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Nishant Shah

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Asia in the edges: a narrative account of the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Summer School in Bangalore

Nishant SHAH

ABSTRACT *The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Summer School is a Biennial event that invites Masters and PhD students from around Asia to participate in conversations around developing and building an Inter-Asia Cultural Studies thought process. Hosted by the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Society along with the Consortium of universities and research centres that constitute it, the Summer School is committed to bringing together a wide discourse that spans geography, disciplines, political affiliations and cultural practices for and from researchers who are interested in developing Inter-Asia as a mode of developing local, contextual and relevant knowledge practices. This is the narrative account of the experiments and ideas that shaped the second Summer School, "The Asian Edge" which was hosted in Bangalore, India, in 2012.*

KEYWORDS: Inter-Asia, pedagogy, summer school, young researchers, cultural studies

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At the heart of the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies (IACS) project has been a pedagogic impulse that seeks to train young students and scholars in critical ways of thinking about questions of the contemporary. The ambition of developing an "Asian way of thinking" is not merely a response to the hegemony of North-Western theory in thought and research, especially in Social Sciences and Humanities. It is also a way by which new knowledge is developed and shared between different locations in Asia, to get a more embedded sense of the social, the political and the cultural in the region. Apart from building a widespread network of researchers, activists, academics and artists who have generated the most comprehensive and critical insights into developing ontological and teleological relationships with Asia, there have always been attempts made to integrate students into the network's activities. From student pre-conferences that invited students to build intellectual dialogues, to subsidies and fellowships offered to allow students to travel from their different institutions across Asia, various initiatives have inspired and facilitated the first encounter with Asia for a number of young researchers who might have lived in Asian countries but not been trained to understand the context of what it means to be in Asia. Over time, through different structures, such as the institutionalisation of the *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* Journal and the growth of the eponymous conference, the IACS has already expanded the scope of its activities, involving new interlocutors and locations in which to grow the environment of critical academic and research discourse.

Building upon the expertise and networks of scholarship developed for over a decade, the IACS Society initiated the biennial Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Summer School, in order to engage younger scholars and students with some of the key questions that have been discussed and contested in the cultural studies discourse in Asia. The IACS Summer School that began in 2010 in Seoul, is a travelling school that moves to different countries, drawing upon local energies, resources and debates to acquaint

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Table 1. The 2012 Inter-Asia cultural studies summer school: a snapshot

The Asian Edge
Core course: Methodologies for Cultural Studies in Asia (2–11 August, 2012)
Optional courses
The Digital Subject / Technology, Culture and the Body (13–16 August, 2012)
Language of Instruction: English
Homepage: http://culturalstudies.asia/?page_id=86
Inquiries: iacs@cis-india.org
Organisers: Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bangalore; The Centre for Internet & Society, Bangalore
Host: Centre for Contemporary Studies, Indian Institute of Sciences, Bangalore
Co-organisers: Consortium of Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Consortium Institutions; Institute of East Asian Studies, Sungkonghoe University, Korea
Course Coordinators: Nitya Vasudevan & Nishant Shah
Number of Students: 35 students from 12 Asian countries.
Number of Faculty: 17 from 5 Asian countries[a].

[a]A full list of instructors and the prescribed curriculum can be found at http://cis-india.org/internet-governance/iacs-summer-school-2012.

students with the critical discourse as well as the experience of difference that marks Asia as a continent. The summer school in 2012 was hosted jointly by the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society and the Centre for Internet and Society in Bangalore, India, in collaboration with the Centre for Contemporary Studies at the Indian Institute of Sciences.[1] For a snapshot of the Summer School, see Table 1.

