

Special Issue

Introduction: Can Asians Critique?

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The question “Can Asians Critique?” serves as the point of departure for this special issue, not as a provocation concerning intellectual capability, but as an invitation to re-examine the historical formation, conceptual boundaries, and enduring possibilities of critique itself. At stake is not the inclusion of Asian thinkers within a pre-existing canon of critical theory, but the conditions under which critique has been defined, institutionalised, and geographically delimited within dominant philosophical traditions. In particular, this question compels us to reflect on the extent to which Asia has been structurally excluded from, and yet continues to preserve, the potential for critical thought beyond its marginalisation.

The European tradition of critique is commonly traced to the Enlightenment, most notably to Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, where critique is formalised as the interrogation of reason’s capacities and limits. This Kantian model established a foundational framework for modern philosophy and the human sciences, positioning critique as a reflective mode that subjects systems of knowledge to rational examination. Over time, this understanding of critique became synonymous with philosophical modernity itself, shaping the parameters of what counted as critical inquiry. However, in establishing itself as a universal rational discourse, European critique simultaneously obscured and displaced other traditions of reflective thought. It defined itself not only through epistemic rigour, but through selective remembering and forgetting.

The role of Asia in this history has been largely occluded. While European thinkers were not unaware of Asian traditions, these were rarely acknowledged as constitutive of philosophical modernity. The offhand remark by Friedrich

Nietzsche referring to Kant as the “Chinaman of Königsberg” is emblematic of this ambivalence: Asia is present in the European imaginary, yet marked as exterior to the unfolding of reason. Within such a framework, Asia is not excluded through ignorance, but through a structural act of erasure that renders it intellectually peripheral and conceptually subordinate

The Tradition of Critique in Asia

Rather than viewing this erasure as total, this issue proposes that Asian traditions have continued to preserve the possibility of critique, not by replicating European models, but by sustaining alternative modes of reflection, judgment, and intervention. These modes, while often unrecognised within dominant theoretical vocabularies, nonetheless engage in forms of critical practice oriented toward ethical discernment, social accountability, and epistemological inquiry.

The historical record provides ample evidence of this continuity. In classical Indian philosophy, traditions such as Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, and Buddhist logic developed systematic procedures for debate, inference, and the evaluation of truth claims. In early Chinese thought, the Mohist critique of ritual hierarchy and the Daoist skepticism of normative constructs exemplify distinct forms of philosophical questioning. In Southeast Asia, oral traditions—riddles, aphorisms, metaphorical narratives—have served as vehicles for social commentary and moral critique, often operating within culturally embedded registers rather than through formalised theoretical abstraction.

These practices are also reflected at the level of language. In Tagalog, *kritika* coexists with terms such as *puna* (criticism or correction), *pansin* (notice or observation), and *puri* (praise), suggesting a continuum of critical engagement ranging from subtle attentiveness to overt dissent. In Bahasa Indonesia, *kritik*—borrowed from the Dutch *kritiek*—encompasses not only judgment but also suggestion, interpretation, and evaluation. In Javanese, lesser-used but conceptually rich terms such as *pamrayoga* (constructive suggestion) and *panyaruwe* (correction) point to modes of critique oriented not toward polemic but toward maintaining social equilibrium.

In this sense, the term “critique” (*kritikē*), while sounding so contemporary, is actually a very old concept. From the Greeks, we have learned that it refers to “the faculty of judgment.” From the French, however, we were told that it is “the art of criticism.” Interestingly, it has retained the Greek sense of *kritike tekhnē* or “the critical art” which, oddly, one might consider a contradiction in terms. *Kritike tekhnē* implies that “critique” is about both criticism, and art. Today, as we know,

the critical and the artistic have been separated out like contrapuntal categories.

In Southeast Asia, the idea of what is called “critique” is not new either but differently inflected. In Indonesian literary and cultural studies today, for example, the translation of “critique” is *kritik* in Bahasa Indonesia. Apparently, *kritik* is derived from the Dutch *kritiek* which refers to a whole gamut of senses including, criticism, comment, remark, and discussion. Although the Dutch *kritiek* and the Indonesian *kritik* sound quite similar, the Indonesian *kritik* today encompasses nuances of related Indonesian ideas implied by other deeply situational Indonesian words like *kecaman*, *tinjauan*, *telaah*, and *kupasan*, which imply a spectrum of associative meanings with words like criticism, censure, review, survey, study, or research. Nonetheless, the current local word, *kritik*, is clearly derivative of the term “critique” as it has been generally deployed in the West. Moreover, in the Malay language, “critique” is translated as *kritikan*. Used in context, its meanings range broadly from to review, to examine, to interpret, and/or to evaluate. Apparently, no equivalent indigenous word for “critique” exists in Philippine, Indonesian, and Malaysian languages, but that does not mean that the concept does not exist, however narrowly linguistic one might wish to limit the question posed by the colloquium.¹

