

The AsiaBarometer: Its Origins, Its Principles and Its Prospects

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1. 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 daily lives of ordinary people. It was launched in 2002 in my article on the monthly magazine called *Chuo Koron* (Central Review) in 2002. The first survey was conducted in summer 2003 in ten Asian societies: Uzbekistan, Sri Lanka, India, Myanmar, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, China, South Korea and Japan with a sample size of approximately 800 each, and using face-to-face interview except in Japan. It was funded by business firms in Japan. Its first major academic product came out early in 2005:

Takashi Inoguchi, Miguel Basáñez, Akihiko Tanaka and Timur Dadabaev, eds., *Values and Life Styles in Urban Asia: A Cross-Cultural Analysis and Sourcebook Based on the AsiaBarometer Survey of 2003*, Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores for the Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo, 2005, 503pp., ISBN 968-23-2564-1. (can be purchased through Amazon.com.)

It contains not only country profile and cross-cultural analyses using the AsiaBarometer survey data but also tabulated data tables and figures, field report and coding schemes and the raw individual data of all the respondents plus all the English and local language questionnaires contained in CD-ROM. It represents a first large scale regional survey conducted in a vast area called Asia in which data accumulation and service have long remained until recently to be significantly improved. One can argue that the AsiaBarometer survey project represents one of the most user-friendly projects of all such surveys of a similar kind. It fills in a void of empirical social science

and cross-national survey data in this demographically vast, developmentally dynamic, technologically increasingly proficient, and politically steadily democratizing region. In other words, it is a very user friendly project.

The idea of publishing this volume was first suggested in 2003 by Prof Ronald Inglehart, the University of Michigan, in Nishinomiya, Japan, where Prof Kazufumi Manabe of Kwansai Gakuin University held a symposium on cross-national survey research methodology. I gladly picked up this idea and contacted Prof Miguel Basanez, Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico and former President of WAPOR (World Association of Public Opinion Research) about the feasibility of getting not only research products but also survey data, both individual and tabulated, packed in one volume. He and Siglo XXI Editores, a Mexican publisher, courageously undertook the task. Here is the volume and Prof Basanez.

Needless to say, here on campus, I cannot fail to express especial gratitude to President Prof. Takeshi Sasaki, Director Prof Akihiko Tanaka and Prof Timur Dadabaev, as well as Prof Kabashima, and all the participants of the AsiaBarometer workshop in January 2004, who invariably helped me to move forward. The AsiaBarometer focuses on the daily lives of ordinary people in Asia. It tries to highlight the physical, psychological, and sociological aspects of their life. Their values and life styles are highlighted throughout.

2. What is the Principles of the AsiaBarometer?

With this focus, the principles of the AsiaBarometer are expressed in eight sentences. (1) minimize obtrusiveness in asking questions. (2) try to be as clear and concrete as possible in formulating questions. (3) be culturally and linguistically sensitive. (4) analyze data from bottom up rather than top down. (5) analyze data on the basis of knowledge of environments surrounding respondents. (6) formulate a questionnaire with maximum input from local experts. (7) analyze survey data jointly with local experts. And (8) seek truth with optimism and open mind.

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

(2) Clarity and Concreteness---Social scientists tend to use jargons about abstract and often vague concepts. They should be used minimally. We must reach out the minds of people. We must be utterly plain and clear. One of the inherent difficulties of cross-national survey research is that in an effort to make the same questions asked in as many nations as possible some questions violate this principle. This is especially true with some of the American and European originated questions asked in exceedingly different environments. This is a second principle.

