The title of the conference from which this collection of essays was selected was *Asian Futures, Asian Traditions*, and a recurring seam that binds them together is the invention and reinvention of tradition, a seam sewn with its inextricably intertwined threads of Westernization, capitalism, globalization, the nation state, nationalism, ultranationalism, culture, identity, ethnicity, nostalgia and the construct of ‘back to the future’.

It is now nearly a quarter of a century since the publication (1983) of Hobsbawm and Ranger’s *The Invention of Tradition*. In that collection of essays by British historians it was contended that certain so-called traditions associated with various parts of the former British Empire were, in fact, of remarkably recent origin, and that ‘traditions’ arise – are invented – as a collective response to rapid socio-economic and political change. In the context in which that book was written, the upheavals in question were predominantly those of industrialization and colonization. The contributors to *The Invention of Tradition* could hardly have predicted the ways in which, and the pace with which, changes have since taken place globally. The impact of their book was such that the concept of the invention of tradition was taken up not only by historians, but also by anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, ethnomusicologists and others, and in the reiteration it has itself been reinvented. This is inevitable, for the discourse has become a tradition, a scholarly tradition, which no doubt will continue to evolve, to be refined and redefined, reinvented, as world events unfold. The present collection of essays contributes to that ongoing discourse.

Culture and cultural attributes are highly value-laden, symbolic, politicized and emotive. It has been demonstrated that many of the cultural attributes which we assume to be ‘traditional’, i.e., which we assume to have been handed down from the distant past, are quite simply recent inventions or reinventions. Traditions are typically invented as an assertion of group identity in the face of threat from some kind of external onslaught. They can be regarded as the linchpin of cultural and even personal identity. No matter where, apparently, “‘Traditional’ . . . imbues whatever it is used to signify with positive and edifying value and cultural authenticity regardless of the actual history, vintage, or derivation of the thing in question.” Although the essays in...
the present book can be individually approached from other perspectives, collectively they demonstrate various ways in which diverse groups in Asia have responded to the juggernaut changes rumbling inexorably through their societies and economies and histories, and some essays explore where this might take them in future.

Over the past two centuries or so, humankind has experienced a revolution in communications. That revolution has two prongs: a revolution in the conveyance of people and goods (i.e., transportation), and a revolution in the conveyance of information. In transportation, most of the world has to some extent moved from reliance on foot, oxen, horse and sail to bicycles, steam engines, the internal combustion engine, electricity, aeroplanes, the jet age and travel into outer space. As a result, an increasing proportion of the human population has acquired the ability to travel ever faster and roam ever further afield from geographic origins. It is now a commonplace for some of the privileged of the world to circumnavigate the globe in a day (currently about twenty-six hours from Auckland to London). The transportation revolution has been paralleled by the information revolution: from writing brush, quill pen, slate and chalk to typewriter and ballpoint pen, the postal service, telegraph, wireless, telephone, radio, television, satellite, video links, computers, mobile phones, email, and the internet. These two revolutions together have created a globalization of cultural experience resulting in the contraction of time-and-space in our day-to-day lives. It is arguably upon these two technological revolutions that globalization of all aspects of our lives is founded.

The fear that globalization would result in a worldwide loss of diversity and cultural variety is not as new as we might like to think, and began with modernity itself. The French naval officer, novelist and travel writer, Pierre Loti, lamented in 1887:

Il viendra un temps où la terre sera bien ennuyeuse à habiter, quand on l’aura rendue pareille d’un bout à l’autre, et qu’on ne pourra même plus essayer de voyager pour se distraire un peu . . .

Some day, when man shall have made all things alike, the earth will be a dull, tedious dwelling-place, and we shall have even to give up travelling and seeking for a change which shall no longer be found.

This fear has intensified in recent years along with the accelerating pace of globalization, and has been reiterated thus:

Some Western social scientists and anthropologists, and not a few foreign politicians, believe that a sort of cultural cloning will result from what they regard as the ‘cultural assault’ of McDonald’s, Coca-Cola, Disney, Nike, MTV, and the English language itself . . . Whatever their backgrounds or agendas, these critics are convinced that Western – often equated with American – influences will flatten every cultural crease, producing, as one observer terms it, one big ‘McWorld.’
Indeed, for example, I recently rode on the Paris Metro for the first time in nearly thirty years, and I was struck most forcibly by the change in its smell. There is now but the merest whiff of the highly distinctive odour that used to characterise the Metro, which was, I guess, a cocktail of French coffee, garlic, Gauloise cigarettes, French perfume, urine and some local brand of disinfectant. Now it smells to me little different from the London Underground or the Tokyo Chikatetsu. True, these metropolitan underground rail networks are all cleaner and more pleasant to use, but it is as though they have been deodorized and sanitized to the cultural equivalent of hospital sterility.

