Editorial

Gijs Mom and Nanny Kim

How topsy-turvy can the world of mobility become? The London cab has recently been revived by a Chinese automotive group,¹ General Motors had to be rescued by the American taxpayer, and BMW is converting its cars to electricity. In Delhi, after a rape and murder of a woman in a bus, rickshaw pullers introduced “safe for women” rickshaws.² In Brazil riots against corruption and poverty started in a bus, out of outrage at increased ticket prices.³ In Rio de Janeiro there are three bus accidents per day, in part caused by drivers racing against each other.⁴ How can we understand the plethora of confusing messages from a world of mobility that seems to spin out of control, more so with every new decade? New Mobility Studies tries to make sense of this turbulence and as editors of *Transfers* we seek fresh approaches that are not afraid of transgressing boundaries. This issue, in which we present scholarship beyond the immediate reach of Western mainstream mobility studies, is an example of such boundary crossing.

“China, please slow down. If you’re too fast, you may leave the souls of your people behind,” exclaims Kishore Mahbubani in his recent book on *The Great Convergence* between “Asia” and “the West.”⁵ It is unlikely that Mahbubani’s warning had reached China’s new president and Communist Party leader, Xi Jinping, when he promised his people the realization of the “Chinese Dream” during the twelfth National People’s Congress on March 15, 2013. That dream consisted of, among other things, a house and a car.⁶ Mahbubani’s warning is also applicable, in a very literal sense, at a much more local and mundane level. In Indian Chandigarh a local NGO mobilized the holy Lord Rama to help pedestrians cross roads, after authorities changed the roads to accommodate Formula 1 racing. Now that “for human beings it is difficult to cross the roads, only god can help them.”⁷

Transfers is committed to trans-disciplinary and transnational research that opens up global perspectives. We deliberately reach beyond Western experiences and paradigms, and actively foster exchanges between scholars across the globe. This issue is a result from that commitment and it has been a lesson in the joys and challenges of cross-cultural communication.

Of course the mobility of ideas is part and parcel of our daily work, and it is never predictable. Communication hinges on expectations and works best when both parties are engaged because they wish to learn something. Ideas are transformed in the communication process, and even when we imagine that we are talking about the same thing, there is no way we can be quite sure.

“Perfect misunderstandings” can lead to pathbreaking insights. In compiling this issue, we have learned that some of the key factors in transnational, and even more in transcultural academic exchanges, include both linguistic and practical (often economic) barriers, and differences between academic cultures.

Firstly, although English is close to becoming the global language, local languages still define academic communities. We mostly talk within our own circles and only seek outside input when and where we judge we need it. Though applying in varying degrees to most parts of the world, language barriers appear most obvious in what we might broadly call Asia. The academic circles of mainland China, Japan, Korea, India, Bangladesh and Taiwan are large enough to maintain a vibrant internal discourse inaccessible to most Western scholars, though exchanges are intensifying as younger academics acquire fluency in English. Most of this escapes Western academics, partly because few have Asian language skills.

Secondly, practical restrictions still limit access to research even in the age of the internet. Apart from language barriers, economic factors remain important. Scholars outside the wealthy countries and well-funded institutions face difficult choices in terms of investing time and money to access cutting-edge research. This may lead to intellectual isolation, but it is not always out of choice. Many mainstream Western sources are not available at an affordable price in India, and even if they were, a “centripetal” academic culture can prevent local scholars from engaging with “Western” discourse.

Thirdly, while academic cultures are globally linked, flows of ideas mainly follow one-way passages. European academics are tuned into new trends in the U.S., and U.S. scholars occasionally turn their attention to European voices. Non-Westerners try to draw inspiration from Western models, which have become largely coterminous with U.S. scholarship, but as Chakrabarty has so clearly shown Western academics do not feel any need to reciprocate.⁸ The circle is closed by the migration of Non-Western scholars, primarily to the United States and secondarily to Europe. Flows somehow go full circle and lesser flows cut across them, but academic migrants under considerable career pressure are often not in a good position to consciously challenge the cultures and research priorities of their host environment.

For the editors of *Transfers* all this boils down to the task of overcoming parochialisms on all sides. To make transcultural transfer work, all of us in the field—authors, editors, reviewers and readers—need to invest time and effort to accommodate diverse scholarly priorities, to make research results accessible across the globe, and also include them in our scholarly conversations. In our case, this meant that we initiated the concept of “mentors” to help transfer and translate the invited scholars’ contributions to this journal’s envisaged audience. These “mentors” include: Deborah Breen (for Shahnaz Huq-Hussain/Umm Habiba), Georgine Clarsen (for Rajendra Ravi), Nanny Kim and

(guest assistant editor) Har Ye Kan (for Xu Tao and Ding Xianying), Peter Merriman (for Gopa Samanta/Sumita Roy) and Frances Steel (for Maksudur Rahman/Md. Assadekjaman).

We have drawn two key lessons from the experience of preparing this issue. When it comes to linguistics and translation, we have decided to consciously treat English as a global means of communication, encouraging a simple and precise style that allows for regional inflections, rather than a strict adherence to some imagined “correct” form. And with the aim of creating the widest possible accessibility, we include original languages as needed. Personal and place names remain in their local form when transliteration can be ambiguous, as are quotes where this is necessary for direct access to readers of those respective languages. We therefore include, for example, Chinese quotes in their original form. Based on the same consideration, we add English translations of terms and quotes originally in other European languages for non-Western readers who may be unfamiliar with them.

