



# Shaping Asia:

## Connectivities, Comparisons, Collaborations

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This article proposes that research and teaching across the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) can profit from relational and comparative conceptual and methodological approaches in studying societies and cultures in Asia. Our point in case is an interdisciplinary networking initiative called ‘Shaping Asia’. It takes up the challenge of collaboratively grasping complex connectivities that shape (or have shaped) dynamics across Asia in diachronic and synchronic perspectives. This way, it aims at coming to critical terms with Asia’s positioning and circulations in a globalised world (Duara 2014). Such an understanding of and learning from - and with - ‘Asia’ (in fact, we prefer to employ the idea of pluralised Asia’s) in scholarly and ‘other’ worlds such as political realms, cultural production or social activism is needed in a context of highly asymmetrical relations in the rapidly transforming times like today. The methodological approach is also seen by us as relevant with respect to tracing and understanding historical relations and formations, in particular as we aim at transgressing scholarly and geophysical compartments that are rather common in qualitative research. For such an endeavour, thorough scholarship on different Asian regions and locales, based on the command of Asian languages and intimate ethnographic knowledge of cultural and religious particularities and mostly obtained through prolonged field studies can be further sustained and deepened and contribute to theorising ‘from the Global South’ when connectivities and comparisons are taken seriously in scholarly cooperation.

**Keywords:** methodologies of trans-regional research, Asia, connectivities, comparisons, interdisciplinarity in collaborations

This article proposes that research and teaching across the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) can profit from relational and comparative conceptual and methodological approaches in studying societies and cultures in Asia. Our point in case is an interdisciplinary networking initiative called ‘Shaping Asia’. It takes up the challenge of collaboratively grasping complex connectivities that shape (or have shaped) dynamics across Asia in diachronic and synchronic perspectives. This way, it aims at coming to critical terms with Asia’s positioning and circulations in a globalised world (Duara 2014). Such an understanding of and learning from - and with - ‘Asia’ (in fact, we prefer to employ the idea of pluralised Asia’s) in scholarly and ‘other’ worlds such as political realms, cultural production or social activism is needed in a context of highly asymmetrical relations in the rapidly transforming times like today. The methodological approach is also seen by us as relevant with respect to tracing and understanding historical relations and formations, in particular as we aim at transgressing scholarly and geophysical compartments that are rather common in qualitative research. For such an endeavour, thorough scholarship on different Asian regions and locales, based on the command of Asian languages and intimate ethnographic knowledge of cultural and religious particularities and mostly obtained

through prolonged field studies can be further sustained and deepened and contribute to theorising 'from the Global South' when connectivities and comparisons are taken seriously in scholarly cooperation. 'Shaping Asia' brings together important contributions from the fields of transregional/-cultural and -local studies, from new or critical area studies as well as from global studies. It also draws upon the work of other comprehensive initiatives in the HSS, albeit pushing propositions further, in the case of this networking initiative, with particular focus on comparison, connectivity and collaboration as explained below.

In assembling scholars from Germany and Asia under such an agenda, we find inspiration in and partially connect with other similarly interdisciplinary and ambitious initiatives, such as the International Institute of Asian Studies in Leiden, the Centre for Asian and Transcultural Studies (Heidelberg), the Global Asia initiative at Copenhagen University, the Global Asia Initiative (Duke University, Durham) as well as the Asia Research Institute (NUS, Singapore).

In order to reflect the agenda in an academic realm, in this contribution we present concepts and preliminary findings from our networking initiative constituted in 2018 that was carried by the universities of Bielefeld and Heidelberg, along with other partner universities and institutions. 'Shaping Asia' has emerged from the multidisciplinary field of Asian Studies in Germany, in collaboration with Asian partners. Its aim is to engender sustained research and activate new collaborations among scholars from the Humanities and qualitative Social Sciences based at German Universities in exchange with their colleagues working at partner institutions in different parts of Asia. The initiative is geared at comprehending Asian past and present dynamics - beyond national or regional boundaries and cultural containers. The research partners engage in designing and testing research strategies and fields that allow for a synergetic approach towards various ways in and through which regions of Asia have been imagined, governed and politicised. Their designs are attentive to the connections, frictions and dissonances that have reconfigured societal and cultural conditions

and contexts in Asia. These can be observed through three key thematic dynamics in Asian societies that we envisage to examine in the constitutional phase of the networking initiative: their rapid urbanisation, critical knowledge production, and modalities of governance and infrastructural change.