Plotting edges: the rationale

The second summer school, hosted in August 2012, with the support of the Inter Asia Cultural Studies Consortium and the Institute of East Asian Studies, was entitled "The Asian Edge." We decided to stay with the metaphor of the Edge because it allowed us to experiment, both conceptually and in process, with new modes of engagement, interaction, knowledge production and pedagogy. The idea of an Asian Edge was interesting because it signalled a de-bordering of Asia. The Edge is also an inroad into that which might have remained invisible or inscrutable to those outside of it. The imagination of an Asian Edge brings in both the imaginations of geography as well as the notion of extensions, where Asia, especially in this hyper-real and geo-territorial age does not remain contained within the national boundaries. Within the Inter-Asia discourse, there has been a rich theorisation around what constitutes Asia and what are the ways in which we can reconstruct our Asianness that do not fall in the easy "Asian Studies" mode of being defined by the West as the ontological reference point. Chen Kuan-Hsing's (2010) argument in *Asia as Method*, where he argues that Asia is a construct that emerged out of the Cold War and needs to be deconstructed and unpacked in order to understand the different instances and manifestations of India, have captured these dialogues quite comprehensively. Similarly, Ashish Rajadhyaksha's (2009) landmark work *Indian Cinema in the time of Celluloid* marks how questions of nationalism, modernity, governance and technology have been peculiarly and particularly tied to cultural objects and industries such as cinema, not only in negotiations with the post-colonial encounters of India with its erstwhile colonial masters but also with the different locations and imaginations of India. Chua Beng-Huat (2000) in *Consumption in Asia* similarly points at the ways in which Asia works at different levels of materiality and symbolism, creating communities, connections and commerce in unprecedented ways, not only within Orientalist imagination but in Asia's own imagination of itself.

The Asian Edge was also a way of introducing new thematic interventions in the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies discourse. While

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the IACS project has invited and initiated some of the most diverse and rich conversations around cultural production—ranging from creative industries to cultural politics; from cultural objects to flows of consumption and distribution—we haven't yet managed to shift the debates into the realm of the digital. The emergence of digital technologies has transformed a lot of our vocabulary and conceptual framework, but we haven't been able to translate all our concerns into the fast-paced changes that the digital ICTs are ushering into Asia. With this summer school, we wanted to introduce the digital and the technological as a central trope of understanding our existing and emerging research within inter-Asia cultural studies. And the edge, borrowing from the Network theories that have their grounds in Computing, Actor-Network modelling and ICT4D discourse, gives us another way of thinking about Asia. As the computing theorist Duncan Watts (1999) points out in his model of our universe as a "small world", the edge, within networks is not merely the containing limit. It is not the boundary or the end but actually the space of interaction, communication and exchange. An edge is the route that traffic takes as it moves from one node to another. Edges are hence tenuous, they emerge and, with repetition, become stronger, but they also die and extend, morph and mutate, thus constantly changing the contours of the network. The ambition was to refuse the separation of technology from the Cultural Studies discourse, introducing what Tejaswini Niranjana in her work on Indian Language education and pedagogy calls "Integration" (Niranjana et al. 2010) rather than "interdisciplinarity". It was also to provide a different historical trajectory to technology studies, what science and technology historians Kavita Philip, Lily Irani, and P. Dourish (2010) call "Postcolonial Computing."

The Asian Edge then became a space where we could consolidate the knowledge and key insights from the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies discourse, but could also open it up to new research, new modes of engagement, and new questions that need the historicity and also the points of departure. These ambitions had a direct impact on both the structure of the Summer School as well as the processes that were subsequently designed to implement it.

The core course: methodologies for cultural studies in Asia

The Inter-Asia Summer School in Bangalore thus had some distinct ambitions, which were reflected in its structure. While it wanted to reflect the rich heritage of scholarship that has been produced through the decade-long interventions, and give the participating students a chance to engage with these intellectual stalwarts of Asia, it also wanted to reflect some of the more cutting-edge and future-looking work that is also a part of the movement's younger scholars. Hence, instead of going with the traditional model where the pedagogues teach their own text, explaining the nuances and intricacies of their work, we decided to stage a dialogue between the existing scholarship and emerging work. The curriculum for the summer school was designed by Dr Tejaswini Niranjana, Dr Wang Xiaoming and Nitya Vasudevan, to form the first Inter-Asia Cultural studies reader, reflecting the various trends and debates around different themes that have occurred in the movement. The reader, which served as a basic textbook for the summer school, and has plans to be bilingual (English and Mandarin Chinese), introduced historical thought, critical interventions and conceptual frameworks drawn from different locations within Asia. The reader not only incorporated the scholars whose work has shaped the Inter-Asia cultural studies movement but also the formative modern thought that has been central to the social, cultural and political theorisation in Asia.

