

Tan Lejos, Tan Cerca: On the Intellectual Implications of Latin American Studies in East Asia

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ABSTRACT

Tan Lejos, Tan Cerca: On the Intellectual Implications of Latin American Studies in East Asia: The Pacific Ocean separates East Asia and Latin America but also opens a window of opportunity for exchanges between the two regions. Due to the rapid development of bilateral economic relations, increased government research funding and ever deepening intellectual curiosity among scholars, the development of Latin American Studies in China has seen unprecedented developments over the past two decades. Japan and South Korea also have a long history of engagement with Latin America, and research communities in both countries have already developed distinct traditions and approaches to studying the region. With the globalisation of Latin American Studies, East Asian scholars face common challenges and responsibilities as they make important decisions about the way they view the North Atlantic research tradition and refine their identity or cultural consciousness as the subject of the “South” in the cognitive system of the global frame. In 2014, East Asian Network of Latin American Studies (EANLAS), a regional academic community promoted by the joint efforts of Latin American scholars from Japan, South Korea and China, is expected to serve the realization of the above visions at the entity level through communication and collaboration with relevant academic networks at various levels.

Keywords: East Asia, Latin America, China, Area Studies, EANLAS

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As a scholar from East Asia, I find exploring Latin America to be a relatively rare opportunity given to the physical distance and cultural differences which limit contacts between our two regions. Even when two worlds are far apart, it seems that innate curiosity always drives inquiries into foreign people and objects – but it is also never easy to build mutual, in-depth understanding of each other. Even time and space are working against us; winter and summer, day and night are both diametrically opposed in Latin America and East Asia. The urge for these two regions to bridge the gap between them can only be driven by strong forces. As relations between Latin America and East Asia are growing ever closer, this essay presents firstly a retrospective look into the process of their development from the beginning.

CONTACT AND COGNITION ACROSS THE PACIFIC

Research indicates that China and Latin America did not have direct interactions in the written history before modern times. The real contact began at the beginning of the 16th century, after Christopher Columbus discovered the New World and Vasco da Gama opened a new route to Asia. At this point, the main transport channel between Europe and China shifted from land to sea. Relations between China and America began to slowly emerge through trade—with Manila as a hub (Luo Rongqu 1986). Later, in the 19th century and more specifically between 1800 and 1874, a large number of Chinese contract laborers went to Latin America. This migration wave was the first time large groups of Chinese people came into contact with the region, and it was later followed by four other migration waves. Today, the largest numbers of overseas Chinese are concentrated in South and Central American countries, such as Peru, Brazil, Ecuador, Venezuela, Panama, Argentina, Costa Rica and Surinam. Most of these migrants are engaged in business, software, manufacturing, construction, the service sector and the resource industry.

The earliest works by Chinese scholars on Latin America were produced during the Ming and Qing dynasties. A pioneer in this regard is Xu Chaojun, whose book *Gao Hou Meng Qiu* is the first Chinese work to include a historical inquiry into the region (Xu 1807-1809). Another example of an early study is *The Four Continents* by Lin Zexu which contains stories about the heroic resistance of the Chilean Araucans

against Spanish colonial rule (Lin 2018). However, according to the mainstream view of Latin American studies community in China, these early texts are far from the area studies mentioned today, which mainly developed after the founding of the People's Republic of China.

Post-1949 China-Latin America relations can be divided into three periods. The first one lasted from 1949 to 1970 and it was shaped by historical (Cold War) and ideological (revolutionary) factors. The second period of official relations was between the 1970s and the late 20th century. In these decades, the international system went through substantial political, economic and social changes. China and Latin America were experiencing reform and development at the same time. Most Chinese scholars took a pragmatic approach and focused on exploring topics that were directly relevant to their own country's development; they sought to study practical problems and concentrated on Latin America's opening-up and economic adjustment, comparing it with China's post-1978 reforms. Other topics that attracted their interest included Latin America's development strategy, paths and models, as well as social justice movements, democratization, political and ideological changes. The 21st century can be viewed as the third period of China-Latin America relations. Globalization and market forces have, somewhat surprisingly, tightly bound these two opposite regions standing at different ends of the world. Economic interdependence and cooperation between them have reached unprecedented levels as interlocked processes are already in motion. China has become Latin America's most important trading partner in Asia as well as one of the major sources of foreign direct investment and external financing. With the acceleration of its economic and social transformation, China has begun paying closer attention to Latin American case studies on issues such as the middle-income trap, urbanization and inclusive growth. Meanwhile, Latin American studies in China have also entered a more institutionalized development track. This is manifested in three aspects, and the first one is the development of research institutions with a strong regional focus. According to partial statistics, as of July 2019, there are 56 institutions engaged in Latin American studies in China, with more than 500 full-time and part-time researchers (Guo et al. 2020). The second aspect here is the incorporation of Latin American Studies into other subjects within the education system. In addition to the study of Latin America's history, languages, literature, economics and politics, today more scholars explore the region from various perspectives grounded in anthropology, sociology, archaeology, law,

religion, art among others. The third aspect is the increase in government attention to, and funding for research on Latin America. On the one hand, this is the natural result of closer economic ties between the region and China; on the other, it is also driven by the government's inclusion of Area Studies in its most recent strategic development agenda. For scholars, it is crucial to maintain a balance between the academic rigour and the public service aspect of their research in Latin American Studies; in particular, it is crucial to ensure that scholarship does not simply serve as an extension of government policy.

