

POLICY FORUM

Introduction

Asia's Nationalisms: Understanding Time, Place, and Agency

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All across the globe, nationalism seems to be back in vogue. In Europe and the United States, economic discontent and mass migration have fueled its political appeal, while calls for greater national discretion have become the rallying cry against postwar multilateral experiments like the European Union and global institutions created to manage international, political, and economic tensions. Nationalism is positioned as the anti-globalist cause.

In Asia, contemporary nationalism has been growing out of different grievances, largely associated with the politics of war memory. Incidents that raise questions about territorial sovereignty and compensation for victims of war provoke heated popular reaction, as the politics of identity have attached firmly to the state and its cause. During the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II in 2015, commemorative speeches by the prime minister of Japan, the president of South Korea, and the president of the People's Republic of China all spoke to the shadow of that war on the aspirations of their nations.¹ History, and its reimagining, provides ample fodder for Asia's contemporary geopolitics.

Yet, nationalism in Asia has not always been aligned with the state, nor has it always been reactive to other Asian nations. In the early twentieth century, nationalism was the mobilizing force for those who sought liberation from Western colonial rule. As the century progressed, movements were organized around the appeal of becoming modern. Movement leaders and the communities they rallied were as varied as the identities that continue to shape the region's politics.

Today, as globalist ideals are challenged around the world, Asia's nationalisms offer a rich contrast to the idea that nationalism presents itself as a unifying ideology. In many cases,

¹ See Carol Gluck, Rana Mitter, and Charles K. Armstrong, "The Seventieth Anniversary of World War II's End in Asia: Three Perspectives," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 74, no. 3 (2015): 531–37 and John Delury, Sheila A. Smith, Maria Repnikova, and Srinath Raghavan, "Looking Back on the Seventieth Anniversary of Japan's Surrender," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 74, no. 4 (2015): 797–820.

the call to rally around national symbols, to mobilize on behalf of an idea of the nation, as well as the reactive impulse to nationalisms of other societies all suggest a far more complex rendering of this particular brand of identity politics. How nationalism presents itself in the complex politics and geopolitics of Asia is a compelling research agenda.

Early Advocates

Nationalist advocacy has differed over more than a century of social dislocation. From their early encounters with Europeans to the upheaval of the interactions between colonial powers and Asian societies, nationalist thought evolved as civil conflict and two global wars engulfed the region. European expansion across the globe was not simply fueled by industrialization and the desire for resources to fuel it. The celebration of national power fueled the contest that was at the heart of imperialism. Nationalism, in other words, legitimized this globalized competition between states. The norms of the Westphalia system, which had long been at the heart of the European order, were thus exported across the globe. Asia's leaders recognized they needed the idea of the nation as much as the trappings of the state if they were to compete.

Early on, Asia's intellectuals who encountered the West at the turn of the nineteenth century felt compelled to craft descriptions of their cultures in part as a defense against the obliterating power of European nationalism. Writers as diverse as José Rizal, Rabindranath Tagore, and Nitobe Inazō highlighted the challenges to their societies of this nationalist impulse.² The industrialization of European societies went hand in hand with the competition between nations. Repulsed and frightened by this organization of power, Tagore in particular warned of the destruction of humanity brought about by this force. During a visit to Japan in 1916, he cautioned the Japanese not to abandon their own values and culture as they sought to compete with the West.³ He warned his own people not to succumb to this greedy submission to power.

Asia's nationalisms continued to organize around this engagement with Western power, and the various manifestations became powerful tools for resisting and challenging

² These writers all wrote about their encounters with Europe and the nationalisms emerging there in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Filipino author José Rizal wrote a novel of resistance that went on to motivate the Philippine revolution: *Noli Me Tangere* [Touch Me Not], translated by Harold Augenbraum (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006). As Japan demonstrated its newfound military might in a war with Czarist Russia, Nitobe Inazō contributed to the Western understanding of his nation's culture in *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (Author's edition, 13th Edition, 1908, originally published in 1904, The Project Gutenberg EBook 2004, available at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12096/12096-h/12096-h.htm>). Finally, world-renowned Indian intellectual and poet, Rabindranath Tagore, emerged as a leading critic of what he saw as the dehumanizing effects of industrialization in Europe. His essays on nationalism, delivered in lectures across the United States and in Japan, have been compiled in *Nationalism* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917), where he warns of the dangers, especially to newly risen Japan and his native India of this crass and dangerous attachment to the nation.

