

BOOK REVIEWS

Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization.

By Kuan-hsing Chen. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010. Pp. 344.

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What is Asia? Most concretely, Asia is a cartographic entity. More significantly, many parts of cartographic Asia are materially and historically connected as a networked region. Finally, Asia exists as a region in the desiring imagination as something historically and politically meaningful beyond the networks. The motivating factors behind this imaginative effort to regionalize Asia are many and often become blurred. The best example of this blurring is the spectrum along which we can grasp Japanese Pan-Asianism in the first half of the twentieth century. Beginning with Okakura Tenshin (with Tagore) and others, there was a strong idealism to rescue historical Asian cultures from Western imperialist materialism. By the end of the period, this noble dream became transformed by the Japanese military into an instrumental ideology of imperialist domination. At different points, of course, the motives were often mixed.

Interestingly, however, the well-springs of Asia as desire for transcendence remain strong as the desire has repeatedly returned over at least the last hundred years. Thus at the end of the twentieth century, before the Asian financial crisis, the idea of “Asian values” reflected both celebratory economic triumphalism and a desire to gain autonomy from the Western powers. Since the beginning of this century, we have seen a different approach. While the triumphalism and search for autonomy has not disappeared, it has been tempered significantly by a more sober and critical assessment of the potential and goals of Asian integration. Chen Kuan-hsing’s new work, *Asia as Method*, rides on the crest of this new wave.

In some ways, Asia in this wave may be seen as not merely a place-holder, an empty signifier for different desires (in the mode of Takeuchi Yoshimi), but as a *transcendent* signifier, partly taking the place of disappointed ideals from the Enlightenment such as communism, nationalism and democracy, which in turn took over the role of religious transcendence, at least for intellectuals. In a transcendent position, Asia allows us to imagine a different future, one which can draw selectively from global historical resources in order to shape a more just society.

Asia as Method is an important intervention that seeks to create a change in our attitudes and approaches in understanding Asia as a region. Like other authors of this wave (including the present reviewer), Chen seeks to rethink the opportunities and challenges of an interdependent and integrating Asia in the present era. While building on earlier formulations such as those of Takeuchi Yoshimi or Mizoguchi Yuzo, Chen brings the specific insights of the postcolonial critic in his formulation of what he calls “de-imperialization” as the basis for integrating Asia. In his concept of de-imperialization, Chen includes the concept of “de-colonization” and the agrammatical, but hard to substitute, “de-cold war”.

The earlier chapters of the book seek to illustrate what Chen means by each of these expressions, while the final chapter – which may become a classic of its kind – represents an excellent demonstration and summation of thinking of “Asia as method”. In Chapter 1, “The Imperialist Eye”, Chen surveys what he calls the sub-imperial imaginary in contemporary Taiwan concerning the move towards Southeast Asia that was launched by President Lee Denghui in the 1990s. Chen’s critique of this discourse is scathing but it seems necessary to make his point. He grasps this discourse within the evident

memory of the Japanese *nanshin* policy of wartime expansion into Southeast Asia. This discourse then represents the sub-imperialist eye, which reproduces many of the same tropes and themes of earlier imperialisms, both Japanese and Western. Thus he evaluates writers who discuss the wartime East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere as a project that was and will once again be welcomed in Southeast Asia. He also studies fictional pieces that focus on sexualized relations of dominance and subordination between Chinese and Europeans rather than the native Malay and other peoples of the region. He tries to show how without undergoing a radical decolonization of consciousness, contemporary transnational activities from Taiwan will continue to harbour imperialist and racist attitudes.

In another essay on the mutually constitutive psychological relationships between colonizer and colonized, Chen examines the writings of Fanon, Memmi and Nandy to explore historical pathways out of this imprisoning relationship. Drawing from studies of neo-Confucian syncretism in late imperial China, he suggests alternative practices of “critical syncretism” that seek to diversify the sources of reference in identity formation of a society. In such a way, the strong sense of the Other – that underlies colonial and national identities – is mitigated by the recognition of several smaller senses of the other within oneself. This is one way of decolonizing the self.

As for the program of “de-cold war”, Chen’s chapter shows that imperialism and the Cold War were continuous. This is not only in the sense that American neo-imperialism continues the imperialist project of domination by other means, but also in that psychologically, the Cold War generated homologous structures of identity atop older forms of colonial formations. In an interesting discussion of two Taiwanese films he shows how the hard identities generated by Cold War nationalism and absolutism rend apart families whose members’ identities and life chances are formed under different regimes. In one of the films reflecting on the lives of low-class, exiled KMT servicemen, identity during the Cold War itself becomes objectified, exchanged and circulated as a means for survival. Another chapter on Americanization in Taiwanese life explores the extreme option offered by Club 51, a group of businessmen and intellectuals who declare that Taiwan should become the fifty-first state of the United States. Although it is an extreme example, Chen uses it as an opportunity to probe the extent and consequences of the dependency relationship that has developed in Taiwan, a situation that must seem very demeaning in an age of national subjecthood.

