

**LIBERATING KNOWLEDGE FROM THE ACEDEME'S INVISIBLE  
'PRISON HOUSE' OF POWER: PROMISES OF 'NEW  
INTELLECTUAL MOVEMENTS' IN REVITALISING ASIAN  
STUDIES**

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A revolution in the academe has been raging. The gatekeepers of traditional scholarship are arrayed against proponents of the 'new intellectual movements'<sup>2</sup> (hereafter referred to as NIM's), a term conveniently used here to capture a vast range of inter-, multi- or even anti-disciplinary scholarly projects such as postmodernism, postcolonialism, cultural studies and others. As Asian Studies has been agonising over perpetual threat of marginalisation, if not extinction, it can not remain parochial in its concerns. It has to reinvent itself if it wants to survive and such reinvention requires re-examination of its position in the ongoing revolution.

This paper is in line with the call for a cross-fertilisation between the methodological and theoretical proclivities of Asian Studies and the 'new intellectual movements'. Such cross-breeding, I believe, will likely enrich both parties, as Asian Studies' concern for the particular will be complemented by NIM's penchant for the theoretical which, in turn, may be refined by cases deeply explored in Asian Studies. Aware that the NIM's concerns are vast, I will focus on only one thread that, so it seems to me, binds all the sub-fields of the NIM's. Such thread is the postmodernist/poststructuralist concern for knowledge-power nexus. It seems to me that what sets the NIM's apart from the more traditional scholarship is its inherent capacity to be self-reflexive and such capacity springs from realization of the deeply political nature of knowledge as well as from the need to expose such nature. My worry, however, is that the fact that NIMs emerged and are thriving within the present academic setting may erode such capacity for self-reflexivity and in the moment of their victory (in the on-going revolution) eventually install themselves as the new gatekeepers of knowledge. The fact that the academe and scholarship as a whole is a bastion of a deeply entrenched interests makes self-reflexivity an unusual commodity, a vice rather than a virtue, if seen from the institutional vantage point of the academia<sup>3</sup>. If that happens, the very strength of NIMs will have been dissipated

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<sup>2</sup> There is really nothing 'new' about these movements. It just that if seen from the vantage point of Asian Studies, its use may be justified.

<sup>3</sup> Scholars who are sympathetic with NIM's ideas and methods may be conscious, as individuals, of the need to exercise self-reflexivity. However, if taken as a collective body, with interests intermixed with the continued existence of the academe, I am afraid of the danger that such capacity for self-reflexivity retreats into the realm of the lip-service.

and their rationale for existence will be put in question. In order to help forestall the ossification and 'academisation' of NIM's, I propose to elevate self-reflexivity as a cornerstone of NIM's and we can do that by being very honest about the position not just of specific scholars, but of the academe and the scholarship as an enterprise with its own distinct interest to preserve, in the whole vexed question of the relationship between knowledge and power. For so long, scholarship has held on to the idea that scholars are professionally trained operators of the scholarship machine who are supposed to be disinterested in the process and output of their work<sup>4</sup>. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that the scholarly community has successfully made, as a testament to its power and influence, the general public think and accept such a role for the scholars. Either way, it gives knowledge a stamp of authority advertently or inadvertently utilized by the powerful (in both negative and in Foucauldian sense). The key, thus, is to liberate knowledge from the invisible prison house of power and I will argue that if NIMs would really be true to its calling, their proponents must be fully aware that being part of the academe put them in an awkward position of sharing with traditional scholars they condemn the role of being wardens of such prison house. I will argue further that freeing scholars, including NIM torchbearers, from the web of such awkward position will require re-examining the status of nihilism or absolute relativism in the existing epistemologies. The long-standing rejection of these two extreme positions seems to me the key to the very pernicious pretensions in the academic community, including those held by NIM proponents. I will conclude with a note on the potential advantages of allowing nihilism to claim its rightful position at the other extreme point of the epistemological spectrum. Its implications on the suggested marriage between Asian Studies and NIMs will then be discussed.

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<sup>4</sup> Even proponents of NIM who exhibit self-reflexivity often frame their analysis and conclusion in a way mimicking traditional scholars in their pretension to offer a 'truthful' findings divorced from the analysts' proclivities.