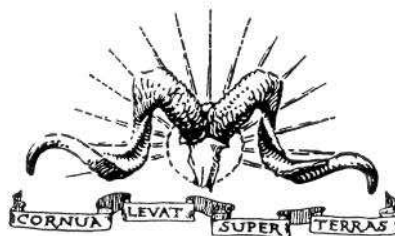


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General

Asian Forms of the Nation. By Stein Tonnesson and Hans Antlov (eds). Curzon Press for the Nordic Institute for Asian Studies, 1996. Pp. 662. Notes. Illus. Maps. Bibliog. Index. £45. Hb. ISBN 0 7007 0403 5. £16.99. Pb. 0 7007 0442 6.

This volume of essays is an excellent antidote to all those works that continue to insist on comparing social and political developments in Asia with inappropriate European norms. The general tenor of the book, set out in a superb opening chapter by the editors (which should become a standard reference point for any study on nationalism in Asia), is that most existing theories of nationalism are inapplicable to the Asian context.

The opening essay, which also distinguishes itself for being entirely readable by the non-specialist, provides the background to a work of immense scope, diversity and sophistication which illustrates that nationalism in Asia is neither a "distorted reflection of a Western precedent" nor a singular Asian model, but instead, a series of different and unique experiences.

Several contributions may be highlighted. The chapter by Tessa Morris-Suzuki surveys how Japanese identity has been far more fluid than the stereotype of a remote, homogenous, island people and how the concept of nationhood has been redefined over the centuries in a way that has written out minority groups from the historical script. In like vein, Thongchai Winichakul dispels the conventional historical image of Thailand struggling to retain its independent identity against the marauding colonial powers in the 19th century when, in fact, the Siamese kingdom was busy swallowing up quasi-autonomous tributary states in competition with the French.

The way in which Asian images of nationhood have been affected by the colonial experience runs as an important theme through the book. The chapter on Vietnam shows how French colonial policy encouraged the Annamese to expand their influence not just over the three provinces that were to become Vietnam itself, but also over Laos and Cambodia, fostering both Viet hegemonic ambitions and Lao and Khmer resentment that was to cause so much trouble in the later 20th century. In contrast, Niels Mulder uncovers the roots of the Filipino malaise that has produced a kind of "reverse nationalism" that looks back on the "golden age" of progress during the years of American occupation.

The varying focus of the chapters from broad-brush portraits to more narrowly centred studies at village level does not always make for easy reading, as the level of specialist detail is considerable. Further, the text does contain occasional errors of style and analysis as well as some contestable generalisations. Let readers, however, make up their own minds whether such minor flaws significantly impede the comprehension of the subject matter, which in the reviewer's opinion they do not.

This book, based as it is on solid, empirical research, deserves to become a standard work in the field. In telling us much about the elusive idea of national identity in Asia, it demonstrates that Asians do possess collective historical memories about 'identity' which are not simply imitations of external ideas. Above all, its value resides in emphasising that through careful, systematic analysis it is still possible to discern innovative and instructive approaches to the study of nationalism.

MICHAEL LAWRENCE SMITH

State and Law in Eastern Asia. By Leslie Palmier (ed.). Dartmouth Publishing Company, Aldershot, 1996. Pp. 155. Bibliog. £39.50. Hb. ISBN 1 85521 781 3.

State and Law in Eastern Asia is an interesting set of papers by a group of specialists well qualified to write on the theme. The volume has its origins in a seminar series at St Antony's College, Oxford, organised by Leslie Palmier in 1993.

The papers cover aspects of state and law in relation to China, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore and Thailand. The editor has provided an introductory survey to set the scene and to draw the distinction between 'law and order' and the 'rule of law'; he also pulls together some useful comparisons, contrasts and the temptations of 'arbitrary rule' in a concluding overview. Throughout the volume the subject matter is also placed firmly, and usefully, in elements of its historical context.

At a time when increasing emphasis is being placed on 'good governance' in a wide variety of spheres, the papers provide additional material towards this debate. They underline the importance of the 'Western' contribution to the discussion of concepts of state and law and the confines within which the discussion is conducted; they also point to its limitations. At the same time, however, the papers show how both the theory and practice of state and law have differed and evolved in differing contexts in what is a very varied region.

In addition to the references at the end of each paper, the volume has a selected bibliography to allow the reader to pursue further the themes discussed. On a practical point, it might have been more useful if the bibliography had been organised more on country and topic lines, as many readers, like your reviewer, are likely to be more interested in the detail of some rather than all the papers.

DAVID HOWLETT

Political Islam: Essays from Middle East Report. By Joel Beinin and Joe Stork (eds). I B Tauris, 1997. Pp. 395. Index. £15.95. Pb.

The publishing house of I B Tauris continues to produce high quality books of scholarship on the Middle East. This volume is no exception. It is a collection of thirty-two articles that have, for the most part, been published in the American journal, *Middle East Report*, in the last few years. They include learned articles, factual reportage and some interviews. A reading of the whole book puts various issues of contemporary 'Islamism' into perspective. But the volume also serves as a work of reference and a source book.

Each writer is responsible for his or her contribution, but if a common theme does emerge, it is that the less attractive (for Western liberals) aspects of Islamism – violence, terrorism, intolerance – have to be seen in a broader context. This in no way excuses atrocities, but it does explain how their perpetrators have been able to claim a legitimacy based on their organisations' other activities. The contributors to this volume draw attention to the fact that both Hamas in Gaza and Hizbollah