Similar to China, the two other major East Asian economies, Japan and South Korea are increasingly developing connections to Latin America shaped by their own historical background and current needs (Hamaguchi, Guo and Kim 2018) .

THE NORTH ATLANTIC TRADITION OF LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES IN THE BACKDROP OF A GLOBAL CONTEXT

How does the growing intellectual and realistic needs combined with the increasing availability of policy and funding support shape Latin American studies? It is a question that has been occupied my thoughts at times. On November 14, 2020, at the 57th Annual Conference of the Japan Society of Social Science on Latin America, Professor Nobuaki Hamaguchi of Kobe University posed two questions related to this topic: a) what is the merit of the Latin American research conducted by a researcher from East Asia, who is neither from Latin America nor from historical stakeholders in the region such as Europe and the US; and b) how will such researches contribute to the globalization of Latin American Studies?

These questions are extremely challenging. Their answer relates not only to the legitimacy of the identity of latinamericanists from East Asia and to the intellectual value of our research, but also to the prospect of revising or challenging the North Atlantic approach in Latin American Studies, and at a deeper level, to the cognition of the global framework and cultural consciousness as part of the “South”. So far, the research agenda of Latin American Studies has undoubtedly been defined by scholars from Europe and the US, especially the latter. As so-called traditional stakeholders, their theories, methods and choice of research

topics have always played a significant role in leading the development of new inquiries into the region.

It is true that since 1990s, with the worldwide flow and interaction of ideas, people and commodities, the decentralization of Latin American studies has gone into motion, however, thirty years on we are still observing a process generally marked by uncertainty and ambiguity. Under this background, how should Latin American Studies be positioned within East Asian academia? Elevating the importance of our scholarship is not meant to deliberately target the de-Westernisation or de-Americanization of Latin American Studies, or to challenge the traditional dominance of the North Atlantic approach. Instead, it only seeks to emphasize the importance of regional identity while exploring a research agenda of global importance, and there are three main steps we should take in this direction.

For starters, it is necessary to promote deeper research cooperation between East Asia and Latin America. The comparative advantage of East Asian scholars manifests itself in exploring issues concerning relations between the two regions, including economic, political and diplomatic exchanges as well as immigration. Furthermore, as noted by Professor Cynthia Sanborn of the Universidad del Pacífico (Peru), it is also crucial to ask more specific questions; for instance, how do non-government actors in East Asian countries engage with Latin America? If this type of research is conducted without the participation of East Asian scholars, it will self-evidently always remain partial, only offering an “outsider’s perspective”. In addition to the areas discussed above, there are also other ones where collaboration between scholars from East Asia and Latin America would yield productive results. Cooperation can lead to intellectual innovation by inspiring a division of labour where academics from both sides can combine their linguistic and inter-cultural competences with various theories and methods from different disciplines to produce novel ideas. As things stand, despite the increasing frequency of academic exchanges, there is still plenty of unexplored potential in terms of collaboration between scholars.

And next, it is important to rediscover and reposition established research topics within a new framework for framing Latin American Studies. In this regard, a starting point could simply be the adoption of a perspective from the Global South to serve as a framework for breaking with the normative aspects of an existing dominant research agenda which remains somewhat constrained by cultural bias. This move would channel a new

line of discourse to supplement the well-known findings of Northern scholars. It would also allow for posing a number of broader questions; for instance, what contributions can East Asian and Latin American scholars make to African Studies? How can Asian Studies scholars in Africa and Latin America increase the impact they have on their field? In what ways can African-based researchers of Latin America contribute to their discipline? Finding answers to these questions might be easier than one initially thinks. From a “Southern” perspective, East Asia and Latin America have many commonalities that can be discussed together and compared; they include growth and governance models, public policy, regional integration and geostrategic challenges as well as gender equality, environmental protection, sustainable development, innovation and social risks brought by the rapid development of social media, and so on and so forth. Building an intra-regional discourse is conducive not only to improving knowledge, but also to providing valuable comparisons and gaining insights from experiences produced within diverse regions and cultures. This move would also be particularly beneficial for the non-Western world (including East Asia and Latin America) which is rising within an outdated global system that it seeks to both exist within and improve; taking steps in this direction would yield both academic value and practical implications.

