THE KEY CONCEPTS

The Cluster will focus on the dynamics of shifting asymmetrical flows between the cultures of Asia and Europe in a global context. “Asia” and “Europe” are used here in the way in which both terms (or their variants “East” and “West”) are colloquially used as shorthand for exceedingly rich and diverse cultural areas, both of which only come under such a unifying rubric if juxtaposed in this manner. “Asia” is and has been also in Europe et vice versa. The Cluster follows recent research in treating the string nation/state/culture/language as a reified construct with vast discursive consequences rather than as a reality, while also recognising its ongoing real life impact. Asia and Europe will be dealt with in a “global context” because each area and their interaction will be studied from a perspective of being part of a global dynamics, not just one between two regions. The focus on the shifting asymmetrical flows between these cultural areas rejects a politically correct pretence of egalitarian symmetry because this would obfuscate an exceedingly important, highly volatile, and energising factor in the past and present of these cultural areas, namely the perception of the existence of such asymmetry.

Asymmetry is a rich heuristic concept with applications in diverse fields ranging from the asymmetric division of cells to asymmetric warfare, from physics and mathematics (with a journal devoted each to “Symmetry” and “Asymmetry”) to the case of information asymmetry about “a car that is a lemon” in economics and the analysis of the patterns underlying innovation (and humour). In these applications the term refers to the asymmetry (in size, power, information etc.) between two discrete bodies. Unidirectional asymmetrical flows are thematised in a wide range of fields from climatology to the behaviour of liquids. The cultural flows at the core of this Cluster’s research, however, are flowing both ways, but asymmetrically so. Far from being simply a deficient mode, asymmetry is at the root of change, transformation, innovation, and conflict. As human agents are involved, the perception of this asymmetry unfolds a strident dynamics of its own. Asymmetry in this context is not just an analytical category, but is one of the driving forces of human agency and interaction.

What makes concepts, institutions or practices flow? Sometimes it is a supposed or given hierarchy (power), e.g. a political or religious power centre; sometimes it is a cultural, religious, or economic field of gravitation with subsequent centre-periphery structures and a number of push-and-pull factors. Ethical factors may also play a significant role, for what is believed to be good attracts people and with them ideas, goods, or practices. In all these processes the cultural “terms of the trade” of concepts, institutions and practices, i.e. the cultural economy, are contested, negotiated and challenged, thus constantly reversed. There is also a tension between cultural symmetry (homogenisation) and asymmetry (heterogenisation) shaping the flows. This, in fact, constitutes the process of culture, not to be understood as geographical entities, but as transregional and transnational concepts that mostly come into existence only through contact with others. Cultures are therefore not social groups or geographies, but social imaginaries that express or create distinctions and asymmetrical flows. Increasingly such flows are not just between two poles, but part of a global exchange with input from many different places and cultural levels.

The concept of “flows” has been used by anthropologists such as Frederick L. Dunn (“Cultural evolution in the late pleistocene and holoscene of Southeast Asia”, in: American Anthropologist, 72, 1970, 1041–1054) to denote the transmission of cultural features from one generation to the next within a definite cultural environment, and has been used by Arjun Appadurai (“Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy”, in: Theory, Culture and Society, 7, 1990, 295–310) others to denote global cultural flows with their disjunctures. It is used here in the latter sense as an umbrella covering concepts, institutions, and practices carried by media, by objects or goods, and by human beings, for instance through migration, tourism, or trade (flow of capital). These features have been developed in a critical debate with Appadurai’s five –scapes (“ethnoscape” etc.), which emphasise the perspective-dominated nature of all of these features, and do not separate between content and carrier. The Cluster is not dealing with comparing intrinsically unrelated things. This gives its work an essential historical dimension, because the flow itself is a historical process that leaves its marks. The elements constituting the flow might be a concept such as “immunity”, an ideal such as “responsibility of the government for the welfare of the people”, an institution such as urban police, a field of knowledge such as physiology, a device such as a stirrup or a gun, a way of doing things (joining a street demonstration, managing a company, greeting a stranger), or a rejection of things coming from elsewhere that remains tied to its counterpart. All aspects of cultural flow hinge on people, on human agency, which also gives its content a strongly idiosyncratic flavour. The selection of elements being introduced into other cultures, let us say from England to China, is not a replica of what some sort of British consent might have at the time considered the elements (texts, ideas etc.). Cultural flow does not end, but actually begins, with its arrival because it is more often than not a pull rather than a push. The facile assumption that the recipient is but a helplessly manipulated or bullied “colonial subject” that might be pitied and derided but hardly deserves study has come under criticism because it does not survive a verfication, which in each case shows strong and diverse human agency and creativity at work in the transformation, diffusion, and reconfiguration of these inflows.

