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The Plasticity of Regions: A Social Sciences–Cultural Studies Dialogue on Asia-Related Area Studies

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The Plasticity of Regions: A Social Sciences–Cultural Studies Dialogue on Asia-Related Area Studies

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Abstract

Representatives from the social sciences and cultural studies continue to exhibit mutual reservations and sensitivities when they encounter each other in the field of area studies. This is particularly so with regard to research on East and Southeast Asia. Given this background and with the intention of deriving a productive definition of area studies, this article attempts to assess the current state of Asia-related area studies by reviewing and comparing the debates within the social sciences and cultural studies in the Anglo-Saxon and German-language spheres on the changing role of the discipline. In this text, region is defined as an ongoing process involving the communicative construction of social relations. Various approaches to describing the regions of East and Southeast Asia illustrate that this process is subject to dialectical movements of de- and reterritorialization, which should be examined as issues of equal empirical rank. In view of a growing focus primarily on transnational and transregional entanglements, this text suggests using the term “reflexive essentialism” and proposes more extensive reflection on the new and essentialist self-assurances, limitations, and entrenchments at the regional, national, and subnational levels.

Keywords: area studies, East Asia, Southeast Asia, deterritorialization versus reterritorialization, reflexive essentialism

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The Plasticity of Regions: A Social Sciences–Cultural Studies Dialogue on Asia-Related Area Studies

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1 Introduction

This article attempts to determine the current state of Asia-related area studies by reviewing and connecting the debates in social sciences and cultural studies that are occurring in both English and German.¹ Its aim is to derive a productive definition of regional studies on the one hand and the region under study on the other.

1 This is a revised version of a manuscript which was discussed intensively with colleagues at Goethe University in Frankfurt/Main in autumn 2013, with colleagues at GIGA Hamburg in April 2014, and at the “Area Studies Revisited. Connectivity, Comparison, Laterality” conference, which took place at the Graduate School for East and Southeast European Studies at Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich in June 2014. In particular, I would like to thank Hans-Jürgen Puhle for his substantial comments and suggestions. I would also like to thank Falk Hartig and John Njenga Karugia, further members of the Area Studies Working Group of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research-funded joint project AFRASO at Goethe University; Patrick Köllner, Sandra Destradi, and other colleagues at the GIGA Institute of Asian Studies; and Andreas Eckert and other participants of the aforementioned “Area Studies Revisited” conference for their constructive proposals for revision. An earlier version of the article is available as one of the Frankfurt Working Papers on East Asia (No. 7/2013) from the Interdisciplinary Centre for East Asian Studies (IZO) at Goethe University in Frankfurt/Main.

Because the article draws on current debates, it first outlines the core initial assumptions, gained through the examination of the available literature and serving as the basis for the argument. It begins by discussing the varied history of area studies and the various solutions proposed by social sciences and cultural studies for coping with its most recent crisis. Subsequently, using (East) Asia as an example, the article reflects on the concept of region as an ongoing process of communicatively constructed social relations. This process, as argued over the course of the text, is subject to contrary movements involving the dissolution of old boundaries and the drawing of new ones, of de- and reterritorialization, of entanglements and entrenchments. These movements should be examined – particularly as regards (East) Asia – as issues of equal empirical rank, and their mutual dynamics assessed.

In this article, area studies is not considered to constitute an independent discipline. Rather, it is viewed as an interdisciplinary research context that focuses on certain regions and transregional issues.² This implies that the interacting researchers remain in their institutionally rooted yet in-flux disciplines and gain impulses from their involvement in this context. In some cases, such impulses can add to the theoretical scope and thematic range of regional research, or they can enrich empirical contributions to mainstream debates and can contribute to the examination of these debates – without creating a general obligation within the area studies community to provide these impulses.

In the 1990s, area studies were subjected to severe criticism from the social sciences. This criticism mainly came from the United States – though some stemmed from Europe as well – and gave rise to the discipline's most recent existential crisis. Since then, its self-definition has changed significantly. Old and new challenges to area studies – such as the rise and decline of certain regions in the political, economic, and media spheres; the implications of the

2 The objective of regional studies, as defined by the German Council of Science and Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat) in 2006, is “to conduct scholarly research on structures and development dynamics in other societies (particularly contemporary societies, yet with consideration of historical graduations) and to describe and to analyze these in such a way that specific features, contexts and relationships are appropriately expressed and reflected upon. The research objects are geographic areas and regions (to be understood as regions on a global scale), the people of which are connected through shared geographic circumstances, a shared cultural background, and/or a history of mutual relations. Shared regional characteristics can be rooted in social, economic, political or also legal contexts, and are influenced and shaped by global influences (such as media, economy, technology and transport)” (Wissenschaftsrat 2006: 7). The definition of regional studies as an interdisciplinary research context is shared here, but the term “region(s)” is reflected upon and is subjected to a more detailed discussion as a process of continual communicative construction; regions are also not generally, as formulated in this quote, defined as a research object (see below). For a critical discussion of the recommendations of the German Council of Science and Humanities, cf. Middell (2013). In this article, he identifies as problematic the fact that globalization processes are primarily viewed as originating from the global North or West, whereas the global South is viewed as being under the influence of globalization. This implies that the dichotomies deemed obsolete remain intact (Middell 2013: 13).

“cultural turn(s)”³ or the demand for transregional approaches; and the various strategies for coping with these challenges – should be subjected to critical reflection when developing an independent conceptualization of area studies. This article has taken on this task.

From the outset, emphasis should be placed on the notion that regions are not defined as static, territorially rooted units, but as dynamic, communicatively constructed concepts. The latter definition is based on the epistemological assumption that social reality is not analyzable in itself, but only in terms of its linguistic representation, and that social and political phenomena are always culturally constituted. Correspondingly, these constructions are not inevitably anchored in territory; rather, geographical connotations are accompanied by cultural, civilizational, political, moral, and other attributions, and are often overshadowed by them. Like other communicative constructs, regions are also subject to open processes of negotiation and interaction between individuals and groups from cultures within them and outside of them. Frequently, various, and sometimes conflicting or competing, concepts coexist (Acharya 2010). Thus, regions themselves cannot really be a research object. Rather, the construction of regional concepts has to be questioned repeatedly in the light of new theoretical approaches advanced by the disciplines participating in area studies research as well as in the light of the respective thematic selections and research designs (cf. Braig and Hentschke 2005).

There are thus no “right” or “wrong” solutions in the development of new concepts for studying regions in the academic field of regional research. Rather, the aim can only be to develop a definition of region that is as productive as possible (Puhle *forthcoming*), taking into account the dynamics, the “plasticity” – the amorphous and malleable character – and the plurality of cultural constructs. This definition should be based on

- changing cultural-exchange relations, which affect the perceived relevance of region-related research topics in the same way as incisive political or natural events do;
- new self-descriptions and external descriptions of regions or subregions – for example, in the wake of regionalist integration initiatives or shifts in geopolitical and economic weight; and
- critical debates with paradigmatic *turns* and new theoretic emphases from specialized disciplines that also influence the “theoretical accessibility” and the disciplinary connectivity of certain regional constructs.

Ultimately, the development of shared, transcendent concepts regarding area studies and the regions to be examined should take into account the various disciplinary traditions and institutional framework conditions as well as the specific research interests and competencies of the participating researchers in order to create an interdisciplinary research context which is as seminal and sustainable as possible.

3 “Cultural turn(s)” is used here as a generic term for various forms of reorientation that have established themselves in the humanities and the social sciences since the late 1960s and increasingly since the late 1980s and the early 1990s (cf. Lackner and Werner 1999; Bachmann-Medick 2006). A more detailed discussion of cultural turn(s) can be found below.

