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2 Indigenous and indigenized anthropology in Asia

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I sometimes say to my Chinese students in Hong Kong, partly as gentle provocation, that we will know the age of colonialism is over when they choose to do their fieldwork in Britain, or Australia, or the United States, or some other “Western” country. That they rarely consider this to be an option is, perhaps, an interesting comment on the state of mind of young anthropologists in Asia. I have encountered a similar reluctance to analyze “the West” among Thai going to study anthropology overseas. I recall one friend writing a letter full of queries and wonderment about the local culture soon after her arrival in the United States in the 1980s. I replied, suggesting that she write her thesis on some aspect of American society. My suggestion was not taken up, and she completed her thesis on rural Thai society. Why was this? There are several reasons: certainly those with more radical leanings hope that their studies will “help the people” at home; some feel that not enough analysis has been done on their own societies; furthermore, often they are encouraged by their foreign supervisors who have usually done fieldwork in Thailand (but this applies equally to China or Indonesia, etc.) to pursue a home-centered line of research, and one suspects that this is partly because it keeps them vicariously in touch with “the field.” In some cases, these foreign students are also obliged to study their own societies as a condition of their scholarships. Sometimes, however, foreign students beg-off doing fieldwork elsewhere because they claim that their language skills are not good enough. But usually, their English (or French, or whatever) is much better than most “Western” anthropologist’s local language skills. So, is it simply that they cannot afford “field assistants” who will clarify pieces of slang, or render thick local accents into the standard form of speech? Or does their reluctance reflect some persistent “cultural cringe?”

Here, of course, we brush up against what has been until recently an enduring pattern in the practice of anthropology, that is, the advantages of affluent anthropologists from industrialized countries in the field. Their research has often taken place against a background of colonial rule and entrenched power differentials, in spite of the individual anthropologist’s beliefs. As Kuper’s (1973) study of the British social anthropologists shows, many of them were anti-colonial. This, however, did not change the objective asymmetry of their social relations in the field.
So, maybe we should say that in Europe, the United States, and Australia anthropology is indigenizing (at least, to a certain extent), while in Asia anthropology is simultaneously indigenizing and de-indigenizing.

But it is time to ask: What can Indigenous and Indigenized Anthropology in Asia possibly mean?

Well, it can simply mean that more people from Asia are conducting anthropology in Asia – either in their own countries or in other parts of Asia. This fact is obviously true. But the key issues that arise from this are: has this fact led to new questions being raised, a different type of practice for anthropology, and a new theory even? The latter, I suppose, is what is meant by the idea of indigenized anthropology.

But before we deal with these issues, I would like to make a rather long detour through a relatively little known field. A form of indigenous and indigenized anthropology has been practised in Asia for close to forty years – in the communist states of Asia.

Communism and indigeneity

One thing that communism in Asia did was to indigenize anthropology. Work by foreign researchers from anywhere was for a long time impossible in these states, then it became possible but under extremely restrictive conditions; in more recent times it is possible but still controlled. These restrictions even applied to “fraternal” comrades, so the few Soviet or Hungarian researchers in Vietnam, for example, were closely monitored. The main exception to this rule that I know of has been the fairly unimpeded access of Vietnamese ethnographers to Laos.

Indigenous anthropologists in these countries found their institutional base in Committees for Social Sciences, in Institutes of Ethnography or in sections of government departments, such as a Committee for Nationalities in a National Front for Reconstruction – or some such similarly named organization. As I have written elsewhere about Vietnamese Communist Anthropology (Evans 1985, 1995, 1999), these anthropologists identified with the developmental aims of the state and saw the minority peoples within their borders as “backward” and as requiring development as defined by the center. This mood remains strong among people in these institutions. Note also that their attention was focussed almost exclusively on what are called national minorities. Anthropologists – or ethnographers, as they are commonly known – did not study the Han Chinese or the Vietnamese. China’s best known anthropologist Fei Tsiao Tung’s studies of Han Chinese took place in the 1930s when he was a student at the London School of Economics. After 1949 his attention was directed toward the so-called “national minorities.”