Asymmetry: A Modern Window into the Deep Past

In the flow between cultures, asymmetries have been present at all times. The ancient civilisations in Asia Minor and the Mediterranean regions offer striking examples, full of people, languages, and objects in motion, with long-distance movements and traffic by traders, migrants, travellers, and a pervasive polyglossy. Of all regions of Europe, Greece is the one in which the transformative potential of asymmetrical cultural flows between Asia and Europe manifests itself strikingly early. The introduction of agriculture from West Asia to Greece during the seventh millennium BCE, and thereafter to other parts of the Mediterranean, would not have proceeded so swiftly if indigenous populations of hunters and gatherers would not have received and accepted a “neolithisation package” consisting of domesticated animals and cultivated plants through existing exchange networks connecting Europe with Asia (Clemens Lichter, ed., How Did Farming Reach Europe? 2005). The question, however, to what degree long-distance relations may have played a decisive role in all these events is disputed

on the basis of a conviction that, in order to be substantiated, asymmetrical contacts should lead to “acculturation”, i.e. a wholesale adaptation to an emulated culture. Since this notion of “acculturation” disregards the agency of the members of the receiving society and their active role in shaping asymmetrical cultural contacts, there is no room for in-between forms, which derive from the selective reception of or even resistance to foreign goods, ideas and practices (Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 1994).

The debate on the cultural effects of contemporary forms of globalisation opens up with concepts such as “hybridity” and “glocalisation” new possibilities to reassess the impact of systems of early exchange at the Mediterranean interface between Asia and Europe. The mere fact that archaeological research up till now has taken such a homogenisation for granted is in itself likely to originate in an essentialist concept of cultures as fixed and clear-cut entities

However, the technical, economic, institutional, and cultural developments of the modern era since the eighteenth century have ushered in a large-scale asymmetric flow between the “West” and other cultures that has fundamentally changed our world, including the two largest and most continuous cultures in East and South Asia, as well as the “West” itself. The depth and width of the ensuing changes might be in a different order of magnitude than those at any earlier period in the relations between Asia and Europe, but have features similar to the Roman impact on the rest of Europe, or the Chinese impact on the rest of East Asia. The study of these developments offers a field of research unique in the richness of its record, the potential relevancy of its results, the methodological challenges it offers, and the frictions involved in it. In the modern world, the very visible earlier forms such as that with a close-by neighbour or an occupying power have expanded to a global scale, facilitated by new technologies of communication and a dramatic increase and speed in the flow of goods and persons. The perception of asymmetrical flows has permeated all layers of society, and the attitudes toward it have become a key factor influencing and even determining individual and collective behaviour. Asymmetry thus qualifies as a key heuristic concept to explore the dynamics of cultural flows, and this particularly so under the conditions of modern globalisation.

Coping with Asymmetry

The most exciting and disturbing feature of such cultural flows is their instability and fluidity. While they always go both ways, they have been shifting and reversing their asymmetries in the past as between Asia Minor and the Greek islands or the Muslim world and Europe. They might do so in the future, and in some key areas are doing this in the present. Traditional Asian medicines have been marginalised through the rapid acceptance of “western” allopathy by Asian elites and segments of the public. Their fortunes reversed with their rise in status among Western patients looking for help in areas where allopathy seemed ineffectual. The Asian practitioners in the West and in Asia adjusted their practices to fit this niche, and have now begun to reintroduce it in their country of origin in this reconfigured form. Most visibly, the economic advances, increasing technical sophistication, and national energy mobilised in Japan, by the “four Asian tigers”, and then in China and India have been followed by the European and

US public with growing trepidation. This trepidation has now spilled over into projections that within a few years the economic, science, technology, and cultural leadership of the world might be altogether in Asian hands, with dire consequences regarding political and economic stability everywhere from the military balance to the entertainment industry to a reversal of the brain drain that has fed much of Western science.

