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Review Article

Retrieving the Bandung Conference … moment by moment

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Review of *Bandung 1955: Little histories*
Edited by DEREK McDOUGALL and ANTONIA FINNANE
Caulfield: Monash University Press, 2010. Pp. 139. Notes, Bibliography, Index.

Review of *Making a world after empire: The Bandung moment and its political afterlives*
Edited by CHRISTOPHER J. LEE
Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010. Pp. 361. Photos, Notes, Select Bibliography, Index.

The Asian–African Conference at Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955 has been written into twentieth-century history as 'a moment' made up of 'little histories', as the titles of the two volumes reviewed here suggest. Both belong to the literature on the Bandung Conference published since its fiftieth anniversary, the broad scope of which underscores the intricate and diffuse nature of the Conference. While offering new perspectives, the contributors also add to its ambiguity: Was Bandung a continuation of the struggle against imperialism? An episode of the Cold War? A protest against centuries of racial humiliation? Or a communist plot? It may well have comprised elements of all these.

The Conference itself was enormously complex, given its delegates, the powers jostling for influence at its margins, and the tense international events swirling around it. There were 29 highly diverse newly independent nation-states present. Despite their strong differences, all shared a unifying experience — a fraught history with the West. They also shared the experience of emerging from colonies, protectorates or trusteeships amid extremely troubled times. Moreover, there was intense pressure on decolonising Asia and Africa to align with either capitalism (the United States and its allies) or communism (the vying monoliths of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China; PRC).

Cold War tensions ran high in a volatile Asia in the 1950s, compounded by economic weakness and military vulnerability. In 1954, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles refused to sign the Geneva Peace Accords, leaving the way open for further

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armed conflict in Vietnam and no permanent peace reached after the Korean War, resulting in a divided Korea. In 1955, the US Navy was patrolling the Formosa (Taiwan) Strait, convinced that the PRC was about to seize the Quemoy and Matsu islands. Asia itself had split into aligned and non-aligned states when the Philippines, Thailand and Pakistan became part of the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) upon signing the Manila Pact.

Bandung 1955: Little histories is a collection of seven papers drawn from two gatherings: one in Canberra in 2004, the other in Chicago in 2005, focusing on the Conference itself, and the external influences both before and after. The volume flits from the Conference to the influencing factors around it in a rather disorganised way and some updating of the papers prior to publication would have been useful to avoid small but irritating errors. By contrast, *Making a world after empire* clearly sets out its broad historical intentions about 'the origins and afterlives' of the Bandung Conference. It was the product of a 2005 gathering at Stanford University, which examined twentieth-century Afro–Asian connections. But neither volume, in fact, is introduced in a way that accurately reflects what it delivers.

Little histories is introduced in a half-hearted tone, with Antonia Finnane stating that the Bandung Conference 'now has little historical resonance outside the Asian region' (p. 1), a statement somewhat belied by the conferences, books and articles in the wake of the fiftieth anniversary.[1] There are disappointing errors, for example when Finnane mentions Gamal Nkrumah as 'son of one Bandung delegate and namesake of another' (p. 3). Gamal's father Kwame Nkrumah did not attend the Bandung Conference for reasons that offer important insights. As Adekeye Adebajo has pointed out in *Bandung revisited* (2008), Nkrumah was prevented from attending by the British government[2] as the Gold Coast was at a critical stage of negotiations towards independence in 1955. In fact, the British Colonial and Foreign Offices were divided in their attitudes towards the Conference, the former actively opposing any African presence at Bandung. The Colonial Secretary claimed rather dismissively that Asians were not 'competent to pronounce on the affairs and destinies of Africa'.[3] This placed Nkrumah in an awkward position, and in a gesture that did not entirely capitulate to British demands, he sent a modest delegation of three to Indonesia, led by cabinet minister Kojo Botsio. As Ghana did not come into being until 1957 it could not play a decisive role at the Conference, but its presence was vital to the intention of the sponsoring nations — Burma, Ceylon, India, Indonesia and Pakistan — to make an African presence credible.