The theoretical apparatus these anthropologists worked with was a Stalinist – Maoist version of Marxism, and the theory of nationalities that came out of Stalinist Russia. Anthropological theory in the “West” was dismissed as bourgeois and colonial or imperialist. Of course, if one wants to push a strong “nativist” line one could argue that these indigenous anthropologists were in thrall
For a long time, the Japanese have studied other cultures in Asia, and this too needs to be set against a background of colonial practice (Van Bremen and Shimizu 1999). Japanese practice also appears to be partly influenced by ideas of cultural homogeneity. That is, if you want to study the “other” you go elsewhere.

Ethnocentrism has influenced Chinese anthropologists differently. It has been rare to find Chinese anthropologists elsewhere in Asia. They have tended to study the “other,” that is the minorities, within China. More recently, however, Chinese anthropologists who have trained in foreign institutions have begun to focus on the Han. Chinese anthropologists from Taiwan or Singapore can, on the other hand, be found researching in other parts of Asia.

So, when we survey the big picture of Asian anthropology and anthropologists, its contours are blurred, and indeed our understanding of the evolution of the respective national traditions is, so far, inadequate.

American, European, or Australian scholars have until recently played a major part in the evolution of anthropological writing on Asia: historically this has been connected to colonialism, though this should not lead anyone to draw hasty conclusions about the “colonial nature” of their studies. There were, as we know, some instances in which the political developments of the time – the Cold War in Asia – influenced some anthropological projects, or at least ensured funding for them. During the Vietnam War, there was a controversy in Thailand about anthropological research there (Wakin 1992), and anthropologists such as Gerald Hickey worked closely with the US government in Vietnam – and, it should be said, he produced invaluable studies of the highland peoples there.

More importantly, the influence of “Westerners” in the anthropology of Asia has been a result of the affluence of these countries after 1945 and the expansion of higher education in them: Their liberal political systems meant that not only did students of anthropology have money for research, but they also had the freedom to choose where they would go. The main restrictions on them came from the governments of the countries where they wished to study, often as a result of post-colonial nationalist xenophobia. As Asian countries have become more affluent, and as higher education in them has expanded, we have seen similar developments in them. As I indicated earlier, Japanese, Taiwanese, Singaporeans, and south Koreans can now be found working all over Asia. Moreover, in conferences these days, one can see an important and refreshing shift in the cultural composition of the participants.

A fall in funding in the hitherto affluent countries has also led to a growing interest in their own “indigenous” anthropology, or “anthropology at home” (which I think was the title of one British book). This is also the background to the founding of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) some years back, and the apparent growth in anthropological interest in Europe. But in some respects this is a return to the founding folklorist traditions of ethnography in Europe. Of course, there are important theoretical issues involved in this shift too, but we should not lose sight of the effects of the mundane but fundamental issue of funding.
(and here I have in mind the French in Indo-China in particular) there is a certain way of seeing that is at work. The “eye” of the camera is very much in the style of the observer and the observed: the colonial photographer looking at the native subject. Only rarely do we find the conventions of “naturalism” that most modern anthropologists prefer – that is trying to be invisible, and trying to record non-staged events. When traveling and working with Lao or Vietnamese ethnographers, I have been struck by our different approaches to photography. They adopt what I identify as “colonial style,” and will record staged events, and instruct people to put on their traditional clothing so that they can be photographed. And sometimes they will remark “you can see these people are giving up their traditions because they don’t wear their traditional clothes anymore.” Their positioning of the camera is symptomatic of an approach and an attitude.

The feeling that one is experiencing the practice of high colonial anthropology in these communist countries is not an illusion either. I would argue that this indigenous practising of anthropology in Asia has, to date, been a form of colonial anthropology. Indeed, sometimes more blatant than anything we can find among European anthropologists who practised in Asia in the past.

