

KNOWLEDGE AND EUROPEAN EMPIRE-BUILDING IN ASIA

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Over the last two decades, ‘knowledge’ has become a key issue in exchanges over the theory and practice of writing about European colonialism in Asia. Knowledge has come to preoccupy historians, anthropologists, geographers, area studies specialists, as well as scholars in postcolonial and gender studies as the production of knowledge is now understood as being fundamental to the power struggles, intellectual transformations and cultural realignments of colonialism. This vision is neatly summed up in Nicholas Dirks’ assertion that:

It has not been sufficiently recognized that colonialism was itself a cultural project of control. Colonial knowledge both enabled conquest and was produced by it; in certain important ways, knowledge was what colonialism was all about. Cultural forms in societies newly classified as “traditional” were reconstructed and transformed by and through this knowledge, which created new categories and oppositions between colonizers and colonized, European and Asian, modern and traditional, West and East. Ruling India through the delineation and reconstitution of systematic grammars for vernacular languages, representing India through the mastery and display of archaeological memories and religious texts, Britain set in motion transformations every bit as powerful as the better-known consequences of military and economic imperialism.¹

This powerful argument, now accepted by many South Asianists and a growing number of scholars working on other colonial sites in Asia, marks a profound shift from the dominant understandings of empire articulated by an early generation of historians. As recently as the late 1980s, many historians

¹ Nicholas B. Dirks, ‘Foreword’ to B.S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: the British in India* (Princeton, 1996), ix.

of European empires downplayed the role of imperial ambition and questioned the importance of ideology, seeing empires in Asia as the product of a series of local crises that ensnared European commercial interests, encouraging the militarisation of cross-cultural trade and growth of both formal and informal imperialism from the Persian Gulf to the China Sea.²

There is no doubt that Dirks' formulation owes a considerable debt to Edward Said's paradigmatic *Orientalism* (1978). But it would be a profound misreading of the historiography on colonial knowledge in Asia to see it as simply an extended gloss on Said's vision of the knowledge-power nexus in an age of empire. We must recognise that a generation of scholars before Said foreshadowed key elements of his arguments. In Indian history, for example, George Bearce and Eric Stokes highlighted the interplay between imperial ideologies and British understandings of South Asian society.³ More importantly, Bernard Cohn, in his ground-breaking research on both the social history of the Ganges valley and the development of the Indian Civil Service, began to explore the relationship between social change under colonialism and the colonial state's understandings of its Indian subjects.⁴ More broadly still, Raymond Schwab's *La Renaissance Orientale* documented the profound impact of Orientalism on European culture during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, anticipating many of Said's arguments in *Orientalism*.⁵ In the 1960s, Donald Lach also began documenting Asia's constitutive impact on European culture in his tremendously important multi-volume *Asia in the Making of Europe*.⁶

While this early work on European knowledge of Asia pre-dated *Orientalism*, there is no doubt that this area of research expanded rapidly after 1978. The applicability of Said's argument was widely debated by many Asianists throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. In the Indian context, Ronald Inden and Gauri Viswanathan tested and reworked Said's thesis.⁷ *Orientalism* was also influential in South Asian historiography because it functioned as the key vector for the introduction of Foucault's notion of the power-knowledge nexus and helped to prompt the turn of the Subaltern Studies collective away from fairly conventional Marxist social history to

² See for example, P. J. Marshall, *'A free though conquering people': Britain and Asia in the eighteenth century* (London, 1981) and P.J. Marshall, *Trade and conquest: studies on the rise of British dominance in India* (Aldershot, 1993). Within the South Asian historiography the best introduction to the debate over the rising power of the East India Companies and the transition to large scale European colonialism is P. .J. Marshall ed., *The eighteenth century in Indian history: evolution or revolution?* (Oxford, 2003).

³ George D. Bearce, *British attitudes towards India, 1784-1858* (Oxford, 1961); Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (Oxford, 1959).