Finally, in the most promising chapter on Asia as method, Chen develops the idea that the de-imperialization of the self and a people in Asia can be achieved only by achieving a distance from the obsessive absorption with categories and values of knowledge from the West. This is largely an essay on epistemology with implications for self-formation. He takes the example of the received category of “state versus civil society” which informs many fields of knowledge in the humanistic and social science disciplines. Taking his inspiration from the work of Partha Chatterjee on Indian “political society”, Chen shows how the state-civil society formulation is a uniquely Western historical development which is inadequate to grasp formations – especially of the poor and marginal – in Asian societies outside the modernized legal and institutional spheres (although they are of course an integral part of modernity at large). By looking more closely at other instances of such formations in East Asia, he is able to come up with the concept of “minjian” society, which occupies a sphere similar to Chatterjee’s “political society” and is responsible for understanding much that endures in Asian societies. In this way, Chen instructs us how Asia as an inter-referential method will bring us closer to grasping the shared realities that have moulded the histories, cultures and destinies of the societies in the region.

To be sure, there are also weaknesses in the work; certainly the critique is highly provocative and unlikely to go unchallenged. My own concerns are smaller. Rhetorically, Chen tends towards a moralizing style that may alienate some of his readers. Some may also see the blame game being played a little unfairly, tilting more against the Japanese and the Taiwanese versus the mainland and Korea, especially in Chapters 3 and 4. The embedded rationale for the imbalance seems to be that Japan and Taiwan had no opportunity to reflect on the imperialist war and the colonial experience as a result of

the swift transition to the Cold War, whereas presumably the Koreans and the mainland did undergo anti-imperialist reflection. While the argument may hold for Japan and Taiwan, it underestimates the instrumental nature of nationalism. After all, the anti-Japanese imperialist rhetoric of the PRC was not very developed until the 1980s when it was massively mobilized for geo-political rather than moral reasons. Moreover, the critique of imperialist and racist attitudes cannot be separated from the contemporary conditions of capitalist competition, that is, from the question of new relationships between identity-forming machineries and agencies of capital accumulation. Hence in addition to the historical conditions, we need to investigate new forms of (inter-Asian) stratification and domination across nations that may challenge older, hard boundaries of identity but also create new ones.

But given the importance of the book, these are petty criticisms. All in all, Chen Kuan-hsing has produced a work that should galvanize a generation of Asian scholars to debate and ponder the meaning and direction of Asia at a time when regionalization produces many challenges and moral complexities for society.

The International History of East Asia, 1900–1968: Trade, Ideology and the Quest for Order.

Routledge Studies in the Modern History of Asia. Edited by Antony Best. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2010. Pp. 224.

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Speaking to students at Cambridge in October 1928, the British author Virginia Woolf insisted that “history is too much about wars; biography too much about great men.” Both Antony Best in his introduction to this stimulating collection and Akira Iriye in his concluding remarks make similar points. Both insist that it is time to rethink what they reckon to be the narrowness of earlier works, and call for transnational approaches where conflict between nations is no longer the chief concern of the historian of the Asia-Pacific.

The dozen chapters in what is perhaps a rather ambitiously titled text go some way to supporting the Best-Iriye thesis. They form the final product of the multi-volume Anglo-Japanese History Project that was established in 1995 through generous Japanese funding to re-examine relations between two countries with two highly divergent collective memories. It remains to be seen, however, if such laudable efforts will have much resonance with the wider public. Here, as Ian Nish calmly notes, the impact of cooperative scholarship “takes time. One cannot assume that the message percolates to the people at large in the short term.”

The bulk of the essays have little or nothing to say about post-Pacific War dealings. Those few that do, conclude in all but one instance by 1960 when the British moment in Asia was finally ending and Japan was already a major economic presence once again in Southeast Asia. Yet the concentration on pre-war themes is surely correct. It is hard to make any particularly large claims for Anglo-Japanese relations once the lengthy occupation and the tortuous negotiations that led to the San Francisco peace settlements of 1951–1952 confirmed that Tokyo’s fate depended very largely on its relations with Washington. (The fact that very few Japanese students in the early twenty-first century are aware that the British Commonwealth had stationed troops in the Chugoku and Shikoku regions in 1946–1947, or that the head of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East was an Australian judge, suggests that the Occupation too is seen as an all-American show.)

Instead of offering the conventional trajectory of a gradual switch from the cordiality of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1902 to its collapse and replacement by the Washington system after