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“I Find it Very Claustrophobic to be Stuck in a Small Place”: An Interview With Engseng Ho

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In December 2015, Engseng Ho visited Leiden University as the keynote speaker for the Ocean of Law conference. Two years later we reconnected for a conversation about his career, the study of diasporas, the legal history of the Indian Ocean world, and his fascination with inter-Asian connections.

Engseng Ho is professor of cultural anthropology and history at Duke University, Muhammad Alagil distinguished visiting professor of Arabia Asia Studies at the Asia Research Institute, and the director of the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore. He was previously professor of anthropology at Harvard University and senior scholar at the Harvard Academy. After graduating from Stanford with undergraduate degrees in economics and anthropology, Ho spent a few years as an international economist in Singapore before pursuing a Master's and PhD at the University of Chicago. His works have been central to the field of Indian Ocean Studies, especially regarding the international and transcultural dimensions of Islamic societies across the Indian Ocean and their relations with Western empires.

You were born and brought up in Penang, a city built on its transnational and multiethnic maritime roots. Did this inform your childhood and later intellectual journeys?

I think all my work has the hidden agenda of making a name for my home island, which became a backwater in the 1970s and '80s. When I grew up in Malaysia, there were always racial conflicts among Malays, Chinese, and Indians. The ruling party was a combination of race-based parties. I was brought up to think that different races don't get along and that there is an inherent conflict in a racial situation. But actually in Penang itself, the situation was quite different. There were Penangite Chinese, who are called Baba or Peranakan, descended from Chinese mixed with locals. You also had a lot of Indian Muslims, who became Malay.

There is a term called *masuk melayu*: you can become Malay over a couple of generations. Many people who were known as Malays in Penang were not in fact of indigenous descent, including some of the top politicians such as Anwar Ibrahim, and Mahathir Mohamad in Kedah. There were many cases where Malay women were Chinese who had been adopted by Malay families, or where people who were quite Chinese-looking were of mixed descent. Also, in each town of Malaysia, especially among the Chinese, one dialect dominates the others. In Penang it was Hokkien, which the Indians and the Malays also spoke.¹

Altogether, the racial view of the country was not what we experienced in Penang, but we did not have the language to think about it in a different way. Penang is what I now know to be a typical port-city emporium in the Indian Ocean. That is the experience I grew up with. But of course I didn't have any comparative idea of what all that meant. The other thing about Penang is that it is an island with nice beaches. Every holiday we went camping by the beach, and in school we built our own kayaks from wood. I grew up swimming and I was a competitive swimmer. I suppose later on in my career those two things came together: the multiculturalism of Penang and the experience of the sea.

In the mid-1980s, you moved to the US for your undergraduate studies at Stanford University. How was the experience of encountering a completely distant and different land? Did you feel yourself being part of a diaspora at the time?

When I went to the US my idea was to study for four years and then go back home. I used to love building things from scratch or from bits and pieces of broken toys, so I thought I would be an engineer. The main goal of going to university abroad was to be able to make a living and have my parents stop worrying about me. Engineering was good because it combined my interests and theirs. But none of that happened.

When I went to college, I had never thought of myself as very studious. In the British school system you don't study until the end of the year. I wasn't used to studying all the time. But one thing that I found interesting was to read people like Durkheim in classical sociology. It was a shock to me that people wrote books about things that I knew and had been thinking about for a long time. When I read Durkheim on reification in religion and the idea that God is the image of human beings projected onto a higher plane, I wanted to write home to my friends who were Christians to tell them they had got it all wrong and that there was a rational explanation for what they had misconstrued. Growing up in Malaysia, ideas and intellectual life were quite marginal to me. It was a commercialised place, business is big there. The world of ideas was therefore stunningly new to me.