However, instead of inviting the scholars whose work has been central to the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies thought, the instructors for the courses were younger critical scholars who are building upon, responding to and entering into a dialogue with the work

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prescribed in the curriculum. The pedagogy, hence, instead of becoming a "lecture" that synthesises earlier work, became a three-way dialogue, where the students and the instructors were responding to common texts, not only in trying to understand them but also in the context of their own work and interests. Moreover, each session was co-taught, by instructors from different disciplines, locations and geographies, to show how the same body of work can be approached through different entry points and pushed into different directions. The classroom hours, thus became a "workshop" space where the students and the faculty were engaging in a dialogue that sought to make the historical debates relevant to the discussions in the contemporary world. They also showed how the older questions persist across time and space, and that they need to be engaged with in order to make sense of the world around us.

Additionally, the Summer School classroom was designed as a space for collaborative pedagogy. The morning discussions around texts from the readers were followed by students presenting their work as a response to the texts prescribed for the day. Taking up a pecha-kucha format, it invited students to introduce themselves, their work, their context and their interventions and to open everything up for response and dialogue. The ambition was to build a community of intellectual support and interest, so that the students not only forge an affective bond but also a sense of collaboration and commonality in the work that they are already pushing in their existing research initiatives. The faculty for the day, along with some of the senior scholars also attended these presentations and helped tie in some of the earlier questions that might have emerged in the class, to the new material that was being introduced in the space.

While this dialogue around new research was fruitful, we also were aware that there is a huge value in getting the students to interact with some of the more formative scholars whose work was prescribed in the curriculum. Hence, alongside the classrooms, we also hosted three salons that brought some of the significant scholars from the Inter-Asia movement into a dialogue with each other, as well as into a conversation with local intellectuals and activists. The first salon, organised at the artist collaborator 1 Shanthi Road, saw Chen Kuan-Hsing and Tejaswini Niranjana, discussing the impulse of the Inter-Asia movement. Charting the history, the different trajectories and the ways in which it has grown, both through friendships and networks, and intellectual interventions and collaborations, the conversation gave an entry-point to younger scholars in understanding the politics and the motivation of this thought journey. The second salon, organised at the Alternative Law Forum, had Ding Naifei (Taiwan) and Firdaus Azim (Bangladesh) in conversation with legal sexuality and human rights activists Siddharth Narrain and Arvind Narrain (India) to unpack the politics of rights, sexuality, modernity and identity in different parts of Asia. The third salon, hosted at the Centre for Internet & Society, saw Ashish Rajadhyaksha (India) in conversation with Stephen Chan (Hong Kong) looking at questions of infrastructure, sustainability and the new role that research has to play in non-university and non-academic spaces and networks. The salons were designed to be informal settings for conversations and socialising, giving the summer school students access to the senior faculty outside of the classroom setting.

The summer school also wanted to ensure that the students were introduced to the materiality and the texture of the local, to understand the different layers of modernity and habitation that the IT City of Bangalore has to offer. Hence a local tour, charting the growth of Bangalore from a sleepy education centre to the burgeoning IT City that it has become, guided by curator and artist Suresh Jairam, was included as a part of the teaching. The four-hour walking tour laid bare the different contestations and layers of an IT city in India, showing the liminal markets, local cultures of production, and the ways in which they need to be factored

into our images and imaginations of modernity and the IT City. Along with these, there were student parties arranged in different local clubs and institutions of Bangalore, to offer informal spaces of socialising for the students but also to give them a glimpse of what public spaces and cultures of being social might look like in a city such as Bangalore.