Between Indonesia and the Philippines are hundreds of languages which are spoken by both the majority and minority cultures to whom the basic ideas of “critique” might hold a particularly counter-dominant meaning in their lives as individuals and as communities as it does among Tagalogs. This may be so because in Maritime Southeast Asia, conceptual categories are often literally and rhetorically rooted in people’s everyday life, history, culture, and society, such as those that are related to the word critique, which makes it difficult to find equivalent expressions between one language and another. From the vantage point of everyday life, *kritika* is not a specialist term for intellectuals alone; even workers engaged in collective bargaining use the term at will in the factories, or the Filipino domestic contract workers abroad in organizing themselves for community project with other domestic helpers from other countries in Hong Kong. Its meanings are refracted commonly yet variously across context-specific “locations.”

For example, in the Cebuano language, a major Philippine language, “critique” refers to “tuki” (examination, analysis or scrutiny) or “saway.” On one hand, “saway”

1 In Philippine literary and cultural studies, “critique” is generally understood in the context of the term *kritika* as drawn from European history of ideas initially via the Filipinos’ Spanish colonial education from the 16th century to the late 19th century and later, American colonialism in the early 20th century.

could mean negative criticism; on the other hand, it could also mean censorship¹ In other words, contrapuntally, on one hand, it could refer to the exercise of criticism, and on the other hand, it could mean the imposition of censorship, depending on its use in context. Clearly, this history goes back centuries. In the article, “*Magaling Datapoua: Ang Dating at Galing sa Estetika ng Ating Panitikan*,” (“Good but...”) foremost Philippine studies scholar, literary and cultural critic and National Artist, Bienvenido Lumbera, suggests that the emergence in the country of what is now called “kritika” as a critical category owes to some unarticulated assumptions between cultures.

Lumbera cites the case of the Spanish Dominican missionary, Francisco Blancas de San Jose of the famous *Memorial de la vida Cristiana* (1606) and *Arte y reglas de la lengua tagala* (1610) who had written a poem in Tagalog following the model of the Spanish versification that we recognize as the European “romance,” so beloved of Spanish sailors, Poetically, the romance is very different from the seven-syllable one that the natives had traditionally followed, such as the poetic form called the *tanaga*. Lumbera explains that the Spanish friar had asked a Tagalog native to read his poem. To quote, “*Sa pag-aakala marahil na hahangaan at tutularan ang kanyang katha, ipinabasa niya ito sa isang katutubo*” (“Expecting his work to be admired and emulated, that Spaniard asked a native to read it”). In response, the native was said to have replied, “*Magaling, Datapoua Hindi Tola*” (Good, but it is not a poem.).²

One might surmise the reason why. For one, the romance that was brought into the islands told tales that were written either in dodecasyllabic or octosyllabic lines, while the Tagalog *tanaga* of the natives used the conventional seven-syllable versification which was laden with metaphors. Moreover, the European romance, which took the form of the dodecasyllabic *awit* and the octosyllabic *corrido* were traditionally about love and adventures which were set in the Middle Ages. On the other hand, the *tanaga* consists of four lines with seven syllables each with the same rhyme at the end of each line—that is to say a 7-7-7-7 syllabic verse, with an AABB rhyme scheme. Like the Japanese haiku, the *tanaga* is traditionally untitled and most are handed down by oral history, and contain proverbial forms, moral lessons, and ethics.

In addition, while the romance followed a narrative thread, the *tanaga* spoke in metaphors. Therefore, in terms of poetics, one might say that the “encounter”

1 The Cebuano language is the lingua franca of Central Visayas, parts of Eastern Visayas, some parts of Palawan, and most parts of Mindanao.

2 Bienvenido Lumbera, *Tomas*, Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies, University of Santo Tomas, July 2021, pp. 189-199.

between the romance and the *tanaga* was a clash of aesthetics. But what could also be inferred is that the Tagalog native's remark about the Spaniard's "poem" had implications deeper and bigger than just a matter of aesthetic taste; basically, the encounter was undergirded by a clash of cultures.

