The AsiaBarometer: its Origins, its Principles and its Prospects

The following text was prepared as introductory remarks to the AsiaBarometer Symposium, University of Tokyo, on March 16 2005.


What Is the AsiaBarometer?

The AsiaBarometer is a regional survey project regularly conducted in a broader East Asia encompassing East, Southeast, South and Central Asia, with a focus on the daily lives of ordinary people. It was launched in 2002 by way of my article in the monthly magazine Chuo Koron (Central Review). The first survey, funded by business firms in Japan, was conducted during the summer of 2003 throughout ten Asian societies namely, Uzbekistan, Sri Lanka, India, Myanmar, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, China, South Korea and Japan, with a sample size of approximately 800 respondents each, and using face-to-face interviews except in Japan. Its first major academic product was published early in 2005:


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It contains not only a profile for each country and cross-cultural analyses using AsiaBarometer survey data, but it also includes tabulated data tables and figures, field reports, coding schemes and raw individual data of all respondents plus all the English and local language questionnaires contained in CD-ROM form. This stands as the first large scale regional survey conducted in a vast area known as Asia in which data accumulation and service have long remained poor. One can argue that the AsiaBarometer survey project is one of the most user-friendly projects of all similar surveys. This project, supported by cross-national survey data, fills a void in the field of empirical social science in this demographically vast, developmentally dynamic, increasingly technologically proficient, and politically steadily democratizing region.

The idea of publishing this volume was first suggested in 2003 by Prof. Ronald Inglehart of the University of Michigan, in Nishinomiya, Japan, where Prof. Kazufumi Marabe of Kwansei Gakuin University was leading a symposium on cross-national survey research methodology at that time. I gladly picked
up this idea and contacted Prof. Miguel Basanez of the Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico and former President of WAPOR (World Association of Public Opinion Research). We discussed the feasibility of packing research products as well as individual and tabulated survey data into a single volume. Prof. Basanez together with Sigio Xo! Editors, a Mexican publisher, courageously undertook the task. Needless to say I feel the need to express special gratitude to President Prof. Takeshi Sasaki, Director Prof. Akihiko Tanaka, Prof. TIMUR DADABAEEV and Prof. Kabashima, as well as to all the participants of the AsiaBarometer workshop in January 2004, who invariably helped me.

The AsiaBarometer focuses on the daily lives of ordinary people in Asia. It aims to highlight the physical, psychological, and sociological aspects of their lives. Their values and life styles are highlighted throughout this study.

What are the Principles of the AsiaBarometer?
With this focus, the principles of the AsiaBarometer are expressed in eight sentences. 1) Minimize obtrusiveness when asking questions. 2) Try to be as clear and concrete as possible when formulating questions. 3) Be culturally and linguistically sensitive. 4) Analyze data from the bottom up rather than from the top down. 5) Analyze data on the basis of knowledge of the respondents' surrounding environment. 6) Formulate a questionnaire with maximum input from local experts. 7) Analyze survey data jointly with local experts. And finally, 8) Seek the truth with optimism and an open mind.

1) Unobtrusiveness - Survey research is inherently obtrusive. It attempts to penetrate the minds of people. It sometimes asks questions that many people do not like to be asked. Minimizing obtrusiveness should be a fundamental principle when doing cross-cultural survey research in such a diverse region as Asia in terms of diversity, both within and across nations.

2) Clarity and Concreteness - Social scientists tend to use a jargon when discussing abstract and often vague concepts. This vocabulary should be used minimally. We must reach out to the minds of people, therefore, we must be utterly plain and clear. One of the inherent difficulties of cross-national survey research is that in an effort to ask the same questions in as many nations as possible, some questions violate this principle. This is particularly true of a number of questions that originate from America and Europe and that are asked in widely diversified regions.