³ Tagore, *Nationalism*, 63-115. See also Yoshihiro Ohsawa, "Tagore's Critique of Nationalism in Japan, 1916," *HIKAKU BUNGAKU Journal of Comparative Literature* (1981): 97-108 (in Japanese). (Available at https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/hikaku/24/0/24_97/_article).

colonial rule. Asia's nationalist thinkers began to focus on how to strengthen their own people. Fusing what it meant to be Japanese, Chinese, or Indian into a means of self-government occupied much of the early decades of nationalist debate. Japan's success in avoiding colonization, as well as its surprising defeat of Russia in the war of 1904-05, brought a new energy to those who sought a similar autonomy for their own nations. Indeed, Japan in the early decades of the century became a site of nationalist debate; Sun Yat-sen famously lived there as he developed his call for a Chinese nation.⁴

How to organize popular support for this idea of the nation began to dominate the nationalist cause. As Sun Yat-sen argued, it was not enough to rid his country of foreign influence. Sun's famous "Three People's Principles" described the challenge of bringing unity to the "heap of loose sand" that was China.

Today we are the poorest and weakest nation in the world and occupy the lowest position in international affairs. Other men are the carving knife and serving dish; we are the fish and the meat. Our position at this time is most perilous. If we do not earnestly espouse nationalism and weld together our four hundred million people into a strong nation, there is danger of China's being lost and our people being destroyed.⁵

Cultural identity was thus firmly enmeshed in the world of global power.

And yet, building a new relationship between those who sought to lead and those who were to be led took time. Where they existed, colonial administrations had created a new sense of oneness, linking diverse localities and communities across time and space in new ways. Educational opportunity brought many elites in contact with the metropolis only to dissuade them of its superiority. Indigenous languages married with new technologies, such as print and radio, allowed those frustrated with foreign dominance to communicate and organize. In Java, Soetan Sjahrir at the age of twenty-five was jailed in 1934 for advocating the education of Indonesians. A little more than a decade later, he would testify in front of the United Nations Security Council to claim his people's right to be independent of Dutch colonial rule.⁶ Trade and commerce created pockets of wealth and influence among some sectors, and also brought elites across imperial dominions into greater and greater transnational contact. Imperialism had upended old orders, and had created the opportunity for new voices to emerge.

⁴ See Marius Jansen, *The Japanese and Sun Yat-sen* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1954). See Marie-Claire Bergere, *Sun Yat-sen* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998) for a comprehensive biography of Sun and his ambitions for China.

⁵ "The Three People's Principles," Sun Yat-sen, from Wm. Theodore DeBary and Richard Lufano, *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From 1600 through the Twentieth Century, Volume Two, 2nd ed.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 320-323.

⁶ For his writing on his effort to claim independence on behalf of his nation, see Soetan Sjahrir, *Out of Exile* (New York: The John Day Company, 1949), rewritten and edited in Dutch by Maria Duchateau-Sjahrir and translated by Charles Wolf, Jr. Much of his advocacy focused on the right of his people to be educated, not in the language or history of the Dutch, but in their own language and their own history as a nation.

A Changing Purpose

War soon intruded. World War I in Europe weakened the hold of some colonial powers. Germany lost its foothold; France floundered. The United States emerged unscathed and Japan took the opportunity to pursue its own ambitions. Similarly, the effort toward a negotiated peace raised the hopes and expectations of some. At Versailles, Japanese diplomats argued for a racial equality clause as Ho Chi Minh sought to gain the American delegation's attention.⁷ And yet, there was little appetite among the remaining Western powers for recognizing the stature of nascent Asian powers.