Handling the asymmetry thus becomes part of the public contestation on all sides. It is a principal matter of public spheres and discourses with scholarship actively involved. Efforts are made to rationalise asymmetry as necessitated by some higher law (Social Darwinism, geopolitics, race, political structures, religious attitudes, and the like); to trivialise it as pertaining only to an area of little status and importance (lower production costs due to lower qualification and living standard); or to shift it by mobilising and organising individual and collective efforts. All three responses tend to involve a recasting of the present and a reinvention of the past, creating various historicities and forms of heritage to match their respective agenda. Scholarship dealing with such asymmetrical flows and their shifts is not an unaffected observer, but operates in a highly contested field in which it already has played – and continues to play – a significant and not always wholesome role. This in turn has invited criticisms and polemics ("orientalism", "propaganda", "nationalism") that frequently suffer from the very afflictions (such as tunnel vision) imputed to opponents. By focusing on the shifting asymmetries in these flows, the Cluster will not shirk this contested field, but take the calculated risk of going straight to the heart of it. In a critical departure from past practice, it will do so by introducing five closely linked analytical, methodological, and institutional elements. First, the notion that asymmetry in cultural flows is not a passive or constructed constellation, but itself a factor whose perception releases a broad range of creative and destructive human agency. Second, an approach that remains aware of, and includes as topics of research, the instability of such flows over time as well as the past experience and future potential of their shifts. This has considerable consequences for the idea of "culture" as a clear entity with social, religious linguistic or geographical boundaries. Due to their imbalanced structure, the flows transgress such boundaries and mobilise strategies to prevent or create streams. Third, a keen awareness that historical scholarship is part of the problem as well as part of the solution. History is itself part of the conceptual asymmetry. It has played and plays a key role in structuring the human imaginaire and the agency following from it. Researching the dynamics of the historicities developed in this context is therefore an organic part of the Cluster's agenda. Fourth, an approach that rescues and brings into full play the richness of contextualised historical sources and the diversity of the voices and actions of human agents. And fifth, a research design that starts off with the option that transcultural flows are involved in any, even the seemingly most local phenomena, and that includes researchers from both Asia and Europe in all research areas.

The Process of Translation

In Asia, this modern development has led to a new conceptual organisation of human knowledge, a new set-up of institutional structures, and a range of new value-guided practices. The modern Hindi or Chinese terms for "state", "literature", "history", "election", "religion", "public opinion", "health" or "environ-

ment" might all be linguistically unrelated, but they have all been formed or calqued from earlier material to accommodate and translate "Western" notions (that again might appear in English, Spanish, German, French, or Russian) and have their place in a conceptual hierarchy strongly impacted by these foreign models. A similar, even less understood process of translation can be observed in the domains of images or musical forms. The institutions of the city administrations of Chongqing, New Delhi or Hiroshima might seem unrelated, but they all translate a model of urban administration first developed in London, Paris or Chicago during the nineteenth century, and introduced in Asia through foreign settlements such as Calcutta, Harbin or Shanghai. The body language of a political leader during a national day ceremony or of a protester railing against this leader in Hyderabad, Beijing or Osaka might look traditional and local, but they are all informed (sometimes via negation) by "Western" and increasingly global models. The "Western" features reconfigured into different Asian contexts have themselves grown in a long process of absorbing and reconfiguring "Asian" elements ranging from public service examinations to vegetarianism or the notion of a federal reserve bank.

The Asian languages have mostly followed recent Western models by abandoning their previous bilingualism that separated the written from the spoken language and have moved towards a new written language that is based on the vernacular. This new language, however, is in its lexicon, its grammatical structures, and its metaphors ("the ship of state", "soft landing" of inflationary pressures) suffused with elements that go back to "Western" contact languages. Image and sound have moved in similar directions. The result is what we hypothesise to be a globalised or transcultural imaginaire or sound, and a globalised or translingual range of key concepts, metaphors, and rhetorical/grammatical features together with their standard references, all imbedded into a globalised market, however challenged and transformed by hybridisation and "glocalisation".

The link of the local calques with these regional or global features endures beyond the moment of creation and reconfiguration. These features have in fact stabilised through their constant use and reuse even though most of them remain invisible as such on the surface of languages, images or sounds. The modern local Bengali or Japanese embodiments of the concept of "justice" or "childhood" will take on their particular form and history, but they remain in constant contact and negotiation with their regional or global counterparts and join in a translingual debate about them. It may be hypothesised that similar links prevailed between Greek, Aramaic and Latin in the second century BCE, or Tokharic, Tibetan and Japanese in the ninth century CE. These features occupy a similar place in the general order of things because this order of things itself was part of the new conceptual configuration.