(3) Cultural and Linguistic Sensitivity---In north America and western Europe, the Indo-European language speaking areas more or less, this is not so much a problem as it is in Asia. In Latin America and Africa this is not an exceedingly difficult problem either, thanks in part to the influence of colonial inheritance. In Asia it is. We must recognize this. Out of the five largest religions, Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam have the largest number of believers all in Asia. Linguistically diversity is immense sometimes even in one nation. The problem is aggravated at times by the peculiarity of English language. English allows double negation 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

---Can't be too careful in dealing with people

(4) Bottom Up---One of the problems with the mainstream American positivistic social science tends to go about doing analysis from top down. It means that with a fairly abstract general hypothesis it tends not to bother what they regard specific parochial realities. My position on this matter is that given the expected and real diversities and peculiarities in Asia, we had better emphasize the bottom up approach. Instead of placing the whole effort at hypothesis-testing toward cross-cultural generalization, we must pay attention to individual response patterns as if it were a case study. Even if we do not go down to the bottom of the individual level data, it is most emphatically noted here that we must have a good country profile on the basis of survey data the AsiaBarometer produces regularly.

(5) Attention to the Organic Whole---One can argue that the myth of organic whole has

gone forever with the advent of globalization. Globalization has been deepening its penetration. It has been fragmenting the largely nationally demarcated organic whole while linking fragmented parts together globally and regionally so that deeper global and regional integration would emerge. My position here is that globalization does not necessarily wipe out the organic whole completely and that attention to reconfigured organic wholes in various places are most important to better comprehend beliefs, values and practices people hold onto amidst the turmoil of fast and deep globalization.

(6) Questionnaire Formulation with Local Experts---The participation of local experts from each country is deemed very important to fine tune questions with local realities. We do this with this kind of annual workshops. Not only country profile analysis and cross-cultural analysis but also questionnaire revision are placed on the table as we eye the AsiaBarometer the following year. The thrust of a question may not be fully accurately translated into local languages. Only culturally and linguistically proficient experts can make significant inputs in this process.

(7) Data Analysis Conversation and Discussion with Local Experts---Hints and hunches often come from those conversations and discussions with local experts. More operationally, outliers, or odd cases, must be examined together with local academics who know the local scene. That is why the AsiaBarometer workshop is held annually so that both local experts and crossnationally generalizable proposition testers confront each other toward generating more contextualized and sounder knowledge.

(8) Seek truth with optimism and open mind--- When I launched the idea of the AsiaBarometer, many friends of mine gently discouraged me by saying that some Asian countries would not allow me to execute such surveys. Myanmar, Uzbekistan, Vietnam and China, you name it. I did not listen to them. But I did it. And this volume has received the acclaim from world renowned scholars like Prof Ronald Inglehart, Prof Lucian W. Pye and Prof Jean Blondel, foremost experts on cross-cultural survey research, comparative political cultures in Asia, and comparative political institutions respectively as you can see from its Foreword and its blurbs on the cover page.

3 What is the prospect for the AsiaBarometer?

It is very important to be optimistic and openminded when you launceh an original idea and an innovative scheme. It is indeed the case with the AsiaBarometer. Pessimism,

parochialism and protectionism of all kinds must be curtailed. The prospect for the AsiaBarometer survey is bright. First, it is because it enlightens ourselves. We should be able to know more about ourselves. The AsiaBarometer survey immensely helps us by collecting data on daily lives of ordinary people, by analyzing them and by making data and research products available to those interested the world over. Second, the AsiaBarometer survey benefits its users--academics, business leaders, political leaders and journalists. In other words, those who benefits are not only users but also supporters of the AsiaBarometer survey. The second AsiaBarometer survey is now under way, this time focusing on East and Southeast Asia, including Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, China, South Korea and Japan. Although some delay in conducting surveys is taking place, all the data will be acquired later this spring. In the second AsiaBarometer workshop in March 2005 has already made a good start toward producing a second major academic product like the first one. It is my thinking that the rich experiences of these two surveys successively done in 2003 and in 2004 would enable us to conduct AsiaBarometer surveys in each subregion, East, Southeast, South and Central, one by one, from 2005 onward, hopefully with a much larger sample size, with a more nation-wide coverage and with a significantly improved questionnaire. I conclude that with your unstinted support, the future of the AsiaBarometer is bright.

Thank you very much for your attention.