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Towards a Progressive Asian Linguistic and Cultural Psychology

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Abstract

Traditional Linguistic and Cultural Anthropology has been predicated on traditional systems of thought, such as colonialism and that the west has been a purveyor of intellectual work and its traditions. Consequently, the shaping of Asian and non-Asian academic and industrial sector have emerged to separate these two regions, though dynamically.

This paper seeks to provide a new framework for Anthropologically describing Asian Linguistic and Cultural contexts, which show great contradiction. The paper builds on colonialism and post colonialism, and then draws on a comparative ethnography of Asian and non-Asian regions, to present that the symbolic typologies of each of these regions show contradiction. The paper then presents that these contradictions speak against both traditional notions of Asia and non-Asia, and that traditional Linguistic and Cultural Anthropology can become modal, and can be realigned to incorporate complex perspectives in the symbolic analysis of language and culture.

Keywords: Asia, Linguistic Cultural Anthropology, East, West, Symbolism

Introduction

The paper and presentation will focus on developing a progressive yet broad framework of Linguistic Anthropology for Asia, that is, the culmination of the field of Linguistic Anthropology in the post-millennium era, incorporating recent focus on new perspectives and developments, following a century of shifting paradigms in (Linguistic) Anthropology, which has evolved into present day discussions of, for example, modal Linguistic Anthropology (see work by Paul Kockleman). The paper extrapolates from the pathways traversed by traditional Linguistics and Anthropology, to suggest possible avenues for a progressive scholarship, as it applies to Asian (and other) contexts and scholars. The complexity of Asia renders such an epistemological development or movement forward of its Linguistic Anthropology quite arduous yet at the same time exciting and dynamic, at the very least experimental. The discussion and framework of the study will align with my attempts to extrapolate from a previous lineage of development of Linguistic Cultural Anthropology.

Defining Asia and its Linguistic Cultural Landscapes

Generally, Asia spans between regions immediately above Australia to Western Europe, yet the Asian diaspora has placed itself the world over, with a China town in most urban locations, and Japanese, Taiwanese, South Asian and Southeast Asian trends now a global ubiquity. The

existence of a vast number of languages and heritages across Asian territories confirms that an Asian Linguistic Anthropology offers an infinite bank for investigation. Here, ethnography, documentation and other elements of Linguistic Anthropology, both applied and theoretical, such as Asian symbolisms, socialization, language poetics (reduplication, parallelism, turn taking), performativity, language shifts and contact, language planning and policy, language, gender and sexuality, and discourse in online and offline spaces, all patently complexify the field. This complexity is certainly coupled with other societal factors such as migration, colonialism, shifting ethnic and national borders, and forever shifting political landscapes and technologies. More so, the colonial endeavors of the past have assigned substantial agency to Western academic industry, media and institutions, endeavors which have forced ideologies of Asia as a binary opposite to the West, reflexively intensifying attention to Asian languages as ‘worth the romantic and scholarly visit,’ and which thus contribute to the Asian economy of romance, a romantic scholarship as it were. Shifting academic and commercial / industrial landscapes, tensions over origin of cultural heritage, the development of global partners, and forever emerging and shifting international conflicts, have added to (re)constructions of Asian Anthropological landscapes. Asia thus continues to provide a region in constant transition, geographically, culturally, linguistically, politically and anthropologically.

Concurrent with goings on during colonial periods, that is, England in Malaysia, India and Hong Kong, The Dutch in Indonesia, The US in The Philippines, The French in Vietnam, Asian localities were ideologically considered to be liminal and at the global margins. The anthropological study of these languages and cultures (see Bronislaw Malinowski, Clifford Geertz, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown) made for a romantic endeavor. Anthropologists were now studying the romanticized cultures of South, Southeast and East Asia, reflexively assigning British and American Anthropology an agency to predicate Asian societies as objects of exploration. The field of Anthropology was thus either deliberately or accidentally constructed in this way, at its onset, and claims to searching for equally functional / functionalist societies and their languages that were relatively ‘on par’ with English, French, Dutch, Spanish, were thus themselves romantic, ideologically contributing to the gendered differential of culture and race, on a global scale. These gendered differentials were well mediated by the human sciences. Non Asians now had justifiable cause to seek and investigate the Asian other under the guise of assigning these distant and remote civilizations a place on the global anthropological map. The ‘we’ were able to learn from the ‘them,’ and take this (frequently) oriental and romantic knowledge back home in order to supplement scholarship, in the academic institution.

A movement forward in Asian Linguistic anthropology thus may begin with the understanding that early Anthropology, and the study of Asian Language and Cultural heritage, constituted attempts to position these Asian regions as liminal, despite claims of benevolent attitudes towards the East. In its defense, Anthropology in its epistemic intentions, has foregrounded its attempts to reduce this positioning of the East as liminal, and its intention to increasingly assign agency to Asian scholars, researchers and skilled cultural workers and experts, to contribute to this anthropological egalitarianism. However, this has not been a linear process, with constantly renewed efforts by Western institutions and bodies to maintain or intensify Western status, not least through claims of offering optimum ‘native-speaking’ English language based education in all fields. Collaborations between the East and West complexify this further, through transnational data transfer, exchange of expertise in Anthropology and Linguistics (and the Social Sciences and Humanities in general), and of course, massive mobility between these

two parts of the world, as scholars (and students) move across in neoliberal fashion, directing valuable resource towards 'upper' institutions.