Initially I was also interested in psychology. I wanted to understand people and I thought psychology was the solution. It turned out that psychology was full of statistics and regressions, which I did not find very insightful. I was then lucky to take a one-year intensive course on Western civilisation, from the Greeks to the medieval

ages to the modern period. It gave me a very strong sense of the intellectual history of Western thought. It was just mind-opening and gave me a real sense of the contextualisation of ideas. That somehow seemed a useful way to think about things which were happening in a completely different part of the world.

After your undergraduate studies you worked in the financial sector for some time in Singapore. How then did this thought process lead to an intellectual transition?

After all this intellectual stimulation I was no longer interested in doing engineering, and I ended up taking a lot of other classes—I actually took all the classes on Marxism offered on campus. Most of those classes turned out to be in anthropology. I also did a lot of courses in economics and the history of economic thought. I added a few more classes in micro- and macroeconomics, and that lead to majors in both economics and anthropology. But I must say that what I liked in engineering was the systematic thought: you put many pieces together and if you do it well, things work. I used to build little toys with electric motors. Anthropology and economics are actually very much like that as well. In economics, what I liked was macroeconomics and how all the different parts, such as investment, consumption, and government spending, interact with each other. Classic anthropology used to be very systematic as well, with all the different dimensions of society, such as religion, politics, economy, and ideas, interacting in a living culture. I naturally went after those kinds of interactions.

When I went back to Malaysia after graduation, I was visiting some friends at the National University of Singapore when I met a professor in the photocopying room. He asked me what I was doing. When I said I had just returned from the US after graduating, he said: "We need someone to teach computer programming, can you do it?" I told him that I took one course in programming but dropped it, but he said: "I am sure you can do it, you are from a good California university." Two weeks later, I was teaching programming. It was nerve-wracking. After a while, I decided that I had spent too much time in the university, and that I should be outside. So I got a job in the government investment corporation and the central bank. I worked there as a international macro-economist, predicting interest rates, charting exchange and inflation rates. It was exhilarating and challenging for someone fresh from college, because I had to interpret the latest numbers to tough top officials: this goes up, so that goes down. I did that for about two years, and then decided to go back to university.

What did motivate you towards studying diaspora?

The way I got interested in diaspora is very simple. I had the chance to do some summer research as an undergraduate and I went to one of my advisers, G. William Skinner, who was a well-known anthropologist of both China and the overseas Chinese. I said to him that I would like to do a project on the Cape Malays in South

Africa. That sort of choice was quite typical for me: something I knew, which was to say Malays, but in a very different place that I did not know. It was a contrast between familiar and unfamiliar. But he said, you know what, summer is a short time, it would take time for you to get to know the place, so why don't you go back to Malaysia? I was hugely disappointed but I went back to Penang and studied the Baba (or Peranakan) Chinese. Through this research, I learned all sorts of things about this community, which did not sit quite right with the dominant racial views of the country. They were proud to be British subjects, and they were Anglicised Chinese. Their association in Penang was called SCBA, which stood for the Straits Chinese British Association, but people called it the Straits Chinese Baba Association. Whether they were Baba or British, the basic issue is why this mixed Malay-Chinese population identified primarily with the British. That was strange when you think in terms of identity.

The question of the Baba kept nagging me and I did a lot of fieldwork. I also collected materials from associations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From that point on it was a combination of fieldwork and historical work. I found out that the best way to understand the strange situation of Baba being Baba and British is actually a historical one. Only with seeing how things change over time can you recognise these strange mixtures which become something so real that people don't know what is up and what is down. The research ended up being a story of the racialisation of Malaysia under British rule.² What was initially multiethnic conglomerates competing with each other became parcelled out into individual races under colonial administration.

Why did you then move away from the Malay-Chinese communities?