Forgetting is a key device in trivialising or eliminating the irritant of asymmetry. A full life in the present functional use of concepts and other features originally absorbed in this asymmetrical process is easily oblivious of the past, while the scholar who streamlines the past bears more of a responsibility. The creative calques of such features give them a semblance of authenticity that hides two important facts: The external origins of these calques together with their specifically new meaning acquired in their new context, and the fundamental difference between these calques and the material from which they have been made. The seeming surface continuity of the modern features with those of the past

effectively hides the utter alterity of the conceptual and other features of the past compared to those of the present with the consequence of seemingly making research into these features of the past largely redundant. The consequence has been a dismal neglect of studies in this field, which only recently has begun to be challenged.

Cultural flows are transported loudly and visibly through media ranging from translated books to still or moving images and the World Wide Web; silently through objects/goods ranging from tea, cotton and China to corn, bicycles, and I-pods; and physically through human beings from the missionary to the translator, from the Indian student studying in England to Lafcadio Hearn writing down Japanese folk tales, from migrant populations trying to escape political and economic conditions for a better and safer place, to conquerors and colonialists occupying other lands. The study of these flows demands the abandonment of the comfortable notion that the written word is the key record of human experience and therefore the privileged access to it. While for many earlier developments only written, visual, or material sources survive, the modern era offers the option to study them extensively in conjunction. The study of any given element in this flow, whether it has to do with the writing of a national hymn, the reshaping of the body to fit a new beauty ideal, the concept of non-violence, or the institution of an art academy, will require – and greatly benefit from – the inclusion of information carried in visual and aural media as well as in human beings. Such necessity will require the development of appropriate methodologies. The inclusion of often marginalised visual and aural material into the analysis will also open access to marginalised historical actors, whose main form of acting and record-keeping is not writing.

The Modernisation Package

Among elite groups in China, India, Japan and elsewhere, the notion gained dominance that Western wealth and power resulted from a loosely defined "modernisation package" made up of new concepts, institutions, and practices. In order to overcome an asymmetry they refused to accept, these elites proposed to break with the "backward" elements of their own tradition and to adopt this package. This common endeavour set off a lively trade within Asia, with other Asian states functioning as positive or negative models. Other groups developed their own (fundamentalist or pragmatic) ways of handling this situation, but as they lacked intellectual stature or discursive powers in both East and South Asia, their approach did not gain dominance. Instead, it became part of the con- and countertext of elite reform or revolution projects. In a number of contexts, such as some countries with Muslim majorities, the modernising elites did not gain or retain hegemony. In these cases, hegemonic "fundamentalist" position must be read against this "modernising" con- and countertext.

Cultural flow comes from, and goes to, an environment with historic specificity, and it leaves neither end unchanged. Many of the features and fixtures of modernity have already been shaped with a view to their global applicability or export, and once they are inserted in Asia into one or several "western" modernisation packages, they are again cut to size and rearranged in a manner that might secure them a worldwide career but is rarely faithful to their original purpose. At the same time, these "foreign"

elements are inserted into new cultural environments in Asia that neither leave their content nor their stature unchanged. The Asian reception will have to become an integral part of the analysis of modern Western concepts, institutions, and practices as much as historians of Asia will be involved in researching the recasting of these elements for the local stages. It will be necessary to restudy the ingredients, composition, and history of these packages from this new global perspective with a strong role played by historical studies.

Historical Narratives and their Consequences

Scholarship has summarily described the massive structural changes resulting in Asia from the inflow of the "modernisation package" as (largely imposed) derivatives of their Western models. This explains things "from their origin" while marginalising their actual functions. While this is an accepted and familiar mode of explanation in the humanities, it becomes questionable because it inserts itself so neatly into a "Western" master narrative that posits the continuity of the prevailing asymmetry, and fails to account for the functionality and creativity (or, in opposite contexts, the destructive energy) of locally reconfigured elements of this package. The modern age is treated as a global age sui generis. The long-term stability in the asymmetry presumed by much Western scholarship on Asia has been extended into the past through the development of a nation- and Eurocentric history that largely disregards the earlier European experiences of inverse asymmetry; and into the future by describing the transformations in other cultures as an eternal, and eternally unsuccessful, catch-up race. It blocks from view the normality and necessity of flows between cultures, and the huge creative and destructive energies they release. Earlier flows of inverse asymmetry into Europe have been reduced to largely marginal external "influences" transformed beyond recognition by local European cultures. This master narrative has in turn generated its mirror image in Asia. To take a Chinese narrative as an example, China's "four great inventions" (compass, gun powder, paper, printing) are described as being at the base and origin of the rise of the West. "China" has been continuously giving progress to the world while the cultural inflow has been marginal and quickly sinified if it did not derive from Chinese outflows in the first place.