The *Shaping Asia* networking initiative builds on the by now well-established critique of methodological regionalism and nationalism as well as the identification of cultural associations with geographical locations that pays attention to the fact that these continue to be influenced by research politics and academic funding across the globe. To enable structured discussions and ensure innovative scientific results, three connected thematic lines stand currently in the forefront of enquiry. These are informed by the joint interest to develop innovative methods for uncovering commonalities, and for comparing and contrasting through collaboration:

*Urban assemblages and uneven mobilities in Asia:*

This thematic line considers the transforming nature of public urban spaces and practices related to cultural heritage as a resource of knowledge co-production and collaborative socio-cultural practices.

*Knowledge production and circulation:*

This thematic line understands Asia as a region in the world where (post)colonial domination and its manifold interrogations are linked to the modalities of knowledge production and circulation, while seeking to grasp how Asia is and has been shaped in this process. At the forefront is the search for alternative narratives that challenge colonial legacies and the homogenising spread of 'world culture' driven by neo-liberal forces while also providing a voice for agents, contents, forms and media so far considered outside the legitimate canons of knowledge.

*Infrastructure and the remaking of Asia through adapting, orchestrating and cooperating:*

This thematic line studies the impact of large-scale infrastructure for the re-making of Asia. The line considers population management through digital

technology, technical support for vulnerable coast lines, and cross-border mobility projects in order to grasp how local specifics, national agendas, and international collaborations shape the experience of living in Asia.

### Conceptual considerations

Over the last two decades, growing interconnections among different Asian locations and the broader forces of globalisation have brought sweeping changes to the region, impacting practices of place-making by the 'grip of worldly encounter' (Tsing 2005). These come to light in academic, economic and political alliances as much as in globally mediated debates on climate change, migration, urbanisation or populism. Alongside digital technologies, the changing pressures of capitalist production and labour markets, and transforming politics and fabrics of public spheres and communities in action means that there is an amazing, while puzzling rich traffic of people and ideas that contribute to the shaping of Asia.

With the concept of 'Shaping Asia', notions of a 'plural Asia' and of 'pluralising Asia' can be facilitated, instead of 'one' Asia with clear boundaries and 'content'. Why so? Given that the notion of 'Asia' is omnipresent in public discourses, in academic research, and in the every-day invocations of a frame within which actions and visions are conceived, we still know too little what it means to 'be Asian' and to adopt – or challenge - 'Asian' perspectives when acting and speaking. Until the beginning of this millennium, scholars and practitioners have rarely engaged in inquiries seeking to apprehend the multi-lateral, multi-scalar and translocal connectivities and conditions that impact 'Asia as assemblage'. With the notion of 'assemblage', we propose a relational process of multi-scalar as well as multi-temporal composition, a methodology attuned to practice, materiality and emergence, as Colin McFarlane (2009) has developed in his work on transcultural aspects of urbanisation. We follow Ong and Collier's proposition that this concept enables a look at 'material, collective and discursive relationships' and shifting territorial forma-

tions (Ong and Collier 2005: 4, in McFarlane 2009: 562; McCann and Ward 2011: XV), engaging in trans-regional perspectives.

Only few attempts have been made to actively pursue trans-regional research within Asia (see Perera, Pathak, Kumar 2019; Pathak 2018; van Bremen et al. 2005; Abu-Er-Rub, Brosius, Meurer, Panagiotopoulos, Richter 2019). The narrative 'l'Asie n'existe pas' (Asia does not exist), alleging absence of an 'Asian spirit' or 'civilisation commune' (Nguyen 2006) has triggered many debates about Asian self-understandings. A sense of national, ethnic, cultural and historical distinction, diversity, or divergence dominated transregional identifications and is mirrored in, if not also enforced by scholarly work in and on Asia. Gayatri Spivak's statement that 'Asia is not a place, yet the name is laden with history and cultural politics' (2008: 9, see also Hui, Hutters 2011; Duara 2010) aptly expresses an omnipresent ambivalence between narratives of Asia's role as an important category and imaginary, on the one hand, as well as the manifold divisions – such as nationalist and ethnic revivalism - within the Asian social spaces (including the Asian diaspora), on the other. Yet, both also attribute notions of lack and deficit, while we hope to bring to the fore also the bare facts of imagination as social practice. This is mirrored, for instance, in the work of Ananya Roy who, in her essay 'When is Asia' (2016), proposes that 'Asia' is less a bounded location nor a set of freely floating transnational/-continental circulations. Rather, she describes is a set of citationary relations through which a politics of futurity is crafted as a mode of governing and inter-referenced character of the Asian century. Theoretical approaches that seem associated and productive in this context have been incorporated from Mobilities Studies (where relationality and connectivity is more than just a linear movement from A to B, or where disconnection and inertia are as important as high speed and mobility; see Sheller 2015).