The summer school found a new richness because two of the days were twinned with a workshop on Culture Industries, supported by the Japan Foundation, which became a pedagogic space for the summer school participants. The students had a new focus introduced to their work and a chance to meet other scholars and activists in the field from Asia, who presented their work as part of the Summer School. The creative industries workshop also afforded a chance for students to form new connections and collaborations with projects and research initiatives that were being discussed in that forum.

These different components were thus designed and put together as a part of the core course for the Inter-Asia Summer School in Bangalore. Each component had a specific vision and was designed to offer different spaces of learning, pedagogy and interaction for everybody included. The core course was an overview of the diversity and exchange that are parts of the Inter-Asia movement. The course ended with a "booksprint" model where the students, inspired by the conversations at the summer school, were given a day to submit written work that would capture their own learning and growth in the process. The submissions could take the form of an academic essay, a sketch towards a research essay, a blog entry summarising key events from a particular conversation, or a narrative summary of the key points in their own research and how it relates to the conversations at the Summer School. While the core course was compulsory for all the participants, the Summer School also offered two optional elective courses, which the students could opt for after the core course was concluded. The optional courses were designed to introduce students to work and debates that had not yet emerged centrally in the Inter-Asia debates, but were part of their current conversations.

New nodes: Optional courses: the digital subject/technology, culture and the body

The optional courses, which lasted for four days, were a way of introducing the students to some new core debates that are emerging in the Cultural Studies discourse. The courses were designed to specifically concentrate on how the older questions and frameworks are being reworked with the emergence of digital technologies, thus helping students to consolidate their own work and also engage with research initiatives across different parts of Asia.

The first optional course, entitled "The Digital Subject," was coordinated by Nishant Shah and had lectures by Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Lawrence Liang. It proposed to account for the drastic changes in the relationships between the State, the Citizen and the Markets with the rise of digital technologies in the twenty-first century. The course proposed that as globalisation consolidates itself in Asia, we see changes in the patterns of governance, of state operation, of citizen engagement and civic action. We are in the midst of major revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa, powered by digital social change, some headed by cyber-utopians specialising in Web 2.0 and Social media. Phrases such as "Twitter Revolutions" and "Facebook Protests" have become very common.

Instead of concentrating only on the newness of technology-mediated change, there is a need to engage with the changing landscape of political subjectivity and engagement through a reintegration of science and technology studies with cultural studies and social sciences. The course thus posited certain questions that need to be addressed, within the domain of cultural studies, around the digital: what does a digital subject look like? What are the futures of existing socio-cultural rights based movements? How do digital

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technologies produce new interfaces for interaction and mobilisation? How do we develop integrated science-technology-society approaches to understand our technology-mediated contemporary and futures?

Through a series of seminars, workshops, film screening, lectures, and field-trips, the course challenged the students not only to look at new objects of the digital but also to ask new questions of the old, inspired by the new methods and frameworks that the digital technologies are opening up for us.

The second optional course entitled "Technology, Culture and the Body" was coordinated by Nita Vasudevan and had Audrey Yue, Ding Naifei, Tejaswini Niranjana, Wing-Kwong Wong, and Hsing-Wen Chang as instructors. The course began with a hypothesis that, at this moment in history, we seem to be embedded in what Heidegger calls "the frenziedness of technology." Hence, now more than ever, it is important that we try to understand how the gendered body relates to technology, and what this means for the domain of the cultural. For instance, what are the freedoms that technology is said to offer this body? What are these freedoms posed in opposition to? How do we understand technological *practice* contextually, both historically and in the contemporary? Is it possible to have a notion of the body that is outside technology, and a notion of technology that is outside cultural practice?

The course called for a move away from the idea of technology as a tool *used* by the human body, or the idea of technology as mere prosthesis or extension, to map the different ways of understanding the relationship between culture, technology and the body, specifically in the Asian context. It will involve examining practices, cultural formations and understandings that have emerged within various locations in Asia. The course engaged the students in close-readings of key events and texts, hosted workshops to present and critique their own work, and think of collaborative pathways towards future distributed research and pedagogic initiatives that can emerge within the Inter-Asia space.