2 Area Studies in Crisis – Critiques and Counter-Critiques

The historiography of the changeable trajectory of area studies has its origins in the era of the European Enlightenment and Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859). His role as a pioneer of area-specific multidisciplinary work, brought about by his research travels to Latin America, the United States, Russia, and Central Asia, the effects of which extended far beyond the horizon of the Europe of that era, has been extensively reviewed and requires no repetition here. In contrast, however, a brief recapitulation of the development of area studies and, in particular, the manifold points of critique directed at it over the course of the late-nineteenth century and the twentieth century is necessary in determining its position at the present time. The first occasion for a critique of area studies was provided by its academic establishment in nineteenth-century Europe as “colonial studies,” when it, as a “child of the empire,” provided linguistic and regional knowledge that served colonial expansion interests. Parallel to its international ascension during the first half of the twentieth century, area studies underwent a systematic institutionalization, particularly in the United States. Immediately after the Second World War, and especially in the 1960s, the Social Science Research Council systematically supported the establishment of dozens of multidisciplinary “area studies centers” at the country’s major universities (these numbered 124 in the early 1990s; Lewis and Wigen 1997: 166).

Edward Said inflicted the first comprehensive shockwave on area studies in 1978. In his much-cited book *Orientalism*, he criticized the occidental world for spreading a “web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology” (Said 1978: 27), the conscious or subconscious ideological aim of which was the subjugation of the researched peoples. He contended that area studies, in a false and irreducible opposition between the “self” and the “other,” always focused on the “other” and never on the “self,” and demanded that these concepts be replaced with an entirely new postcolonial paradigm for the academic analysis of non-Western societies that actively and critically reflected on the hegemonic relations. The establishment of postcolonial studies as an independent research branch in the 1980s can be seen as an immediate response to Said’s critique of area studies – which, however, did not suffice to take the wind out of the critics’ sails.

In the 1990s, a further, intense wave of criticism from the ranks of Anglo-Saxon social sciences was directed at area studies. In the United States in particular it was contended that, with the end of the Cold War, area studies had lost its main function – the “identification of the next enemy” as part of a mission to serve geopolitical interests – and had thus lost its right to exist. With the ongoing advance of globalization, the regions had also experienced a substantial loss of significance, and the extensive investment of public funding in regional research centers could no longer be justified. Additionally, it was more or less sweepingly denied that area studies was of a scholarly nature: It was asserted that the discipline’s representatives were characterized by an atheoretical or even anti-theoretical, and in the best case eclectic, stance towards disciplinary theories and by a lack of methodological knowledge, so

that all that remained for them was inductive, descriptive, idiographic access to their research topics. Their work was said to be confined to individual case studies (mostly individual countries, societies, nation-states, national cultures), to which they regularly attributed an exceptional character in the absence of options for comparison to other regions. And they were said to claim “exceptionality” to legitimize their research. Furthermore, it was contended that, due to their intensive study of foreign languages and their time-intensive field research, regional researchers had the tendency to identify with their research object in a manner that obstructed their identification of comprehensive and systematic theoretical and empirical connections beyond the uniqueness of “their” region (Bates 1997; Shea 1997; Acharya 2006; Rüländ and Werz 2010; Mehler and Hoffmann 2011).

In the United States, where area studies was strongly integrated into the social sciences and was in a comfortable situation in terms of institutions and staffing due to extensive funding from the Social Science Research Council and others (Lewis and Wigen 1997; Puhle *forthcoming*; Schäbler 2007), the criticism from social science colleagues impacted the area studies community with such force that it brought its practitioners to the brink of an identity crisis. In comparison to the United States, the vehemence of the criticism in Europe, particularly in Germany, was initially reduced by the fact that regional research often existed in niches within the institutional contexts of linguistics and cultural studies. Since the mid-1990s, area studies has suffered here all the more, however, from the trend towards abolishing or merging precisely these so-called “minor subjects.” This trend is the result not only of cuts in public funding for economic reasons but also of the general hearsay concerning the supposedly unscholarly nature of area studies.

Only slowly and cautiously did representatives of area studies come out from under cover after this storm of criticism. Area studies researchers working within cultural studies argued that superficially applying “universal” theories to specific regions without in-depth knowledge of these regions was not particularly productive. Purely disciplinary approaches on the basis of formal theory would not suffice for the appropriate analysis and comprehension of the historically and culturally shaped behavior of human actors. Representatives of strictly disciplinary approaches were criticized for remaining blind to the “rest of the world” beyond the horizon of Anglo-Saxon mainstream research interests, and the predominantly quantitative methodologies were said to inadequately conceive of the realities of everyday life in these regions. Area studies researchers working in the social sciences pointed to significant impulses from area studies for the epistemic communities – for instance, comparative politics, which often views itself as a “parent discipline.”⁴

4 The work named in this context is limited – apparently due to the substantial research efforts required, which individual researchers are only rarely able to perform or are only able to perform at the end of their academic career. The following are prime examples of such seminal works from political science: Schmitter’s (1971) work on neocorporatism in Latin America; Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol’s (1985) work on the role of the state in the process of globalization in Asia and Latin America; Linz and Stephan’s (1986) exploration of demo-

More proactive colleagues went so far as to turn the tables on the criticism emanating from the social sciences and to describe Western political science as one of many area studies, with a theoretical reach limited to the United States and Western Europe. The provinciality of the Anglo-Saxon mainstream was further underlined with the accusation that while “research about” the region was conducted, only in the rarest cases was “research with” colleagues from the researched regions undertaken (Braig and Hentschke 2005; Wissenschaftsrat 2006; Mehler and Hoffmann 2011). The fact that current-day German-language debates about area studies regularly include demands for “research with” instead of “research about” can be viewed as an expression of the force of this counter-critique.

Several representatives of international relations countered the claim put forth by critics of area studies that, in the wake of globalization, the regions had suffered a loss of significance; they contended that national and subnational units not only remained analytically relevant, but might also, in the future, gain more significance as dynamic counterweights in the globalization process (prominent on this matter is Acharya 2004; cf. Rüländ and Werz 2010). The events of 11 September 2001 not only vindicated these voices but also led to selective re-investments in area studies, particularly Middle East studies, within a short time (Shami and Godoy-Anativia 2007). However, in these cases, just as in other regional studies, there came the regret-filled realization that the previously “downsized” staff and institutional capacities of the “minor subjects” could not be reestablished overnight, particularly given the fact that, due to the lack of incentives for an academic career in this domain, the recruitment of new staff had significantly decreased over the course of a decade. Furthermore, some qualified area studies researchers were adverse to exposing themselves given the potential risk of once again being politically exploited.

In recent decades there have been efforts to revitalize contemporary area studies. In Germany these have included, among other initiatives, the interdisciplinary research association *Wege des Wissens: Transregionale Studien* (Circulation of Knowledge: Transregional Studies), which brought forth the *Forum Transregionale Studien*; the aforementioned recommendations of the Wissenschaftsrat; and the “Initiative zur Stärkung und Weiterentwicklung der Regionalstudien” (Initiative for Strengthening and Advancing Area Studies), implemented by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) in 2008.⁵ Despite

cratic transitions in Southern Europe, South America, and the postcommunist regimes in Eastern Europe; Lieberman’s (2003) study of fiscal policies in Brazil and South Africa; Kohli’s (2004) comparison of state-led industrialization in India, Korea, Nigeria and Brazil; or Solinger’s (2009) comparative investigation of the impact of global markets upon political change in China, France and Mexico (see also Sil 2013).