Present-day "kritika" in Tagalog derives from the Spanish "critica" bringing into it the European sense of "critique" whose meaning ranges from the descriptive and analytical (appreciation) to the normative and critical (evaluation). *Kritika* in Tagalog, refers to a spectrum of meanings today in everyday language. From one end of the hermeneutical spectrum, there is the sense of "pansin" (to observe, notice, remark, recognize;), and on the other end, the sense of "puna" (to criticize, comment, fault-find, censure), thereby moving between the senses covered by the rhetorical force of "explication," the imaginative energy of "interpretation," and the polemical power of "argumentation."

Indeed, old Javanese words exist though rarely used now which are associative of "critique." Words like *pamrayoga* which means a suggestion or an advice or *panyaruwe* which means criticism or "kritik" as they also say. *Pamrayoga* refers to an advice or solution given to solve a problem that has a constructive and objective nature. On the other hand, *panyaruwe* also refers to criticism that is meant to correct a problem. Interestingly, these Javanese terms align quite well with the fine distinction between the Tagalog *puna* and *pansin*, where Asian "ethics" and Western "critique" seem to overlap in places. More importantly, they both admit of critique's situatedness and contingency.¹

In the age of globalization, there are at least two important considerations in the understanding and deployment of "critique" in the specific case of the literature and culture of archipelagic Philippines and Indonesia, in particular. The first consideration is their long literary history that may be both traced back to precolonial orature. That, despite the historical dominance of Java Island

1 In Tagalog, deployed in contemporary context, the word *puna* could be used interchangeably or finely delineated to mean either the idea of *puri* (praise) or *pintas* (dispraise) on one hand, or the idea of mere *pansin* (observation). However, *pansin* can be couched in the language of a *puna* and if pursued, eventually end up as a *puna*. In traditional Javanese and Tagalog societies where the sense of "hiya" ("shame") and respect are observed, expressing "critique" of the strongly argumentative type would have been taken to be too impolite and combative to be practiced so openly. Indeed, shame and respect are features of traditional Asian societies as well. Therefore, *kritik* or *kritika* may apparently come out to be just a *pansin* rather than a flat-out *puna*. Still, "critique" could be deployed similarly in specialist disciplinary discourses such as in literary and cultural criticism—called *kritisismo* or *panunuring pampanitikan* (literary criticism, in the sense of either *puri* or *pintas*, or both). As such, even literary criticism is as much a critique as any.

within Indonesia—its language, economics, and culture—or as in the case of the Philippines, especially its “Manila-centricism.” Indeed, their oral traditions are practiced side by side with written contemporary ones in the Philippines where riddles, proverbs or epics may be said to have carried in themselves “critiques” of their own concerning their communities about interpersonal manners, responsibilities of rulers, leadership, and governance. Understandably, in their orature, “critiques” often come wrapped in “ethics.”

The second consideration has to do with the fact that Indonesia and the Philippines are both archipelagos with a shared reality of multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-linguistic histories that have remained in the category of “developing countries” for so long but have never quite made it to league of “developed” countries for complex reasons, and our shared history of multiple colonization has not helped either. As archipelagos, Indonesia and the Philippines have shared vulnerabilities not only from natural disasters but also from those that are man-made, devastating the environment and triggering destruction to life and property, and the planet. Foreign multinational companies have been made rich by these countries’ rich natural resources while the majority of their own people have been impoverished by them.

For many decades now, Indonesia and the Philippines have been experiencing internal and external migration between or away from their islands. Globalization has been a boon and a bane, depending on whether you are the beneficiary or the victim of this international order. Global diaspora is endemic in the two countries because among the most important exports of their economies are not products but people—the human labor of the world’s working class. In neoliberal globalization, of course, people and products are interchangeably one and the same.

The situated nature of these practices challenges the assumption that critique is inherently adversarial, rationalist, or oppositional. In many Asian contexts, direct confrontation may be culturally proscribed, yet this does not foreclose the possibility of critique. Rather, it appears in alternative forms: coded speech, poetic refusal, or indirect address. The encounter between Western philosophical ideas and Asian traditions in the 19th and 20th centuries generated new forms of critical engagement. Asian thinkers neither wholly adopted Western concepts nor simply reverted to tradition. Instead, they developed hybrid intellectual strategies that questioned the presumed universality of European categories while reactivating local resources for critique. What emerged from this process was not a rejection of critique but its reconfiguration—what might be termed a postcolonial critique that addresses the dual task of provincialising Europe and pluralising the very concept of

critical thought.