According to this European narrative, priority in humanities research has to go to the original rather than the derivative or copy. This has had wide-ranging structural consequences for the alignment of the humanities and social sciences. While this alignment has been followed worldwide as part of the asymmetrical flow – departments of philosophy in Japan only teach Western philosophy –, its weaknesses have become visible in its decreasing explanatory powers. Initial efforts have been made on the level of individual scholarship and local structural realignment to achieve a better match to the structures of the problems encountered. On the level of research, these efforts have been directed at particular nations and languages, and have brought in the particular competence of scholars in the respective culture, but lacked the framework to pose the question on a transcultural and global level that would allow understanding the particular phenomenon as but the local form of a global process. Others have taken the opposite approach and have focused on a global and general hybridity of cultural forms without a careful and systematic study of a wide range of original sources.

The Cluster challenges this master narrative that posits the permanence of asymmetrically important flows from the "West" into Asia along with its historical explanation, its methodology, and the resulting Eurocentric structures of humanities and social science research. This master narrative has failed to account for the actual shifts occurring in the present, and has streamlined the past to eliminate anomalies. It has blocked from view important and increasingly relevant developments in the modern age, which in turn have shown the importance and relevance of their predecessors.

The Global and the Local

In the modern age, the global has become visible as a level sui generis. While asymmetries continue to exist and shift, the global cannot be reduced to being but the sum of its parts or a field for the main players to exercise their powers. Its features and dynamics cannot be researched by the summation of studies on different areas, but these researches have to take their point of departure from the global. This will in turn allow them to approach the local as a translation, transformation or rejection of the global. The new options of documentation available in the modern age are no argument that such decisive global (or regional flows) did not exist in the past. The evidence amassed over the past two decades from DNA tracing allows for the reconstruction of human mobility and migration, the exchange of specimens of domesticated animals and plants but also of agents of disease across the globe well into the historical period. Scientific archaeology has facilitated the reconstruction of the paths of trade across huge distances for periods without written record. Many decades of research on folklore motifs have indicated a global migration of oral materials going far back in time. Initial studies on regional cultural flows in the Near East, the Mediterranean, Europe, South, Central, and East Asia using objects, images, or texts have shown the overwhelming presence and importance of transcultural flows. It is reasonable to hypothesise that, with a different speed and density, the "global" has been throughout a part of human local and personal experience, buried under the imprint of the nation as the standard paradigm of time and place at the time when modern academia formed.

The very fact that societies and cultures were imagined as fixed entities restricted research to choose between either assuming a global homogenisation or a "clash of civilisations" as the most likely outcome of globalisation. Mike Featherstone and Bernd Wagner have, however, pointed out that the image of "authentic" cultures was from the beginning an illusion and therefore flawed (Mike Featherstone, Consumer Culture and Postmodernism, 2005; Bernd Wagner, Kulturelle Globalisierung, 2001). Cultures, they remarked, are never static and homogenous, and they come into being through continuous encounter and exchange as well as mutual incorporation and separation with the peoples of the outside world, the "others". Cultures are always in between and in this sense global. Simple centre–periphery models for the explanation of asymmetrical flows tend to retroengineer the past on the basis of – transitory – modern economical constellations and geographic perceptions, insinuating a universally applicable significance of economy, space and distance.

It would therefore be a mistake to regard "glocalisation" as a modern phenomenon and to assume that the idea of a colorful patchwork of "authentic" cultures may still be valid for so-called "traditional"

societies or earlier periods of history. The main reason why cultural hybridity and glocalisation should indeed be regarded as relevant to premodern as well as modern contexts has to do with the agency of social actors. In combination with the structure of the social space of a society this agency must have at all times ensured that impulses arriving from the outside world were transformed by merging them with existing values and world views.

In this regard, two closely interrelated contexts of the operating of the agency can be differentiated. The first context is the one of *translation*, through which the meanings of foreign practices, objects and ideas are made accessible in the course of the transfer from one society to another. The discussion of the cultural implications of contemporary globalisation underlines that in different parts of the world the same goods and ideas can be interpreted in different ways, an insight which also has a bearing on much earlier exchange systems. The second context is the one of social imaginary (Cornelius Castoriades, L'institution imaginaire de la société, 1975). The discursive practices involved in the negotiation of the meaning and value of foreign features are directly linked to to the norms and values regarded as appropriate and to the way in which the world is conceived.