

Asian Forms of the Nation

Stein Tønnesson and Hans Antlöv (eds)

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Both with regard to theoretical depth and empirical insight, *Asian Forms of the Nation* sets an outstanding example of Asian comparative studies. In the introductory chapter 'Asia in Theories of Nationalism and National Identity', the Editors Stein Tønnesson and Hans Antlöv define the ambitious objective of this conference reader: to formulate a 'theory of national space and a theory of nations-of-intent' (p 23). Strict consideration of one or other approach (the first derived from political geography, the second from the post-modernism of Benedict Anderson) as well as the 13

authors' shared belief in distinct Asian nationalisms provide for an exceptionally homogeneous, stringent and innovative volume on nationalism in general.

In one of the analytically strongest contributions to this book, Tessa Morris-Suzuki begins the country studies with an exploration of 'The Frontiers of Japanese Identity'. It is the paradigmatic shift from geography or space to history or time which allows the Meiji government to drop the old, centric *ka-i* world order and extend the boundaries of Japaneseness (*bunmei*) to Japan's frontier islands. Under the impact of the European concept of the nation-state, foreignness of erstwhile peripheral barbarians mutates to underdevelopment of yet-to-modernise segments of a primordially redefined Japanese 'Volk' (*minzoku*) and its integral geo-body.

This 'geo-body, the territoriality of a nation as well as its attributes such as sovereignty and boundary' (p 70), features as the key promoter of nationhood in 'Maps and the Formation of the Geo-Body of Siam' by Thongchai Winichakul. Conflicts between the Siamese Kingdom and the respective colonial forces over ambiguous space and multiple sovereignties are accompanied by country mapping, border demarcation and creation of national symbols which establish a deliberately new notion of Thainess at the end of last century.

Meticulously unrolled by Christopher Goscha in 'Annam and Vietnam in the new Indochinese space, 1887-1945', this case presents itself as somewhat the reverse of the Thai experience. Albeit under a revolutionary design, the prevailing nationalists' dismissal of an externally pushed Indochinese nation-of-intent marks the reassertion of a precolonial, 'historical attachment to Vietnam' (p 121).

Resurgence of an exclusivist nationalism concerns Peter van der Veer in 'Gender and nation in Hindu nationalism' and Arild Engelsen Ruud in 'Contradictions and ambivalence in the Hindu nationalist discourse in West Bengal'. The first author's expertise notwithstanding, this reader doubts that male-oriented 'gender identity' as 'ground of contestation' (p 145) provides a suitable explanatory variable for the supposed modernity of today's *avatars* of Ramraj. In weighing up the caste/class/community dependencies of Hindu national politics against the strong regional identity of West Bengal, Engelsen Ruud suggests a differentiated understanding of the phenomenon beyond its religious connotation.

Niels Mulder's pessimistic evaluation of 'Filipino images of the nation' could be illustrated by adding a spatial image: on a world map of nationalisms the Philippines would make a blank area, void of any nationalist doctrine, drowned by a post-colonial inferiority complex.

Up in the Himalayas, however, Graham E. Clarke is lucky enough to discover viable patterns of modern territorial nationalism that follow Anderson's assumption of the 'imagined community of nation' as a consequence of colonially imposed 'states behind newly-formed borders' (p 206). But Clarke himself warns of a collapse of his three-stage model of 'Blood, territory and national identity in Himalayan states'. Where the dominance of one kin group as denominator of national identity is not accepted, ethnic separatism may arise as shown in Mikael Gravers' 'The Karen making of a nation' and their opposition against 'the Burmese model of a unitary state' (p. 239).

'Nationalism transcending the state: changing conceptions of Chinese identity' by Törbjörn Lodén provides (besides a fascinating lesson on the country's intellectual history!) a different example of how political unity can be pursued. China after Mao returns from class-based state nationalism to race-based cultural nationalism—thereby again projecting a unified national identity towards the total of the former empire.

Two complementary chapters on Malaysia conclude this fully detailed, well arranged and profound volume on *Asian Forms of the Nation*. Both 'The construction of the post-colonial subject in Malaysia' by C.W. Watson and 'Nations-of-intent in Malaysia' by Shamsul A.B. reach at a highly critical assessment of the officially administered national consciousness. Neither has its normative orientation become clear (going global, East, colonial?), nor has it replaced competing

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nation-concepts between and within the *bumiputera* (sons of the soil) and *non-bumiputera* sections of the Malaysian society.

Not to repeat abundant statements in praise of *Asian Forms of the Nation*, one should wish a further workshop on assertions like 'The Islamic world does not have a civilizational nation' (p 26) or colonialism as 'creative confrontation' (p 91)—this time considering political scientists in the invitation list.

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