Making a world, on the other hand, is introduced as a concerted attempt, as Christopher Lee states, to 'restore a chronology and trajectory of historical experience' (p. 2) and place the Bandung Conference as a pivotal moment within the

1 Jamie Mackie, *Bandung 1955: Non-alignment and Afro–Asian solidarities* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2005); *Bandung revisited: The legacy of the 1955 Asian–African Conference for the international order*, ed. Tan See Seng and Amitav Acharya (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008); Kweku Ampiah, *The political and moral imperatives of the Bandung Conference of 1955* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

2 Adekeye Adebajo, 'From Bandung to Durban: Whither the Afro–Asian Coalition?', in *Bandung revisited*, p. 109.

3 Nicholas Tarling, '"Ah-Ah": Britain and the Bandung Conference of 1955', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 23, 1 (1992): 88.

colonisation–decolonisation continuum. (In his commemorative book, *Bandung 1955: Non-alignment and Afro-Asian solidarity*, Jamie Mackie filled in some of these gaps, although not in a deeply theoretical way.) Lee explains that the essays in *Making a world*

> explore the scales of power and geography not only to examine the ramifications of Bandung itself, but add greater empirical depth to meanings of the postcolonial, a stronger area-studies perspective to cold war scholarship, and at the broadest level, a more concerted emphasis on how political projects based on the 'majority world' shaped global history during the latter half of the 20th century. (p. 6)

Lee's collection does not quite live up to these expectations, however. The essays bring new perspectives to the circumstances of colonisation that would have motivated Afro–Asian solidarity in the first half of the twentieth century, and the postcolonial resistance to the West during the Cold War. Despite this, and Lee's convincing articulation of the legacy of Bandung and its absence from the historical record, few direct links are made to the Conference itself, to the extent that one unfamiliar with the actual event will gain only a vague understanding of it from this volume. The three chapters in Part One ('Framings'), for example, barely mention Bandung.

The first chapter by Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that in the immediate post-war, decolonising era, pedagogical and dialogical styles were evident in developmental politics. As part of decolonisation, leaders such as Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and President Julius Nyrere of Tanganyika (Tanzania) tutored former colonial subjects of empire to become citizens of nations. But Chakrabarty does not refer to examples of this at Bandung itself. He illustrates this postcolonial style with an example of Indian and Tanganyikan leaders tutoring the new citizens of their respective nations how to sing the national anthem correctly. But Nehru had taken this pedagogical style to Bandung, much to the irritation of his contemporaries. Roeslan Abdulgani from Indonesia's foreign office and head of the Conference Joint Secretariat found Nehru and his key adviser V.K. Krishna Menon quite arrogant. In *The Bandung connection* (1981) Abdulgani attributed this Indian arrogance to the advantage afforded them in having 'thoroughly mastered the English language … and negotiations with the British'.[4] Carlos P. Romulo, Ambassador to the United States representing the Philippines at Bandung, was similarly irritated by Nehru's pretensions as a world statesman.[5] Indeed the pedagogical style of postcolonial leaders was very much on show among the Asian leaders at Bandung, with Nehru, Romulo and even the rather hapless Sir John Kotelawala of Ceylon believing they were ideally placed to lead the region towards a new era of East–West understanding. Ultimately, however, it was Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai who took the honours in diplomatic acuity at Bandung.

Teaching the new citizens of Asia and Africa to express their nationalism in a Western style suggests that national prestige was to be found in mimicking the Anglo–European world. Yet regardless of his style, Nehru's assertion of the foreign policy of *Panchsheel* — or the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence — at

4 Roeslan Abdulgani, *The Bandung connection: The Asia–Africa Conference in Bandung in 1955* (Singapore: Gunung Agung, 1981), p. 26.

5 Carlos P. Romulo, *The meaning of Bandung*, The Weil Lectures on American citizenship (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), pp. 13–14.

Bandung was clearly designed to thwart the West and steer Asia and Africa through the Cold War as non-aligned nations. Nehru saw the Conference as an opportunity to tutor his counterparts *away* from Western bipolar hegemony and towards a more authentic foreign policy, underpinned by Asian principles. Chakrabarty notes that the pedagogical style of leadership exercised within independent nation-states moved towards a democratising model, and was no longer a part of the 'Europeanisation of the Earth' (p. 57). Panchsheel was a cogent example of this. Not only did this foreign policy initiative defy the Europeanisation of the Earth in international affairs, it was a truly democratic, self-determining ideal and really did mark the Bandung Conference as an attempt to make a new world after empire.