Both courses had additional assignments that included close-reading of texts, practical field work, critical reflection and collaborative projects completed during the span of the course.

Tying things up: key learnings

The Second Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Summer School was an ambitious structure, and while there were logistical hiccups in the implementation, there were some key learning aspects that need to be highlighted.

(1) *Working with tensions*. Asia is not a homogeneous unified entity. There are several geo-political tensions that mark the relationships between different countries in Asia. While the academic protocol and individual interest in learning more can help negotiate these tensions, these tensions do play out in different linguistic, cultural and emotional unintelligibility, which becomes part of the pedagogic moment in the Inter-Asia classroom. Orienting the instructors to these tensions, and trying to build a collaborative environment where the students appreciate these tensions and learn to communicate with each other and engage with the different contexts is extremely valuable. In the summer school, we had students helping each other with translation, providing new contexts and critiques for each other's work, and learning how to engage with the palpable difference of somebody from a different country. These tensions can sometimes slow the content and discussions in the classrooms, but taking it up as a collective challenge (rather than just thinking of it as a logistical problem where students not fluent in English need to be given tools of translation) made for a productive and rich learning environment.

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(2) *Ownership of community structures*. When young scholars from different parts of the world are thrown together for such an intense period of time, it is inevitable that there will be bonds of friendship and belonging that grow. We had debated about whether we should invest in doing online community building by creating platforms, discussion boards and other structures that accompany digital outreach and coordination. However, apart from the initial centralization for applications and programming, we eventually decided to make the participants owners of these activities.' to give a better sense of the 'digital structures of community building'. And it was fascinating to see how they formed social networks, blogs, Tumblrs and other spaces of conversation among themselves, making these spaces more vibrant and diverse, thus leading to conversations beyond the summer school.

(3) *Infrastructure of participation*. The Summer School was an extremely subsidised event thanks to the generous support of the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Consortium, the Institute of East Asian Studies and the Indian Institute of Sciences, who helped in significantly reducing the costs of registration. The availability of travel fellowships, subsidies, scholarships, and an infrastructure of access cannot be emphasised enough in our experience. Owing to the subsidised costs, the living conditions and the logistics were not optimal. And while the students were extremely cooperative and accommodating with the glitches, we realised that better living conditions and amenities, especially for young students who are travelling to a different country for the first time, are as important as the classroom and the intellectual thought and design. Finding more resources to ease the conditions of travel and living will help build richer conversations inside and outside the classrooms. Sustained efforts to find more funding for a space for the IACS summer school need to be continued.

(4) *Selection processes*. It was wanted to promote the Inter-Asia movement and hence a first preference was given to students who applied for the summer school through an open call for application. The students were asked to have references from people who have been a part of the movement, and also to send in a brief essay describing their expectations from the summer school. We were scouting for students—given that the numbers we could accept were limited—who were involved in not only learning but also in contributing to the social and political thought of the Inter-Asia movement. We also encouraged students who might not have been a part of a formal education system but are considering further education. Instead of building a homogeneous student base, there was an attempt made to find different kinds of students, from different locations, at different places in their own research work, and with different disciplines and modes of engagement. Scholarships and travel aid were offered to students who we thought deserved to be a part of the summer school but did not have access to university resources for participation. The diversity helped bring a more comprehensive compendium of skills and methods to the table.

(5) *Integration and relevance*. Younger students often find it difficult to deal with historically formative texts from other contexts because they do not see how this responds to their context or is relevant to their work in contemporary times. Efforts at integrating the different cultures, showing the different trajectories of thought and research within Asia, and at locating the older texts in the context of modern-day research were hugely rewarding and more attempts need to be made to continue this process of making the historical

archive of the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Movement relevant and critical in new research.