I think there is a link between this Baba story and how I got into the Hadramis, because both communities were very similar. While studying the Chinese in Malaysia, I was also looking at the Chinese across Southeast Asia as part of a larger diaspora. In places like Thailand and the Philippines they integrated so well into society that many of them became political leaders and rulers. In other places, like Indonesia, the Chinese were assimilating successfully until roughly the beginning of Dutch rule. Then the assimilation process was interrupted by colonial government, and Baba Peranakan emerged as distinct communities. Something similar happened in Malaya. Later on with the arrival of *totoks* (migrant Chinese) in the twentieth century, you have a re-Sinicisation. In these processes, at one point people from abroad integrate and assimilate, at some other point they become a third or creole community, and at yet another point they become racialised again. This was an analysis which William Skinner had put forward in his writings. That wider view of diaspora and how it can have different historical outcomes in different places and times was quite liberating intellectually, because it meant that you are not necessarily stuck in the position you find yourself in in a certain decade or place. It opened my mind up to all these different kinds of possibilities which exist either when you go back in the past or when you go sideways to a different country.

At some point I realised that there also were these Hadrami Arabs prominent in Southeast Asia who could also be thought of as a diaspora. In certain places like Malaysia they are considered Malay and are part of the elite, as descendants of the Prophet. In other places like the Philippines, they might be part of the Muslim groups who had been considered rebels ever since the Spaniards were there. In southern Thailand, some might be associated with Muslim separatists. In Indonesia, the situation is more mixed. Some of them became sultans of polities like Pontianak and Siak. In other places or times, native politicians such as Sukarno would be unhappy with them as people who make use of religion for their own purposes. So the Hadrami Arabs were quite similar to the overseas Chinese, having all kinds of different experiences across the region.

I wanted a way to compare and contrast their experiences with the Chinese, the Dutch, the English, and the Portuguese in the region. The Portuguese were also very well integrated in the Indian Ocean. Initially they felt that they were not climatically adjusted to the tropics. They became interested in tropical plants, which they ate, thinking to ingest as well the climatic and organismic elements of the region. They also intermarried with locals, thinking that their bodies would become acclimatised by intermixing with locals from the tropics. The Dutch also intermixed until roughly about 1800. There was a lot of intermarriage between the Dutch and the natives. Other Europeans used to make fun of it as the Dutch going native. It was only in the nineteenth century that it became all racially oriented and more concerned with preserving their racial identity. In Southeast Asia, we see all these different diasporas meeting and overlapping. The Arabs were one of them, but also the Chinese, the Dutch, the Malayalis, Tamils, Gujaratis, and Bengalis.

In your work there is a strict divide between the European colonisers on the one hand and Indian Ocean diaspora groups on the other. You write, "Europeans brought only their genes. Hadramis carried along their genealogies as well." Would a less strict divide be possible and perhaps informative as well?

In terms of a strict divide, if you think of independence in Malaysia and Indonesia, the Dutch were kicked out as foreign occupiers. Some Chinese were considered foreigners and were kicked out or sent back to China, but others were so localised that they couldn't be expelled. Although a small minority considered the Hadramis as foreigners, by and large they were considered natives. Not just natives; some of them were thought to be the most native of the natives, being the leaders of Islam. Once we think about this in the context of independence, you see very different outcomes for these communities which all were diasporic and had histories of intermixing and localisation. Why is it that you have these three very different outcomes upon independence? That is how I would see the Europeans within this matrix of intermixing.

But you also identify many local communities as part of a diaspora. By doing so, are not you removing them from their indigeneity and matrilinearity? For you, does indigeneity come only patriarchally?

What I found out was that in all these communities where you have a father who is Dutch, Chinese, Indian, or Bugis intermarrying local women, the children from that union are diasporic from the father's side and indigenous from the mother's side. What is strange is that many of these communities originally are quite patrilineal. It turns out that the mothers were very important. For example, a Chinese coming from China, fresh off the boat, smart and hardworking: a wealthy, locally established Chinese Baba has him marry his daughter. The kids take on the mother's surname or her father's name. So what you have is a sort of matriliney emerging.