This is, of course, only one side of the coin. The other side is that in the space of one generation we have all come to enjoy the opportunity and even the reality of a cultural diversity never before known. An example of the globalization of culture that most readers will readily relate to is that of cuisine. Twenty years ago in small towns in a small island nation like New Zealand, there was normally a pub, a fish-and-chip shop and a cafe offering not much more than a limited range of sandwiches and cakes. Nowadays, it can been almost taken for granted that in even the most remote settlements of one of the more remote nation-states in the world there will be Italian-style pizza and pasta on offer, European-style coffees, American hamburgers, Japanese sushi, Mexican nachos, Indian curries, Chinese takeaways, and the list grows all the time. Take it or leave it, but it is there if you want it. And this new cultural diversity is being replicated in towns – not just capital cities – the world over with regard to many aspects of material and non-material culture.

Globalization is itself inventing new traditions. Australia and New Zealand engage in rivalry over which invented the pavlova (a dessert of meringue, fruit and whipped cream). The British Tourism Board now promotes curry as Britain’s national cuisine. While so-called ‘Chinese’ food in Western countries is a kind of generic adaptation that can seldom be pinpointed to have derived from a particular authentic Chinese recipe, the same can be said of so-called yōshoku in Japan, except in reverse. Southern French Provençale country cooking was transported to Paris, where it evolved into Parisian ‘nouvelle-cuisine,’ which was learnt there by a Japanese chef who later took it to a Japanese restaurant in Hawai’i aimed at Japanese package tourists. In the end product, raw beef was converted into raw fish, vinaigrette dressing into a soy sauce dressing, and the dessert was adapted with pineapples and the Hawai’ian tropical fruits expected by the Japanese tourists. The meal no longer bore any resemblance to the Provençale peasant cooking that inspired it. The cuisine was by then a global product, neither distinctly Provençale, nor Parisian, nor Japanese nor American-Hawai’ian. ‘Fusion’ has become the order of the day, and not just for restaurant menus: the same may be said of everything from music, apparel and architecture to vehicle design, earthquake engineering and political systems.

Everywhere, though, it would appear that people are highly selective regarding the invention of tradition. As Zwingle puts it:
Critics of Western culture blast Coke and Hollywood but not organ transplants and computers. Boosters of Western culture can point to increased efforts to preserve and protect the environment. Yet they make no mention of some less salubrious aspects of Western Culture, such as cigarettes and automobiles, which, even as they are being eagerly adopted in the developing world, are having disastrous effects. Apparently westernization is not a straight road to hell, nor to paradise either.\footnote{7}

In reaction against this globalization of culture that is perceived by many to be resulting in a monochrome hotch-potch, we can witness a renewed vigour in the invention of tradition. In the face of such threat to their cultural identities, people everywhere are seeking ways to resist the complete extinction of earlier ways of life. At its most benign, we see the revival of vanished or vanishing crafts like pargetting in East Anglia, the revival of endangered languages like Welsh and Maori and Ainu, the reconstruction of eighth-century palace buildings like the Suzakumon opened in 1998 in Nara, Japan. Invented traditions of this sort are for the most part ubiquitously and unexceptionally innocuous and intellectually or aesthetically pleasing.

Nevertheless, the consumers of the new global culture largely comprise the more affluent sectors of the populations of all societies. It is a certain level of affluence that allows access to McDonald’s, computers and the internet, air travel or Christian Dior perfume, whether one is in Japan, Italy, India, the Philippines or New Zealand. Along with the globalization of cultural experience, then, we are observing an almost frenzied chauvinistic fervour to preserve a distinct identity through the invention and reinvention of traditions. Indeed, the extreme response of some to globalization of culture is a violent rejection of it, an exaggerated desire to reinvent an imagined culturally ‘pure’ past in the present, by exclusion of anything perceived as ‘foreign’. The novelist Yukio Mishima was one such reactionary in Japan, whose response to post-Pacific War Westernization was to commit seppuku (or harakiri, the ritual disembowelment of the samurai warrior tradition) in 1970. At the extreme fringes of such reaction, the world has in recent years witnessed massacres and cultural vandalism including the bombings of Afro-Caribbean and South Asian districts in London; the massacre of gorilla-watching white tourists by Hutus in Africa; destruction of the huge rock Buddha in Afghanistan by the Taliban; blood-chilling so-called ‘ethnic cleansing’ in former Yugoslavia; ongoing hostility between Israel and Palestine; orchestrated hijack-suicides in the United States on 11 September 2001 by extreme Islamic fundamentalists aiming to strike at what they perceive as the heart of Western cultural, economic and geopolitical domination of the globe; and retaliation by the United States against Iraq. All participants in such activities are attempting to preserve what they regard as ‘their culture’ and at the same time to denigrate that of some other nation or people – the perceived enemy.
The participants in these extreme forms of nationalism, racism and xenophobia, like the ultranationalist skinheads of Britain and Germany, predominantly (though not exclusively) belong to lower socio-economic brackets, people who stereo-typically are less well-educated, more likely to be unemployed, and who can only window-shop for, rather than indulge in actually purchasing for themselves, the attributes of global material culture. Fanatical extremists and terrorist organizations, however well-educated and well-resourced the leaders themselves may be, recruit primarily from among the youth of poorly resourced marginalized sectors, no matter where in the world or what the avowed ‘cause’.