With respect to the style of writing, we would like to encourage a greater openness for alternative forms of presentation. The issue is in part familiar to the West in the friction between “continental European” and “Anglo-Saxon” academic cultures due to empirical and ideological caution on the one hand and the perfection of a storyline structure on the other. The conventions of storylines based on the tradition of essay writing and a more theory-driven approach certainly may contribute to making research results readable and accessible. However, scholars with a strong empirical or activist background, or those with experience of repressive regimes, may not easily submit to tight, teleological storylines, preferring instead the safety—or enjoying the freedom of—raising questions and addressing issues without necessarily offering answers. Though there is much variation in approaches, we have found that non-Western submissions tended to be closer to the second model—discursive rather than following a linear logic and not carefully framed by theoretical argument. To engage in an open-ended transcultural exchange, we will do well to approach unfamiliar experiences and approaches broadly receptive to wherever they may take us.

These cultural differences posed problems for refereeing as well. Here we were forced to question those forms of disciplinary parochialism that reject scholarship that does not fit the hegemonic mould. As editors we are still struggling with the question of where concerns with quality and academic rigor stop and recognition of cultural differences start. The details of referencing and citation proved to be just one source of friction in the flow of cross-cultural translation. We have come to understand that our Style Guide does not easily apply to diverse publishing contexts and computer programs may not produce footnotes in the form we have come to expect.

This “Asia Issue,” then, is the first of what we hope will be a long sequence dedicated to non-Western mobility topics. It contains two contributions from

China and three from India and Bangladesh, all of them written by scholars “native” to those locations.

The first two contributions present recent research first presented at the workshop “Mobility and Everyday Life” held in Shanghai January 5–7, 2012. Both explore Chinese mobilities in the first half of the twentieth century, with a focus on how ordinary people responded to transport modernization. Xu Tao, in his “Making a Living: Bicycle-related Professions in Shanghai, 1897–1949,” examines small workshops that began by repairing, servicing, and occasionally importing bicycles. Some of these developed to become market leaders in the import trade. Most, however, remained small-time and marginal enterprises—repair shops staffed by itinerant workers who mainly fixed punctures, where bicycle rental, bicycle theft and the guarding of parked bicycles provided important sidelines.

In his “The Firedrake: Local Society and Train Transport in Zhejiang Province in the 1930s,” Ding Xianrong employs a combination of literary sources and oral histories to explore responses to trains in a rural province. He found that migrants enthusiastically welcomed the train while locals initially regarded it as unnatural, likening it to a dragon that had exchanged its natural element of water for fire. While locals usually walked and rarely ventured to take the train, the greater ease of travel accelerated labor migration to the coastal area.

The three contributions from India and Bangladesh are the result of a series of workshops held in Delhi, Kolkata, and Dhaka in July 2012 and January/February 2013. They make up our Special Section on Rickshaws, introduced by guest editor M. William Steele who is currently researching the diffusion of rickshaws from Japan across the Asian world, and who claims that the “West” may see a revival of slow traffic partially based on a vehicle long (and still) considered non-Western and obsolete. Through this section we intend to open a new field of study, which counters the mainstream obsession with and assumptions about “modernization” brought by car and road. Peter Cox, a well-known bicycle specialist, was invited to comment on this section. This section is truly interdisciplinary. Steele and Cox are historians, and Gopa Samanta, Shahnaz Huq-Hussain, and M. Maksudur Rahman are geographers. Their co-authors are all research students. Together they show how the merging of “Western” and “non-Western” scholarship, as well as of historical and non-historical expertise, may have unexpected outcomes.

This rickshaw section is further enriched by two extra contributions. In our Art and Mobility section, Gopa Samanta discusses some beautiful rickshaw paintings from Dhaka. For our forum section, Ideas in Motion, we invited Rajendra Ravi to tell his personal story of rickshaw activism. Ravi’s political approach to rickshaws is a reminder that mobility and politics cannot be separated. We publish his story as a challenge to integrate activism and scholarship, and to make more explicit the covert relationship between

transport modes and vested interests. Scholarship on the emancipation of rickshaw pullers is as much needed as scholarship on women's emancipation. But while the latter has now found a place in scholarly discourse, the former is much less accepted as valid scholarship, perhaps a reflection of the mainstream "neutrality" of current transport studies. This is why we intend to dedicate a special strand in the main, peer-reviewed part of our journal to current-day mobility politics, including policy and planning, and especially its relationship with long-term developments.

As usual, we also bring you our regular review sections on museum, film and books. To make this into a truly Asian issue, however, all contributions are related to Asian topics. Thus, we offer you an issue of which we as an editorial team are particularly proud. We hope it will function as an invitation to send us more, and better.

Notes

1. Robert Lea, "Black Cabs Finally Get Their First Chinese Owner," *The Times* (February 2, 2013), 14.
2. Marjolein van de Water, "Brazilië heeft het ineens gehad," *De Volkskrant* (June 19, 2013), 3.
3. René Moerland, "De man die u vandaag vervoert, is geen verkrachter" [The man that drives you today is no rapist], *NRC* (January 14–15, 2013), "De Wereld", 1.
4. Philip de Wit, "Stadsbus achtervolgt stadsbus in Rio de Janeiro," *NRC* (December 14, 2012), 12.
5. Kishore Mahbubani, *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West, and the Logic of One World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013), 79.
6. Oscar Garschagen, "Xi belooft de 'Chinese droom' te realiseren," *De Volkskrant* (March 18–19, 2013), 2; also see "Xi-Li Vision of Governance has Chinese Dream in Sight," *China Daily* (March 18, 2013), retrieved from China.org.cn on March 23, 2013.
7. Navdeep Asija, "Lord Rama Came to Help Pedestrian for Safely Crossing the Chandigarh Roads" (e-mail May 10, 2013).
8. Dipesh Chakrabarty cited in Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) (Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History, ed. Sherry B. Ortner, Nicholas B. Dirks, and Geoff Eley), 204.