

# Editorial Note

A journal can be said to have reached a certain stage of maturity when it can feature contributions by returning authors. With this issue *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* is moving past this threshold. Three of our four authors have published with us before at various points during our fifteen-year journey. Their contributions—which probe transcultural aspects of sites of Jewish memory in Singapore; trace the itineraries of religious pilgrims and the tourists walking in their steps on Enoshima Island, Japan; examine the transnational formation of the contemporary Chinese notion of civilization; and evaluate calls for epistemic justice in the rewriting of South Asian histories of science—testify to the versatility and continued vitality of the transcultural perspective, even, or perhaps especially, in times when political tides seem to tilt toward disconnect and exclusion.

Jay Prosser's essay on the *mahallah*, the Jewish quarter of Singapore, demonstrates that times of upheaval and segregation intensify rather than obstruct transcultural mobility and entanglements. *Mahallahs* first appeared as Islamic spaces scattered throughout the Ottoman empire but the term (originally meaning “encampment” in Arabic) and the idea soon travelled beyond the Middle East to Central, South, and Southeast Asia, adopting along the way more expansive meanings, ranging from military garrison to a civilian neighborhood shaped around ethnic or religious identities. Jews from Iraq and other Ottoman territories carved out a space for a Jewish *mahallah* in British Singapore in this latter sense and established with it a way of life shaped by multiple forms of transculturation. Prosser's dense article brings this site to life by reconstructing its history from its formation in the 1870s to its eventual disintegration in the 1960s through the lens of his own family's multilayered memories. Drawing on research conducted for his recent monograph *Loving Strangers*,<sup>1</sup> the author paints a vivid picture of the intersecting life stories of his kin and the place that made the encounters of trans-imperial subjects like them possible. His account relies on a broad range of sources to recreate their world: in addition to official documents and material evidence collected *in situ*, he enlists diaries, letters, family photographs, oral histories, personal interviews, sound recordings, and even recipes to sketch a multisensory image of the practices and relations that became characteristic of this dynamic community. His rich essay illustrates that transcultural phenomena can only be understood by bringing together multiple voices and perspectives and that researchers need to move deliberately between different scales, from the intimate realm of the family to the level of the regional and global turbulences that challenge

---

1 Jay Prosser, *Loving Strangers: A Camphorwood Chest, a Legacy, a Son Returns* (London: Black Spring, 2024).

or enrich the identities of individuals and groups threading their paths along rugged migratory routes in search of a safe haven to anchor their existences in volatile times.

Alexander Vesey's study of the cult of Benzaiten on Enoshima Island (in Japan) furnishes a transcultural analysis of the formation and history of an instance of ostensible Japanese cultural uniqueness, as a commodified object of touristic consumption. Vesey deploys a mix of archival work with primary documents, findings from ethnographic fieldwork, analysis of online resources, and secondary scholarship. He traces a long and rich story of transculturation that embraces various phases of Japanese religious and cultural history—such as the intimate synthesis of elements of Buddhist and Shintō origin in the premodern period, the Meiji nationalist attempt to “purify” the national body of “foreign” Buddhist elements, the modern rise of sea swimming and beachgoing culture, or *manga*-derived tropes and aesthetics. The analysis also embraces a diverse cast of cultural agents; various scales of time; and Benzaiten's shifting affiliations with various dimensions of culture, including not only religion and cult, but also tourism, the discourses and symbols of romantic love, and Japanese reflexes of New Age spiritualism. Vesey's fine-grained account shows that the cult of Benzaiten has been formed and reformed continuously in significant part through the impact of “in-bound” elements from outside cultures at various levels of scale: local (e.g. the affluent urban milieu of the old capital, Edo); national; and transnational (ultimately as far afield as India; Vesey draws upon the rich work of Catherine Ludvik to show that Benzaiten—a goddess of ultimately Indian origin Sarasvatī—was born transcultural, as it were, and already had a long career of transculturation behind her before she first reached Enoshima). These elements interact with local cultural forms, which themselves are often sedimented products of earlier rounds of transculturation. At the same time, the Benzaiten cult also participates in “outward bound” processes, in which it enters into global flows—for instance, of tourist experience, or digital media representations—and thereby itself acts to produce further transculturation. Thus, barely concealed beneath the surface of cultural forms like Benzaiten and Enoshima as her abode, which like many staples of the tourist industry are constructed as quintessentially and distinctively “Japanese,” Vesey shows us a long-lived and complex network of transcultural connections.