Recent initiatives highlighting inter-Asian connectivities and frictions have yet to become sufficiently visible and to contribute to a vision of a 'pluralised Asia' (a term not to be confused with a more ideologically and politically loaded notion of

‘Pan-Asianism’ or ‘Asiacentrism’, see Chen 2010). Speaking about ‘pluralized Asia’ we emphasise that there is not ‘one’ Asia, but describe Asia as a place of multiple imaginations and connected realities. Rather than reifying the notion of ‘Asia’, we propose to engage critically with concepts such as ‘the Asian century’ or ‘the Asian Age’ in order to understand the work such concepts are doing. Who proposes these notions and who contests them? And how is knowledge about Asia historically, culturally and politically produced and embedded in the world as well as in scholarly production of ‘Asian’ knowledge, or knowledge of Asia? The practice of ‘shaping’ stands for a twofold, if not ambiguous process of grasping the dynamic, fluid and vibrant qualities that constitute Asia beyond methodological nationalism or regionalism, as well the epistemic construction thereof.

The concept of ‘shaping’ stands for a participative, multi-positional process. ‘Shaping’ entails different relationalities and modalities of governance as giving form to society and polity. ‘Shaping’ means to act, but also to react to external action. Being acted upon instigates and invites (re)actions, tacit dissent and overt opposition. ‘Shaping’ also stands for the identification and framing of “grand challenges” – both within academic research and in societal practice, for instance, urban transformation, migration and demographic shifts. ‘Shaping’ is a creative act of knowledge production, whether intentionally or not, manifesting power-structures, collaborations and tensions of diverse kinds (Svasek and Meyer 2016). The concept of *Shaping Asia* carries with it connotations resulting from orientalist and postcolonial endeavours, discussing them critically, as well as measures to counter-balance those. It also considers the varied forms, synchronically and diachronically, in which the world has been shaped by Asia, too.

In this way, the *Shaping Asia* networking initiative seeks to support initiatives that cross-fertilise Humanities and qualitative Social Sciences as well as the field of New Area Studies (Derichs 2017, Hornidge and Mielke 2017, Houben 2013), and to study entanglements and relationality to offset potentials of in-depth local studies that may run in dan-

ger of compartmentalising knowledge. We engage with post-colonial and post-nation debates (Randeria, Conrad and Römhild 2013) as well as with new approaches to transregional studies, also profiting from the new attention conferred on multi-scalar entanglements (Abu-Er-Rub et al, 2019; Brickell and Datta 2011). Relevant, too, are approaches towards the shifting modes of knowledge and power production (Alatas and Sinha 2001) in and of Asia in light of what has been critiqued as ‘Europe-as-theory and Europe-as-power’ as well as ‘Asia as method’, often linked to problematic forms of Asianism and Eurocentrism, and their impact on academia (Chakrabarty 2000; Chow and de Kloet 2014: 3).

In sum, *Shaping Asia’s* objective is to bring together scholars of excellent regional and disciplinary expertise who are experienced in employing and sharing their competences across disciplinary, thematic and methodological fields of inquiry. The current three thematic lines allow for networked research endeavours on key developments – contemporary and historical - in the Asian region and in scholarship on Asia.

With the initiative, we also aim at a scholarly community-constitution. We intend to strengthen the collaboration of scholars in the Humanities and qualitative Social Sciences who work in the various fields of Asian Studies, including the ‘small disciplines’, and at expanding their cooperation with partner institutions in Asia. The middle-term objective is to establish a sustained scholarly platform for generating joint research activities and for enabling academic exchange in different collaborative formats to further internationalise Asian Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences in Germany, in Asia and globally.