3) Cultural and Linguistic Sensitivity - In North America and Western Europe as well as in the Indo-European language-speaking areas, this is not so great a problem as it is in Asia. Nor is it a critically difficult problem in Latin America and Africa thanks in part to the influence of colonial heritage; whereas in Asia, it is. We must appreciate this cultural and linguistic distinction. Of the five largest religions, Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam have the largest number of believers all in Asia. Linguistic diversity is vast, sometimes even in one nation. The problem is aggravated at times by peculiarities of the English language. For instance, English allows the use of the double negative to express subtle nuances to discerning users. The following question is a very good example: "Generally, do you think people can be trusted or do you think that one cannot be too careful about dealing with other people (that it pays to be wary of people)?"
   - Most people can be trusted
   - One can't be too careful in dealing with people

4) From the Bottom Up - One of the problems with mainstream American positivist social science is that it tends to analyze from top to bottom. This means that with a fairly abstract general hypothesis, it tends to avoid what it regards as specific parochial realities. On this issue, we believe that given the expected and real diversities and peculiarities in Asia, we would do best to emphasize the from-the-bottom-up approach. Rather than focusing the entire effort of hypothesis-testing on cross-cultural generalizations, we must pay attention to individual response patterns as if this were a case study. Even if we do not reach the bottom of the individual level data, it should be emphasized here that it is essential to obtain a good country profile based on the survey data that the AsiaBarometer produces regularly.

Indonesia
Brunei
Cambodia
India
Japan
Uzbekistan

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The thrust of a question may not be fully or accurately translated into local languages until culturally and linguistically proficient experts make significant inputs in this process.

5) Attention to the Organic Whole - One can argue that the myth of the organic whole has forever disappeared with the advent of globalization: it has deepened its penetration, it has fragmented the largely nationally demarcated organic whole while linking fragmented parts together both globally and regionally so that a new scene might emerge. Globalization does not necessarily wipe out the organic whole completely. Attention to reconfigured organic wholes in various places is important to better understand the beliefs, values and practices that people hold onto amid the turmoil of fast and rapid moving globalization.

6) Formulation of the Questionnaires with the Support of Local Experts - The participation of local experts from each country is very important for them to help in fine-tune questionnaires that recognize local realities. Such exercises are carried out during annual workshops. Not only are country profiles and cross-cultural analyses placed on the table each year as we examine the AsiaBarometer, but the questionnaire is meticulously revised. The thrust of a question may not be fully or accurately translated into local languages until culturally and linguistically proficient experts make significant inputs in this process.

7) Data Analysis Conversation and Discussions with Local Experts - Hints and hunches often issue from conversations and discussions with local experts. More operationally, outliers, or odd cases, must be examined with the help of local academics who know the local scene. The AsiaBarometer workshop is held each year so that both local experts and crossnational generalized proposition testers may confront one another in order to generate more contextually related and sounder knowledge.

8) Seek the Truth with Optimism and an Open Mind - When the idea of the AsiaBarometer was launched, many friends gently opposed the project by stating that a number of Asian countries would not welcome such surveys: Myanmar, Uzbekistan, Vietnam and China, to name but a few. The project was carried out regardless of this opposition. The volume has since received the acclaim of world renowned scholars. Prof. Ronald Inglehart, Prof. Lucian W. Pye and Prof. Jean Blondel, are foremost experts on cross-cultural survey research, comparative political cultures in Asia, and comparative political institutions respectively, a fact that is attested by the book's foreword and the tributes expressed on the cover page.

What is the Prospect for the AsiaBarometer?
It is very important to be optimistic and open-minded when launching an original idea and an innovative scheme. This is indeed the case with the AsiaBarometer. Pessimism, parochialism and protectionism of any kind must be curtailed. The future of the AsiaBarometer survey is bright. In the first instance, it enlightens us: we should strive to learn more about ourselves. The AsiaBarometer survey helps us immensely through the collection of data on the daily lives of ordinary people, by means of analysis and via data and research products made available to those interested throughout the world. Secondly, the AsiaBarometer survey benefits its users - academics, business leaders, political leaders and journalists. In other words, those who benefit are not only users but also supporters of the AsiaBarometer survey.

The second AsiaBarometer survey is now under way; this time, it focuses on East and Southeast Asia, including Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, China, South Korea and finally, Japan. Although we are encountering some delay in conducting the surveys, we expect that all data will be acquired later this spring. The second AsiaBarometer workshop in March 2005 has already made a good start toward producing a second major academic product similar to the first one. The rich experiences of the two surveys done successively in 2003 and in 2004 will enable us to conduct an AsiaBarometer survey in each of the sub-regions, namely, East, Southeast, South and Central Asia, from 2005 onward, hopefully with a much larger sample size, with a more nationwide coverage, and with a significantly improved questionnaire. With your unstinting support, the future of the AsiaBarometer is very bright indeed.