Why do I say colonial? These anthropologists have self-consciously aligned themselves with the state in order to extend state control over ethnic minorities lying within the borders of the modern state. In this sense, it is internal colonialism – and we may wish to debate this concept. The first major task of anthropologists in China and in Vietnam and in Laos was to go and make an inventory of all the ethnic groups in the country, and to draw up criteria – social and cultural – for deciding on “nationality.” This so-called “cultural categorization” had real political effects concerning the granting of, for example, autonomous zones, or any other privileges that may go with minority status. It also meant excluding some groups who made claims to separate minority status, as well as the amalgamation of other groups who claimed to be separate. Once this was carried out this state assigned status became part of one’s status as a citizen, and one’s “nationality” was recorded on one’s identity card. This power of creation or dissolution of groups is similar to the power of the European colonial state and its advisors to reinforce the power of particular chiefs and rajahs or not, to recognize the existence of certain groups or not, and to recognize certain types of land use or not.

Anthropologists are also required to identify so-called “reactionary” and “superstitious” practices – whether in religion, marriage practices, residential practices, and so on. In this sense they are true to the spirit of Morgan who wrote:

It is one of the harsher, and at times even painful, office of ethnography to expose the remains of crude old cultures which have passed into harmful superstition, and to mark these out for destruction. Yet this work, if less genial, is not less urgently needful for the good of mankind. Thus, active at once in aiding progress and in removing hindrance, the science of culture is essentially a reformer’s science.

(cited in Tambiah 1990: 44)
to a foreign theory, that is, Marxism. But such a claim is problematic as one ends up in a bizarre regression. So, extreme Russian nationalists today denounce Marxism as a Jewish theory, or a Jewish plot; and presumably Germans could do the same; while perhaps Jewish fundamentalists in the Middle East could denounce Marxism as “Western” and German. These are real possibilities within a “nativist” discourse.

Such claims, of course, raise the tricky problem of what constitutes a “foreign” theory. That is, how can one apply the idea of “foreignness” to a theory? But let me leave this question hanging for the moment.

The Chinese, for a complex set of reasons, took up Marxism and applied it to Chinese conditions, as did the Vietnamese and Lao and North Koreans, and so on. And a great deal of ink has been split on how they “indigenized” Marxism. I do not think anyone today would dispute the fact that the Chinese, the Vietnamese, and the North Koreans forced Marxism through their own cultural sieve, and rationalized this in all sorts of ways.

In other words, Marxism did not come into these societies in some pure form, nor did it operate in some pure theoretical space, but like all knowledge it was subject to local social, cultural, and political forces. (In this sense it parallels the fates of world religions — such as “foreign” Buddhism in China or in Thailand.) The Chinese, Vietnamese, and Lao anthropologists that I have met considered themselves to be Marxists, whatever their understanding of what that meant, and saw themselves applying that theory to “local conditions,” and in many respects they thought they were “indigenizing” the theory. Most of them did this in good faith, and often of their own volition.

One of the consequences of the revolutions and the cutting off of intellectual life in these countries from “the imperialist West” was that for the next thirty years or so these anthropologists were impervious to theoretical developments in anthropology elsewhere. The main people they met with and went to conferences with and discussed theoretical and empirical issues with were themselves. Occasionally, they would discuss such issues with communist intellectuals from other countries. But, practically, they lived in an indigenous universe.

Another consequence of the revolution and the condemnation of the “Western” theory as bourgeois was that the foundation text for these ethnographers was Engels’ *The Family Private Property and the State*, and perhaps some may have read excerpts from Morgan. Their work, therefore, was wedded to a very rigid view of the stages through which societies must pass — primitive communism, feudalism, capitalism, and so on. So in some respects, until very recently anthropology in these countries lived in a nineteenth-century evolutionist intellectual universe.

It was for this reason that people like myself felt they had stepped into a time machine and traveled backwards upon a first encounter with communist ethnographers in these countries. When reading their monographs or articles, or seeing them at work, it was as if one was observing an early twentieth-century British social anthropologist in, say, colonial Africa. Take photography as an example: if one looks back at photographs taken during the European colonial period in Asia
something that he found boring. What he had brought with him was a book in Vietnamese on the Black Tai from Vietnam and he set about using this book as a checklist to see whether the Black Tai where we were staying were “really” Black Tai. Soon, he confided to me that these Black Tai were forgetting their traditions as they could not recite to him histories of the Black Tai as found in his book, and as few of them knew how to read the traditional script, he decided there was little of interest to study. Meanwhile, my interest was focussed on cultural change, and any practices that may reflect this, and one quickly realized that studies of cultural change and what they meant to people were not on his agenda.