Asian nationalism now had to contend with a new imperialism, that of Japan's. Fueled by growing economic and social dislocation at home, Japan's military gained a greater influence over the imagination of national power. In Asia, Japan's ambitions to form a "brotherhood" among Asians were welcomed by some, but as the Japanese military expanded its reach into China, wariness grew.⁸ The war years brought two empires, the British and the Japanese, to an end. For those who had found examples in each, modern war had proven calamitous. As the Japanese and British empires clashed across the region, the armies formed by each became the training ground for a whole new generation of nationalist leaders in Asia.⁹ From India to Indonesia, Burma to the Korean peninsula, new revolutionary leaders began to emerge who believed that in the end, military force would be required to oust colonial rulers.¹⁰ Military service became an adjunct to the nationalist cause.

World War II fundamentally altered Asia's balance of power and transformed the nationalist cause. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Asia's largest power, the People's

⁷ For the best account of the diplomacy that produced the Treaty of Versailles, see Margaret Mac Millan, *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2003).

⁸ For the definitive account of Japanese thinking at this time, see Jeremy A. Yellen, *The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere: When Total Empire Met Total War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

⁹ For a fascinating military history of that period and the leaders who emerged to lead the postwar nationalist movements in Southeast Asia, see Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945* (London: Harvard University Press, 2006) and *Forgotten Wars: Freedom and Revolution in Southeast Asia* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007).

¹⁰ Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose ultimately was persuaded that without military forces, India would never be free of the British and even aligned with Japan's military leaders in the quest for independence from the British. See his thinking in Sisir K. Bose and Sugata Bose, eds., *The Essential Writings of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose* (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press India, 1997). In Burma, General Aung San also rose to lead his nation to independence through a military career and collaboration with Japan against the British. See his daughter's biography in Aung San Suu Kyi, *Aung San of Burma, 2nd ed.* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Kiscadale Publications, 1991). Ho Chi Minh ultimately turned away from his efforts at persuasion and diplomacy to call for armed resistance in his famous appeal to the Vietnamese people, "Wage Resistance War!" in December 1946, included in the English-language *Selected Writings of Ho Chi Minh: Vietnam Revolutionary Leader* (New Delhi: Leopard Books India, undated), 87. See also William J. Duiker, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1995).

Republic of China.¹¹ Mao Zedong's ultimate victory over Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party (Guomindang) was achieved largely through ensuring that the Chinese peasant saw his communist forces as his ally. In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh too saw the power in identifying the Vietnamese nation with the Vietnamese peasant. Their national narrative was now framed in the language of socialism, but amended to mobilize the communalism found in agrarian Asia.

Finally, a far more peaceful nationalist project was underway in the societies freed from colonial rule. As Benedict Anderson, the eminent scholar of Indonesia, has chronicled, independence in the postwar world required a new identity, an "imagined community" that would craft the story of the nation.¹² In this rendering, nationalism was not a force for contest and conflict, but rather a narrative. Fictional to be sure, but once again brought back to the purpose of explaining shared identity – this time for those who wanted it shared.

Asia has not been free from military conflict since 1945, nor was negotiated peace with Japan fully accepted by all of its neighbors. Forty-nine countries participated in the San Francisco Peace Treaty that ended the U.S.-led occupation of Japan. But it did not include all of Japan's neighbors. Bilateral peace treaties were necessary with most of Japan's neighbors, and even then, not all found comfort in the reckoning. War legacy issues continued to simmer as the Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union kept the fear of war close.

Indeed, two wars fed the nationalist cause. The first, in Korea, divides that nation up to the present day. The second, in Vietnam, ended with the unification of the nation and the defeat of the world's strongest military power. The Vietnamese leader who had advocated for his nation since the Treaty of Versailles had finally achieved its independence from foreign rule.