Our objective is to grasp recent large-scale societal challenges and dynamics of change in and of Asia by conducting research and strengthening our conceptual tools in three distinct and yet interrelated thematic lines. This entails overcoming the far-reaching compartmentalisation of research fields and disciplinary segments by means of cross-fertilising both Humanities (understood broadly as also comprising

qualitative social and cultural sciences) and New Area Studies (Hornidge and Mielke 2018; Houben 2017). *Shaping Asia* proposes a de-centred, multi-perspectival and transregional research framework with which to look at Asian societies and cultures. The research is and will be pursued on the basis of a more enhanced interdisciplinary co-production in exchange with stakeholders from non-academic fields.

### Shaping Asia's 'transversal lens' as a methodological strategy

To achieve the goal of developing a multi-perspectival and transregional focus on Asia in the world, the *Shaping Asia* networking initiative deploys a methodology based on three conceptual pillars, namely *connectivities, collaborations and comparisons*.

#### Connectivities

Connectivities are a suitable concept and method with which to overcome often rigid and artificial binary oppositions and container cultures enforced, for instance, by methodological nationalism. By focussing on connectivities, we stress the dynamic relations and processes connecting different societal realms – such as social institutions and solidaric communities, cultural repertoires, habituated ways of being and agentive objects. Scholarship in the Humanities has used the term 'connectivity' to denote a focus on transgressive formations and their interrelations, but also to challenge a hegemonic view of globalisation as a homogenising process and train the attention on demotic and vernacular qualities of connection-making or breaking. Earlier examples include new media technologies and global, historical case studies of regional reciprocity, and "non-territorial readings of a politics of place" (Amin 2004). We prefer the term 'connectivities' to 'connections' because the *Shaping Asia* networking initiative focuses not merely on the fact that two sites are connected, but also on *how* the connections transform what is being connected, for instance, through acts of translation.

The concept of 'connectivities' prompts us to focus on entanglements, spaces of transaction and

translation, and the 'brokers' that operate in therein, thus actively shaping, as well as being formed by connectivities (Robinson 2017, Saxer 2016). Equally, we need to inquire into patterns of ruptures, antagonisms and closures or restrictions leading to *dis*connectivities. While connectivities are a relevant heuristic lens for research, they are also essential to thinking Asia, and further impact the fabric of our conceptualising the continent: knowledge production both constitutes and transforms those who are connected – or disconnected – in Asia and beyond, including African or Indo-pacific contact zones.

While the concept of 'connectivities' entered academic research only recently, scholars can already draw on methodological approaches elaborated in such fields as transnational (Basch et al. 1995) and translocal studies (Freitag and van Oppen 2009, Gerharz 2012), and the 'entangled history' approach, as well as research tools responding to multisitedness (Hannerz ..., Marcus 1995, Falzon 2009, Shore et al 2013).

#### Comparisons

Comparisons are important elements of knowledge production that challenge us to critically revisit our concepts and methods in exploring relationalities and scaling; 'revealing the assumptions, limits and distinctiveness of particular theoretical or empirical claims, and for formulating new lines of inquiry and more situated accounts' (McFarlane 2010: 726). The networking initiative *Shaping Asia* examines how 'difference' and 'sameness' are put into relation across different scales based on our scholars' regionally and linguistically granulated knowledge. It instigates scholars to conceptualise the grasping of social realities created through mutual observations of comparing difference, otherness, and similarities that underline tacit or overt acts of comparison. Moreover, locating and mapping sites and forms of comparison also leads to a better understanding of their effects (Epple and Erhart 2015, van der Veer 2016) at particular moments in time. Thus, engaging with comparison as a heuristic lens and important means of knowledge production is key for our networking initiative.

The researchers comprised in the Shaping Asia-initiative discuss how comparisons instigate change at three levels: (1) how comparisons shape societal processes across temporal and spatial scales, (2) how scholarly investigations observing such processes are driven by overt or tacit comparisons, and (3) how they (can) profit from engaging in transregional comparisons.