Although many of these communities are thought of as patrilineal, in fact the matrilineal or matrilineal aspect is quite important. This is something which I found out through fieldwork. In the academic literature on the Baba Chinese, the mother's side is usually downplayed. Jean Gelman Taylor argues that Batavia was a matriclan society up to the nineteenth century.³ The women and the women's networks were actually the key players. Dutch men, whether they came from Holland, Sri Lanka, or Japan, when they came to the Indies it was through their wives that they became localised and rose up in the ranks. The Arabs have a very similar thing: they say that *al-niswan shabaka* (the women are a network). When the Hadramis came to the region, they also had marriages with local princesses or other local elites, and rose up in the ranks.

Pertaining to the theme of this special issue, legal history has been very central to your work, in which there are recurrent references to the Hadramis moving across borders with legal documents and that many of them were "concerned rather with hewing to the letter of the law." What is law for you in the Indian Ocean context?

First of all, it came as a surprise to me to have anything to do with law and legal history. As a child, I was always afraid of policemen. Malaysia is one of the most highly policed states in the world, in terms of the number of policemen per capita. When I was growing up, the policemen had these Italian cars called Alfa Romeos which were very fast. We had only bicycles, so we always tried to avoid the Alfa Romeos. We always ran away from the law.

When I started looking at the Hadramis I was not interested in law at all, but I soon realised reading the Hadrami texts that they often wrote about law. There was a book, *Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn* by Nawawī that was very popular among Hadramis, but it is essentially a legal book. There are discussions in it about certain dilemmas, such as what do you wipe yourself with when going to the bathroom in the desert? To me it was strange that this was law, because no policeman is going to come after you, no

judge was going to have a court case over how you wiped yourself in the desert or jungle. This changed my idea of what law is about. The Hadramis wrote a lot about law, but they also practised Sufism whether in rituals or in writings. In Islamic studies it is often said that law and Sufism are at odds with one another. But here I encountered people who were prime exponents of both. By studying the Hadramis I could see how law and Sufism were practised by the same individuals. When I was following the genealogies, I realised how the same issue could at times look like law, at times like mysticism.

When and why did you decide to focus on the Hadramis?

There are actually a few different paths which led me to the Hadramis. When I was in Singapore, I was working as an economist, and according to a survey by the *Economist* magazine at the time, Singapore came in number one as the world's most boring city. Working as an economist in the world's most boring city, I found myself wandering the streets quite often, ending up in the Arab Street area. There, the first thing I realised was that there was an international world of Islam. The Malay Sultan's palace is there, but there is also a Muscat Street and a Bussorah Street; names from across the Islamic world. It turned out that the Muslims in Singapore actually are quite a multicultural bunch. What was classified as a Malay neighbourhood was actually an international Muslim concourse. There are Javanese, Malays, Buginese, Omanis, Egyptians, and also Hadramis.

I took Arabic classes in the building of a Malay martial arts association (Persatuan Pencak Silat Singapura) and at one of their ritual gatherings commemorating the death of a holy man, they gave me a book with his long genealogy. I subsequently found another book with a similar genealogy from Lamu, East Africa, and one from Hadramawt as well. This made me realise that in Hadramawt, East Africa and Singapore a common genealogy existed, which basically connected these three very different places. That was a revelation.

I also realised that the Hadramis across the Indian Ocean were in all those places that the British had been in as well. This provided the opportunity to, in a sense, redo the lens of British colonialism, but through the eyes of an Arabic community or diaspora which had been present in all these places but in a very different social position. This was quite a different way of looking at colonialism and decolonialism, and on a very big scale. The Hadramis showed how native eyes were not just local eyes, and how they actually could be very international and cosmopolitan eyes.