These sorts of links are missing throughout *Making a world after empire*; and while the chapters do illustrate the movements in 'power and geography' in the post-Bandung era, the connections to the Conference are assumed more than they are substantiated. *Little histories*, on the other hand, greatly benefits from Jamie Mackie's opening chapter, which provides a thorough overview of the Conference in a similar way to his *Bandung 1955*. Mackie focuses on the domestic impact of the Bandung Conference for Indonesia where the holding of an international meeting was seen by many as a mere deflection from the Republic's domestic political strife. Many leaders in the West, already hostile to the idea of Asians taking a proactive role in international affairs, cynically regarded President Sukarno and Prime Minister Ali Sastroamidjojo as merely creating an elaborate domestic distraction.

The Bandung Conference did, however, serve Indonesia well in instilling a sense of confidence in its foreign policy of non-alignment and, importantly for Sukarno, further distancing Indonesia from the West. The 'Bandung Spirit', though in hindsight to some extent postcolonial hyperbole, signified what Nehru called a 'psychological moment' that significantly boosted national esteem in the decolonising world. It also disrupted deeply ingrained assumptions in the West and put it on notice that alternatives to its military and containment strategies were being entertained in Asia and elsewhere. *Little histories* provides some wonderful insights into this phenomenon, exceeding the expectations set out in the Introduction.

Kristine Dennehy's chapter 'The Bandung spirit in post-war Japan' stands out in this regard. Dennehy demonstrates Nehru's point that Bandung was a moment of psychological shift; 'Japanese leftists,' she explains, 'celebrated Japan's participation in the Bandung Conference as a turning point in relations with other Asian countries' (p. 59). Given Japan's erstwhile aggressive imperial aspirations and its treatment of colonised Asians during the Pacific War, this is a significant attribution to the Bandung Conference. Dennehy notes that among the criticisms levelled at imperialism at Bandung, no mention was made of Japan. Instead, Japan had suffered the humiliation of occupation by the United States and, she argues, could thus legitimately claim in 1955 to have shared the experience of a loss of sovereignty to a Western imperial power. This further strengthened the sense of Asian solidarity and characterised the Bandung Spirit as fundamentally opposed to Western aggression.

McDougall and Finnane's collection also provides a well-balanced representation of the nations at Bandung and the inclusion of Japan — which was not an overt presence at Bandung — adds an important dimension. Roland Burke's excellent chapter

on Charles Malik and the 'pro-Western group' at Bandung also brings balance and scope to understanding the East–West tensions at work.

In contrast, Lee's volume focuses on Egypt and Africa. Africa played a comparatively small part at the Conference, because most of Africa was still colonised in 1955. Of the 29 countries represent at the Conference, 15 were Asian, including Afghanistan, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), the PRC, Japan, Laos, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, North and South Vietnam, and 10 were from the Middle East, including Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey and Yemen. This leaves only four from sub-Saharan Africa: Ethiopia, Gold Coast (Ghana), Sudan and Liberia. In the 1950s the countries of Central Asia were part of the Soviet bloc and at the planning meeting for the Bandung Conference at Bogor in December 1954 Nehru dismissed their inclusion, stating: 'We should consider the Soviet Union as a unit. It can hardly be described as an Asian power.'[6]

These regional categories are, of course, problematic. It was the imperial West that carved the regions of Asia or 'the East' into geopolitical spheres, from the Near East across to the Far East, and these spheres could be quite malleable as imperial objectives dictated. The term 'Middle East' remains one of the most difficult to determine. Gamal Abdel Nasser's top foreign policy priority was to restore Egyptian leadership in the Middle East, but under his rule Egypt sought new forms of solidarity based on shared experience, aspirations and resistance. Nasser, who had been prime minister for only six months in April 1955, was keen to make the acquaintance of like-minded states at Bandung. The Egyptian delegation was the largest at the Conference, exceeding even those of the host states. The Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, Mohamed Abdul Khalek Hassouna, wrote one of the most detailed, comprehensive accounts of the Bandung Conference, a further indication of the importance of Bandung to the Arab world.[7] In *Little histories* Youfeng Mao provides a beautifully detailed account of Egypt's disaffection with the West in the mid-1950s, and Nasser's desire to cultivate relations with communist and non-aligned states. Nasser's deals with Zhou Enlai at Bandung on trade and arms not only gave Egypt 'prestige as a champion of Arab nationalist causes' (p. 104) but support for its bid for leadership of the Muslim world, carrying Egypt–China relations through the 1960s and 1970s.