⁴ Many of these essays are collected in his Bernard S. Cohn, *An anthropologist among the historians and other essays* (Delhi, 1987).

⁵ Raymond Schwab, *La renaissance orientale* (Paris, 1950).

⁶ Beginning with Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the making of Europe. Vol.1: The century of discovery* 2 vols (Chicago, 1965).

⁷ Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford, 1990); Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of conquest: literary study and British rule in India* (New York, 1989).

modes of analysis moulded by post-structuralism. Within this context, Gayatri Spivak's essays on the Rani of Sirmur and sati were particularly influential bringing Subaltern Studies and deconstruction (as well as feminism, Marxism and psycho-analysis) together and in ushering in a sustained debate over the nature of the colonial archive within South Asian historiography.⁸ This work has profoundly transformed our understanding of the basis and cultural impact of colonialism. In suggesting that colonial archives were power-saturated sites generated by the political and cultural interests of the colonisers, the 'archival turn' in South Asian history has consistently questioned the possibility of accessing the 'voices' and subjectivities of colonized peoples, especially women, children, and those of low status.⁹

The essays gathered here engage in various ways with this literature. The issue opens with an essay by Will Sweetman that poses important questions about the connection between knowledge-production and imperialism, by examining the 'pre-history' of Orientalism. Sweetman's reading of the work of Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, a German Lutheran who spent thirteen years as a missionary in the Danish enclave of Tranquebar in Tamil Nadu, probes encounters that do not have the kind of clear connection to imperial power that characterised the new Orientalist learning that flourished in Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay and the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This is an important project because it examines the particular forms of knowledge-production associated with early modern missionary activity, which has drawn less attention than modern missionary work, and that shows the particularly of many of the features of colonial knowledge diagnosed by historians working on nineteenth century British India.

James Warren's essay assess the role of two 'public men', James Emerson Tennent and Samuel White Baker, in framing British understandings of Ceylon during the mid-nineteenth century. This wide-ranging essay is particularly concerned with mapping the 'competing masculinities' that were articulated by Tennent and Baker in their publications about Ceylon and the role of these visions of masculinity in shoring up British authority in the wake of the 1848 revolt in Ceylon.

Mark Ravinder Frost's essay locates the sites examined by Sweetman and Warren in the broader context of the maritime networks that fashioned an extended colonial public sphere in Asia. Frost's work brings together the history of religion and political thought with the history of communication, producing a set of rich insights into the forms of intellectual sociability that flourished under (and frequently positioned themselves against) colonialism.

⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'The Rani of Sirmur: an essay in reading the archives', *History and Theory* 24:3 (1985), 247-273 and 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (London, 1988), 271-313.

⁹ These issues are explored in Tony Ballantyne, 'Archive, state, discipline: power and knowledge in South Asian historiography', *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 3:1 (2001), 87-105.

Karen Yuen's essay on the *mui tsai* controversy – which the British saw as a debate over an Asian form of slavery – also adopts a trans-national approach to the history of colonialism in Asia. Her essay suggests that new debates over the nature of Chineseness flourished in Malaya and especially Hong Kong in the early twentieth century as agents of the British empire attempted to assess the customary basis of *mui tsai* and the extent to which it embodied the distinctive qualities of Chineseness. Yuen documents the British drive to identify authoritative Chinese informants who could inform them about the nature of *mui tsai*, the conflicting opinions offered by various British experts on the practice, and the efforts of British reformers to have their understanding of *mui tsai* (and of Chineseness more generally) recognised as definitive.

Haydon Cherry's essay shifts our focus to France's Asian empire. Arguing against some of the recent Foucauldian-inflected work produced on colonial knowledge in South Asia, Cherry highlights the growing role of local scholars and institutions in shaping the development of archaeology in colonial and post-colonial Vietnam. Cherry stresses the entangled nature of European and Asian knowledge traditions and warns against easy assumptions about the hegemony of colonial authority and the dominance of European disciplines.