Altogether, studying the Hadramis offered an interesting intellectual challenge. They had histories that were found in manuscripts and one could study them across the Indian Ocean. And they provided a different way of understanding and interpreting the international society through native eyes, not native of a small place, but of the whole Indian Ocean region.⁴

In your writings, the Hadramis appear as a single bloc, either as collaborators with or rebels against the Portuguese, Dutch, British, and the American colonisers or empires. By doing this, are not you making centuries-long and countries-wide struggles into that of a single diaspora-versus-empire story?

That is a very good question. One of the things which interested me about the Hadramis initially was that if you looked at one family, there were family members in different parts of the world. They were speaking very different languages and living in very different places. In one family, there can be Africans, Arabs, and Malays. In that sense, the Hadramis are like the United Nations within one family. To me, coming from racialised Malaysia, to encounter this sort of explosion of identities and languages within one family was hugely liberating. This was the interest that drove me.

You are right to say that the article “View from the Other Boat” about Bin Laden versus the United States seems to create a view of the Hadramis as one bloc fighting Europeans and later Americans for over five hundred years.⁵ Yet, I think that this idea of a bloc actually is one that only arises in certain critical moments in history and is a product of someone who is able to travel, to recognise familiarities and similarities, and who is able to marshal what are actually very different agendas, very different contexts, very different backgrounds, into one agenda. It is not one bloc, but it is someone of this diasporic community who recognises possibilities across the ocean, and attempts to mobilise them into one movement.

You wrote the article shortly after 9/11 while being based at an American university. What were the responses you received after publication?

When 9/11 happened, I was actually in the library looking at old colonial documents where British officials were trying to figure out why some of the Hadramis were going from Java to Aden, and whether they were “good” or “bad” Arabs. Someone called me to watch a small television in the library and I saw the planes crashing into the buildings. Then it turned out that behind it was an Arab, Bin Laden, someone from the Hadrami community. It hit me like a sucker punch. I was doing very historical work and suddenly reality hit me. I could not help but start working on this very contemporary phenomenon.

I was looking not just at the Hadrami diaspora, but also at the English as a diaspora. I was trying to figure out basically two diasporas: one Anglo, one Arab. One became an empire and one became anti-imperial. Although they actually had a lot to do with each other historically, I wondered at what point were they partners and at what point did the partners fall out? Which is exactly the story of the Bin Ladens and the Bushes, because they were partners in business and they fell out after 9/11. So essentially this was not about two different ethnic, racial, religious or cultural blocs against each other. Rather, this was about people who very closely associated with

each other as partners in business who then fell out with each other – on a great civilisational scale, we were made to believe.

I received various kinds of responses to the article. In my own anthropology department at Harvard there was only deafening silence. I was also involved in the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies and there the reception of the piece was much better. The head of that academy was Samuel Huntington, well known for his book *The Clash of Civilisations*. He invited me to present the piece and I got a lot of vigorous responses, including from someone who used to be in the CIA. I had argued that one of the reasons 9/11 happened was that the United States had brought a lot of arms, especially Stinger missiles, into Afghanistan to fight the Soviets, as part of a project to use Islam as a weapon. But after the Afghan war the Americans hadn't bought back those missiles or deweaponised the place. They did not clean up after themselves. Huntington's friend, who was the ex-CIA officer, looked at Sam, they both muttered and said: "Yes, there we made a mistake." Subsequently, I received a lot of invitations to present my piece in other places. I think it somehow struck a chord. At that moment, I felt that historical knowledge and context could help one think quite concretely about very contemporary phenomena.

Looking back at the article now, more than fifteen years after writing it and identifying the United States as an "invisible empire," how do you observe current American interventions in the Middle East, Yemen in particular?

There is a funny way in which the imperial powers flip things backwards. Marx said that ideology is like a camera obscura or a pinhole camera: it is the truth, but upside down. The image reverses. When American politicians talk about Islamic terrorism, they talk about invisible cells, about Bin Laden putting out secret and coded messages to his followers in televised videos. The dominant conviction is that these Muslim networks are quite invisible. This was exactly my analysis of the American empire.

