

History 3029 Transnational History: A New Perspective on the Past

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Book review

Duara, Prasenjit. *The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future.*

Asian Connections. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Prasenjit Duara is currently the Oscar Tang Chair of East Asian Studies at the History Department of Duke University. He was born and educated in India and received his PhD in Chinese History from Harvard University. His research focuses on Modern China. His previous three books were *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (1996), *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern* (2004) and *The Global and Regional in China's Nation-Formation* (2008). His work places Asian countries in the context of broader global and regional processes, thus incorporating ideas from world history.

The author sets out to find an alternative paradigm to three global crises in the modern world. The first is the problem of environmental sustainability, caused by competitive capitalist states legitimizing the conquest of nature for human needs since the eighteenth century. He argues that the modern world is now caught in a treadmill of competition and growth, and the resulting climate change has the potential to wipe out a large proportion of living beings. The second is the loss of transcendent authority to challenge worldly authorities. Here, transcendence is not limited to religion but includes ideas of scientific utopianism. The author argues there are currently few moral forces which offer alternatives to the paradigm of competitive capitalist states. The third is the continuation of competitive capitalist states in Asia, which has the potential to create irreversible effects on the environment for the modern world. However, the author notes that Asian civilizations have larger populations and live closer to nature. Together with state agencies and local communities, growing Asian countries such as India or China can create a more organic vision of the world we live in, as well as an appreciation for the sacredness of nature.

The book revolves around two central ideas: transcendence and circulatory histories. The author uses these two ideas as the basis of his alternative paradigm to solve the three global

crises. Transcendence is “a way of human knowing based upon an inscrutable yearning or calling” that “draws on a non-worldly moral authority.”¹ Circulatory history is a lens of viewing the circulatory nature of historical ideas and practices. The first chapter, “Sustainability and the Crisis of Transcendence,” describes the three global crises of the modern world. The author also attempts to find alternative historical and transcendent universalism in the Chinese and Indian traditions. The second chapter, “Circulatory and Competitive Histories,” details the idea of circulatory histories as the author’s basis of criticizing the national modernization narrative prevalent in current formations of history. The third chapter, “The Historical Logics of Global Modernity,” introduces complexity theory and “big history” as extensions of the logics of the new methodological concept of circulatory history in the second chapter. The fourth chapter, “Dialogical and Radical Transcendence,” distinguishes between the radical transcendence mostly associated with the Abrahamic traditions, and the dialogical transcendence in the plural and polytheistic non-Abrahamic traditions of Asia. The fifth chapter, “Dialogical Transcendence and Secular Nationalism in the Sinosphere,” explores the relationship between state and religion in late imperial China, identifying the methods of dialogical transcendence present in popular religions during the time period. The sixth chapter, “The Traffic Between Secularism and Transcendence,” examines how religions in Asia reacted to new religious ideas from the West in the nineteenth century. The seventh and final chapter, “Regions of Circulation and Networks of Sustainability in Asia,” examines the circulatory forces and networks that pervade Asia today.

The author argues that the non-Abrahamic religions of Asia are less exclusive and more accommodating of different sects. Abrahamic religions emphasize religious confessionalism and the idea of a chosen people, which the author argues is the prototype of competitive nationalism, leading to the current crisis of global modernity. Duara instead calls for non-absolutist conceptions of transcendence, which he calls dialogical. The book is full of examples of dialogical transcendence flourishing in Asia, such as the New Life movement in China initiated by Chiang Kai-Shek in 1934, which combined the ideas of modern citizenship with Confucian ethics and spirituality.² Duara focuses particularly on the values of self-cultivation, harmony, taking responsibility, and cooperation present in many of these Asian traditions, which offer possible alternatives to the current unsustainable model of competitive nation states.

¹ Prasenjit Duara, *The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 6.

² *Ibid.*, 207.

The book is structured following the author's central ideas, which does not allow for neat divisions between chapters. The author tries to split the book into three categories of investigation. The first is the identification of the forces and developments that have led to unsustainability. The second explores alternative ideas and movements in history that could restore a more sustainable world. The third is replacing the "national-modernization" model with the paradigm of "sustainable modernity" within the humanistic disciplines. The first two categories are historical whilst the third is methodological and conceptual. The author's core ideas of radical and dialogical transcendence and circulatory histories are present throughout the book.

In my opinion, the book succeeds in presenting a rich historical narrative, but the ideas of circulatory history and transcendence are problematic. The book's historical narrative is ambitious in scope. It attempts to integrate the history of East and West through the model of circulatory history. The author is adamant that we need to build a new, future-oriented and sustainable historical narrative with the idea of transcendence. He argues that nationalistic history and its focus on the West should be replaced by circulatory history. He lists numerous examples of circulatory history in his book; for example, in chapter 2, he describes the idea of civil disobedience which originated from the Indian texts of the Upanishads and the principal Vedas. These texts were then translated by Raja Rommohun Roy and were deeply admired and cited profusely by the American Transcendentalists. Thoreau published *Civil Disobedience*, which then influenced Mahatma Gandhi.³ This illustrates how ideas circulated from the East to the West and back again. The book has many similar circulatory histories, which are well researched and reflect the author's breadth of knowledge.