A web of such connections also informs recent calls for a new world order and the terms in which these are raised. Ori Sela's article probes the transcultural formation of a concept of so-called “civilization-states,” whose propagation can be regarded as one of the most visible symptoms of the current backlash against ever closer global integration. Disputing the legitimacy of the rule-based world system established during the Pax Americana of the twentieth century, regimes like Vladimir Putin's Russia, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey,

Narendra Modi's India, Xi Jinping's China, and of late even Donald Trump's United States call for a novel, if only vaguely defined, multipolar order by insisting on unbridgeable civilizational differences between the world's remaining or aspiring great powers. Non-state actors such as the so-called Islamic State (*Daesh*) also embrace notions of civilizational exceptionalism in hopes of strengthening their struggle to erect a revived caliphate. Tempting as it may be to understand these interconnected efforts as the fulfillment of Samuel Huntington's prophecy of a "clash of civilizations" (1996), neither the notions of civilization that have been mobilized nor the causes underlying their seemingly wide-spread acceptance conform to his analysis. Instead, we see very different actors molding the concept of civilization in different ways to advance competing political visions that converge, despite all alleged incompatibilities, in rejecting liberal societies and forms of government as well as institutionalized constraints, domestic or international, on what they claim are legitimate exercises of unbridled power. Of particular interest from a transcultural perspective is the observation that notions of civilization weaponized in these contexts are felt to be more potent argumentative props than even hardened identitarian views of "culture." While partly overlapping with current and past understandings of the latter, civilization is presented not so much as a soft, imaginary bond fostering identity and social cohesion but as an indisputable material fact. Once communities have integrated not only culturally and spiritually but also economically, socially, and politically to form a "civilization," so the narrative put forward in recent years by the Communist Party of China and others says, they form a self-contained, stable, and autonomous collective whose sovereignty is absolute and thus immune to boundaries imposed by universal values and norms. By reconstructing the transcultural entanglements within and between Europe and East Asia from which this combative notion of civilization has emerged in China, Sela's essay shows that its propagandistic exploitation draws on a narrow slice of earlier meanings and recent interpretations that lend themselves most readily to ideologization. Read in conjunction with kindred scholarship, his piece underlines that the authoritarian visions of born-again empires that thrive in many parts of the globe should be seen not as rejections but products of transculturation, in this case of aggressively anti-globalist, if nevertheless undeniably global, resentment and ambitions.

Sela's investigation of uses of the concept of civilization that posit an intrinsic incommensurability of cultural entities in the name of resisting the universalistic claims of a Western canon is connected to wider debates going back to Dipesh Chakrabarty's call some 25 years ago to "provincialize Europe." More recently, the postcolonial critique of Western theory's claims to global hegemony by invoking difference has brought forth several avatars such as decoloniality, "Asia as Method," or the move to create "theory from the

South,” generating in turn an appeal for “epistemic justice.” In the concluding article of this issue of *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* Dhruv Raina delves into the consequences of impassioned calls to “decolonize” paradigms and minds for the history and philosophy of science. His account takes us through the chronology of narratives of science starting with the story of its putative “spread” from European centers to “nonscientific” peripheries. At the same time, he cautions us against subsuming the critique of this story within the overall nexus that postcolonial writings have posited between modernity, Eurocentrism, and the politics of knowledge. Modern science, Raina argues, occupies a distinct domain owing to its self-positioning as the sole authority to arbitrate claims of truth and falsity, to distinguish between scientific and non-scientific forms of knowledge. One path to unsettling the exclusionary character of this monopoly has been the recuperation and valorization of indigenous knowledge undertaken by theories of decoloniality, irrespective of the divergent understandings of indigeneity that continue to prevail within a range of colonial contexts. Raina’s close reading of the historiography of modern science, while exposing the processes and arguments by which the Eurocentric imagination has been provincialized, points to the work that remains to be done in order to go beyond relentlessly espousing critique and undertake the creative task of generating alternative concepts, which while being anchored in different sites, would strive towards global credibility. A moot point is that the accounts of knowledge formations discussed here, be they claims to civilizational uniqueness, or the recognition of knowledge forms as intrinsic to livelihoods, or be they denunciations of epistemic injustice, all remain premised on the existence of discrete units of investigation whose dynamics of development are alleged to be exclusively driven from within, even when sporadically connected through one-directional flows. The struggle to ensure epistemic justice, Raina concludes, calls for an analytical paradigm that brings the plurality of knowledge systems in conjunction with those worldly exchanges across historical time that have, through a negotiation of differences, transformatively shaped ways of knowing. Following from this we might further reflect on the nature of theory within a transcultural paradigm. In other words, it could be hypothesized that transculturation conceives of theory not as simple abstraction from a pre-existing cultural unit, or a form of knowledge that exists in alterity with everyday praxis. Concepts of truth and falsity at stake within the history and philosophy of science, instead of standing for static, transhistorical values, are intrinsic to braided ways of being within social constellations rather than existing outside of them, constellations themselves always and already transcultured.

We should not conclude this note without thanking Sophie Florence, our long-time managing editor, for her tireless and meticulous work for our journal and her infinite patience in putting up with the quirks and idiosyncrasies of

more or less sensible editors, reviewers, and authors. Dr. Bruno Shirley, a fellow Kiwi, will take over the reins from the next issue and we look forward to this new stage in our journal's development. Welcome to Bruno—and all the best to Sophie for her future endeavors, in and beyond the publishing world.

Monica Juneja, Joachim Kurtz, and Michael Radich