The special issue ends with William O'Reilly's exploration of the impact of Orientalism on the intellectual culture of Enlightenment Ireland. In keeping with recent work that has stressed the ways in which representations of Asia and the Pacific were entangled, O'Reilly shows how new knowledge produced by European activity in the Asia-Pacific fed into debates over the origins and nature of Irish language and culture. Although the diffusionist arguments elaborated by Charles Vallancey and the various connections he identified between Irish and Oriental cultures have been subject to ridicule, O'Reilly locates these connections within developing imperial networks as well as the specific debates that gripped the Irish elite in this period. O'Reilly's essay is an apposite way of concluding the collection because it demonstrates complex multi-point comparisons and substantial networks that ensured that colonised cultures reshaped Europe itself, even in the Irish case where Dublin Castle and the Anglo-Irish elite exercised a form of imperial authority over a subject population.

Although these essays traverse a wide-terrain – from India to Vietnam, Hong Kong to Ireland, from the history of archaeology to the cultural history of elephant-hunting – they share a deep concern over the role of knowledge in empire-building. Taken together, the essays in this special issue offer four major insights into encounters between Europe and Asia since the eighteenth century. First, and most broadly, although each essay stresses the pivotal role of knowledge production in European imperial projects, collectively they underscore the very particular ways in which colonial knowledge developed in different locations, at different times. This is a crucial point, because it reminds us that although 'knowledge' has moved to the very heart of research on empire, such work has not presented any general theory that explains European, or even British imperialism, *tout court* in the mode of the

Robinson-Gallagher thesis or Cain and Hopkins's 'gentlemanly capitalism'.¹⁰ Work on colonial knowledge is underpinned by a variety of theoretical and methodological underpinnings and can lead to divergent readings of the nature of empire. This is most apparent, perhaps, in the withering critique that Nicholas Dirks has levelled in his *Castes of Mind* at Chris Bayly's *Empire and Information*.¹¹ The clash between Dirks and Bayly, or Bayly's dismissal of postcolonial 'discourse theory' for that matter, underscores that 'knowledge-production' functions as an analytical problematic rather than a coherent theory of empire. The essays collected here also present a variety of approaches to the connection between knowledge and empire, capturing the some of the possibilities opened up by this type of analysis.

Following on from this, the second point that these essays underline is the place of knowledge-production in the distinctive forms of 'colonial modernity' that developed in Asia. The 'notion of colonial modernity', highlights the complex enmeshment of empire-building and nature of modernity, particularly very specific patterns of power relations and cultural concerns that structure the very specific forms of modernity – which is, of course, supposedly universal – that unfolded under various imperial regimes in Asia. Here we have essays that scrutinize a variety of sites – from Ceylon to Hong Kong, Singapore to Vietnam – and chart the ways in which assorted forms of knowledge (e.g. archaeology), media (e.g. print culture), practices (e.g. hunting), and institutions (e.g. learned societies) developed within these various colonial sites. They reveal that the construction of 'colonial modernity' was an ongoing process, 'unfinished business' in Antoinette Burton's formulation, open to both contestation and reformulation.¹² In exploring the distinctive forms of colonial modernity that developed in Ceylon, across the Indian Ocean, in Hong Kong and Malaya, and in Vietnam, these essays contribute to a broad wave of scholarship that is producing richly textured work on Asia's colonial histories. With this kind of work in mind, Vicente Rafael notes that recent research on colonialism in Asia has led 'a growing number of area studies scholars ... to shift their focus from the modernization of local differences to understanding the various strategies for localizing modernity.'¹³ In effect, this has undercut the 'development' paradigm – which saw all societies moving at different paces towards modernity (marked by individualism, capitalism, and the authority of science) – that underpinned area studies from its genesis. Of course, this old 'development' model also tended to identify European colonialism as a key vector of the universal values of modernity; an

¹⁰ Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher (with Alice Denny), *Africa and the Victorians* (New York, 1961); P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, 'Gentlemanly capitalism and British expansion overseas. I. The old colonial system, 1688-1850', *Economic History Review* 39:4 (1986), 501-525; P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, 'Gentlemanly capitalism and British expansion overseas, II. New imperialism, 1850-1945', *Economic History Review* 40:1 (1987), 1-26.