The author's sources come from three main academic disciplines, namely history, religious studies, and philosophy. For example, in chapter 7, "Circulatory regions and sustainability networks in Asia," the author borrows the idea of actor-network theory (ANT) from Bruno Latour's philosophical works *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991) and *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (2005).⁴ His examples of the development of networks in Asia are drawn from historical studies; for example, his examination of the precolonial maritime networks and modern Asian networks draws on the work of Hamashita Takeshi, which includes *The Tribute Trade System and Modern Asia* (1988) and "Intersecting

³ *Ibid.*, 53-53.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 242.

networks of Indians and Chinese: A Comparative Investigation of the Remittance System” (2003, in Japanese), which are historical works.⁵ As the author describes his book as a “historical sociology” of East and West, it is logical that the author draws on these three different academic disciplines to formulate his arguments.

In my opinion, the author succeeds in the first two categories of investigation in this book. The author is at his best when he delves into examples of his ideas. His command of Asian history produces condensed and brief histories on the religious traditions and evolution of ideas in different parts of Asia, such as Vietnam, Cambodia, China, and India. The author’s accounts of circulatory histories in the Asian region are extremely interesting and a testament to the author’s erudition.

The third category, owing to its methodological and conceptual leaning, should be judged on philosophical grounds, and in my opinion the author’s ideas, while laudable and certainly a step in the right direction, end up suffused with jargon and unclear terminology, which undermines the veracity of his arguments. For example, in chapter 4, “Dialogical and Radical Transcendence,” the author writes “we may think of this locus as a source of reflexivity on consciousness as a whole;”⁶ however, the term *reflexivity* is undefined here. The author could make his arguments much clearer for his audience if he restated and sharpened the definitions of the terms in the book.

The author’s digressions into deep philosophical discussions, in my opinion, distract greatly from the core purpose of the book, which is to find an alternative paradigm for a sustainable world. From a policy making perspective, large abstractions such as “dialogical transcendence” or “the traffic between the secular and transcendent,” while engaging and illuminating in an academic context, become difficult to translate into concrete suggestions on how we can create a more sustainable world. If the core argument is to “elevate planetary sustainability into a transcendent ideal,” the author has few discussions on how we may achieve it, such as the mechanisms of propaganda, cult creation and influence required to do so. The author traces the development of religious ideas and their circulations as if they were things-in-themselves, rather than ideas embedded in people and their needs in life.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 244-45.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

To give a personal example, I have an intimate relation with the Tiande religion and its offshoot, the Holy Church of Heavenly Virtue, and am therefore able to offer insight on the ideas of dialogical transcendence in this context. The Tiande religion worships Xiao Changming, a religious leader born in Sichuan in 1899. He was allegedly resurrected and soon gained a large following. The Tiande religion abides by the “Five Religions in One” principle. They claim to combine the doctrines of Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, and Islam, although they mainly worship buddhas. The “Twenty Virtues” of the Tiande religion is the main creed for all followers, and supposedly is the distillation of the ideals of the five religions into one simple and easy-to-understand chant. It exists in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China, and its current headquarters in Hong Kong is located in Tuen Mun.⁷

The author’s central argument is that the radical transcendence model espoused by the Abrahamic faiths has led to unsustainability, whereas the dialogical transcendence model common in Asian traditions can lead to a more sustainable future. However, in the case of the Tiande religion, I fail to see how dialogical transcendence can lead to a more sustainable paradigm in the secular realm. The mix of doctrine is illusory in the Tiande religion; for example, Christianity and Islam are mentioned only in a few lines in the sacred texts of the religion, and the twenty virtues are all based on Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian religious ideas. There is not necessarily a connection between the secular and the transcendent, either. The ideas, whilst proclaimed by every adherent of the Tiande religion, are most often just chants and religious mysticism that the followers themselves do not necessarily understand, let alone “traffic” into the secular realm.

In my opinion, a philosophical approach to these new religions in Asia, where the author applies philosophical concepts and sociological arguments to understanding these religions and their implications for his ideas of transcendence, do not necessarily reveal a complete picture. In the Tiande religion for example, there exist secret codes and rules that are only revealed to members within the “inner circle” that would surely be inaccessible to outside observers. In terms of methodology, an anthropological approach of understanding deeply what these ideas actually mean to members of the religion, without resorting to merely applying philosophical ideas, can create a clearer picture of the role of “dialogical transcendence” in Asia.

⁷ “Tiandi teachings,” Wikipedia, accessed November 2, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiandi_teachings.

Further, I am skeptical about whether the environmental ideals embodied within Asian traditions and dialogical transcendence necessarily lead to environmental protection. Duara himself admits that Buddhism and Daoism have done little to limit environmental pollution and damage in China. In the case of the Tiande religion, for example, a call for “returning to nature” does not preclude the Hong Kong headquarters deciding to raze large parts of nature to build additional buildings. More work is needed to discover whether dialogical transcendence can actually lead to the change needed to create a sustainable future.