5 The examples given here are by no means exhaustive; a detailed inventory of the German research landscape in the domain of area studies is provided by Puhle (*forthcoming*); see also online: <www.forum-transregionale-studien.de>, <www.wissenschaftsrat.de>, Wissenschaftsrat 2006/2010; online: <www.bmbf.de/foerderungen/16467.php>. For detailed information on the BMBF’s Initiative for Strengthening and Advancing Area Studies, which has funded seven competence networks and nine intra-university centers in Germany to date, see online: <www.bmbf.de/foerderungen/13101.php> (German) and <<http://pt-dlr-gsk.de/en/1035.php>> (English).

these partial improvements, area studies remains for the most part in a state of suspension between the disproportionate strain on “minor subjects” due to mandatory spending caps on public funding and selectively articulated demands for political consultation, as well as between a collective identity crisis and the urge for scientific self-assertion.

3 Strategies for Coping with the Crisis

In recent years, several participating disciplines have formulated various solutions for coping with the crisis in area studies and productively continuing the discipline’s development.

3.1 *Social Science Strategies*

One strategy has been and continues to be the promotion of social science approaches regarding theories, methods, and the setting of topics in regional research, with the aim of improving the connection between regional studies and mainstream debates in the social sciences and thus increasing acceptance within the “parent disciplines.” In accordance with the disciplinary expectations of Anglo-Saxon social sciences, area studies are generally under increasing pressure to use quantitative analytical methods; if possible, mixed-methods designs that claim to gainfully combine qualitative and quantitative methods are selected.

The appeal for a new synthesis of area studies and international relations, as programmatically formulated by Amitav Acharya some years ago, is an example of such a thrust from the social sciences. For Acharya, the abandonment of the criticized niche of area studies was a promising development in the rapprochement between “region-oriented disciplinarians,” who were firmly rooted in the theoretical debates of their disciplines but who turned to empirically relevant cases in Asia, and “discipline-oriented regionalists,” whose research focus was initially on traditional regions but increasingly included a theoretical foundation (Acharya 2006). In the subsequent years, Acharya and other colleagues placed even greater hopes on “transnational area studies” (*ibid.*), expecting, in particular, innovative research on cross-sectional issues that appeared to be of interregional relevance in the wake of globalization. Examples of cross-sectional issues that transcend the regional context are global governance topics such as public health, climate change, terrorism, ethnicity, identity, transformation and democratization processes, and many more.

With the establishment of comparative area studies, which aims to provide region-related empirical expertise as a substantial foundation for comprehensive theory-driven research on issues from the domains of political science, economics, or sociology, transnational or transregional research met with broader approval in the social sciences. Using more or less systematically constructed research designs, comparative area studies relates regions to each other in the examination of such overriding questions in order to check the explanatory strength of certain theories or, depending on the status of the research, to generate new hypotheses.

For example, the GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies in Hamburg, which undertakes comparative area studies (CAS), distinguishes between three types of comparative design. Intraregional comparisons compare certain aspects or phenomena from various geographic units within a specific world region, whereas interregional comparisons endeavor to identify regional patterns (such as democratization, regional cooperation, etc.) as well as to analyze similarities and differences in these regional patterns. So-called cross-regional comparisons compare certain analytic units across regions. The cases for these comparisons are deliberately selected from various world regions so that the researcher/s can investigate the theoretical assumptions regarding the causal relations (Basedau and Köllner 2007; Rüländ and Werz 2010; online: <www.giga-hamburg.de/en/comparative-area-studies>).

The advantages of this strategy as a response to the criticisms of area studies made from within the social sciences are apparent. First of all, it signals the constructive acknowledgment of this criticism and the acceptance of the concomitant challenge to enable area studies to connect to mainstream debates taking place in the social sciences. This connection then results in improved opportunities to return positive impulses to the specialized disciplines and to participate in the identification of interregional cross-sectional issues which merit research. Comparative area studies can thus function as an important link between empirically saturated (single or small-N) case studies with limited reach on the one hand and generalizable large-N studies with a global reach on the other, without abandoning the advantages of using valuable regional expertise and context-sensitive analysis (Berg-Schlosser 2012; online: <www.giga-hamburg.de/en/idea>). The American political scientist Rudra Sil recommends “cross-regional contextualized comparison” as the ideal comparative-methods solution in area studies. This approach has successfully contributed to the generation and checking of theories of medium reach by way of systematically generated small-N comparative designs, without losing sight of the contextual depth of historical processes (Sil 2013). It is precisely the context sensitivity and the potential historical depth of comparative case studies, as well as their methodological pluralism and their consideration of multiple dimensions of the comparison, that proponents see as their strengths (Ahram 2011).

On the other hand, a certain risk is becoming discernible, in the sense that area studies may assume a defensive position, feeling obliged to prove its scholarly nature not only by loyally appropriating the unquestioned logic of disciplinary delineations but also by accepting social science mainstream views regarding which theoretical and methodological approaches can be deemed “scholarly” and which cannot. In view of the empirical abundance and the resilience of the regional “matter” provided by the cases compared, which cannot, regardless of how systematically the comparative design has been constructed, ever be fully sterilized, regional researchers will often only suboptimally meet the demands of parsimonious variable settings and the isolation of causal relations; they will thus hardly be able to escape the pressure of social science justification. A recent study on the applicability of quantitative methods in the context of comparative area studies arrived at the rather sobering con-

clusion that there is often an inherent dilemma between the simplifying, probabilistic logic of quantitative analytical methods and the particularist logic of the historical uniqueness and singularity of the selected cases. The chances of avoiding this dilemma are limited. Without sufficient consideration of specific national contexts and local historical conditions, as the author demonstrates using the example of global comparative research on “transitional justice,” corresponding large-N studies do not yield satisfying results (Oettler 2014). In particular, the fact that with categories such as intra-, inter- or cross-regional comparison the “region” concepts on which these categories are based are, to some extent, presumed to be congealed, static, and fixed – and thus remain unquestioned – is worthy of reflection.

Analogous to the concept of “methodological nationalism” in the social sciences, in history, and in other humanities disciplines, and the widespread use of isomorphic concepts such as “nation,” “nation-state,” “society,” “culture,” “identity,” etc. – which are repeatedly reconstructed by the comparative method and are confirmed in their historical reality as “objects” of comparison (Amelina et al. 2010; Middell and Naumann 2010)⁶ – one could speak of the seductiveness of a kind of “methodological regionalism”: When identifying analytical units of comparison, comparative research designs also implicitly adhere to a container-like logic of relatively homogeneous, delineated, mutually exclusive, “natural” world regions or other regional entities, and thus repeatedly recreate anew the regions used in their comparison through the selection of the compared entities. When such a case selection is conducted, particularly according to “most similar” or “most different” criteria, the essentialist and stereotypical attribution of certain homogeneous “traits” to particular world regions and their national and subnational units may slip in through the back door, while internal differences and processes of change may, intentionally or not, remain underexposed.

In order to avoid such essentialist seductions, it seems imperative, when selecting the cases to be compared, to reflect upon the extent to which the selected units can actually be examined independently and “in isolation” from each other, or whether they should be deemed dynamically interactive due to mutual and global influences exerted by models, norms, concepts, and ideas. In cases of doubt it may be necessary to analyze, alongside or beyond the comparative analysis, the dimensions of interaction and transfer between the units of comparison. This can be done, for example, using a systematically designed intertemporal comparison that is able to capture the dynamics of the spread of certain norms and ideas. Conversely, studies regarding norm diffusion can indeed benefit from supporting the analysis of such processes with various regional, national, or local comparisons. In general, “comparison and transfer” (Schriewer and Kaelble 2003) should not be viewed as mutually exclusive research strategies, something that still happens frequently in the social sciences and cultural studies due to varying disciplinary default settings and mutual reservations. In-

6 “Over the last two decades, it has not only become clear that comparisons construct their objects rather than reflect historical givens but that comparative history itself has supported the construction of the nation by supposing or ‘proving’ its existence” (Middell and Naumann 2010: 161).

stead, they should be viewed as two analytical dimensions that productively complement each other (Huotari and Rüländ 2014).