Today, this work continues in response to shifting global conditions. Environmental degradation, technological transformation, labour precarity, and migration demand renewed forms of reflection that are attentive to lived realities and planetary entanglements. Asian critical traditions—whether articulated through philosophical systems, oral literature, or diasporic practices—offer conceptual resources for addressing these challenges. Their significance lies not in their proximity to Western models, but in their capacity to widen the scope of critique itself.

This special issue therefore proceeds from the premise that critique is not the exclusive property of any single tradition. Rather, it is a translatable and historically variable practice of thinking that emerges wherever systems of meaning, power, or value are interrogated. To ask “Can Asians Critique?” is to examine the conditions under which critique is recognised, the forms in which it appears, and the horizons it opens. Asia may have been forgotten in the dominant history of critique, but it has continued to preserve—and now rearticulate—its possibility.

What follows are contributions that engage with this possibility across philosophical, literary, cultural, and political contexts. They explore how critique operates in multilingual archipelagos, indigenous lifeworlds, colonial inheritances, and contemporary diasporas. Collectively, they aim not to supplement an existing canon, but to reframe critique as a field of thought responsive to plurality, contingency, and the unfinished work of conceptual transformation.

Critique, Rooted and Reframed

“A Return to Materiality: Reframing ‘Digital Feminism’ in South Korea” by Jay Hee-jeong Sohn analyzes cyberspace in 21st-century South Korea through the conceptual lens of digital gore capitalism, which offers a critical framework that foregrounds the lived realities of the Global South. Such realities are marked by uneven attempts to replicate a capitalist system orchestrated by the Global North, which often results in systemic failure, fragmentation, and violence. The analysis reveals the digital sphere as a space shaped not only by connectivity and innovation, but also by new forms of exploitation, discrimination, and exclusion.

The paper situates South Korea not as a peripheral imitator of Western modernity, but as a crucial site from which to theorize global techno-capitalist structures. In doing so, the paper seeks to displace Western-centric critiques of technology; instead it theorizes the materiality of the digital and the embodied experiences of those who engage with it. Drawing from the feminist resurgence in South Korea since the 2015 reboot and the digital lives of Korean women,

the paper highlights how feminist critique can intervene in dominant narratives of technological progress. Emphasizing materiality—a central concern in contemporary feminist theory—it challenges Big Tech’s transhumanist fantasy of immaterial, frictionless digitality, and proposes an alternative understanding of the digital rooted in situated, material, and embodied practices.

“Can Asians Feel? Affect Theory and the Decolonial Politics of Untranslatability” by Jeremy de Chavez presents a distinctive form of “Asian critique” by examining what Claudia Garcia-Rojas terms “white affect studies,” a field of research rooted in the work of white male psychologists and philosophers. Rather than starting with the question “Can Asians Critique?” the essay instead poses, “Can Asians feel?” This shift uses feeling as a foundation to propose an alternative affective reading practice that emphasizes the untranslatability of certain affects and emotions in Anglophone postcolonial texts. The essay argues that these moments of failed translation arise “from a discrepancy between the affects sedimented in literary form and the universalist language of emotion used to specify them.” It contributes to postcolonial criticism and Affect Theory by suggesting a new interpretative approach to the former and initial steps to decolonize the latter.

“Theory of Causation and Principle of Irreduction: Nagarjuna, Spinoza and Latour” by Ki-Myoung Kim challenges the essentialist binaries that have long shaped comparative philosophy—particularly the opposition between “Eastern” and “Western” traditions. Rather than offering a counter-essentialism that reifies “Asian philosophy” as a fixed and coherent category, Kim argues that such reversals risk reproducing Eurocentrism in the form of inverted Orientalism. Instead, the paper proposes a model of philosophical critique that moves beyond these dichotomies by tracing structurally resonant critiques of substantialist metaphysics in the works of Nāgārjuna, Spinoza, and Latour. This approach allows for a trans-traditional philosophical engagement grounded not in cultural identity but in conceptual convergence.

As an Asian philosopher trained in both East Asian and European intellectual traditions, Kim situates his work not outside but within the project of “world philosophy.” Indeed, the very signifier “Asia”—which historically marked what lay outside the conceptual geography of Europe—can now be reimagined as a space generative of philosophical thought that speaks across civilisational boundaries. The capacity to think across traditions—to identify resonances without collapsing differences—enables a distinctive mode of critique grounded in both historical specificity and conceptual agility. In this sense, Kim’s paper is an example of “Asian critique” not because of its geographic origin, but because it demonstrates how

philosophical thinking situated outside Euro-American institutional centres can intervene in global debates on ontology, identity, and power. It aims to contribute to a deprovincialized and truly planetary practice of philosophy.