One of the important things that can be done now is to show that. Because, if you for example look down the Swahili coast in East Africa, all these Arab and Muslim communities are targeted by both Americans and local governments in terms of surveillance, imprisonment, interrogation, torture, and so on. These communities are considered to be highly suspect. History and anthropology can show that these communities are not hidden or invisible. They are historical populations who have been there for hundreds of years. And yes, they have all these connections with each other. And yes, at some moments these connections can be mobilised. As Bin Laden has done. As Abd al-Rahman al-Zahir had done between Aceh, Malabar, the Hejaz, and Istanbul. As Sayyid Fadl did from Malabar through Yemen to Istanbul. Yes, there were these Hadrami figures who were able to mobilize followers. But the communities as a whole are not at all hidden nor illicit. They are these actual, historical, legitimate communities which involve men, women, children, sometimes sultans, lawyers, and human rights activists. They are interlinked and diasporic, but

they are legitimate communities. They can be studied and understood. And the simple fact of their spread does not mean that you should go round up or shoot whomever you think is an Arab or a Muslim. That is simply ridiculous.

Your work has been central to the field of Indian Ocean Studies. More recently, you have also been actively engaging in the relatively new field of Inter-Asian Studies. How are these two fields functioning in relation to each other?

I see Indian Ocean Studies as an early model, which has successfully demonstrated over the past thirty years how deep and wide connections can be across two places that are actually quite far from each other. Oceans in general (Mediterranean and Atlantic Ocean studies have shown the same) have proved to be productive laboratories for thinking about how distant societies can be connected to one another.⁶ More recently, scholars who work on continents have started to see the value of placing importance on these far-flung connections. The notion of the openness of interconnections is, to me, a key idea that has now been taken up as well by those who work on land and territory.

To bring it back to our earlier discussion on diasporas, what has become very clear to me is that diasporas are not exceptional. Diasporas are normal. As I mentioned before, Malaysia only became racialised after the British took over, and that produced the idea that mixed populations such as mixed Chinese or Malays are a strange phenomenon. Yet if you go back in history they were the norm. It is normal for people from Malabar to live in the Persian Gulf or in Java or the Malay Peninsula. It is normal for Bugis to be not only in Sulawesi, but in the Moluccas and even in Johor.⁷ It is not exceptional and they are not foreign intruders. It is normal for Jews to live among gentiles, among Greeks, among Europeans, rather than to be confined to a small piece of land that was home two thousand years ago. The norm is actually that people are spread out, not that they stay back home.

This presents an idea of a very mobile world, but many communities—the majority, the subaltern—are not necessarily mobile. Where does this leave the study of immobility?

The majority of South Asian scholars, following subaltern or postcolonial thought, took on a territorial approach that looks at the masses and the downtrodden peasants and their relations with the central state. This happened in the context of postcolonial independence, within a Nehruvian project, and I would say also in the context of American fears of peasant revolts leading to communism. It also tended to take for granted the unfinished British project of unifying the subcontinent by analysing the princely states as conservatives without true power; hollow crowns. There is a much smaller stream of South Asian scholars who did not focus on the territory but on the

sea surrounding South Asia. They gave a very different view of India; a view from the boat. The inter-Asia venture I think is essentially the last stage of decolonisation.

Inter-Asian connections precede colonialism, have a lot to say about colonialism, and have lessons for us in the postcolonial period. The current rise of China has to do with supply chains, and they reconnect Asian countries to one another. Before colonialism there were many intense, deep ties between the different Asian regions. It could be a small village in Kerala and a small village in Malaya. It is not all big scale but it was intense and longstanding. In the late colonial period these Asian countries became tied not to each other but to the colonial metropolis. Malaysians went to London, Indonesians went to Amsterdam, and others went to Lisbon and so on. These links to the Metropole still exist.