However, at the same time, we probably do have to admit to ourselves that it will rarely be possible to fully resolve the tense relationship between “comparison and transfer” in the reality of research, as there will likely always be a trade-off between the “clean” isolation of compared cases and their concomitant decontextualization, between the principle of theoretical-conceptual economy and the plasticity of dense description, and between comparative validity and historical context-sensitivity. The only solution appears to be to reflect upon this trade-off against the background of the specific question and to make explicit the extent to which it can be addressed through a suitable combination of comparative and dynamic analytical approaches. A discussion of these issues, the results of which are keenly awaited, is currently taking place at the GIGA.

3.2 *Cultural Studies Strategies*

A different response to the crisis of area studies and a different strategy for the academic self-assertion of regional research from a cultural studies perspective is evident in the conscious appropriation of epistemological impulses in the context of the so-called “cultural turns.”⁷ The beginnings of the “cultural turn” as an insight into the communicative construction of social and political phenomena date back to the late 1960s, before the fundamental criticism of area studies. However, the rapid proliferation of turns subsumed under this generic term since the 1980s, and since a further subsequent increase in the 1990s, can be placed in a closer evolutionary context with the area studies crisis. The increasingly faster sequence of interpretive, performative, reflective/literary, postcolonial, translational, iconic, and spatial turns (Bachmann-Medick 2006) in the aftermath of the self-reflective reorientation of the humanities and the social sciences can be viewed in part – aside from the competition for symbolic capital expressed therein (Bourdieu 1993) – as a quest for a new academic self-definition, new and concomitant methodological approaches, and new fields of activity in the wake of the area studies crisis. These paradigmatic realignments of area studies have definitely provided very valuable impulses.

The postcolonial turn, which originated in the 1980s in literary studies, is a particularly clear example of this. Against the backdrop of self-reinforcing asymmetries in global power relations, as analyzed by Said and others, analytical categories were developed to uncover these asymmetries and question the dichotomous perceptions of other and self, the essentializing of the other, and the universalist claims of Eurocentric science. Thus, the postcolonial turn can be deemed the “first reorientation of/in cultural studies which from the outset located its own problem and methods tableau beyond European horizons” (Bachmann-Medick 2010).

7 According to Bachmann-Medick a “turn” in the humanities and the social sciences has occurred “when the new research focus ‘swings’ from the material level of new research fields to the level of analysis of categories and concepts, when the new research focus no longer only generates new objects of insight, but also itself becomes a means for and a medium of insight” (Bachmann-Medick 2006: 26).

The almost simultaneous occurrence of the translational turn, the resonance of which gained momentum over the course of the 1990s, was of immediate relevance for area studies. The grand narratives of progress, technology, and a Eurocentric historical philosophy, and the associated presumption of the direct comparability of cultures within a unified, homogeneous reference area were rejected; culture was now understood as a translation process. The analytical focus shifted to the active transfer and negotiation processes between cultures, including translation “errors,” ruptures, and distortions. Thus, transcultural interactions became analyzable as a part of entangled histories, as transculturally “interwoven,” “transnational” history, *histoire croisée*, not only with regard to the transferred “objects” (goods, knowledge, migrants) but also, and in particular, with regard to the concomitant translation processes (Randeria 1999/b; Osterhammel 2001; Werner and Zimmermann 2006; Gassert 2011).

The greatest influence on area studies, however, can probably be attributed to the spatial turn, which, originating from a realignment of cultural and human geography, quickly found its way into the humanities and the social sciences as of 1989.⁸ A territorial definition of space was replaced with a relational one:

The traditional container concept of space as a container of traditions, cultural identity, or even home has been replaced. Instead, space is now viewed as a creative factor in social relations, differences, and networks, as a multilayered, often-contradictory result of localizations, claims to space, demarcations, and exclusions. (Bachmann-Medick 2010)

Within German academia, the insights generated by the spatial turn were absorbed by, among others, the aforementioned research strand “transregional studies,” a term under which historians, cultural scientists, linguists, ethnologists, etc. have congregated since 2002. In comparison to “transnational area studies,” which have a social science focus (Acharya 2006), “transregional studies” have a substantially broader capacity to connect to the humanities. The general aim is to internationalize the content of humanities *and* the social sciences by advancing research that combines systematic and region-specific questions and pursues these questions from a transregional perspective – that is, beyond traditional, statically defined “container” conceptions of regions. In contrast to the comparative approach, with its origins in the social sciences, the circulation of knowledge, cultural transfer processes, and mutual entanglements between regions are at the center of this analytical line of inquiry. The focus is decidedly placed on non-European societies. Their interactions with Europe and the United States, and also with each other, are examined. The analysis of such circulation and transfer processes seeks to avoid or critically question any Eurocentric presumptions.⁹

⁸ The reference work is Soja (1989).

⁹ Braig and Hentschke (2005); Hentschke (2009); online: <www.wiko-berlin.de/institution/projektoperationen/archiv/wege-des-wissens-transregionale-studien>; <www.forum-transregionale-studien.de>. The fact that, among other things, the Social Science Research Council has been offering postdoctoral scholarships with the title “Transregional Research: Inter-Asian Contexts and Connections” since 2012 speaks in favor of

Proponents of the spatial turn questioned essentialist and holistic conceptions of culture(s) and replaced them with the examination of tensions between centers and peripheries, interstices and contact zones; contradictions within seemingly homogeneous cultures; departures from tradition and the reinvention of traditions; and processes of marginalization and exclusion, of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Borders as in-flux constructions became an analytical category: prominent examples of the redrafting of “mental maps” from more recent times include, for example, the invention of Eastern Europe, the various Anglo-Saxon and German variations of the Middle East and the Far East, or, as described in more detail below, the reshaping of Asia.

However, beyond the individual turns, which are not located on a linear axis of cultural studies “progress” but instead exist simultaneously alongside one another and offer various possibilities for new analytical categories, Bachmann-Medick points out two fundamental characteristics of the cultural turns that make them relevant from the perspective of area studies: On the one hand, they can be deemed “hotspots of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity” insofar as they release the disciplines from the pressure of having to distinguish themselves from each other as isolated, quasi-nation-state entities within the academic world. On the other hand, the various turns can be described as “intercultural and transcultural interfaces,” as they depart from sectioned-off academic cultures, disciplinary monopolies on methods, or the culture-specific selection of topics and instead offer systematic and connectable analytical categories. Therefore, “in a pluralized academic landscape” the various turns are suitable “as ‘corridors’ for transnational scholarly communication” (Bachmann-Medick 2010).

Even though these options have only been used to a limited extent by non-Western researchers, they seem to be the most suitable for fulfilling the sometimes commandment-like demands for “research with instead of research about”¹⁰ with content and for creating incentives for scholars to step out of their own disciplinary and epistemic enclosures and open themselves up to interdisciplinary and transcultural collaboration. Arjun Appadurai’s appeal, formulated in the 1990s, to take regional knowledge seriously is all the more relevant today: “[A]reas are not just places, but are also locations for the production of other world-pictures, which also need to be part of our sense of these other worlds” (Appadurai 1997: 6).

In this context and in contrast to the aforementioned strategy of promoting the capacity for connecting with the social sciences, literary studies and cultural studies have set and are setting the terms. The latter approach has been adopted by those social scientists who have taken a critical stance vis-à-vis the mainstream of their discipline. An advantage of this second strategy is that regional researchers are no longer caught in a defensive position that

the internationalization of the term transregionality; see online: <www.ssrc.org/fellowships/transregional-research-fellowship>.

