

# SPECIAL SECTION ON RETHINKING MOBILITY HISTORY IN ASIA

History, Historiography, and Be(com)ing  
on the Move

*Introduction to the Special Section*

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If we now live in the “Asian Century,” what and how are we to think about the seeming incongruence of the traditional rickshaw and the high-speed shinkansen? What is the historical context behind the growing and sometimes alarming statistics of Asian motoring, both their production and use? How do we explain the explosion of mobilities, both local and global, in and about Asia? Amid this evident desire to be on the move, the articles in this Special Section begin to tackle some of these questions, by means of exploring three different iterations of organized transport in East and Southeast Asia in the last century. In the process, they seek to provide some answers (and pose further questions) to the conduits through which historical Asia moved, why it did so in the way it did, and whether there was anything qualitatively different in the way Asia embraced its potential to move.

As a complement to Tim Cresswell’s reading of “mobility in the modern western world,”<sup>1</sup> this Special Section is likewise interested in the cultural meanings latent within movement, but in this case from the perspective of the modern Asian world. Accordingly, its goal is also more than just to trace some of the “new wheels”—rickshaws, railroads, taxicabs, omnibuses, automobiles, and streetcars—that have come to populate Asia in the twentieth century, but, more importantly, to discover what the significance of these transport modes were to their respective societies in that period. Notably, the cases broached by the three articles expose an inextricable link between mobilities and the idea of, and the determination to achieve modernity in Asia. This was not to be realized in isolation, however. Rather, residing in colonial times, Asian societies often found their impetus to modernize through, and in relation to, Western interpretations (and impositions) of their own versions of modernity. In this sense, there also existed a twist in the meaning of mobilities in modern Asia, in that they were not so much pursued, appropriated,



and practiced because Asia was becoming modern but rather because modernization had inexorably pressed itself against Asia, along with much of the developing world.<sup>2</sup>

Such a sentiment was succinctly synthesized by Fukuzawa Yukichi, Japan's great Westernizer. Writing in 1885, Fukuzawa compared "the movement of civilization" to measles. Once introduced, it was impossible to contain. But, unlike a communicable disease, civilization brought with it benefits as well as damages. Among these benefits were new technologies of movement. He wrote,

Transportation has become so convenient these days that once the wind of Western civilization blows to the East, every blade of grass and every tree in the East follows what the Western wind brings. ... If one observes carefully what is going on in today's world, one knows the futility of trying to prevent the onslaught of Western civilization. Why not float with them in the same ocean of civilization, sail the same waves, and enjoy the fruits and endeavors of civilization?<sup>3</sup>

Yet, the option to "go with the tide," as it were, was never guaranteed. Colonial, and now neo-colonial, forces often restrict as well as realize the convenience of mobility. As Weiqiang Lin makes clear in a recent published article on the politics of flying, the world's aerial order continues to follow the logic of the Western world and continues to marginalize Asian states, limiting their ability to develop their own (aero)mobilities.<sup>4</sup> In this light, even as mobilities and transportation technologies could usher in new forms of civilization, and in fact become symbols of modernities for Asia, the mobility of mobilities is seldom a smooth process, but, rather, laden with negotiations and struggles over power.

This is not to suggest that Asia necessarily occupies the position of an imitator, or that Western mobility/modernity is the sole paradigm available. The articles in this special section seek to place agency in Asian hands, and even to change the lens of historical analysis. Indeed, the circulation of transportation models is scarcely linear but entails strategic re-workings, innovations, and the creation of alternative and "hybrid" solutions.<sup>5</sup> Analogously, while Japanese propagandists in the 1940s were able to declare, "transportation is civilization," Japan's imperial mission was hardly deferential in outlook, seeking to transcend Western-inspired modernity.

More recently, there have been persistent calls to escape from the "prison of ethnocentrism" within academia.<sup>6</sup> As an example, Ola Söderström highlights the global diversity of speeds, obstacles, moorings, and power relations in the travel of modern types, and urges recognition of the spatial variety and complexity of modernity. His focus on the subversive strategies of users gives particular agency to ordinary people, making them leaders in the creation of distinct patterns of modernity.<sup>7</sup> Frank Dikötter's work on "exotic commod-

ities” similarly demonstrates how everyday “acts of creative appropriation” describe China’s experience with modernity, including mobility.<sup>8</sup> And finally, a recent conference on “Theorising Mobilities in/from Asia” held at the National University of Singapore in 2013 draws crucial attention to the possibility of other philosophies of mobilities, which departs not only from Western experiences but also from the way these movements are being studied, understood, and discussed in existing literatures.<sup>9</sup>

In this regard, the three articles in this Special Section are an extension of these efforts, but simultaneously offer a more targeted examination of how different iterations of mobility/modernity unfolded within Asia historically. For example, M. William Steele shows how the rickshaw, invented in Japan, was exported and appropriated in other parts of Asia, thereby reversing the usual narrative of the Western origins of Asian mobility/modernity. Akiha Daisuke, the marketer of rickshaw to Asia, was more capitalist than colonizer; he offered cheap mobility (and, by extension, modernity), by establishing the rickshaw and its offspring as irreplaceable people-movers in the non-Western world.