Then, and somewhat self-evident, it is crucial to shape a distinct East Asian perspective on Latin American Studies. Admittedly, I have some doubts about the likelihood that this development will materialise. It is well known that almost all sub-sections of Area Studies emphasize the integration of region-specific experiences and interdisciplinary contributions. Scholars from various fields of study may hold a different view on whether the East Asian perspective on Latin American Studies has intellectual value, or even exists in the first place. For instance, East Asian historians of Latin America would most likely be unable to claim any comparative advantages in terms of their research on the region. After all, their field of study emphasizes objectivity and does not attach particular importance to differences in one’s identity or perspective. In addition to history, this may also apply to other fields such as archaeology, but it is not the case, say in international studies. Especially, for example, in many global issues with the characteristics of chain interaction or some common issues with cross-regional comparison or reference, East Asian scholars can participate directly in the knowledge production and innovation process by bringing in their own views and experiences.

EAST ASIAN VISION OF LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES AND THE ROLE OF EANLAS

As mentioned above, despite the great physical distance separating East Asia and Latin America, they have a long history of interactions. Latin American studies in China, Japan and South Korea have a huge potential for conducting comparative studies. For a long time, although the three countries have had extensive exchanges in various fields, the contacts among Latin American scholars have been very limited, and each side has a relatively weak understanding of its counterparts' respective research agenda. There are many reasons for that, including the lack of an appropriate platform for exchanging ideas and the rather limited drive for establishing such initiatives. EANLAS was founded in 2014 in the hope that it will serve as a community and platform for organising research-related activities which promote the mutual recognition and deepening exchanges among the latinamericanists in East Asia. This move seeks to drive the development of internationalization and institutionalization of Latin American studies in the region. Through the joint efforts of Latin American Studies Association of Korea, Japan Society of Social Science on Latin America and Peking University throughout the past six years, we have achieved many tangible results in this regard. Looking into the future, with the further improvement of internal and external conditions, I believe that EANLAS has the potential to play a larger role in the following aspects.

First of all, it can further develop into a platform for exchange and cooperative research between East Asian and Latin American scholars on the existing basis. In fact, since the first annual workshop held at the Peking University, we have been paying attention to incorporating scholars, diplomats, journalists and business people from Latin America to participate in our discussion. It also may be possible to consider applying for greater institutional support from higher education institutions across East Asia and Latin America to jointly assist the development of researchers (especially from the younger generation), and further integrate the strengths of academic debates and arguments from both sides. I believe that this move would also help to inspire greater interest in Latin America among East Asian scholars. They could then join research groups on the region, while younger Latin Americans would develop greater curiosity about it as well. In addition, Tim Niblock, Honorary Professor at the University of Exeter, rightly reminded me that the material

basis and support for conducting research on Latin America is much stronger in China, South Korea and Japan than it is in other parts of Asia. In order to promote larger-scale academic exchanges or research collaborations between Latin America and Asia, it would be necessary to offer greater support to scholars from various parts of Asia.

Second, EANLAS can bridge the gap between Latin American Studies at the global, and at the regional level in East Asia. In addition to establishing direct links with scholars and universities, the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) also serves as a larger platform for academics from EANLAS and/or East Asia to establish a deeper dialogue with their counterparts from various regions. When Professor Aldo Panfichi Huamán from the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (PUCP) served as LASA president (2017-2018), he took a profound interest in EANLAS, leading a working group to participate in our second annual workshop at Kobe University as well as a regional research seminar held at Kyoto University in Japan. In May 2018, LASA held its annual congress for the first time in Europe (Barcelona, Spain), and the theme of “Latin American Studies in Asia and Russia” featured on the agenda of the Presidential Sessions. Currently, LASA is discussing the possibility of jointly organising a regional conference with EANLAS. If this effort comes to fruition, it will contribute both to the globalisation of LASA and to the increase of EANLAS’ impact beyond the region as well as the participation of East Asian scholars in the international debates on Latin American issues.

Last but not least, it is crucial to establish mechanisms for contact and cooperation between Latin American and global research networks. In November 2016, I was honoured to be invited to participate in a workshop jointly organised by the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS), the South-South Exchange Programme for Research on the History of Development (SEPHIS) as well as Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). Through the engagement with these Asian studies communities, I deeply felt the far-reaching significance of the connectivity between research networks in the Global South. For East Asian scholars, the regional research network we build across Asia is particularly important. There are two routes we can take to pursue this goal: a) connect institutions, existing initiatives and scholars from Latin America that consistently work with Asia; and b) develop relationships with established research organisations across Asia such as IIAS and ICAS. This type of engagement

would benefit all involved as it can expand the existing space for research collaboration on many issues that transcend region-specific topics and cover areas of common concern and interest for all involved.

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