10 Concerning this motto, it should be noted that the logic of mutual exclusion expressed with the word “instead” may also appear to be an expression of a bad Eurocentric conscience, which could even cement the dichotomy of “the West” and “the Rest.”

makes them feel obliged to prove the scholarly nature of their discipline. This new position is more conducive to their proactive participation in shaping the paradigmatic realignment of the humanities and the social sciences, as well as the accompanying understanding of science, including the question of “legitimate” methods. However, it might pose the risk that, once again, albeit at a higher intellectual level, the representatives of this strategy withdraw, not into the ivory tower of Eurocentric exoticism but, together with their colleagues from the regions under study, to the niches of culturalist exceptionalism. Nevertheless, as yet, the various turns seem to hold limited appeal for colleagues from non-European regions. This may change with the increasing pressure for academics worldwide to compete for limited symbolic capital and to publish in international peer-reviewed journals. Of course, Western area studies researchers would then have to accept that the research agenda would be set to an equal extent by non-Western colleagues.

4 Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, Asia-Pacific – Attempts to Capture a Moving Target

On the basis of the reflections so far, the following discussion illustrates the plasticity of regions as the communicative constructs of social relationships, using the example of the region Asia or East Asia. Clear-cut definitions of the relevant regions are intentionally not used, because, as is demonstrated below, any demarcations are themselves subject to dynamic changes. Instead, several approaches to the description and classification of regions are distinguished. In the real world of imaginary spatial layouts these can often exist parallel to and interact with each other. Thus, a distinction between essentialist, interactionist, institutionalist, and reflectivist approaches can be drawn (cf. Godehardt and Nabers 2011), by means of which the dynamic nature as well as the plasticity of several coexisting conceptions of the (East) Asian region(s) becomes visible.

4.1 Essentialism

Essentialist approaches focus on a spatial perspective, according to which the criterion of geographic adjacency is combined with the attribution of shared historical experiences and/or shared cultural features. As Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen outlined in their book *The Myth of Continents*, published in 1997, and Pekka Korhonen has most recently and impressively confirmed, Asia and its subregions have, since the earliest use of the term in Greek literature some 2,500 years ago, not only been subject to significant geographical shifts on the map of the world but have also been subject to strongly varied civilizational and political attributions. Initially, Asia denoted the territory inhabited by Greeks east of the Aegean Sea – that is, the northwestern part of contemporary Turkey. In subsequent centuries it increasingly and gradually expanded to the southeast and the northwest to include the Levant and the Bering Strait. In 1730, Asia received its first clearly pejorative civilizational connotation: Against the background of the dominant Enlightenment narratives, Europe – including Rus-

sia under Peter I, “the Great” – was deemed the epitome of progress. Asia, in contrast, was then termed the vast territory “beyond the Ural” and was seen as the stronghold of backwardness, roamed by nomads or oppressed by “despotic” rulers who kept their subjects in ignorance and lethargy. Except for a phase of European fascination with the exotic Orient (historians’ terminological equivalent for the geographical “Asia”) in the nineteenth century, which was primarily directed at India and China, Asia or the Orient was, in the course of the imperialist expansion of European powers, deemed a backward, “dormant,” or “weak” region, with China as the proverbial “sick man of Asia.” These characterizations seemed to be reinforced by the recurrent military defeats that Asian states suffered in conflicts with European colonial powers (Lewis and Wigen 1997; Korhonen 2012; see also Schwab 1984; Wagner 2011).

If these geographical, civilizational, and political characterizations were almost exclusively external attributions, the period around the beginning of the twentieth century saw the first politically connoted self-descriptions in the Asian region as a reaction to colonial supremacy. As Amitav Acharya has reminded us, in the early twentieth century cosmopolitan intellectuals such as the Indian poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, the Chinese historian and publicist Liang Qichao (who participated in the founding of an “Asian Solidarity Society” in 1907 in Tokyo), or the Philippine author and national hero José Rizal invoked a universalist idea of Asia, which in addition to India, China, Japan, and the Philippines also included Vietnam, other Southeast Asian states, and Persia (Duara 2010). Based on shared spiritual values and civilizational achievements among equals, this idea fluctuated between the decisive rejection of nation-state confines and the hope of improved chances of achieving national independence through regional solidarity. In the late 1930s and 1940s, the idea of a pan-Asian community was ultimately usurped by Japan’s imperialist endeavors. The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere comprised – in addition to Japan and the Japanese-occupied territories in Korea, Taiwan, and Sakhalin – China, Manchuria, French-Indochina and Indonesia, the representatives of which met in 1943 for the Greater East Asia Conference. Even though the construction of a “Greater East Asia” derived its legitimacy from the spiritual and cultural claims of the pan-Asian idea, it also represented a clearly hegemonic relationship consisting of the political and civilizational subordination of the participating territories to imperial Japan (Acharya 2010; cf. Karl 1998; Steadman 1969).

The end of the Second World War redrew the geographical and political map of Asia, which then dissolved into more or less stable national units that were fighting for the end of colonial rule and national independence, or that were proactively seeking to demarcate themselves from each other pursuant to the global logic of ideological blocks. With the separation of the Middle East based on security concerns – a region that rapidly gained significance in the diplomatic vocabulary, particularly that of the United States – what remained of Asia was only the relatively isolated subregions of South Asia, (North)East Asia, and South-

east Asia. The frequently invoked spirit of the Bandung Conference of 1955,¹¹ which was intended to strengthen the voice of the nonaligned states against the superpowers, came to nothing after a few years due to dominant and conflicting nationalisms (cf. Korhonen 2012). The economic success of various Asian states and the increasing economic interaction within Asia as of the 1960s created incentives for the rediscovery of commonalities and shared values in East Asia and Southeast Asia and served as a template for various attempts at regional integration, in which, however, the subregions remained dominant (see below).

In particular, China's rapid economic ascent, which started in the early 1990s, increased the appeal and the symbolic capital of belonging to (East) Asia – to the same extent which, within the Western perception, scenarios of the West's own decline accumulated and the talk of a Rising Asia, and an "Asian" or "Pacific twenty-first century," became more frequent. Warnings were also issued from the perspective of economic geography that the growing global influence of East Asia needed to be acknowledged and used in the formulation of grand theories and overarching research questions (Yeung 2007). Essentialist and homogenizing attributions such as an "East Asian development model," "Asian capitalism," or "East Asia's Confucian political culture," as invoked recently by none other than Francis Fukuyama (2011), have increased in quantity and public resonance with the region's growing economic and political weight at the global level. Parallel to the increasing symbolic capital of belonging to (East) Asia, the region is also growing geographically: In 2011, Russia and the United States joined the East Asia Summit, which first convened in 2005 (Korhonen 2012). As this most recent expansion of (East) Asia confirms, the region continues today to be reconstituted through the interplay of geographic, political, cultural, and other essentialist attributions.

4.2 Interactionism

Interactionist descriptions of regions are based on the relative density of interaction and cooperation between states (or, more generally, between political, economic, or social communities). In the course of increasing economic interaction, security cooperation, and other communication, collective processes of trust, identification, and learning emerge and, in turn, shape the further conduct of the actors (Godehardt and Nabers 2011).

As regards the Asian region, mutual interactions in accordance with the previously described, numerous reinterpretations of Asia were characterized by a diverse history. In pre-colonial times there were thriving networks of trade and finance between Arab, Jewish, Indian, Chinese, and Southeast Asian merchants. These were not fully replaced by but rather overlaid with the transregional trade flows of the colonial era and often continued to function as partial elements at the subregional and local levels (Duara 2010). A dense network of economic, social, and cultural interactions grew particularly out of the Chinese diaspora, which spread to large parts of Southeast Asia and beyond from the nineteenth century on. The "en-

11 The conference included representatives from 29 Asian and African states, but was clearly dominated by the former (Acharya 2007).

trepreneurial spirit” attributed to the Chinese diaspora survived the ethnic pogroms and ideological entrenchments of the postwar period (Redding 1990; Chan 2000; Redding and Witt 2005).