I have worked on and off with this person for almost ten years now. One of the first things I did was begin to pay for him to learn English for, as I argued, it was necessary for him to gain access to wider anthropological debates. I should also say that in our initial research in the north I was dependent on him to translate the local dialect into standard Lao for me, and he was often much quicker to see things happening in the village than me, but the irony was that he was not interested in them as an anthropologist. They were simply, for him, normal events that occurred in villages and did not require any special thought, such as a death ritual that happened while we were there.

Let me follow this person further in order to try to tease out what we could possibly mean by indigenous. His father was Black Tai, his mother Lao, he studied from junior secondary school to university in Vietnam and in Vietnamese, he is now married to a Vietnamese woman who lives with him in Laos, and they have three young boys. His ethnographic training is in Vietnamese, and most of his texts, until recently, have been in Vietnamese. More recently, he has had access to Thai and English texts. There is no doubt in my mind that his intellectual formation is special, but I find it hard to think how the term indigenous helps me to understand what he does or is.

Indeed, one can see in him, and among ethnographers in Vietnam and in China, a desire to “de-indigenize” their ethnographic practice and to learn more about anthropological developments in the “West,” feeling now that what they have been doing and what they know theoretically to have been almost a waste of time and obsolete. What they can publish, however, remains strictly controlled by the state. What has distinguished the development of anthropology in these communist countries has been the recognition of ethnography by the state and its formal separation from sociology (unlike the evolution of the discipline in non-communist Asia). This has partly been a consequence of the object of research being defined as a study of minorities and not the majority population. Furthermore, a relatively large number of “indigenous” (i.e. minority) ethnographers were trained and employed by the state. I suspect, however, that with market-driven criteria increasingly entering the academic and state fields in these countries this situation is rapidly changing.

The communist states are an important example of large-scale indigenous practice of anthropology in Asia. Yet, they have produced no significant anthropological studies and no significant theoretical breakthroughs. Of course, one can object that these indigenous scholars were operating in totalitarian systems and
I have recorded elsewhere, for example, how the Vietnamese in the southern highlands broke up the matrilineal longhouses there, claiming that they were a backward and primitive form. And as I note there, one can sense the incomprehension of these matrilineal cultures by the patrilineally oriented Vietnamese (Evans 1995).

I have met no mainland Chinese, Vietnamese, nor Lao ethnographer who has learnt a minority language. They expect the exchange to take place in the dominant “national” language. The only ethnographers who work in minority languages are minorities themselves who have been drawn into the Institutes of Ethnography or the Committees for Nationalities in order to carry out studies on their own peoples. Often, these people will operate as either interpreters and/or informants for ethnographers from the dominant ethnic group. In fact, these Institutes require a separate study. But from my observations in all three countries, they have been crucial vehicles for the upward social mobility of individual members of minorities, whereby they become trained and fluent in the dominant language and modes of thought, and apply these uncritically to their own peoples who they begin to see as backward, and indeed as a status they have left behind. In fact, they and their families migrate to the main cities, and they, or at least their children, begin to marry into the dominant group. Of course, I have no objection to cross-cultural marriage, but if one looks at the sociological role of these institutes it is not as some kind of representative institution for minority “voices,” although one will find a greater tolerance in them of minority cultures than one will find in the society at large. They are institutions for the carrying out of state policy among minorities, and indeed most of their members agree that the state’s policies with regard to the minorities are enlightened and correct.

It is true that among the mountains of material gathered by these ethnographers—and in terms of paper it is a lot—there is some interesting and important empirical material. It is, however, always placed in a theoretically inadequate framework and there is certainly no tradition of recording minority “voices,” except perhaps their oral legends. Their studies will typically begin by trying to place the society in some traditional past, and within the pre-arranged categories of the Marxist evolutionary framework. The ethnography will be set out in standard categories of kinship, economy, religion, political organization, and finally a section on the good life under socialism. Indeed, I would argue that we learn relatively little about the working of these societies from this mountain of work, and in fact learn more about attempts by the state to codify the cultural boundaries of these groups.