So saying, we must also recognize that a differential in the distribution of wealth within and between groups is only one of the ingredients of the status anxiety that fuels cultural conflict. The compulsion to assert one’s identity or that of the group to which one belongs, especially out of fear of its being subsumed by others, appears to be equally as strong.

However, as Edward Said wrote in a different context:

Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly? By surviving the consequences humanly, I mean to ask whether there is any way of avoiding the hostility expressed by the division, say, of men into ‘us’ (Westerners) and ‘they’ (Orientals).\(^8\)

The chapters in this book are examples about how specific East, South and Southeast Asian peoples have responded to the issues and problems raised above, but the issues and problems themselves are universal and global.

As I argue later in this volume, taken to its logical extreme, the discourse of invented tradition surely suggests that all traditions are fabricated, invented, reinvented, and in a sense, therefore, superficial. This is most disturbing, for if we strip away all traditions (and they were all invented at some time in the past), what is left of ‘culture’? Arguably, nothing but a common experience of humanity and biological survival: birth, growth, maturation and death; feeling hunger, cold, heat, pain, fear, sexual desire, greed, compassion; the need for food, water, shelter, exercise and various kinds of stimulation. If we probe much below the surface of invented tradition, the pointlessness of all cultural conflict becomes clear.

Chakrabarty (1998) suggests that there are two ways of looking at ‘tradition’: one he calls ‘nostalgic’, the other ‘epiphanic’. ‘Nostalgia is located in an experience of loss and calls for a politics of recovery and recuperation, and for a political agency adequate to that task,’\(^9\) whereas:

An epiphanic vision does not necessarily call for a realization of a future that is also a gesture of return to a historical past. Unlike the moment of nostalgia, the epiphanic vision is not located in a thematic of loss.
Epiphany is precisely the capacity to get out of historical time and hence out of the idea that a loss has happened in history.\textsuperscript{10}

By this, I infer that he means that the ‘nostalgic’ view of the past is backward-looking not only literally in time, but psychologically too. In my view it is essentially nostalgia for an idyllic past that never existed anywhere in fact. It is a kind of self-delusion, and like all delusion, it has little that is constructive to teach or offer us. The ‘epiphanic’ view appears less emotive, more realistic, more pragmatic and thus more instructive for facing the future.

In the hope of facilitating access and improving coherence, I have located the twenty-four essays in this book in one of three broad groupings: (1) Tradition and History; (2) Politics, Economics and Gender Studies; and 3) Language, Performing and Visual Arts. Several chapters in this book explore aspects of the ‘traditional’ past (Starrs, Palmer, Soulliere, Johnson, Itō, Rubin). Something that many of the chapters share in common is what might be called geographical cross-referencing within Asia. Scholars are increasingly looking outside the narrow confines of individual cultures and beyond the boundaries of individual nation states for instruction of a comparative nature. Thus, we see discussed topics concerning the Japanese in central Asia (Stalker) in the former Japanese Empire (Sakamoto) and China and Southeast Asia (Itō); the Chinese in Indonesia (Allen) and Malaysia (Ong and Ong); comparisons and contrast between the development of historiography in the Philippines and Indonesia (Curaming); and linguistic connections between Japanese and Malay (Fujimura).

The influence of globalized culture is discussed in several chapters: the transformation, for example, of visual and performing arts in Thailand and Vietnam (Rubin); Bhutan (Dobson); China (Lam) and Malaysia (Hashim); various ways in which the globalization of political economy has affected China (Kwong, Brady), Vietnam (Kerkvliet), Japan (Curtin), Bangladesh (Halder), the Philippines (Storey) and Indonesia (Hosen). The effects of the Asian financial crisis among the poor of Malaysia (Berma) and Indonesia (Suharto) are addressed. The interrelationship between local cultural icons and tourism are explored by Ong and Ong and by Dobson. ‘Epiphanic’ visions of the future that call for a break with ‘traditional’ pasts are suggested in their respective areas of study by Halder, Suharto, Curtin, Storey and Dobson.

Given that ‘Asia’ is an artificial construct that includes a huge multiplicity of peoples, languages, nations and cultures, we cannot speak of an Asian tradition or the future of Asia. The many ‘traditions’ in Asia each have their own specific histories and will face the future in their own specific ways: hence the topic of this book, Asian Futures, Asian Traditions.
REFERENCES


NOTES

1 Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983.
3 Loti (Vercier, ed.), [first published 1887], 1990, 50.
4 Loti (Ensor, trans.), 1913, 16.
8 Said, 1979, 45.