Kate McDonald similarly questions the role played by Western colonialism in bringing mobility/modernity to Asia, providing a precedent for Japan’s subsequent imperial ventures in Asia. She argues that in both European and Japanese colonialism, mobility and modernity went hand in hand, even as stagnancy came to be a reason for empire. In the case of Japan, not only did this vision of circulation serve to encourage domestic liberal reforms in the first instance, it also led to the introduction of large infrastructural projects, such as railroad construction in places like Taiwan and Korea, in the name of civilizing these populations. Michael Pante’s study of the history of motorized urban transport in the Philippines and Singapore returns the gaze to Western colonialism in those two societies. But far from capitulating and assuming that transport development in those two colonies were the result of Western technological exportations, he shows how “native” drivers, thought by their Western “masters” as incapable of operating modern vehicles, were able to appropriate these machines to their own ends. The result was a form of transgressive mobility that disrupted colonial discipline and the neat flow of knowledge and technology from West to East.

Taken together, each article interrogates how mobilities emerged in highly specific settings and critically questions how far they were able to bring Asia into its own quest for modernity, however this was defined in its unique local circumstance. While the articles do not completely elide the continued relevance of Euro-American influence on these societies, they take as starting point the view that Asia was (and is) not simply following in the West’s footsteps, in the course of charting out its mobile futures. Instead, this special section examines how particular Asian milieus became mobile

modern societies in their own right and challenges the notion that moving is the sole preserve of the West.

Of course there can be no simple substitution of West for East. Taking hints from recent scholarship, these articles seek to blur distinctions rather than sharpen them. We have always lived (and moved) in a multi-polar world. Steele's conclusion seeks to replace the simple story of Western introduction/imposition of new modes of mobility in Asia with a more complex repertoire of possibilities and interactions. McDonald, on the other hand, notes that there are similarities in the way mobility was used as a justification for colonialism, whether East or West. Explicitly, while Western colonial powers had used tropes of connecting and circulating to impose their modernity on Japan, Japanese imperialists soon appropriated the same tropes (and locomotive technologies) to legitimate and achieve their own expansion in Asia. In effect, she shows how Japan realized Fukukawa's dream to "leave Asia and join the West,"<sup>10</sup> thereby confounding any notion that East and West should remain in separate spheres. Pante goes one step further, reminding us of multiple Wests and multiple Easts. He shows how different racial and socio-economic groups among the colonized—Filipinos, Chinese, Malays, and Indians—were able, in different ways, to literally take the steering wheel out of the hands of their colonial masters.

What do these articles tell us about the future of mobility in Asia? One thing is certain, neither the shinkansen nor the rickshaw will disappear. Asia embraces both—and so may the rest of the world. China (and the rest of Asia) may challenge the United States as the locomotive of the twenty-first century. On the one hand are powerful SUVs, super high-speed rail, new magnetic levitation technologies such as the Maglev trains, self-driving autos, 3-D express coaches or straddling buses, supersonic aeromobility, and the dream/reality of space travel. On the other hand, other modes of mobility persist, including the solar powered rickshaw, China's 150 million electrically driven two-wheelers, and the mini car revolution. Toyota Motors may well be the world's largest manufacturer of automobiles, but Japan itself, unlike China, seems to be giving up on the car, or at least on power and speed. Electric-assisted bicycles, small boxy hybrids, and mini cars now dominate the Japanese market. Some see this trend as another example of Japan falling victim to the Galápagos syndrome, in which unique development does not translate into other settings.<sup>11</sup> However, the coexistence of different modalities may yet offer a new lens for viewing the world of mobility, one that embraces diversity and transcends distinctions between East and West, North and South.

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## Notes

1. Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
2. Tim Bunnell, *Malaysia, Modernity, and the Multimedia Super Corridor: A Critical Geography of Intelligent Landscapes* (London: Routledge, 2004); Jennifer Robinson, *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
3. Fukuzawa's "*Datsu-A ron*," (literally "On Leaving Asia," shows the dilemma of the Westernizer; he concludes this March 16, 1885 editorial in the *Jiji Shinpō*, declaring that Japan "should leave Asia and join the West" (*datsu-A nyū Ō*). For a translation "Goodbye Asia," David Lu, *Japan: A Documentary History* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1997), vol. 2, 352–53.
4. Weiqiang Lin, "The Politics of Flying: Aeromobile Frictions in a Mobile City," *Journal of Transport Geography* 38 (June 2014): 92–99, esp. 97.
5. Weiqiang Lin explores this dependence on "hybrid solutions" in 2013 at the RGS-IBG Annual Conference in London in a paper entitled "Assembling a Great Way to Fly: Performances of Comfort and Affective Care in the Air".
6. Charles Taylor, "Two Theories of Modernity," *Hastings Center Report* 25 no. 2 (March–April 1995), 124–33, esp. 28, <http://www.nabilechchaibi.com/resources/Taylor.Two%20theories%20of%20modernity.pdf> (accessed February 12, 2014).
7. Ola Söderström, "What Traveling Urban Types Do: Postcolonial Modernization in Two Globalizing Cities," in *Critical Mobilities*, ed. Ola Söderström et. al, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 29–57.
8. Frank Dikötter, *Exotic Commodities: Modern Objects and Everyday Life in Modern China*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

9. Theorising Mobilities in/from Asia, November 14–15, 2013, National University of Singapore, [http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/events\\_categorydetails.asp?category-id=6&eventid=1425](http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/events_categorydetails.asp?category-id=6&eventid=1425) (accessed February 12, 2014).
10. Fukuzawa Yukichi, “Good-bye Asia,” in David Lu, *Japan: A Documentary History*, vol 2, 352–53.
11. See “Japan as Galápagos Again—Now It’s the Cars,” *Wall Street Journal (Japan Real Time)*, December 17, 2013, <http://blogs.wsj.com/japanrealtime/2013/12/17/japan-as-galapagos-again-now-its-the-cars/> (accessed February 12, 2014).