As outlined above, intra-Asian relations in the 1950s and 1960s were characterized by competition and conflict rather than interaction and cooperation. Cooperation in the field of security policy, which was often at the center of transnational interaction in other world regions, only developed slowly in the subregions (such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), see below) and continues to be impaired by tensions and conflicts between individual states or between subregions (India versus China, Southeast Asia versus China, etc.). However, since the 1970s there has been a steady and rapid increase in economic interaction. In the 1980s, approximately a third of the trade volume of the Asian economies took place within Asia. Since then, this share has risen to over 50 percent (Asian Development Bank 2008).¹² The so-called “Asian Crisis” of 1997/1998 not only provided a historical occasion for significantly increased institutional efforts towards regional integration, but can also be deemed a symbolic trigger for a strengthened sense of solidarity among Asian states. The relatively successful handling of the most recent global financial crisis by the Asian economies, in particular by China, has provided another useful template for unprecedented intra-Asian interaction. The spread of CNY-denominated trade transactions, the Asian Development Bank’s noticeable gain in status, and the revitalization of the Chiangmai Initiative from 2000 to increase mutually accessible liquidity reserves for use in the event of new crises in the financial markets are examples of this development (Hilpert and Loewen 2010).¹³

In addition to the increasingly dense economic interaction, cultural and social interaction has substantially increased since the 1990s. The transnational consumption of films, TV series, pop music, Manga comics, and other products of popular culture produced in Asia has grown substantially (Duara 2010; Heryanto 2013). Furthermore, Prasenjit Duara recognizes as a new phenomenon the tremendous mobility of professional, predominantly Western-educated elites of Indian, Chinese, or Southeast Asian descent who migrate between the metropolitan centers of Asia and other world regions. According to Duara, these somewhat “extraterritorial” metropolitan centers were created and shaped not only by national resources but also, and above all, by a “set of global and intra-Asian flows of labour, capital, and knowledge” (Duara 2010: 978). Even if he does not rule out the possibility that this cosmopolitan source of identity for the Asian elites might, in the long run, be to the detriment of so-

12 The figures stated here refer to the following countries and regions, as listed by the Asian Development Bank: ASEAN states, China, Japan, Korea, India, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

13 Economic geographers view this most recent dynamic development of economic links in East Asia as a unique opportunity to further the theoretical development of the discipline, contrary to its reputation of being hostile towards theory, and to take targeted measures to open it up to larger interdisciplinary issues such as the proliferation of capitalist economic systems or ecological challenges; Yeung (2007).

cially marginalized groups in the countries of East Asia and Southeast Asia, he does see grounds for an optimistic scenario:

Region formation in Asia is a multipath, uneven, and pluralistic development that is significantly different from European regionalism. Moreover, the region has no external limits or territorial boundaries and does not seek to homogenize itself within. Individual nations, economic, regulatory, cultural entities, and non-governmental organizations have multiple links beyond the core, and when a country beyond the core arrives at the threshold of a sufficiently dense set of interactions and dependencies with it, it may [be] brought within the region's framework of governance. (Duara 2010: 981)

As this quote suggests, "Asia" is being designed as an alternative to models of nationalistic entrenchment and regional exclusion. As a conscious contrast to a self-contained, inward-looking "European regionalism," Duara invokes a "redux" version of a cosmopolitan Asia that is, without any external territorial borders and without any internal homogenization pressure, predestined to expand across the globe in the long run.

4.3 Institutionalism

Another approach describes regions according to institutional processes of regional integration, based on the assumption that international institutions are voluntarily created by states in order to counter collective-action issues as well as high transformation and information costs, etc. As the example of the Asian region demonstrates, the development of such regional or international institutions is substantially influenced by historical caesura such as the end of the Cold War or financial crises.

After very hesitant beginnings in the 1950s and 1960s, which were characterized by strong ideological tensions and several military conflicts between and within the Asian states, 1967 saw, for the first time, the creation of a more long-term, stable regional organization: the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It consisted of Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore; today, its members also include Brunei, Burma and Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. In the subsequent years, particularly after the Cold War, it served as the nucleus of other regional organizations: the security-focused ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), founded in 1994, which the United States, Russia, and the European Union belong to, and the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM), which has been dedicated to multilateral exchange between Europe and Asia in the areas of economics, politics, education, and culture, as well as the protection of the environment and the climate. The inclusion of China, Korea, and Japan in the ASEAN+3, which was created in the late 1990s, as described above, to handle the "Asian crisis," was generally seen as an institutional breakthrough towards a shared East Asian and Southeast Asian identity in primarily economic terms. The organization is not, however, free of tensions between its members. In particular, the Southeast Asian states view China's increasingly perceptible ambitions to ascend to the

position of leading economic and political power in the region with suspicion. The insistence on nation-state sovereignty and the principle of nonintervention in internal affairs remains the business foundation for all the organization's activities, so that any institutional deepening, with a concentration of supranational competencies, remains unlikely in the foreseeable future (Acharya 2010; Korhonen 2012; the topic of regional integration in Asia is relatively well researched and extensively covered in the literature; see, for example, most recently Ziltener 2013).

As of 1967, and on the initiative of Japan and Australia, several organizational platforms for the creation of a "Pacific" community, such as the Pacific Basin Economic Council (1967), the Pacific Trade and Development Conference (1968), and the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (1980), developed parallel to the Southeast Asian initiative. The Southeast Asian states responded with skepticism to this "Pacific idea," in which the United States also played a substantial role; they saw it as an attempt to marginalize developing countries. In order to overcome this conflict and to include the ASEAN states, and with a view to including China as a foreseeable economic heavyweight in the region, the "Pacific" idea was ultimately expanded to an "Asian-Pacific" idea. The institutional breakthrough was achieved in 1989 when the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation was founded as an intergovernmental organization. It initially included 12 Pacific states (among them the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) and now includes 21 (among them Chile, Peru, and Russia). As Amitav Acharya has emphasized, the constructive development of economic interdependence was at the center of the group's efforts, not the previous anti-colonial or anti-Western agenda of sustaining national or regional independence (Acharya 2010). Nevertheless, counter-reactions ensued: the East Asia Economic Caucus, proposed in 1990 by the then incumbent Malaysian prime minister Mahathir, decidedly rejected the inclusion of "Western" countries in the "Asian" economic zone. Even though the proposed caucus was not implemented due to Japan's resistance to the exclusion of the United States, such "Asian" needs for exclusion appear to continue to exist – in contrast to Prasenjit Duara's interactionist definition of "Asia" quoted above.

The landscape of regional and international organizations in and around "Asia" has been shaped, to this day, by tensions between a more functional "Asian-Pacific" logic, defined according to economic interdependence, and a more geographically-culturally conceived "East (and Southeast) Asian" logic. The People's Republic of China serves as an important link between these two institutional logics. It remains to be seen whether the East Asia Summit, which was founded in 2005 and which expanded ASEAN+3 to ASEAN+6 by including India, Australia, and New Zealand and which, since 2011, now also includes the United States and Russia as members, can be filled with life in the long run. Much will depend on whether it is possible to contain China's quest for dominance without decreasing its interest and commitment in this regionally extensive organization.

4.4 *Reflectivism*

Approaches to the description of regions can be described as “reflectivist” if they ask how and according to which criteria regions are intersubjectively constructed, who is included or excluded by these constructions, and how dominant interpretation patterns prevail or compete with each other. This approach rests on the assumption that regional identities are transformed by social interaction due to the fact that intersubjective meanings change in the course of ongoing cooperation and communication. In the dynamic interplay between self-attributions and external attributions, regional attributions are consistently renegotiated and reinvented. From this constructivist perspective, identity becomes a completely relational concept, and region becomes a communicative construct: a fabric of socially divided bodies of knowledge and intersubjective meanings underlying collective norms, rules and institutions. As such, the concept of region is never fixed or absolute, but the object of an ongoing framing process in which the participating actors compete for the prerogative to interpret, demarcate, and decide who is a part or not part of the “imagined community” (Anderson 2006): “Regions are what actors make of them” (Lake 1997, cited in Godehardt and Nabers 2011: 9). Such construction processes of regions as “imagined communities” vary depending on the respective “region builders” – social actors, scientists, political representatives of individual states, etc. – who are sometimes pursuing specific political projects (Neumann 2003). In a similar vein, Rick Fawn describes nations as “ongoing projects . . . , because not only their goals and capacities but also their very memberships can change, they are potentially more complicated to study than even states” (Fawn 2009: 33).