Often, comparisons create and are based on 'hard' data. A broad range of quantifications at global and regional scales are driven by pronounced comparative orientations. University or global city rankings, gross domestic products, or indexes of happiness (Alkire et al. 2012) put comparative processes in place. More recently, Humanities and Social Science scholars have become interested in critically examining comparison as heuristic tool, seeking to grasp the criteria for quantifying and creating bounded units (including 'Asia' as regional entity) that, at times, reinforces problematic hierarchies and classifications (Duara, Perry 2018; McFarlane 2017). Inquiring into the practices of comparing helps us uncover relationalities and entanglements that matter for Asian actors. Encountering different solutions to issues (such as education, social welfare or climate change) that are driven by different cultural orientations or different political cultures can result in creative epistemic re-adjustments. This may be the case in transnational spreading of ideas and modes of solidaric action in transnational critical movements, and in the mutual observations of populist rhetoric in media productions. Studying urbanisation processes across Asia, too, requires a comparative 'assemblage' approach, since urban transformation might follow a globalised pattern and yet contain local trajectories that require particular expertise of diverse social hierarchies and political histories (see McFarlane 2010).

Furthermore, *Shaping Asia* stresses that research traditions and modalities of knowledge generation deserve to be compared. This goes beyond the dichotomisation of Western approaches in comparison to non-Western ones in referring to inter-Asian traditions, features, patterns, and characteristics. What

can we learn from comparatively reflecting on modalities of knowledge production such as preferences for theory-oriented vs. preferences for the generation of applied knowledge? What kind of trajectories can be traced that also help to explain why often compartmentalised variants of Asia studies in Germany (Chinese Studies, Japanese Studies, Indology, Southeast Asian Studies etc.) differ in their approaches and self-understandings and often undermine transregional conversations and approaches? Answering these questions would be particularly important for diachronic and synchronic advances across disciplines.

### *Collaborations*

The *Shaping Asia* initiative is based on the premise that knowledge production can be substantially enriched by co-production and collaboration. Over the last years, the Humanities and Social Sciences (especially those in qualitative study fields, and the so-called 'small disciplines' or *Kleine Fächer*) have witnessed a change regarding the nature and scope of collaboration. While important contributions continue to come from individual disciplinary projects resulting in single authored publications, more scholars currently combine and pursue their own projects by engaging in collaborative exchange. *Shaping Asia* has the potential to become a co-productive (and this includes critically contesting each other) forum and testing ground to systematically entangle area and disciplinary perspectives for critical knowledge production.

Collaborative exchange is crucial in both the field of connectivities and comparisons. The former requires joining forces through multi-sited and multi-perspectival observations. However, connectivity and collaboration as promising approaches alone does not suffice. It is also necessary to establish *when* and in *what way* exchanges are 'multi-perspectival' in nature, and how they appear in our research inquiries and methods. Are exchanges between the global 'North' and 'South' necessarily multi-perspectival? To what extent are scholars across the world able to share academic traditions when globalising

forces buttress a canonisation (if not homogenisation) in academic standards of excellence and the travel of ideas? What role do geo-political positionings – whether in Asia or beyond – play in academia? Last but not least, how do research policies affect scholarly positionings? Where are the limits of collaboration and who defines them? How can we reposition our concepts and methods by developing a studying-materials-in-conjunction approach? The same might count for coproduction of fieldwork and research output/outreach. A collaborative approach, where materials and field situations are studied in conjunction, is hard work, and time-consuming. But from our two-year experience in setting up this initiative, we can observe that the investment is encouraging. This way, ‘Shaping Asia’ shapes scholarly communities and co-produces, ideally, new forms of knowledge and cooperation, too. We are encouraged and stimulated by other remarkable initiatives such as the International Institute of Asian Studies (IIAS, Leiden), the Asian Dynamics-Initiative (Kopenhagen University), Duke University’s *Global Asia* Initiative, and hope to connect in order to further improve and sharpen our approaches and strengthen Humanities-based research and teaching.

### *Shaping Asia’s thematic lines*

This networking initiative deploys three inter-related thematic lines to inquire as to how Asian cultures and societies are shaped – in past, present and future perspectives – and how scholarship must critically reposition concepts and methods, yet also build on its strengths in order to grasp contemporary and historical challenges.