“Theorizing the Selves: Hip-Hop and Subjectivity among Ambonese Youth” by Wening Udasmoro and Elizaveth F. Drexler theoretically positions critical island studies in the context of social sciences and humanities studies. Moreover, it tries to advance the scholarship in this field by unequivocally positioning itself in their interdisciplinary cross-section, contributing to its growing and deepening body of knowledge. In this perspective, the discussion in this article cannot be separated from other scientific perspectives, especially in the context of subject-object relations where power contestations are always present. Moreover, empirical experiences from the island could enrich the scientific debates in that field, giving rise to and even strengthening the critical island studies’ perspective and critical epistemology.

Against the dominant views, the subjectivity elaborated on in this article regards the islands not only as objects, as they are often portrayed, peripherally, against the broader question of Indonesian identity. The views expressed towards the positionality and subjectivity of Ambon Island suggests that the Ambonese are powerful subjects. They have collective authority, although their power is contested internally in various arenas of struggle. for their own identity.

“Predicaments of Prestige” by Joel David focuses on film criticism in the Philippines, its form of practice that, like the medium under review (film) and the medium used for criticism (print), which were both directly provided by the country’s Western colonizers, along with film commentary shaping itself after first American and later French models. Joel David argues that, in attempting to distance themselves from their foreign influences, Philippine film critics banded together and attempted to propagate what they envisioned as a new canon that embodied their own prescription for excellence. His inspection of this prestige-granting dynamic, taking off from James F. English’s critical reconsideration of Pierre Bourdieu’s studies of cultural capital, proceeds from his former insider status in the award-giving body as well as the academic institute dominated by these critics, and raises questions about processes, motivations, and the difficult possibilities of upholding progressive ideals in such an undertaking.

The study’s usefulness for Asian criticism lies in its acknowledgment of English’s argument that awards in the modern age will be as much problematic as inevitable; from this arises the need to look into how the prestige-granting body’s internal dynamics create a narrative of conflict, compromise, and influence-peddling

despite its members' claims to objectivity, consistency, and concern for upgrading the preferences of film audiences. Like English (and reworking Bourdieu), David does not advocate for the dismissal of prestige-making activities altogether; instead, what is initiated is a call for a carefully considered and historically responsive project of counter-canon formation.

"Diasporic Errantry" by Maria Luisa Torres Reyes examines errantry in moments of the country's history of diasporic poetics that does not just involve a scattering of people. It is not just about the dispersion but about their return to their homeland, or a reliving of homeland in a strange land among familiar objects, rituals, practices, and memories. It is about the coming and going of the Filipino overseas contract worker who returns home again and again after and in between work overseas as a domestic helper, a seaman, or a construction worker -- the repatriate (*balikbayan*). Alongside the OCW, is the *balikbayan* box, which contains both objects (*pasalubong*) and subjects (dead *balikbayan* 's body), the embodiment of that internationalist imaginary "elsewhere" of which Glissant speaks. Inside the moving box, crossing the oceans between home and not-home, is the errantry of the diasporic Filipino repatriate, caught between mobility and stasis under neoliberal globalization.

Finally, "Beyond Market Representation: Lacan, Fanon, and the Impossibility of Neoliberal Equality" by Alex Taek-Gwang Lee critiques how neoliberalism commodifies identity through a fantasy of equal exchange that ignores the structural realities of racial and sexual difference. Drawing on Fanon and Lacan, it argues that the neoliberal promise of market-based recognition is flawed because it assumes universal exchangeability, which colonial and patriarchal systems fundamentally obstruct. The essay shows how political demands for recognition are co-opted into market demands for representation, deepening the marginalization of oppressed subjects. Identity becomes an entrepreneurial pursuit that generates *jouissance*—a mix of enjoyment and suffering—rooted in the impossibility of recognition within market terms. Ultimately, the essay contends that resistance must confront the contradictions hidden by neoliberal exchange, rather than seek validation through it.

In closing, we thank the Critical Island Studies consortium, an international network of universities for participating in this publication project. CIS works to move away from the prevalent Eurocentric cosmology of nature, focusing on the study of oceans and islands instead of lands and continents from an archipelagic perspective.