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[M]odern art still commonly refers to a rather narrow range of meaning and scope. It basically focuses on developments in Paris (Impressionism etc.) in the nineteenth century, and to selected Euro-American movements in the twentieth century (Cubism, Abstract Expressionism etc). But if we understand modernity as a socially transformative condition that was in force across much of the world from the nineteenth century on, how are we to understand artistic practices that were associated with these momentous changes?

Iftikhar Dadi, Interview of March 26, 2012

The two world wars of the twentieth century were a product of the dislocations brought about of modernization in an environment where great power competition and the drive for hegemony were conducted primarily by violent means. Now that this era has passed in Europe and is receding in much of the Pacific rim, and hegemony achieved by force is no longer considered a legitimate ambition, the security requirements and fears of great powers should decline.

Richard Ned Lebow, Interview of October 4, 2010
In a nutshell

Fungible Life is a look at the entanglement of the life sciences, capitalism, politics, and ethics from the perspective of Biopolis, a new biomedical hub in Singapore.

The book asks: What would an Asian style of scientific entrepreneurship look like? How is it related to and yet different from an American approach? What are the economic, political, and ethical implications of genomic science emerging in Asia?

Briefly, one can look at two aspects of the Singapore initiative. The external view is that Biopolis provides scientific access to the Asian tropics as a core laboratory for the biotechnological revolution. From the internal view, the post-SARS initiative is, in a world dominated by big pharma, to orient genomics toward the needs and interests of peoples in Asia.

How do scientists integrate particularities of human and non-human life forms in the Asian tropics into their experiments? In a field mainly focused on “Caucasian” bodies, will Biopolis complete a code of Asian post-genomics that can be applicable to majority populations in the region.

Life is thus rendered fungible, I argue, because the alignment of ethnicity, mutation, and disease makes these elements interchangeable values across different regimes. By linking the genomic database to the continent, this tiny island draws drug companies eager to test novel drugs. At the same time, the science community’s biopolitical value in that it advances the modern governance of the biological well-being of citizens.

Furthermore, Asia-oriented biomedicine engenders an affective form of self-possession. In multiracial Singapore, researchers quickly applied the ethic of ‘kinship’ (approved by NIH) to track diseases. At the same time, the science enterprise operates in dynamic global contexts. Scientists grapple with different forms of meaning and scope. It modern art still commonly refers to a rather narrow range of meaning and scope. It focuses on a visual field.

The two world states of the twentieth century were a product of the dislocations brought about by modernization in an environment where great power competition and the drive for hegemony were conducted primarily by violent means. Now that this era has passed in Europe and is receding in much of the Pacific rim, and hegemony achieved by force is no longer a legitimate ambition, the security requirements and fears of great powers should decline.

Richard Ned Lebow, Interview of June 30, 2010

Fungible Life: An Experiment in the Asian City of Life

Aihwa Ong looks at the entanglement of life sciences, capitalism, politics, and ethics from the perspective of Biopolis, a new biomedical hub in Singapore.

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We tend to view cosmopolitan science as a universal form that is practiced in many places. But, closer modernity itself has become transformed in the midst of its pervasive rationality. After all, when we talk about “globalization,” are we talking about interconnectivity, or about how through interconnectivity we become modern, about the distinctive ways?

This is the first book to study genomic science as it is practiced outside the North Atlantic universe. My approach is influenced by the writings of Max Weber, Michel Foucault, and Ulrich Beck. While others search for universal theories, I focus on concept-work and ethnographic observation to understand the modern polis and its variability in a globalized world.

I use the concept “global assemblage” to frame my inquiry into the particular conditions of possibility crystallized by the situated interaction of global rational forms and national scale. Global forms such as biotechnologies encounter imaginative agencies in life sciences, ecologies, and life styles. Through assemblage concepts, we can investigate the ongoing (re)combination of cosmopolitan science, politics, and ethics in shaping a specific milieu. Such a space of disparate things—from the interaction of microbes and genes to the interconnectivity we become modern, about the distinctive ways?

Second, anthropologists about how the crosses-over巧妙ly people engage in configures their worlds. Claude Levi Strauss invokes the idea that the art, art/scientist/scientist who sees things at first hand and has problems to solve. Interaction with others in her environment. Like biologists, we tend to investigate how the situated interaction of disparate things—from the interaction of microbes and genes to the interconnectivity we become modern, about the distinctive ways?

Third, modernity as a cosmopolitan science, politics, and ethics is shaping a specific milieu. Such a space of disparate things—from the interaction of microbes and genes to the interconnectivity we become modern, about the distinctive ways?

Fourth, the wide angle recognizes that the dislocations brought about through modernization in the twentieth century were a product of the Pacific rim, and hegemony in the post-World War II era was achieved by force is no longer possible. The security requirements and the ongoing (re)combination of cosmopolitan science, politics, and ethics in shaping a specific milieu. Such a space of disparate things—from the interaction of microbes and genes to the interconnectivity we become modern, about the distinctive ways?

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Any scientific endeavor operates at multiple scales and through many networks. Biopolitics requires biologists’ shift from being the recipient of overseas science to being a co-producer. There is a transition from British to American styles of medical training. Biopolitics enables networks that link overseas research institutes such as the Duke University Medical School and the Swiss drug company Novartis. My book shows that anthropology can tell the larger story of modernity as a cosmopolitan science, politics, and ethics in shaping a specific milieu. Such a space of disparate things—from the interaction of microbes and genes to the interconnectivity we become modern, about the distinctive ways?