In reflecting on the nature of so-called “indigenous” and “indigenized anthropology,” what are we to do with a young Lao who has studied ethnography in Vietnam in Vietnamese, and who takes texts produced in Vietnam by the resident Black Tai in the Institute of Ethnography in Hanoi, back to Laos in order to use it as a basis of comparison with Black Tai communities in Laos? I had this experience when I first went up to Houaphan province in Laos in 1988 with a Lao ethnographer to start a study of Black Tai there.

When we reached the village site where we would be based, our research strategies were quite different. I began with the standard survey of the village,
Anthropology has always been committed to trying to understand other cultures and societies because, I would argue, of the importance of cross-cultural insights to anthropological theorizing. The practice of comparison (which of course has its own methodological problems) often raises questions and problems which do not occur if one focusses on a single culture. One can see this in the practice of anthropology in China in which anthropologists often become Sinologists and remain largely ignorant or uninterested in the rest of Asia. They become entrapped in a very powerful Sinocentric field (or is Sinocentrism indigeneity?). Their studies rarely proceed by way of comparison – except perhaps with “the West” (read the United States), when in fact more appropriate comparisons may be found in Asia. An obvious example of inappropriate comparison has been in discussions of the Chinese notion of “face.” Anthropologists and psychologists have labored to show that Chinese are obsessed by “face,” whereas Americans are not. The discussion has been oblivious to research on “face” (i.e. notions of pride, shame, etc.) in other Asian cultures, such as Thailand or Bali, for example. This is despite the fact that an essay by one of the world’s most famous anthropologists, Clifford Geertz (1973), has dealt precisely with the question of the presentation of self among Balinese. I have no doubt that an anthropologist from Thailand or Bali working in China (or vice versa) would not miss the opportunity for comparison. And I have no doubt that comparisons of this kind would produce a more subtle understanding of “face” in everyday life in all of these cultures.

Earlier in this chapter I left a question mark hanging over the issue of so-called “foreign” theories. It is often asserted that anthropology is hopelessly compromised by the “Western” origins of its theories. And alongside such charges we may hear calls for a “Chinese Anthropology,” or an “Asian Anthropology.” To my knowledge, however, the claim that anthropology is irretrievably compromised has never been argued substantially or at length, and has more often than not rested on a nationalistic assertions of difference which are assumed to be common-sensically apparent. (Often these claims are little more than demagogy.) These assertions rarely demonstrate an understanding of “Western” intellectual history, of its radical shifts in perspective in recent centuries, or the diversity of “Western” thought, which is strongly marked by both romantic, idealistic discourses and rationalistic, scientific ones. Which is the “real West?” Therefore, I must agree with Maurice Godelier’s reply to the question: “Is social anthropology indissolubly linked to the West, its birthplace?”:

anthropology is a mode of knowledge which has been able to take shape only by distancing itself from the West, by shifting its focus away from it and often by taking issue with its ethnocentric representations of the rest of humanity.

(1995: 141)

This is not to argue that anthropological writings have not been, at times, shot through with ethnocentric assumptions that have compromised their findings. But, interestingly, it has been mainly “Western” scholars who have been most
not free to explore a "real" indigenous anthropology. But as I have suggested, this is not the way these indigenous scholars saw the problem, and moreover one has to deal with the fact that it was "indigenous" totalitarianism as well.

I say this because I want to problematize the idea of indigeneity and because I also think that hiding behind this idea is a notion that, for example, only Chinese can really understand Chinese culture and society, or Thai the Thai, and so on. This notion is inimical to anthropology.

**Indigenized anthropology?**

As Adam Kuper (1994) reminded us some years ago, ideas similar to those currently advanced by advocates of indigeneity have been associated with the extreme racist nationalism of Nazism in the past. One of the things we discover in such discourses, he says, is that some "natives" are more "native" than others are, that is, allegedly less polluted by foreign concepts or genes. (In Asia, one finds an invidious discourse in which both ideas are combined in the "naturalised" slur *Banana*, "yellow on the outside, white on the inside," applied especially to those "genetically pure" Chinese, Thai, etc., who have been brought up overseas.) In the current debate what is one to do with an anthropologist whose parents come from different "racial"/cultural backgrounds? In such a discourse, they would seem to be permanently compromised – or one finds oneself asserting to an absurd case which argues that they can only study others like themselves. A key issue is, however, who has the power to define and manipulate the notion of "native," "indigenous," or whatever? Of course, some states have asserted this right – but should anthropologists?