Early Anthropology, and more centrally Linguistic Cultural Anthropology, was centered on, be it obfuscated by, Western scholarship on Asian regions and societies, and rarely the opposite. Malinowskian and Radcliffe-Brownian work, for example, set the European stage for work on the Anthropological other, with the European as agent and the Asian as the Anthropological predicate, as did American work by Geertz, Mead (South Pacific) and others. Not to say that work by these scholars was not groundbreaking and intended to change things. It is a truism that Bates, Radcliffe-Brown, Mead, Geertz did level the East-West seesaw of egalitarianism, or at least, retarded the swing, though not ideally, and not in a way that would at the time truly benefit the East. Their contributions were directed well, though. Their intentions, at least explicitly, were Boasian, where these Anthropologists sought to approach romanticized Asian societies so as to expose these societies as functional in their own right, and to uncover language systems and lifeworlds that do not correlate with preconceptions of cultural lineages and heritages of Asian countries. After all, where would the excitement lie if everything found was as anticipated. The Western sought to find an inspiringly different East, and still does. Implicitly however, or subsequently, these investigations and explorations by outsiders to Asia somehow reinforced the marginal and liminal perceptions of these Asian geographical and cultural spaces, so as to intensify and hence to re centre Europe and the United States in the Anthropological scheme of things. The binary was sustained, Asia was repositied and repositioned as the Eastern 'other' vis-à-vis a Western scholarship of Linguistic Cultural (Social) Anthropology, and the field had accomplished its imperial intentions.

Framework

Theoretically, the discussion is initially grounded primarily on colonialism and postcolonial theory, combining this work with symbolic anthropology, so as to suggest new frameworks with which to extrapolate and to substantiate new frontiers. This paper then employs critical theory and work on Asia and its Linguistic Cultural Anthropology, in an attempt to extrapolate from the lineage of Modal Linguistic Anthropology, on Asia. Ethnographically, the paper emerges from a 24 year ethnography of Asia, beginning in the Northeast with Japan and South Korea, to the Southeast, with Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, and neighboring countries.

As its starting point, the framework draws on historic ideologies that position Asia as largely, but not pervasively, of Confucian Heritage, where the classical Anthropologist would see these Asian systems as different and hence incongruent to the upbringing of the Western Anthropologist, thus rendering Asia a romantic place. That is, the West and the East were seen as different in that the West would relinquish certain hierarchies predominant in the East. This notion of systemic difference between the East and the West has long existed and has pervaded even Anthropological cum scholarly thought. A scrutiny of the complexity of society in both of these regions (the East and the West) would quickly problematize these ideologies, and would show that this is not the case.

The investigation then becomes predicated on the far reaching and highly common societal ideologies of difference, even in scholarly work, followed by a deconstruction of these ideologies, employing a Symbolic Anthropology framework to reveal the complexity of the East and its Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Animism, and so forth, while observing the

junctures between Confucianism and other potent discourses such as Patriarchy, Religion, and ways in which these discourses intersect. Anthropological perspectives shift from Asia to outside of Asia, that is, the West, where institutionalized values and practices inform comparative ethnographical work, as do the conceptions of Westerners toward Asians and vice-versa. These comparative ethnography draws on multarious facets of Asian lifeworlds, such as sexuality, (the breaking apart of and deconstruction of) filial piety, the syncretism of institutionalized religions, and a resurgence in cultural heritage (though this historiography is frequently fabricated and distorted for neoliberal gain). In short, the framework seeks to refute positivist ideologies of Asia as pervasively and inherently hierarchical, respectful and deferent, and moves to argue that Cultural and Anthropological borders can be fluidly repositioned globally, and can thus become ideologically dexterous, while we shift our investigation from the Asian etic to the Asian emic. Linguistic Cultural (and other) Anthropology is exactly about complexifying the field, that is, locating models that shift our perceptions of the etic to the emic through signification, language socialization, language mediation, reflexivity, and so forth, which all become symbolic tools to describe ways in which a society becomes a complex highly functional world previously seen as a blur, and previously seen as romantically distinct from the West.

Finally, though as the central and larger part of the framework, the study observes the symbolic typologies through Asian regions, which become complex in contradictory ways, in such that these contradictions are embodied. That is, individuals and larger society both act contradictorily, thus refuting the belief that these Asian symbolisms which separate the East and the West are bounded by geography, but rather, have been ideologically constructed through a lineage of (post)colonialism, and romantic scholarship when othering the East.

Discussion

Then what does a progressive Linguistic Anthropology for Asia entail? The observation and realization that the positivist processes of framing Asia as Asia would well inform a deconstruction of the why these processes of had occurred and continues to occur. By recognizing how these processes of separation are encoded in Linguistic Cultural Anthropology, as well as in language and cultural systems throughout the East, and in discourses of the East, complex power structures and their symbolic typologies can be located as agents of misrepresentation of Asia and the framing of and legitimizing Asia as an Asian set of cultures. Observing these symbolic typologies through Asian regions, allows for the complexifying of Asia, and for finding contradictions in Asia that refute traditional ways of seeing Asian symbolisms. As such, a progressive Linguistic Cultural Anthropology would indicate that the construction of Asia is largely ideological, and that tradition of ideology has led to misrepresentations of Asia, by both Western and Eastern scholars.