Lived Experience, Mediated Representations and Rapid Economic Growth:
South, Southeast and East Asia, 1980-2000

Overview

We propose a three-year collaborative project, to begin in 2001-02, between the Center for Asia and Pacific Studies (CAPS) and the South Asia Studies Program (SASP). The project's goal is to specify, compare and theorize the bittersweet life experiences associated with economic growth in South and East Asia. While growth, an economic phenomenon, provides the starting point for the project, its terminus will be an enhanced cross-disciplinary understanding of key aspects of contemporary culture.

The key innovation is to examine seriously the lived experience of individuals and households during a period of rapid economic change. "Lived experience" is intended to refer to, on the one hand, quotidian social behaviors--that is, to how personal and domestic lives are actually lived by actors bobbing in the contemporary Asian economic mainstream--and, on the other hand, to the representation of lived experience in cultural media such as fiction, film, urban legend, advertising, television and journalism. Although there is always a gap between lived experience and mediated representation, their mutual constitution and interdependence are assumed from the outset.

Hitherto South, East, and Southeast Asian scholars have coexisted in universities with little significant interaction (an exception is Greenough and Tsing 2001). Key elements of the project intended to overcome this gap will be monthly seminars (10 meetings a year) and an annual workshop. SASP and CAPS faculty will tap into their own research and explore topics in tandem that invite cross-disciplinary and cross-areal learning. Distinguished visitors of interest to both CAPS and SASP will also be invited to campus to participate in the seminar series. The culmination of the project each year will be a 1-day workshop that will have as its explicit purpose the comparative discussion of the experience of economic growth in South, Southeast, and East Asia. At the end of the third year the most significant of the papers presented will be edited for publication.

Why Asia?

Not since the nineteenth century when England plunged into industrialization has the world witnessed such a dramatic upturn in the material lives of common folk. Though neither smooth nor inevitable, economic growth in Asia carries the potential to affect one-half the world's population. The concept of growth is often a shorthand for driving up the domestic living standards of privileged social sectors while indirectly enhancing collective well-being. Economic growth has traveled in four distinct waves across Asian countries, first in Japan, second in Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea, third in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and most recently in the "transition economies" of China, Vietnam, and South Asia. (Pakistan and Bangladesh have had state-fettered market economies since the 1970s, while India's economic reform program began in
1991; Myanmar and North Korea have yet to initiate changes along the lines of other Asian nations.) According to the World Bank's 2000/2001 World Development Report, the two fast growing regions in the world in the 1980s were East Asia and the Pacific (8% average annual growth) followed by South Asia (5.7%). In the 1990s the same two regions were again the fastest growing at 7.4% and 5.7% respectively. Formally speaking, this means that East Asians today are a staggering 4 times as rich as they were just one generation ago. In the same formal terms, South Asians are almost 3 times better off today. Such numbers cry out for explanation.

The Rapid Economic Growth (REG) project will explore the effects of Asian growth in ways and in sites that are tangible and accessible. The emphasis throughout will be on small groups, families, and individuals (particularly but not only in urban settings) rather than on abstract, aggregate forces like inflation/deflation. Statistical indexes of economic trends can serve as entry-points for locating social sites of growth experiences, but an overriding aim will be to rely on interdisciplinary methods and presentational formats that social scientists and humanists share. Such methods and formats include case studies, historical narration, thick description and open-ended comparisons.

To appreciate the magnitude of recent changes, the REG project will contextualize economic growth in terms of earlier developments. The timing of economic growth varied among countries naturally requiring a historically nuanced appreciation of the last two decades. Changes in Japanese society during the slow-growing 1990s may thus appear as minor tremors in contrast to the social convulsions that took place between 1940-1960. Differences in religious-philosophic traditions (Hinduism in South Asia, Islam in S.E. Asia, and Confucianism in East Asia) provide another interpretive framework with which to analyze the different experiences of economic growth. Furthermore, differences in colonial histories may suggest causal factors for the varied growth patterns.

Some key concerns:

1. Economic growth per se.

The promise of economic growth is improved social well being typically dubbed "development." Although in the first two decades after the end of WWII, western economists tended to equate development with growth, other aspects of development have been emphasized since the mid-1960s (Arndt 1987). These other considerations include social capital factors such as public health, universal literacy and education, and widespread rising nutritional intakes. Today the multi-dimensional and more subjective nature of development is widely appreciated. Economic growth, by contrast, is now viewed as simply the material basis of well being.

The REG project will examine social and cultural institutions that translate economic growth into well being. Such institutions would include private, community organizations which facilitate the transfer of resources across social groups. Another example is the diasporic trading families whose language and kinship ties underpin the
international flow of capital. While development paradigms are not the central concern of the REG project, we expect to engage researchers focusing on issues of globalization, the politics of culture, social justice, feminist theory and gender studies, and the development of new social movements.

2. Decline, corruption, and disaccumulation.

The overall trend in Asian growth has been punctuated by periods of contraction and social upheaval. For example, the financial crisis of 1997 precipitated a sharp economic downturn in Indonesia, Thailand, and Korea—yet to a different extent in each country—with the result that many found their economic prospects and the value of their assets dissipated by devaluation and denial of foreign capital. Such moments send powerful waves through whole societies. High-level political struggles also have great impact on consumption and confidence; consider the effects on private lives of constitutional disarray in Pakistan for the last ten years and the scandals that rocked Korea in the same period. The fall of the Suharto regime, directly linked to the economic crisis, coincided with attacks against the ethnic Chinese minority in Indonesia. Disruptions associated with economic downturns warrant careful attention.

The REG project will examine the lived experiences of those both on and off the economic bandwagon. It is well-known that economic opportunity does not accrue evenly across social groups. The back streets of Beijing and New Delhi testify to the lopsidedness of growth. In rural as well as urban India, the proliferation of mobile phones and satellite dishes occurs alongside persistent problems of food security. Clearly recent growth has been uneven both across and within all Asian societies, and we expect these differences to show up sharply in our deliberations.

3. Gender.

Representations of gender occupy a central place in the contests about meanings and identities accompanying contemporary economic processes. The rise of Asian affluence has changed relationships between gender and power, and gender relations are central to the making of the new middle classes and modernity across Asia. The training of girls from elite families for key roles in the global economy and the commoditization of poor women as prime objects of consumption by affluent men are at two ends of a spectrum; in the middle one can place the likely experience of most women who will be neither brokers nor hookers but office/factory workers and homemakers.

4. Representation.

The representation of economic growth in film, literature, and mass media does more than fill up the gaps between "tradition" and "modernity." It gives audiences a way to evaluate their own experiences and to interpret the changing world around them. Given that cinema like fiction favors concrete events over abstract processes, what gets concretely represented in fictions and films about producers and consumers in South, Southeast, and East Asia? Is there any utility that taxi drivers and tea-drinkers can take
away from an Indian cinema that is relentlessly sentimental about rural life and that endlessly hankers after glamorous foreign lifestyles? Can scholars find something diagnostic about Chinese stories whose heroes struggle for the good life in the mean streets and malls of post Cold War Shanghai? Can the erotic and sumptuary preferences of Asia's new rich be considered objective corollaries of rising real incomes?

Some literature

We are not the first to detect that significant new developments in lived experience and in representation now characterizes most of Asia. There are a number of intriguing collections of essays that tramp some of the same territory outlined above but none of them have the comparative South Asia-Southeast-East Asia dimension we propose to explore. Of particular note are three volumes in the New Rich Series published by the Asia Research Center located at Perth based Murdoch University: