

Entangled Worlds, Situated Knowledge; And Why Cultural Context Matters

Rachel Harrison
Professor of Thai Cultural Studies
Head of the SOAS Doctoral School

I often find myself feeling that the French “Father of Modern Philosophy” René Descartes has a lot to answer for. By privileging the activities of the brain in relation to being human, his much-celebrated maxim, “I think, therefore I am”, effectively decoupled body and mind, ejecting the former into a dead-end realm of imagined unruliness. Under the regime of Cartesian duality, body and mind were no longer intimately entangled as equal partners in the shaping of our awareness of the world around us. The violence of this separation, this antithesis of the recognition of the significance of entanglement, has, I suggest, wrought havoc on the processes by which our understanding of the world is currently shaped and experienced as researchers. Such (partial and partisan) “understanding” is sustained by the dominance of Western forms of knowledge production in global academia, of which Cogito Ergo Sum is a founding father. The dissemination of this perspective was fuelled first the European Enlightenment, then by the scientific and economic successes of the Industrial Revolution, that in turn fostered the heady vision of Modernity as the ultimate measure of civilisational prowess.¹ The sheer brilliance of science, exemplified by Joseph Wright of Derby’s well-known painting from 1768, *An Experiment with a Bird in an Air Pump* [see fig. 1.], becomes a focus for veneration. It is reflected in Wright’s dominant, central figure in the painting who towers higher than his assembled audience and is clothed in a red gown that draws the eye towards him. The faces of his surrounding spectators are visibly infused with the very ‘light’ of the Enlightenment. Only one among them – a young girl – who averts her gaze, perhaps suggesting the emotional fragility of the ‘fairer’ sex in the face of masculinised reason.

Continuing the theme of gendered division, it took the sensitivity of Mary Shelley, in her classic gothic novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), to expose the heartless path down which an obsession with scientific mastery had the potential to lead us. As her protagonist, Victor Frankenstein, explains to a fellow pioneer in this tale of scientific misadventure: “You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once

¹ As Dipesh Chakrabarty points out, this “‘first in Europe, then elsewhere’ structure of global historical time was historicist; different non-Western nationalisms would later produce local versions of the same narrative, replacing ‘Europe’ by some locally constructed center. It was historicism that allowed Marx to say that the “country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future.” *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007): 7.

did; and I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been.”²



Fig 1. Joseph Wright of Derby, *An Experiment with a Bird in an Air Pump*, 1768, National Gallery, London.

In this short foreword to the current issue of the *SOAS Journal for Postgraduate Research*, I allude to the effects of dominant forms of Western knowledge construction imposed by the colonising brutalities of Western Europe and the subsequent neo-imperial arrogance of the United States. I am not the first to argue that this “civilisational” package of modernity and reason has successfully served to delegitimise and eradicate other perspectives long-known, valued and understood in the world beyond its borders - a world so frequently and carelessly referred to as the non-West (as if we would dream of referring to women as non-men; or white boys as non-black!), whereby huge swathes of the globe are defined in the negative, by a state of absence and unbelonging to their “infinitely superior” Other. Writing in *Provincialising Europe* in 2000 [2007], Dipesh Chakrabarty, for example, explains the outcome of these processes on the analysis of social practices in modern India, where:

² Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* (London: Penguin Books, 1992 [1818]): 31.

[F]ew if any Indian social scientists or social scientists of India would argue seriously with, say, the thirteenth-century logician Gangesa or with the grammarian and linguistic philosopher Bartrihari (fifth to sixth centuries), or with the tenth- or eleventh-century aesthician Abhinavagupta. Sad though it is, one result of European colonial rule in South Asia is that the intellectual traditions once unbroken and alive in Sanskrit or Persian or Arabic are now only matters of historical research for most – perhaps all – modern social scientists in the region.³

Nevertheless, acknowledging the impossibility of rejecting or discarding European thought, Chakrabarty's purpose is to instead recognise that it is "at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought – which is now everybody's heritage and which affects us all – may be renewed from and for the margins."⁴

In accord with Chakrabarty, I invite us to imagine what we might do as researchers to reinstate the intellectual value of entanglement and to confirm the accompanying importance of situated knowledge. How can we continue to mitigate against the unshakable status of Western forms of knowledge and the damage inflicted on "Other" ways of understanding the world? And how can we begin to re-entwine differing forms of knowledge through a honed awareness of the specificities of cultural context?

I often find myself recalling the counter to Cogito Ergo Sum that the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh shaped as his inventive retort: "I think therefore I am not". His adage connects with long traditions of meditation and mindfulness practice that alert us to the over-thinking of the 'monkey mind' as a distraction from wholeness and attunement. The value of such practices calls for the re-integration of body and mind, aspiring to a state of mental calm, heightened awareness and enhanced empathy for others.

As researchers, we tend to measure the value of our working selves by the intellectual currency of our thoughts. In the world of academia, so highly competitive as it is, s/he who 'thinks' best succeeds. But as Fatima Dhanani and Suraj Telange demonstrate in their introduction to this exciting collection of papers, the accumulation of knowledge is relational; everything is interconnected; and we do not learn through objective 'thinking' alone. In addition to these thought processes, there exists a vast terrain of experience to which we must become more attuned and aware because of its effects on own production of analytical understanding. I refer here to questions of connection, entanglement, subjectivity, feeling, affect, emotion and physical, 'gut' response.

Some of the privileging of these forms of knowledge lie at the heart of traditions of Chinese, South East Asian and South Asian medicines, which have long understood the human body holistically (see, for example, Samuel, François and Zéphir, 2023);

³ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 5, 6.

⁴ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 16.

they have shunned the separation of mind and body that tends to characterise the compartmentalisation of Western medical approaches.⁵ As such, they predict more recent discoveries that indicate, for example, the health of the gut microbiome is intimately connected to mental health.⁶ An accessible summary of medical research on this topic is provided by Frankel and Warren in *Are You Thinking Clearly?* Despite again putting the act of thinking (see Descartes) centre stage, they argue that:

The truth is that we are all less able to think clearly and freely as we imagine. The human brain is highly biased and gullible, our memories malleable and unreliable. From the moment we are conceived to the day we die, our thoughts and actions are shaped by a noisy clamour of conflicting factors. From our genetic coding and the bacteria living inside of us, to the language we speak and the apps on our phone, a host of factors are pulling our strings, often without us even realising it.⁷

The conclusions Frankel and Warren draw as a result of this assessment bear direct relevance to our concerns as researchers situated in a Western cultural context that privileges the power of the individual: “You may want to do things ‘your way’, but how much control do you really have over your thinking?”⁸ What they refer to here resonates with the work of psychologist Nicolas Geeraert in his observations on the relationship between the culture and perception of self:

Individuals in the western world are indeed more likely to view themselves as free, autonomous and unique individuals, possessing a set of fixed characteristics. But in many other parts of the world, people describe themselves primarily as a part of different social relationships and strongly connected with others. This is more prevalent in Asia, Africa and Latin America. These differences are pervasive, and have been linked to differences in social relationships, motivation and upbringing.⁹

Moreover, Geeraert’s assessment echoes the earlier work of cultural psychologist Richard Nisbett, writing in *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners*

⁵ As John Cryan puts it, with reference to Western practices: “In medicine, we tend to compartmentalise the body. So, when we talk about issues with the brain, we tend to think about the neck upwards.” Quoted in Frankel and Warren, “How gut bacteria are controlling your brain.” BBC News, January 24, 2023. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/future/article/20230120-how-gut-bacteria-are-controlling-your-brain>

⁶ An abundance of academic publications testify to this connection, but the crux of their arguments is summarised in Frankel and Warren, 2023: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/future/article/20230120-how-gut-bacteria-are-controlling-your-brain> [last accessed 2 February, 2025].

⁷ Miriam Frankel & Matt Warren, *Are You Thinking Clearly? Why You Aren’t and What You Can Do About It*. (London: Hodder Studio, 2022): 8.

⁸ Frankel & Warren, *Are You Thinking Clearly?*, 8.

⁹ Nicolas Geeraert, “How Knowledge about Different Cultures Is Shaking the Foundations of Psychology”. *The Conversation*, 09 March 2018. <https://theconversation.com/how-knowledge-about-different-cultures-is-shaking-the-foundations-of-psychology-92696> [last accessed March 1, 2019].

Think Differently (2005). Basing his findings on a series of psychological tests, Nisbett and his associates concluded that, broadly speaking (and as a scholar of the Humanities I cannot emphasise enough the 'broad brush' nature of these conclusions), for the majority of Asian peoples "the world is a complex place, composed of continuous substances, understandable in terms of the whole rather than in terms of the parts, and subject more to collective than to personal control."¹⁰ By contrast, to the Westerner, "the world is a relatively simple place, composed of discrete objects that can be understood without undue attention to context, and highly subject to personal control."¹¹ In short, people see the world differently because of differing ecologies, social structures, philosophies, and educational systems. But to add further complexity to Nisbett's picture of neat West-East division, those entities are also deeply entangled with and inseparable from each other in many key ways.

As part of these aspects of global difference, it is incumbent upon us to recognise, as this volume of *SJPR* proposes, the extensive effects of interconnection. That very interconnection with other humans, from other cultures, and with other elements of the natural world, are inseparable from who we are as researchers and what we choose to research. Thich Nhat Hanh encapsulates this with his Buddhist term 'interbeing', echoed in turn by Frankel and Warren's confirmation that our thoughts are related to microbes in our guts – and that our acquisition of those comes from necessary interaction with other people. And in turn again, this recalls the Nguni Bantu term *ubuntu*, one which broadly means "humanity" and is sometimes translated as "I am because we are"/"I am because you are." As Michael Onyebuchi Eze defines it, the core of *ubuntu* can best be summarised as follows:

A person is a person through other people strikes an affirmation of one's humanity through recognition of an "other" in his or her uniqueness and difference. It is a demand for a creative intersubjective formation in which the "other" becomes a mirror (but only a mirror) for my subjectivity. This idealism suggests to us that humanity is not embedded in my person solely as an individual; my humanity is co-substantively bestowed upon the other and me. Humanity is a quality we owe to each other. We create each other and need to sustain this *otherness* creation. And if we belong to each other, we participate in our creations: *we are because you are, and since you are, definitely I am*. The "I am" is not a rigid subject, but a dynamic self-constitution dependent on this *otherness* creation of relation and distance.¹²

Undertaking postgraduate research at SOAS – with a view to becoming an academic, or entering into a related, or indeed an entirely different career, following completion of the PhD – is intrinsically connected to the need for an awareness of both entanglement and of situated knowledge. Entanglement because 'we' are absolutely and always interconnected, not only with one another, but with all the

¹⁰ Richard Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerns Think Differently* (London: Nicholas Brealey, 2005): 100.

¹¹ Nisbett, *Geography of Thought*, 100; for further discussion of Nisbett's work, see Harrison and Helgesen, 2019.

¹² Michael Onyebuchi Eze, *Intellectual History in Contemporary South Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 190-191.

other species in our environment, with Nature and with Culture. This interconnectedness did not, of course, commence with globalisation: but we might reach for more ready examples with the intense experiences of globalisation. We might argue that an institution such as SOAS – the School of Oriental and African Studies, founded in 1916 – was already attuned to globalisation from its inception, albeit as part of the project of Empire whereby our (now-forgotten) motto unsurprisingly became ‘Knowledge is Power’. We might also need to acknowledge, in terms of the relevance of situatedness, that the history and culture of the academic institution in which we produce our research, are intrinsically connected to the processes of that knowledge production. To grasp the basic elements of our own situated knowledge, I would undoubtedly make the work of my former colleague and mentor, Emeritus Professor Ian Brown, compulsory reading: I refer here to *The School of Oriental and African Studies: Imperial Training and the Expansion of Learning*, published in 2016.

The issue for us all in the context of studying what we do and where we do, is to hone as much awareness of ALL the processes that this implies. This short foreword is an invitation to seek ways of knowing our research in the broadest possible terms, knowing that knowing is not limited to thinking but is also a matter feeling, emoting, empathising and connecting; of being well and of well-being in all senses that we have.

List of References

Brown, Ian. *The School of Oriental and African Studies: Imperial Training and the Expansion of Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007 [2000].

Eze, Michael Onyebuchi. *Intellectual History in Contemporary South Africa*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Frankel, Miriam and Matt Warren. *Are You Thinking Clearly? Why You Aren't and What You Can Do About It*. London: Hodder Studio, 2022.

Frankel, Miriam and Matt Warren. 2023. “Looking after the multitudes of bacteria, fungi and other microorganisms living in our guts could help us think better and even offer new ways of treating mental health conditions.” In BBC Future, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/future/article/20230120-how-gut-bacteria-are-controlling-your-brain> [last accessed February 2, 2025].

Geeraert, Nicholas. 2018. “How Knowledge about Different Cultures Is Shaking the Foundations of Psychology”. *The Conversation*, March 9. <https://theconversation.com/how-knowledge-about-different-cultures-is-shaking-the-foundations-of-psychology-92696> [last accessed March 1, 2019].

Harrison, Rachel and Geir Helgesen. "Inviting Differences: An Ideal Vision for Area Studies?" *South East Asia Research* 27, no. 1 (2019): 3-13.

Nisbett, Richard. *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently*. London: Nicholas Brealey, 2005.

Samuel, Aurélie, Alban François, and Thierry Zéphir. "Médicines d'Asie, l'Art de l'Équilibre." In *Médicines d'Asie, l'Art de l'Équilibre* (Paris: Musée National des Arts Asiatiques – Guimet, 2023): 13-38.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus*. London: Penguin Books, 1992 [1818].