Whereas the first three approaches have a primarily ontological character – that is, they focus on varying basic structures for the description of reality – the reflectivist approach also has considerable epistemological implications, because it asks how these descriptions of reality come into being. Essentialist attributions of a geographical, political, or civilizational nature are not taken at “face value,” but as specific offers for interpretation and identification in the open and ongoing negotiation of intersubjective meanings and the competition between self-attributions and external attributions. Attributions or frames can be deemed relatively influential when they are propagated by dominant actors and when, through their connection to historical narratives, traditional knowledge, or other cultural resources, they achieve elevated resonance. For example, Sinderphal Singh has demonstrated that since independence the Indian state has sought to frame, by means of essentialist categories and meanings, the region “South Asia,” excluding Afghanistan and Myanmar, as a Hindu cultural sphere, thereby suggesting India’s “natural hegemony” as a civilizational power in this region (Singh 2011). As this example impressively illustrates, such essentialist and homogenizing attributions are not only telling about the region itself, but also accompany the ever-new inclusion and exclusion mechanisms as well as the hegemonic conflicts in the discursive sphere.

The reflectivist approach described here not only shifts essentialist approaches into a new, constructivist perspective but also transcends the previously discussed interactionist and institutionalist approaches. The interests and identities behind the interactions among the participating actors are not taken for granted, but are introduced as products of social negotiations and cultural interpretations. Interests and identities are not seen as quasi-objectifiable entities, but as relational, socially constructed categories that are subject to permanent shifts over the course of time. The plasticity of the initially “Pacific” and subsequently “Asian-Pacific” idea, described above, may serve as an example here. If the ongoing inclusion of new “members” in an institution fundamentally changes the perception and the implementation capacity of the interests involved, then the symbolic weight and the attractiveness of membership in the institution will also increase, with potentially significant geopolitical consequences: while the United States is becoming increasingly visible on the horizon as an “Asian power to be,” Europe is ultimately becoming peripheral, a territory off the map. The acronym “BRIC,” which was coined by Goldman Sachs in 2001 to describe the emerging economies Brazil, Russia, India, and China (O’Neill 2001), is a further example. In 2010, through the inclusion of South Africa, it was expanded to “BRICS” and, alternatively, with the addition of (South) Korea, to “BRICK.” With the addition of Indonesia it became “BRIICS, and finally, with the ASEAN states and Mexico, “BRICSAM.” These states have not only appropriated these constructions as an element of their self-perception, but have also partially used them as a template for the institutionalization of new transregional economic and political cooperation networks that challenge conventional regional affiliations.

At first glance, this reflectivist approach may seem somewhat out of touch. However, it may be essential for those researchers in area studies who wish to take the insights of the cultural turn(s) seriously. As described above, the transnational turn, the postcolonial turn, and, in particular, the spatial turn conceive of regions and regional identities as malleable cultural constructs. At the same time, area studies is made able to draw upon social science approaches that take seriously the significance of language, of historical narratives, of culture as an intersubjective process of interpretation, and of discourses as the setting for competition over the prerogative of interpretation. This reflective concept certainly does not need to be made explicit in each and every research topic and analytical design. However, because it represents a shared and fundamental epistemological stance of interdisciplinary collaboration, which appears to be constitutive for area studies, it is likely that it would be difficult to revert to what preceded it.

If regions are “what actors make of them,” and if we acknowledge the plasticity of the ongoing cultural (re)construction of regions and subregions, then it is not the task of area studies to replicate or teleologically anticipate these processes, but to sensitively and flexibly reconstruct them. The previous discussion illustrates that there can be no naturalist, fixed, “right” or “false” definition of the region examined from the perspective of area studies. Rather, the aim can only be to formulate a reflective, relational (on the basis of the selected

thematic focus and research question), and productive as possible definition of the region and its subregions.

Accordingly, it may make sense in the Asian context to place the three Northeast Asian states Japan, Korea, and China in a research context that examines the development of “entangled modernities” (Randeria 1999) as a result of the translation, appropriation, and transformation of Western concepts, ideas, and theories since the late nineteenth century, and their implications for conceptions of modernity in contemporary East Asian societies. A focus on the Southeast Asian subregion seems appropriate when, for example, ethnic or religious identity processes are the research interest. The delineation of the research region according to the institutional format ASEAN+3 or ASEAN+6 and its most recent additions, on the other hand, appears to be useful in assessing the surmounting of the financial crisis at the end of the 1990s or the most recent global financial crisis, which have not only had political and economic consequences but have also, as outlined above, impacted the self-perception of national and regional identities, solidarities, and interests.

In the context of globalization, it will likely increasingly become the case that transregional and transcontinental interactions that require the transcension of the regional context will also come into view. Here, the macroperspective on the supraregional handling of cross-sectional topics of global economic and political relevance through various intergovernmental organizations or transnational societal networks may be equally as productive as the microperspective on the interactions of migrants, mobile and educated elites, businesspeople, political “entrepreneurs,” producers and consumers of cultural products, academic discourses, governance concepts, development concepts, etc. within Asia or between Asian, African, Latin American, and other societies.

In the most recent debates about the present and the future of area studies, there is increasingly an underlying trend towards the transcension of regional contexts. Essentialist, culturalist approaches are deemed to be as equally worthy of critique as the focus on nation-states, and particularly on “the state” as the central actor, in the research on interstate and intrastate issues within hierarchical spatial orders. Instead, transnational or transregional research designs that approach cross-sectional topics comparatively or investigate processes of cultural, social, economic, and political interaction beyond conventional national or regional units have become increasingly popular and have, for several years, been rewarded with research funding. Given the progress of globalization and its inherent processes of border dissolution and deterritorialization, and given the significantly increased density of global interaction off the beaten track of economic and political relations between nation-states, economies, and national societies or cultures, this trend does indeed seem realistic and topical.

4.5 Reflexive Essentialism

In light of the increasing trend towards the transcension of regional contexts, however, we should also be consciously aware of the fact that reverse movements that are equally charac-

teristic of the ongoing process of globalization can easily be analytically sidelined. The idea of a dialectical interplay of de- and reterritorialization is by no means new. As early as 1995, Benjamin Barber described, in his book *Jihad vs McWorld*, the simultaneous development of “globalism” and “tribalism” – traditional values, nationalism, religious orthodoxy, etc. with a local or regional element – as an outcome of ongoing globalization (Barber 1995; Puhle *forthcoming*). Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann described a similar dialectic, from the perspective of a global history, that is equally dedicated to the “flows” (migration, the transfer of capital, goods and ideas, etc.) as to the attempts of political and economic actors to control these flows and interactions in order to maintain or regain their sovereignty and autonomy under the conditions of globalization. These reterritorialization and “flow”-control actors can be national or subnational units such as urban metropolises or supranational structures such as intergovernmental organizations, regions, transnational networks, or multinational companies that regulate global value chains in their own favor (Middell and Naumann 2010; Middell 2013).