Amphay Doré, who is of Lao and French parentage, in his autobiographical account of becoming a monk, proposes a more interesting and more complex line of thought:

> Ethnology, which I studied after psychology, gave me the elements for a more satisfactory definition [of myself]: through its ambition to understand a culture not only objectively but also from the inside, it gave a sort of justification to my state as a Eurasian: like a medium, I had the ability to translate from one language into another. Ethnology had, moreover, a global approach to reality, and this accorded well with my nature. It was through it, this western science, that I rediscovered the Asia of my childhood.

(1974: 35)

Lack of "purity" may in fact be an advantage for an anthropologist! As I have argued elsewhere (Evans 1993), neither insiders nor outsiders to a culture have unambiguous advantages. I cite the problems, and I can now cite further cases, that so-called "indigenous" scholars have had in studying their own cultures, or in their own countries. And I suggest that probably one of the best solutions for anthropologists is collaborative research between insiders and outsiders.
The Embodied and by three cognitive theorists (Varela et al. 1991) is perhaps the most theoretically powerful attempt to integrate Buddhist insights into our understanding of cognition, though I must leave it to others more knowledgeable in this area to decide on its long-term viability. In this regard, it is interesting to note that among psychologists there has been a more vigorous debate around the issue of indigenous knowledge and psychologies than there has been in anthropology. But the imprint of a positivistic and scientistic methodology in psychology finds its way into these debates, and indeed is the basis on which the results produced by cultural anthropology are rejected, because the “reliability, validity, and interpretation of the data are not strictly verifiable” (Kim and Berry 1993: 19). Nevertheless, the debate among them has also shown the problematical nature of an indigenous psychological theory (see Pandey et al. 1996).

The main changes to anthropological theory and practice will not come from some so-called “indigenous” transformation. It will come from the entry into anthropological discourse of people from increasingly diverse cultural and social backgrounds who will provide slightly new angles on old questions, arising perhaps from their exposure to different religious philosophies about the nature of humans, and they will bring with them new empirical data produced by an ever evolving world. In the long term, it will be this that will slowly re-shape anthropology’s current contours.

We do not need an indigenous and indigenized anthropology in Asia, or anywhere else, but an anthropology that is more self-consciously and sensitively internationalized. In this respect, the time has come to problematize global categories like “the West” and perhaps “Asia” in anthropological discourse, and to carefully articulate their uses—especially the category “the West.” Its use is a theoretical habit that has been the source of a myriad of uninformed and false contrasts. A further serious issue is that many European and American anthropologists, when they are writing their articles and books in English (or other European languages), assume that they are writing for Europeans or Americans and forget that there is now a very large Asian (let alone African or Latin American) audience of anthropologists and other social scientists who are reading their literature. In fact, I would suggest, it is this feature of anthropological writing, far more than the concepts deployed, which betrays an ongoing ethnocentrism among American, Australian, or European anthropologists. On the other hand, many Asian anthropologists use the category “the West” in a way which shows no particular understanding of the content of that category, and its use largely derives from a long past political, nationalist context.

In this chapter I have tried to show: first, that we need to know more about the political, economic, social, and cultural coordinates which influence the practice of anthropologists in Asia; second, to illustrate through the examples of the communist states of Asia that the practice of so-called “indigenous anthropology” is fraught with problems; and finally to assert, along with Godelier, a metacultural vision of anthropology. Few anthropologists would deny the difficulties and complexities involved in anthropological research, but the challenge and excitement of
active in uncovering the hidden cultural assumptions in the works of their theoretical ancestors through the well-established practice of critique, which is fundamental to the anthropological tradition. In the current phase, the proven fallibility of the ancestors has led some people to become disillusioned with the larger aims of anthropology and we have seen a “post-modern” backlash and outpourings of theoretical and personal angst about the practice of anthropology. The rejection of the “tradition” by post-modernism, not surprisingly, has provided ammunition for those arguing for indigeneity and the theoretical irrelevance of “the West.” It is interesting to note, however, that this backlash has been strongest in the United States where the individualistic and subjectivist turn of post-modernism is culturally most appealing. (It is not insignificant that the French theoretical demigods of this turn have not spawned a similar movement among French anthropologists.) The sociology of knowledge that has always tried to locate theoretical shifts in social and cultural, rather than purely theoretical space is, unfortunately, not a well-developed field among anthropologists.

