cultures that are not their own will be as important in shaping the global relationships underpinning Asia's future as they have been in the past.

From early times Southeast Asia, being at the crossroads between India and China, offers a multitude of examples of visitors who recorded their impressions, sometimes simply as an official report, sometimes intended for wider dissemination. Few college textbooks on Southeast Asia, for instance, would fail to mention the description of Angkor left by Zhou Daguan, a member of a Chinese embassy who spent a year in Cambodia at the end of the 13th century. In a very different time, and in a very

different place, we can consult the report of a Persian scribe included in a mission to the Siamese capital of Ayutthaya in 1685 who remarked on the willingness of the Thai ruler "to learn about the kings of the inhabited world, their behaviour, customs and principles. He sent everywhere for pictures depicting the mode of living and the courts of foreign kings."

It is important to recognise that this was a conversation, not a monologue. Over time, individuals from Southeast Asia travelled to distant lands, and detailed their experiences for posterity. In the early nineteenth century, for instance, the Riau scholar Raja Ahmad and his young son, Raja Ali, made the pilgrimage, not only meeting some of the most eminent Muslim leaders in Mecca but going to Medina with a caravan of two thousand camels. One can

only imagine the enthralled audiences who listened to Raja Ahmad's stories following his safe return. Although mental adjustments are impossible to quantify, it is not difficult to imagine that such experiences could reshape an individual's views of his or her own society. Many of us can attest the subtle attitudinal shifts that travel and overseas living has brought about in our lives. Cross-cultural conversations among ordinary people, most notably the young, lie at the heart of international education.

There has been a proliferation of programmes that allow students to spend time in another country, as students or for an extended visit. The bulk of exchanges have been between the West and Asian societies, while a significant and growing number of young people from Asia spend time in other Asian countries. The knowledge they acquire reaches far beyond the acquisition of language skills; what is important is learning "how things are done" in another culture. Ultimately, this kind of knowledge demands an awareness and non-judgmental acceptance of difference, and these values can never be learnt too early. If we accept that the future of Asia, with all its promise, will ultimately rest with its youth, then the education of a globally perceptive generation is a matter of the highest priority.

Historians of pre-modern Southeast Asia have learned to distinguish between observers with only a passing knowledge of "the other" and those with much greater experience in the region. Two examples of early "exchange students" whose experiences continue to speak to us across the years illustrate the kind of person I have in mind. The first is a young Chinese man, Wang Dahai, who spent ten years in Java between about 1783 and 1793, and whose account of Java written in 1791, reprinted at least seven times, was first translated into English in 1849. Having apparently failed the examinations, and anxious to help his debt-ridden family, Wang followed the path of numerous other young Chinese, and left for the "southern seas". He travelled in Java, entered service as a tutor with a wealthy Batavian Chinese family, and married before eventually returning to China.

Despite sometimes caustic comments, Wang Dahai obviously enjoyed living in Java. He appears to have been comfortable speaking Malay, and his account, Claudine Salmon tells us, introduces 89 Malay words in Chinese characters. He also knew something of other societies in the region, noting as many as 17 different ethnic groups, and commenting on distinctions between the Malay, Bugis and Javanese language and writing systems. He spoke of attending shadow plays and poetry recitations; his account of household interiors and the ways guests were received speaks of his personal relationships, and presumably his own marriage to a local woman. Wang's primary interests revolved around trade, but he seemed to have developed a passion for tropical vegetation, and collected the names of many plants. The same interest apparently



The future of Asia – its youth

led him to compile considerable detail about the collection of certain rare commodities like *bêche de mer*, swallows' nests, birds of paradise, bezoar stones, and tortoise shell. His readers would have been reminded that such activities were never purely an economic matter. Those collecting birds' nests, Wang tells us, must select an auspicious day and success can only be guaranteed through the propitiation of spirits in songs and dance. The special nature of Wang's observations lies in the fact that he was what we would now call a participant observer, and one can sense his personal enjoyment of Java. Much of his pleasure he attributed to the emphasis his host cultures placed on food and rest. "Even if there is an urgent affair, they do not attend to it immediately". He paid Java the greatest compliment of all: even the rice was superior to that of China! It could certainly be argued that Wang's gratitude to his rich merchant hosts encouraged him to offer an especially positive picture. On the other hand, it is also likely that Wang emphasized the appealing features of a non-Chinese to encourage his compatriots to think more deeply about their own.



Rice fields in Java

My second example of the "inquiring mind" concerns John Adolphus Pope, a fifteen-year-old apprentice born in 1771 in Plymouth who was employed on an English country ship from 1785 to 1788. His time in Southeast Asia thus coincides with that of Wang Dahai, and again what struck me when I read his letters to a friend in Bengal was his intellectual curiosity and his genuine interest in his surroundings. The crews of the country ships not only had to be first class seaman, but also needed working understanding of local societies so that they could trade. In this sense, John Pope was an orientalist of the best type. In the Malay port of Kedah, for instance, he met Dul Baddul, the son of the Royal Merchant; they became good friends, even discussing matters like religious differences. Describing various ports from Yangon to Aceh, Pope's

letters reveal a genuine pleasure in meeting new acquaintances and in revisiting places where he had already have already made friends. "Those who say the Malays have no virtues," he wrote, "have never lived among them. I have been received by them as a child and domesticated, I may stay in their families as far as the prejudices of religion would allow, universally treated with kindness and generosity... I shall always think of the inhabitants of this spot with complacency and pleasure." Pope went on to become a captain in his own right, and had a long career trading in India, China and other parts of Asia.

These contemporaries, Wang Dahai and John Pope, seem to me to be prime examples of the expanded outlook that can come about when young people are given the opportunity to live for some time in a culture which is not their own. It may be difficult at times, and certainly the writings of both Pope and Wang show that they were by no means immune from feelings of frustration, and that they themselves sometimes were targets of hostility. But both youths learned that appropriate interactions with others are always culturally contingent and that appreciation of the good in another society enables one to view one's own more clearly.

The 21st century offers unprecedented opportunities of communicating with other societies on many different levels and via many different media. At no point in world history has it been more important to educate global citizens who have the capacity to approach each other as potential friends, regardless of differences in religion, language, ethnicity and culture. Central to the future of Asia must be a renewed commitment to sustain meaningful cross-cultural conversations that are informed by the universal and human values of intellectual curiosity, empathy and simple kindness.

IJAS #38

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