A closer analysis of such reterritorialization trends frequently reveals a surprising phenomenon: in their efforts to maintain their room to maneuver under the conditions of globalization, the actors often do not create new sovereignty frames but instead resort to precisely those essentializations that have, as a consequence of the postcolonial turn and the spatial turn, long been deemed analytically obsolete and thus normatively “scorned.” Therefore, in a certain historical irony, one could say, the traditional container concepts of the European “long nineteenth century” such as nation, society, culture, identity, etc. are reproducing themselves in a non-European context and thus to some extent perpetuating a “long twentieth century” of reissued nation-state imaginations and an exaggerated insistence on sovereignty, within which the European twenty-first century often seems like an anachronistic element. If we take seriously the epistemological turn of a relational concept of space and describe regions as processes of communicatively constructed social relations in a dynamic interplay between self-attributions and external attributions, then it seems imperative to analyze not only the transcension of regional contexts but also such “reessentialization through the back door.” If we want to do justice to the dialectical dynamics of the globalization process, we must not ignore the homogenizing self-attributions and external attributions, and the concomitant inclusion and exclusion strategies, of political actors.

As an extension of the four approaches to the description of regions described above (Godehardt and Nabers 2011), I suggest the concept of “reflexive essentialism” in order to conceptualize the analytical focus on such – seemingly anachronistic – reessentializations: The normative departure from all essentialist approaches, currently en vogue in the area studies discourse, should not result in an analytical departure. Rather, our task should be to recognize the self-referential essentialisms of the actors involved in the globalization process as such and to reflect on them as the constitutive elements of the dynamic negotiation of flows and control (Middell and Naumann 2010).

Particularly in the Asian context, significant trends towards such reessentializations are discernible. Parallel to the ongoing global integration of Asian countries, there seems to be a growing demand for nationalist reflexes and regional homogeneity, for cultural, religious, and ethnic identity affiliations, or for political legitimacy, all drawing on nation-state sovereignty and territorial integrity. An example is the formulation of national or regional development “models” from the East Asian context to accompany the economic success of various East Asian states, most recently China, as a narrative. The so-called China Model has been made prominent by Anglo-Saxon publicists since the middle of this century’s first decade. Initially, the concept was rejected by Chinese officials, who argued that it utilized an ideologically burdened, in principle anti-Chinese, variant of the China Threat thesis. Since around 2010, however, the China Model has become acceptable among the political and intellectual elite as well as in the official Chinese discourse, as it – irrespective of the definition of its content, which, by and large, has stagnated at exchangeable platitudes – is viewed as a welcome symbol of the reappropriation of “discourse hegemony” from the hitherto dominant “West” (Holbig 2010). While Chinese representatives use the China Model to invoke the particularity of the Chinese development trajectory and the superiority of “Socialism with Chinese characteristics,” external discourse participants like using the term as a synonym for the “East Asian Development Model” or simply the East Asian Model (Peerenboom 2007). Most recently, Francis Fukuyama referred to the China Model as evidence of a specifically East Asian “pattern” of successful authoritarian modernization, supported by a shared Confucian heritage of coherent centralized states and a meritocratic bureaucracy (Fukuyama 2012).

The example of the China Model, aka the East Asian Model, illustrates how difficult it has become, in view of such essentializations, to sustain the analytical differentiation between the Self and the Other, between self-attributions and external attributions, which, in past decades, were justified and inspired by the examination of non-Western regions within the social sciences and cultural studies in a particular way. In fact, the symbolic construction of such reessentializations occurs via a dialectical interaction between self-attributions and external attributions – a process apparently perceived by some participants as a hegemonic struggle for discourse supremacy and a monopoly on homogenization.

Overall, China's rise to become a “global player” has certainly been conducive to such entrenchments, rather than eliminating their foundation. The process of regional and global integration in Southeast Asia has also been accompanied by new(ly invented) nationalisms, ethnic conflicts, and intensified “subregionalisms.” While, from the perspective of many researchers, the (nation-)state has increasingly lost its role as the central policy-creating actor, it has, in a sense, gained significance under the surface – whether in the arena of disputed demands for political legitimacy and societal participation, as the imposer of frames or rules concerning discourses, or as a projection surface for national dreams and counter-dreams. As the example of the “Chinese Dream,” introduced by the incoming Chinese Communist Party

chief, Xi Jinping, in November 2012, illustrates most vividly, public interpretations of official dreams can turn into impressive online rows (Marquis and Yang 2013).

Coming to terms with such reterritorialization and entrenchment processes seems to be as equally relevant in understanding the regions and subregions as the analytical assessment of deterritorialization processes and transregional interactions and entanglements (Mrazek 2010; Wang 2010). One could say that the challenge is to constantly and flexibly recalibrate the analysis of nationalisms and cosmopolitanizations, processes of de- and reterritorialization, entanglements and entrenchments. The aim should be to view such contrary, alternating, simultaneous, or dialectical processes as being of equal empirical rank and to examine them with an open mind with regard to results. Instead of adopting a subtle normative primacy of “trans” and “inter” at the outset, we should be equally aware of the sort of “reflexive essentialism” described above.

If a single journal article by Prasenjit Duara with the self-explanatory title “Asia Redux” can incorporate almost two handfuls of programmatic word combinations with the prefix “inter” – interactions, interdependence, interfluent, interlinked, intermediate, intermingled, inter-referencing, intersected, interstices (Duara 2010) – then the question that arises is where the actors and identities of those interactions, the spaces of those interstices, and the entrenchments of the counter-dynamics of those entanglements are. In transcending regional connections, area studies must not fully give up its regional “traction”; the latter is the basis not only for intellectual acrobatics but also for real-world encounters with colleagues from the region.

5 Conclusion

The following insights appear to be central to contemporary area studies:

- The greatest potential of area studies lies in its **interdisciplinary** connections, which productively adopt and implement innovative impulses originating from cultural studies without losing sight of the capacity to connect to the social sciences. These connections provide it with the opportunity not only to theoretically and methodologically carry out highly topical research, but also to function as the connecting link, “translator,” and provider of impulses in both directions, between linguistics, cultural studies, and history on the one hand and the social sciences on the other – two groupings that continue to perceive each other as separate epistemic communities.
- The initial assumption of the cultural turn(s), according to which the perception of reality is always linguistically constituted and **social and political phenomena are thus always communicatively constructed**, is now difficult to imagine as something foreign to the social sciences. An area studies community that works at these interdisciplinary interfaces

must face these epistemological challenges and thus gains the opportunity to identify innovative research topics and methodological approaches.

- These insights go hand in hand with stronger incentives to enter into more extensive communication with colleagues from the regions being studied. In this context, the issue is less the fulfillment of the slogan “research with instead of research about” than simply the joint examination of the epistemological, theoretical, methodological, and thematic implications of cultural turns in the humanities *and* social sciences – in brief, the **transculturality** of research itself.
- Ultimately, topical area studies should not fall back behind the **relational conceptualization of space**, which, in the course of the last two decades, has prevailed over the hitherto prevalent territorial conceptualization of space.
- In particular, this applies to the concept of region, which is constitutive of area studies and should be understood as a malleable cultural construct that not only interprets social, economic, political, civilizational, moral, etc. relations but also actively shapes them. In this sense, one can understand **regions as processes involving the communicative construction of social relations**. It is precisely the plasticity of regions – that is, their amorphous and malleable character – that area studies should take into account.
- With advancing globalization, **transnational and transregional connections** have increasingly stepped into the foreground. In addition to inter- and cross-regional comparison, an analytical focus on cultural interactions, exchange processes, and translation processes seems particularly productive. However, given the increasingly frequent necessity of transcending regional connections, **reverse processes of reterritorialization**, the insistence on or a new emphasis on **nation-state sovereignty, regional homogeneity, cultural identity and other forms of essentialist self-assurance – termed here reflexive essentialism** – should not be disregarded. It is precisely the necessity of analytical recalibration regarding these dialectical movements that gives area studies the opportunity to transfer innovative impulses to the social sciences and to cultural studies.

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