### *Urban assemblages and uneven mobilities in Asia – directed by Christiane Brosius*

This thematic line considers transregional and trans-cultural mobilities and place-making strategies ‘at large’ as a conceptually and methodologically challenging lens. Moreover, we focus on local concepts and experiences of urban life, where we observe habitats, habitations and acts of place- or homemaking. We also base our work largely on qualitative data col-

lection and fieldwork that emerges from ethnographical knowledge of the regions, language and cultural as well as historical backgrounds. The proposition is that the rapid changes we currently witness in Asia can best and must be studied in their transgressive and highly entangled nature. Distributed across places, such processes surface in transregional migration flows and social networks, urban as well as peri-urban and rural transformation, and changing work patterns and social structures. The aim of this thematic line is to attend to these challenges through a new approach to ‘connecting research, scholars and hubs in Asia’ with established experts who bring their context-specific empirical and disciplinary expertise into a translocal forum and multilateral conversation. Mobilities are a fertile field for this branch of the Shaping Asia initiative. It helps to study relational space and processes of spatialisation as potentially mobilising and/or restricting diverse forms of mobilities, and such explorations may also overcome compartmentalising binaries. Urban processes crystallise and bring to the surface the longer history, situatedness and contestations of uneven mobilities on the local, translocal or transregional levels – including rural peripheries and ‘hinterlands’ (Upadhyya, Rutten, Koskimaki 2018; Burdett and Rode 2018). Research fields are, for instance, how burgeoning cities in Asia manage cultural heritage, ownership thereof and access to it (e.g., protection, demolition, gentrification, heritage activism), or how a look at urban ageing populations allow us to reflect urban transformation (e.g., age-friendly cities and caring neighbourhoods).

### *Knowledge production and circulation – directed by Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka*

Currently, Asian actors (especially policy-makers and scholars) are engaging in a striking expansion of their realms of knowledge, and at the same time face stiff competition (often based upon comparisons) within Asia as well as globally. As policies and efforts governing knowledge production and dissemination have been gaining momentum throughout Asia, these are resulting in changing balances and shifts between centres and peripheries.

These dynamics unfold through different kinds of connectivities and comparisons, as well as collaborations within Asia and beyond.

Reflection on knowledge production, circulation, and distribution across Asia as well as in and between epistemic communities is informed by our quest to grasp and to do justice to the magnitude of forms and modalities of knowledge production, and the synergies and clashes between knowledge communities, as well as the im/possibilities of translation between the different realms of knowledge (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2019). It is driven by the acknowledgment of the importance that actors (e.g. policy-makers, private persons, civil society members) themselves allot to knowledge production and dissemination – and in this vein to the connectivities created through the circulation of knowledge. We contend that the sphere of knowledge is shaped in significant ways by comparison – for instance, comparing possibilities of dissent vis-à-vis modalities of knowledge production that are considered hegemonic and oppressive. One important objective is to put academic self-reflexivity in motion, while expanding and challenging our tools for generating knowledge of Asian societies and cultures. While grappling with a diversity of epistemic cultures, we reflect on forms of exchanges in order to understand the challenges to participative knowledge generation and dialogue.

*Infrastructure and the remaking of Asia through adapting, orchestrating and cooperating – directed by Ursula Rao and by Anja Senz<sup>1</sup>*

Investment in new infrastructures contributes significantly to the current rapid transformation of Asia. This project studies the recursive processes by which new investments shape the social texture of Asian societies and vice-versa. Comparison is an ideal tool to map contrasts and similarities across different countries and it helps understand the role of inter-Asian relations for the making of Asian futures. The analysis is organised around three key experiences: adaptation, orchestration and cooperation. The thematic lines consider (1) the way new digital systems for managing

populations are situationally adapted to different localities in Asia, (2) the streamlining effects of global engineering solutions for coastal protection in South and Southeast Asia, and (3) the character of international collaborations for trans-border infrastructure projects. A core group of participating scholars has been chosen for their expertise in the relevant fields. Their work on comparative theorising helps to understand the relation between new infrastructures, nationally framed political cultures, inter-regional connections and trans-regional political co-operations. Through interactions with the other two thematic lines of the *Shaping Asia* networking initiative and during consultation with other experts, this project will contribute to a better understanding of the processes by which Asian futures are being produced.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> Who authored this paragraph.

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