What has been happening across Asia in the past thirty years is the reknitting and strengthening of these Asian connections. What in Willy Brandt's terms is called South-South relations is actually a big historical development. It is the last stage of decolonisation and we don't quite have the concepts for it. One recent concept is globalisation but that is not exactly it. These phenomena are happening at a lower level than globalisation. We need to think of precolonial relations and of intermediate scales.

Is this why you criticise research projects and dissertation committees that have a preference for smaller case studies? Do you consider this a barrier for conducting "thick transregionalism"?

Yes, one of the good things that has happened in the past two decades is something called globalisation. Before, the anthropologist would study the village, and the village was somehow seen as representative of the country. The mantra was, we look small but we understand big things. But I think that if you look at small things, you will understand small things. You might not be able to understand the big things. I have never wanted to be stuck in one place or one time. I find it very claustrophobic to be stuck in a small place.

I tell my students: you need at least two places and at least two languages. And before you can connect them you need to know the two languages and the two places. You do not just do transnationalism or globalisation, because it is the rage today. You do it if you have a phenomenon which actually goes across these geographies over time. Most of my students work on Islamic societies which are spread out in at least two places, but they also study them over time. It is over time that a lot of data are generated.

Your book *Graves of Tarim* is a beautiful read, not only for your narratives, but also for its narration. You master the aesthetics of writing along with the ethnography of aesthetics. What are the things you pay heed to while you write?

People often think that when we do big space and big time we go abstract. And to me that is not what it is about. It is about following your nose. It is about going

someplace you have never been and recognising things which you know from somewhere else.

I do not have literary pretensions, but there are anthropologists who write very aesthetically, such as Nancy Munn. She was at the University of Chicago, where they believed that theory and ethnography have to be blended so well that you can't see the seam between the two. I think the way to blend it is within an aesthetic sense that comes out of the explication of place. Big abstract concepts of social science or historical agendas are hard to perceive. One can actually perceive them when one can smell them. When we go to Yemen and see these houses from mud. If they are well maintained they are white and bright, if they are not well maintained they melt into the earthen landscape, like the fine dust of the *wadi* (valley) in your nostrils. It is this sense of place which I try to capture in my writing. It is the sense of smell that I try to bring across in writing.

Once you really understand a place you can actually sniff out or sense things coming from elsewhere. And it is this meld of things from elsewhere and things very native to a place that captures my imagination. All these distant connections are not something abstract but they have to be something which you can feel and recognise in a visceral sense. That is something I want to convey to readers; to give a sense of how people participate in being connected to far-flung places. They often do not really have a sense that it is unusual, they just live their life. I want to convey how normal such an experience can be, to be in connection with relatives from far away and ancestors from many generation and centuries ago.

Which inter-Asia connections are you following at the moment? Where is your nose leading you next?

Recently I have been trying to figure out what different kinds of concepts we need for studying inter-Asia connections, rather than following internal contradictions, to study them in a central rather than a marginal way.⁸ Others are, I think, sensing similar things and want to articulate them. It will be a collective scholarly enterprise.

I am also thinking about how space and time can be coordinated but can also be disconnected. Amitav Ghosh made a very nice analogy when he said that history is like a river running in one direction, but that he is interested in the fish swimming in all different directions. I think this is a very nice way of putting it. Lives are not linear in the historical sense. How can one go back in time while moving in space? I think that it is the fish that I am currently quite intrigued by. The fish are the old diasporas, the Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Chinese, Hadramis. They have historical experiences and collective memories which span many different continents and oceans. I am intrigued by how these communities, when they travel in space, can also travel in time.

Notes

- 1 Engseng Ho, "Foreigners and Mediators in the Constitution of Malay Sovereignty." *Indonesia and the Malay World* 41 (2013): 146–67.
- 2 Engseng Ho, "Baba Identity in Penang." Dept. of Anthropology, Stanford University, 1985.
- 3 Jean Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia: Europeans and Eurasians in Dutch Asia*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009.
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