¹¹ Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of mind: colonialism and the making of modern India* (Princeton, 2001).

¹² Antoinette Burton ed., *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernity* (London, 2000).

¹³ Vicente L. Rafael, 'Regionalism, Area Studies, and the Accidents of Agency', *American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), 1209.

understanding that has also been undercut by recent work on Asian colonialism.

Thirdly, these essays underscore the intimate connection between knowledge and identity-formation. This point, of course, was at the very heart of Said's *Orientalism*. His insistence on the entanglement of intellectual production and cultural identity remains a crucial starting-point for much work in post-colonial studies and culturally-inflected research within imperial history. Historians of colonial South Asia are now very aware of the intimate connection between the historical and sociological models developed by the colonial state for the analysis of the colonised and the actual direction of colonial reform. Katherine Prior's research very clearly shows, for example, how the East India Company's understandings of the history and religious demography of north Indian towns directed its interventions in conflict between religious communities in the early nineteenth century.¹⁴ This kind of work has reshaped our understandings of social change in the early nineteenth century. Where an early generation of historians saw this period as an 'Age of Reform', the period between 1820 and 1840 is now framed as marking the 'traditionalisation' of Indian society.¹⁵ The old picture of an India radically reshaped by the colonial state's modernising drive (underpinned by the convergence of evangelicalism and utilitarianism), has been replaced by a more nuanced reading of social change, which stresses the ways in which long-standing indigenous transformations converged with British understandings of the Indian social order to ensure the religious dominance of Brahman, the political authority of *kshatriya* warrior-kings, and the high cultural status of Muslim scribal elites. In the essays here on Ceylon, Hong Kong, and Vietnam, we see a similar image emerging, one that stresses the desire of the colonial state to master 'traditional' social arrangements and to delineate these in a clear and systematic matter. These essays also document some of the connections between mastering knowledge about the colonised and the self-image of the coloniser: to 'know the country' was both a key element of actually exercising authority and a marker of imperial fitness to rule, a point made particularly forcefully in the essays by Yuen and Warren.

Fourthly, and finally, these essays move beyond the traditional historical focus on the development of the nation-state to stress the place of knowledge between cultures and the trans-national production of knowledge in an age of global imperialism. Taken together, these essays rematerialise the complex forms of cultural traffic and knowledge dissemination that underpinned the integrative work of imperial systems. In very different ways, Frost and Yuen highlight the emergence of transnational debates and knowledge communities under colonialism. Where Yuen attempts to locate the production of

¹⁴ Katherine Prior, 'Making History: the state's intervention in public religious disputes in the North-Western Provinces in the early nineteenth century', *Modern Asian Studies* 27:1 (1993), 179-203.

¹⁵ This work is synthesised in C. A. Bayly, *Indian society and the making of the British empire* (Cambridge, 1988) and Susan Bayly, *Caste, society and politics in India from the eighteenth century to the modern age* (Cambridge, 1999).

‘Chineseness’ in the interstices of British imperial and diasporic Chinese networks in Hong Kong and Malaya, Frost reconstructs the structures that underpinned the emergence of an elongated public sphere within the cultural world of the Indian Ocean. Conversely, Warren’s essay on Ceylon reconstructs some of the ways in which colonial experience fed into metropolitan culture as well as O’Reilly’s examination of the influence on European exploration of the Asia-Pacific region on understandings of Irish culture during the Enlightenment provide potent examples of the complex refractions and reworking of Orientalist knowledge within Europe itself.

It is my hope that this collection builds upon the increasingly substantial work on colonial knowledge in Asia and will also open up new perspectives that merit further investigation by scholars interested in the connections and entanglements created by the struggles over empire in Asia.