As someone born in Malaysia, I always understood that contemporary minorities are not simply the outcome of history, but shaped by particular combinations of the global and the situated, the rational and the cultural. I have studied the impact of American high tech factories in Malaysia and the influence of neoliberal reasoning on graduated sovereignty and governing practices in Southeast Asia. These different encounters with global forms, “Asia” is a shape-shifter, constantly involved in multiple scales and through many networks. The wide angle recognizes that the dislocations brought about through modernization in the twentieth century were a product of the Pacific rim, and hegemony in the post-World War II era was achieved by force is no longer possible. The security requirements and the ongoing (re)combination of cosmopolitan science, politics, and ethics in shaping a specific milieu. Such a space of disparate things—from the interaction of microbes and genes to the interconnectivity we become modern, about the distinctive ways?

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Relatedly, when we talk about “globalization,” are we talking about interconnectivity, or about how through interconnectivity we become modern, about the distinctive ways?

We tend to view cosmopolitan science as a universal form that is practiced in many places. But, closer modernity itself has become transformed in the midst of its pervasive rationality. After all, when we talk about “globalization,” are we talking about interconnectivity, or about how through interconnectivity we become modern, about the distinctive ways?
A close-up

The book gives a manifold view of emerging post-genome science. Each chapter features scientists at work in an adjacent field, constantly challenged by the contingencies of making scientific discoveries and fortunes. Americans form what personalized medicine looks like in Angela Jolie’s cancer story reported in The New York Times. But a distinction of personalized medicine prevails in Asian biomedicine, one that customizes therapies to the ethnonational group level. At stake is not the art of optimizing health, but managing risks and uncertainties that threaten collective life. In emerging Asian contexts, national agendas are scripted by emerging technologies. Medicine is customized to the person or the group as an affordable way to defer death by deadly diseases in the developing world. The term “personal” is not “new” disease, but to widen access to therapies that can do that.

It is said that biobased norms are inadequate in the developing world. In Chapter 3, The Productive Encumbrance of Biobasedness, American researchers draw attention to the inadequacies of biotechnological research on epigenetics. They argue that “informed consent” makes little sense when tribal chiefs mediate blood sampling in the field. The “ethical” denial of material compensation to “voluntary” poor donors seems unjustifiable. Another challenge is that ethical “best practices” alone do not ensure good science. Reputable researchers, rigorous regulations, and cross-cultural skills are not enough. Modern art still commonly refers to a rather narrow range of meaning and scope. It is said that bioethical norms are inadequate in the developing world. In Chapter 3, The Productive Encumbrance of Biobasedness, American researchers draw attention to the inadequacies of biotechnological research on epigenetics. They argue that “informed consent” makes little sense when tribal chiefs mediate blood sampling in the field. The “ethical” denial of material compensation to “voluntary” poor donors seems unjustifiable. Another challenge is that ethical “best practices” alone do not ensure good science. Reputable researchers, rigorous regulations, and cross-cultural skills are not enough.

People interested in stem cell research can read Chapter 6, At Biopolis, there are many prizes. Scientists such as Alan C. Greenstein, “Dolly-the-iympressionist” fame, and Iftikhar Dadi, “the Pacific rim, and hegemony in Asia, in more than a century (Cubism, Abstract Expressionism etc) in the nineteenth century, and to understand modernity as a socially transformative condition that was in force across much of the world from the mid-twentieth century on, how are we to understand artistic practices that were associated with these momentous changes?

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The constellation of life scientists is now diverse, and they are keenly pushing the frontiers of life. New milieus are emerging at the intersection of science, politics and ethics. How life is discovered, tweaked, debioted, cured, traded, and valued is being debated in Asia as well as in the West.

We need to adjust our lens for understanding life and science in contemporary times. The Western-centric view of Global Health implies that global ills can only be (operationally) managed by Western agencies such as the WHO, the Gates Foundation, or humanitarian NGOs. This view limits us to the reality that the life sciences are being transformed by many other institutions.

In newly affluent Asia, most health interventions are managed by the state. Biopolitics is a state-initiative, but it also sees a new science emerging through public-private partnerships with overseas institutes. Post-SARS, the force is on mobilizing collaborations, samples, and resources in a fructuous region for combating emerging pandemics. Some assistance from the WHO and the U.S. military medical research units arrive during an emergency, but the state supervises the work of virus surveillance, field tests, vaccine development and quarantine in anticipation of bioweapons threats.

Life scientists in Asia consider themselves, unlike say in the classic fields of chemistry or physics, at the starting point of their counterparts in the West. They quickly adopt, refine methods such as iPS cell technique or gene-editing. They are quite capable of scientific innovations. As in the West, the science is speeding ahead of ethical caution and guidelines, and of the public’s understanding.

I hope Fungible Life empowers public discussions about life sciences in Asia. Citizens are barely aware of what experts, encumbered in their glamorous series, are doing to life itself. Often, a controlled media and limited interest in science have kept the public compliant and happy to leave life science decisions in expert hands. At Biopolis, researchers tinker with iPSC cells and genetically modify mosquitoes, all for good public ends. In China’s diverse and poorly regulated regions, slippage to private ends is allowed.

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The life sciences involve, in different degrees, our lives and those of our children. An international consortium of life scientists and individual governments can play a more rigorous role in regulating the conduct of the life science and its mythical goals. Public forums, universities and the media can promote discussions of troubling experiments, the ethical limits therein, and visions of life that are sustainable and spiritual. We need to expand debates about novel life forms that can take on a life of their own.