It has been the well-established theoretical practice of critique in anthropology which enables Godelier to draw the conclusion that:

anthropology has already proved, through its best, and often highly unexpected, results, that it is genuinely possible to construct a metacultural vision of humankind without abandoning cultural diversity. . . . The premise of the construction of a meta-cultural view of humankind (which will never be the spontaneous product of one perception or one culture), is that no specific culture, whatever its nature, can serve as a sole point of departure or centre of reference for the construction of a science of humanity.

(1995: 155)

The widening of the cultural pool of practising anthropologists in Asia will sharpen our understanding of the cultural biases that may pervade our attempts to understand complex societies. Anthropology is now a cross-culturally shared tradition, and as we excavate the history of anthropology in each country, we are more able to fully understand the complex interaction between local traditions and this larger tradition – whether it be the impact of European folklore studies on Malinowski’s formation, or Japanese imperialism on the evolution of Japanese anthropology.

Of course, there is another important issue raised by the debate around indigenous anthropology, and that is the degree to which intellectual systems of thought which do not have their origins in the European tradition can feed back into anthropology and contribute to its theoretical development. For example, can the extensive reflections of the nature of the mind by Buddhists lead to new forms of anthropological knowledge?6 There have been many attempts by Asian psychologists and others to show that Buddhism can provide new perspectives on personality and the mind. But, unfortunately, most of them have been theoretically disappointing (see, for example Sarachchandra 1958; Kawai 1996).
Evans, Grant (1985) "Vietnamese communist anthropology," *Canberra Anthropology*, 8(1–2).
Huang, Shuping (1994) "The criteria of ethnic identification in China," in Barry Sautman (ed.), *Racial Identities in East Asia*, Hong Kong: Division of Social Sciences. Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.
Sautman, Barry (ed.) (1994) *Racial Identities in East Asia*, Hong Kong: Division of Social Sciences, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.
it is admirably conveyed by Obeyesekere’s reflections on his own anthropological practice:

When I study a peasant village in Sri Lanka, I might do several things. I might make a personal self-discovery into my past; I might also make a critique of my own culture; I might see Sri Lanka not in isolation but in relation to the larger Indic or Hindu culture; I might see its parallels with Buddhist Burma and Thailand, and I might ask myself why is it different from Kenya or Highlands New Guinea or Lowland New Jersey. What I do as an anthropologist is to understand culture, or a culture; and such understanding must surely be through the prism of my own cultural subjectivity. Yet the dialogue I carry on is not with the culture: it is an understanding about culture that I carry out in dialogical form with my colleagues from where it spills over into modern life and thought, influencing that life in a variety of ways.... While it cannot provide the energy, the blindness, and the passion that religious and political fundamentalism give to their adherents, it has at least the potential to influence a vision of a more humane world order.

(1990: 274)

Notes
1 There are several studies of Fei’s intellectual odyssey, but see Arkush (1981).
2 For a discussion of some of the issues relating to photography see the essays in Edwards (1992).
3 Of course, anthropology now questions the illusions of naturalist photography – but that is another issue.
4 For a brief account by one of the participants in this program see Huang (1994).
5 For a discussion of racist ideas in Asia see the essays in Sautman (1994).
6 For an important discussion of how “Eastern” theories and Buddhism have influenced the development of European thought see Clarke (1997), especially chapter 9 for its influence on psychology.
7 Throughout this chapter I have been forced to use the self-conscious strategy of distancing myself from common-sense understandings of “the West” by always placing it in inverted commas. It is one of the virtues of Godelier’s discussion that he provides a definition of what he means by the West (Godelier 1995: 144). One of the purposes of Jack Goody’s (1996) thought provoking study is to overcome such simplistic polarities and to point to commonalities in heritage between “the East” and “West.”

References