(6) *Planning the futures*. The participants had all indicated that post the Summer School, they would be excited to see what future avenues for participation there could be. With this summer school, we hadn't looked at modes of sustained engagement with the participants. While they did take the initiative to communicate with each other, the momentum that was generated because of these discussions could not be captured in its entirety because we did not have any formal structures and processes to continue the engagement. Especially if the IACS summer schools are some sort of an orientation into the IACS movement, then there should be more systemic thought given to how those interested in engaging with the questions can do so, through their own academic and institutional locations, but also through different kinds of support structures that continue the conversations and exchange that begin at the Summer School.

(7) *Synergy with the local*. For us, as well as for the students, the synergy with the local movements, activists, artists and research was fruitful and productive. One of the values of a travelling summer school is that every summer school can take up a particular theme that is locally relevant and weave it into the summer school. For Bangalore, it made logical sense for us to bring questions of Digital Technologies and Identity/Bodies into the course. Even within the core course, there was an effort to integrate these as key questions that open up new terrains of thought and research within Inter-Asia cultural studies. The optional courses, which were introduced for the first time, were exciting and generated a lot of interest and engagement from the participants. Attempts at creating these kinds of synergies need to be supported along with new and experimental modes of pedagogy and learning.

The Second Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Summer School was a great opportunity to harness the potentials of the incredibly rich and diverse network that the IACS movement has built up over more than a decade. For us, it also became a playground where, inspired by the hacker culture and DIY movements that dot the landscape of Bangalore, we experimented with different forms of learning and knowledge production. Involving the students as stakeholders in the process, engaging with them as peers, making them responsible for collaborative learning, and creating spaces of participation and socialisation helped us circumvent many of the problems of language and cultural diversity that might have otherwise crippled the entire process. Pushing these modes of interaction and integration, while also creating an environment of trust, reciprocity and goodwill, is probably even more important than the curriculum and teaching, because these interactions create new nodes and connections, with each student and his/her interaction creating new edges that will hopefully shape and contribute to the contours of critical thought and intervention in Asia.

Note

1. A mammoth project such as the Inter-Asia Summer School requires resources, support and generosity from family, friends, and colleagues that can never be measured or cited in a note. However, there are a few people who need to be mentioned for their incredible spirits and the resources that they extended to us. Dr Raghavendra Gaddakar at the Centre for Contemporary Studies, Indian Institute of Sciences and his entire staff were patient and hospitable hosts, housing the entire summer school for over a fortnight. The faculty, students and staff at the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society (CSCS) Bangalore helped in designing courses, finding venues and organising events that added to the richness of the summer school. Raghu Tankayala and Radhika P, both at CSCS were our rocks through this process, taking up a lion's share of logistical arrangements. The help of the entire staff at the Centre for Internet and Society, who were there every step, helping

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with every last detail, and the Executive Director Sunil Abraham who lent us infrastructure and financial support to organise various events and salons, is unparalleled and I know I would have found it impossible to work without the knowledge that they would always be there to watch my back. All the instructors who agreed to join the teaching crew made this summer school what it became (a full list can be found at http://cis-india.org/internet-governance/iacs-summer-school-2012). Both Nitya Vausdevan and I owe a huge amount of gratitude to the IACS society and the Consortium, as well as the stalwarts of the IACS movement who put faith in our vision, and pushed us, supported us, inspired us and helped us to carry out the different things we had planned. The local partners who make our life worth living—friends and colleagues at 1 Shanthi Road and The Alternative Law Forum—have been our rocks and we cannot thank them enough for their support and encouragement. A special thanks to Daniel Goh, who apart from being a faculty member, also helped us put together the website to manage the workflow for the entire project.

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Author' biography

Nishant Shah is the Director of Research at the Bangalore-based Centre for Internet & Society, an International Tandem Partner at the Hybrid Publishing Lab, Leuphana University, and a Knowledge Partner with Hivos, in The Hague. He is the editor of the four-volume anthology *Digital AlterNatives with a Cause?* and writes regularly for the Indian newspaper *The Indian Express* and for the Digital Media and Learning Hub at dmlcentral.net. His current areas of interest are Digital Humanities, Digital Activism and Digital Subjectivity.

Contact address: #192, 2nd C Cross, Domlur 2nd Stage, Bangalore, 560071, Karnataka, India.

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