Micah Muscolino approaches this issue from the perspective of environmental history. In his review, he writes that “Duara does remarkably little to engage with the work of environmental historians who have demonstrated that, environmental ideals aside, Buddhism and Daoism have done little to limit pressure on the environment in China’s past.”⁸ This notion matches my personal experience with the Tiande religion in Hong Kong. Muscolino concludes that the causal relation between transcendent cultural values and ecologically favorable outcomes remains open to further research.

In the third category of investigation on transcendence, the author at certain points extends his ideas into areas of inquiry that may not necessarily correspond. For example, in chapter 4, “Dialogical and Radical Transcendence,” the author argues that dialogical transcendence bears resemblance to philosophical ideas of complexity today.⁹ However, complexity describes “systems in which large networks of components with no central control and simple rules of operation give rise to complex collective behavior, sophisticated information processing, and adaptation via learning or evolution.”¹⁰ Examples include markets where individual self-interest leads to market efficiency,¹¹ or individual ants with relatively simple actions that lead to the sophisticated operation of an ant colony.¹² Dialogical transcendence, by the author’s own definition, is “a way of human knowing based upon in inscrutable yearning or calling with several attributes that coexist in varying degrees” which “permits coexistence of

⁸ Micah Muscolino, Review of *The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future*, by Prasenjit Duara, *Environmental History* 22, no. 2 (April 2017), 276.

⁹ Duara, *The Crisis of Global Modernity*, 143.

¹⁰ Melanie Mitchell, *Complexity: A Guided Tour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 12-13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4-5.

different levels and expressions of truth.”¹³ Both are complex and challenging ideas that have great implications on how we view the world, but they are in my opinion contradictory ideas.

In the same vein, Christopher Key Chapple argues in his review that at points the author stretches his theories too much, in an attempt to create a theory of everything.¹⁴ Although he does not explicitly mention specific areas, I would argue that the above attempt at combining complexity with dialogical transcendence is one such area.

I find Duara’s methodological ideas of transcendence and circulatory histories interesting but difficult to apply in the field of world history. The author distinguishes circulatory from circular, the former being a more self-evident methodological idea. He contrasts circulatory histories with nation building ideologies, which I find extremely important. Take any secondary school history education and more often than not its focus is on the nation rather than on ideas that have circulated between cultures. The author gives the example of the Kanji writing script and how it circulated within Asia.¹⁵ The ideas, whilst interesting, do not necessarily mean a completely new methodology. Describing history as circulatory is different from using the ideas of circulation as a starting point for historical research. Nevertheless, circulatory histories, in my opinion, and a focus on the connections between different states rather than a national history, are the way forward for global history as a discipline.

Interestingly, the example provided in chapter 3 provides an interesting case of how difficult it is to conduct research in the field of circulatory history. The author serendipitously discovered a connection between the famous Indian author Raja Rammohun Roy and the West on a stray sheet of paper in the library as a graduate student in the Boston area. This then led him to pick up scattered pieces of information over the years that slowly coalesced into a circulatory history on the idea of civil disobedience.¹⁶ However, to me it seems difficult to discover these circulatory connections in a field of information. By the author’s own admission in this section, he discovered it only by chance and had to slowly piece the history together over an extended period of time. The author proposes the ideas of circulatory histories but does not detail how to

¹³ Duara, *The Crisis of Global Modernity*, 6.

¹⁴ Christopher Key Chapple, Review of *The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future*, by Prasenjit Duara, *The Journal of Religion* 96 no. 2 (April 2016), 273.

¹⁵ Duara, *The Crisis of Global Modernity*, 85-87.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

conduct it. Further research has to be conducted to find a more systematic manner and the creation of technical tools to aid attempts at creating new circulatory histories.

The author does not specify an audience for the book; however, the book's two major ideas suggest that his audience is primarily scholarly. The author's goal is to shift the paradigm of historical narratives, from nation states to a more planetary narrative. Duara's two major ideas describe the reasons of the current crisis, and how some Asian communities are responding to it. Nonetheless, if the crisis of global modernity is as serious as Duara purports, I argue we must evaluate the practicality of his arguments. A policy maker or leader of a local community would find the book extremely difficult to read, nor would he or she find circulatory history or transcendence helpful ideas for solving the crisis of global modernity. They are useful ideas in understanding the reasons and responses to the crisis of global modernity, but the ideas remain descriptive, rather than prescriptive.

To conclude, I find the author's main argument against the unsustainable trends modernity well worth considering, and his direction of looking to Asia for answers commendable. His research on circulatory histories on a historical level is detailed and well worth pursuing; however, his philosophical discussions on a whole tend to confuse and puzzle the reader with its obtuse and impenetrable language. Further clarification is needed to transform "transcendence" and "circulatory histories" into usable methodological concepts for the field of world history.

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiandi_teachings.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiandi_teachings)