From Elites to Citizens

The idea of the nation is a powerful tool, and yet leaders alone cannot wield it. For this, the energy of the people would be needed. Indeed, early nationalism in China has been attributed to popular uprisings, including the best-known example of the Boxer Rebellion, that were just as frustrated with the old order as with the foreigners who occupied their country. Yet, as elites sought to mobilize the energy of their people, they also had to transform themselves. Many of their personal stories were of turning away from their elite status as young people studying abroad in the cosmopolitan capitals of London, Paris, Amsterdam, and Tokyo and into leaders of their own people, who were far from the center of colonial power. Mahatma Gandhi, of course, offers the most

¹¹ Chalmers Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1937-1945* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1962).

¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso Press, 2016).

astonishing story of this sort of personal journey. Gandhi understood that to represent India's ambition for national identity in the face of British subordination, he had to first represent those within India who had been most defiled.¹³ Thus, nationalism in practice took many forms.

Nor is the story of nation building static. Writing and rewriting the narrative of common purpose is a political act, to be sure. But when the narrative fails to resonate, new authors can and will emerge to summon people to embrace an identity associated with their state. The twentieth century found ample cause for nationalism in Asia, first as a call for cultural preservation and unity, then as a rallying cry for independence. Through the brutality of imperial conflict, nationalism took on the mammoth task of creating a modern nation among old civilizations and a kaleidoscopic array of cultures. Central to forging these varied Asian nationalisms, however, were the global ambitions of powerful states. Popular experience of colonialism and of war gave credence to the nationalist cause. Intellectuals, politicians, and military leaders all framed the need for a nation, but the people's acceptance of that national notion gave it the impetus needed to succeed.

Nationalism thus is made powerful by the fusion of popular sentiment with political mobilization. In Europe and the United States today, nationalism has once again become a familiar and often used term. But for many, the rise in nationalist sentiment signals a return to an old wickedness, sowing seeds of conflict and division, and ultimately, raising the specter of war. Some, however, see this as a new awakening, a commitment to revitalizing the voice of citizens in an effort to reclaim the state from a governing elite who has become overly "globalized."

Asia's nationalisms reflect not simply the will of leaders but also the complex aspirations and resentments of its citizens. The history of nationalism across Asia creates the basis for today's disputes, but the advocates and the purpose of Asia's nationalisms are as complex as the region itself. While Northeast Asia's nationalisms seem to react off of each other, there are more complex struggles for national identity afoot in South and Southeast Asia. Rather than view them through the lens of a populist uprising against elites, the time, place, and agency of these nationalisms deserve far greater analytical attention.

Understanding the Asian experience with nationalism requires looking up from the events of today to see the complex social change that has resulted from more than a century of modern life. Visions of the nation have been contested, even within one society, and the pathway to strengthening that nation has often been supported by ideologies that are shared globally. In other words, over time, across space and propelled by quite different advocates, this idea of the nation has had a rich role in shaping the international relationships of Asia.

¹³ See this account of Gandhi's personal journey as a champion of Indian nationalism in Louis Fischer, ed., *The Essential Gandhi: An Anthology of His Writings on His Life, Work and Ideas, 2nd ed.* (New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1962).

This volume explores the agency shaping contemporary nationalism in Asia. The role of ethnic identity within nationalist politics is particularly fascinating in Asia's large multi-ethnic societies. Similarly, class and gender now have ample energy to recast nationalist narratives, overturning dominant narratives of who can claim a voice in determining the identity of the nation. Democracies have a particular challenge with nationalism: can one vision of the nation prevail? Can one segment of society assert theirs to be the "correct" image of what it means to be Chinese, Indian or Malaysian? Who can challenge the legitimacy of the national narrative, those in power or those who cannot wield power? Finally, the speed and impact of the twenty-first century's new technologies belie the permeability of national experience. The means by which national identities are formed – and then destroyed – is once again at the heart of our global conversation on the rise of nationalism. Asia's role in shaping our understanding of the ever-shifting idea of the nation offers compelling insights into our current moment in international relations.

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