Although *Making a world* captures some of the connections between China and the Middle East and Africa after 1955, in the absence of any context such as Youfeng Mao provides, it only offers glimpses of the real impetus behind them. Laura Bier notes that the Bandung Spirit came to define the Third World, which really took on a definitive form after the Bandung Conference, 'as an imagined space of solidarity' (p. 145). Bier explores these alternative unities through the interest that the Egyptian women's press took in the circumstances of other postcolonial women. She makes one of the best contributions in Lee's collection to our understanding of the ongoing psychological impact that the Bandung Conference had in stimulating

6 G.H. Jansen, *Afro-Asia and non-alignment* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 172.
7 Mohamed Abdel Khalek Hassouna; League of Arab States, *The First Asian-African Conference, Bandung April 18–25 1955* (Cairo: Impr. Misr, 1955).

a sense of Afro–Asian solidarity. Bier sheds light on an emerging curiosity and sense of female solidarity across the Third World, while sensibly noting that only privileged women had access to the feminist movement. The connections to the Bandung Conference are of a renewed sense of cultural agency and Afro–Asian connection; however, this is largely inferred as little inspiration could be drawn from women at Bandung because there were none of note participating, except for a young Indira Gandhi.

James R. Brennan's fascinating chapter in *Making a world* on the wide, but relatively brief, influence of Radio Cairo in decolonising Africa does not make much more than implied links to Bandung as a 'moment' of motivation. As the book moves into an exploration of Mao Zedong's ideological influence on Zanzibar, G. Thomas Burgess notes that until 1955, there were virtually no commercial ties or diplomatic relations between the PRC and Africa (p. 204). That the PRC would gain influence over disaffected Africans and Arabs was one of the greatest fears of those in the West who actively opposed the Conference. Indeed, in 1963 the competition between Soviet Russia and the PRC for influence in Africa was described as 'a second scramble for Africa' by Julius Nyrere (p. 217). Youfeng Mao's chapter in *Little histories* outlining the impetus behind the mutual wooing taking place between Egypt and the PRC at Bandung is recommended reading as context for these chapters in the Lee volume.

The disquiet in the West, especially America and Australia where racialised social and immigration policies were still in force, was borne from fears that the Bandung gathering was evidence of 'blacks ganging up on whites'. The prospect of Muslims and Communists uniting in a tide of retribution, as predicted by Lothrop Stoddard in the 1920s and 1930s, still seemed very real as reflected in some of the media coverage of Bandung in Australia and America. Christopher Waters' chapter in *Little histories* outlines the Australian government's hostile response to the Conference and its consequent estrangement from Asia, especially India and China. He demonstrates that Australia's Asia policy during decolonisation was confused and ill-formed, and it essentially resorted to militarism and containment in its clinging to the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (ANZUS) and SEATO pacts. The Australian government hopelessly lacked imagination in understanding the aspirations of independent Asia and, Waters concludes, its attitude towards Bandung was a 'lost opportunity' to make 'peaceful and positive adjustment to postcolonial Asia' (p. 87). While especially important for Australia, this conclusion might also be extended to the West more generally, where the Bandung Conference was viewed as something of a mere curiosity.

In stark contrast to the attitudes of conservative Cold War nations, the PRC actively sought relationships with the developing world. Jamie Monson in *Making a world* shows how the PRC courted Africa in the 1960s and 1970s through projects such as the building of the TAZARA Railway — connecting Tanzania and Zambia, formerly Tanganyika and Northern Rhodesia — from 1968 to 1986. He argues that the project was underpinned by an ethos of 'revolutionary modernisation' but makes very little of how, or indeed whether, the Afro–Asian spirit this generated could be traced back to the Bandung Conference. The theme of Chinese support in Africa is further explored in Part Three of the volume ('The Present') with Denis M. Tull's observation that 'China sought to construct a common identity with

African states vis-à-vis the paternalistic West' (p. 291). Tull's chapter makes important reading for anyone wishing to understand contemporary Chinese foreign policy. However, for the purpose of this volume, like Monson, Tull does not provide any evidence that relationships forged between the PRC and Africa post-Bandung had their roots in that 'moment' in 1955 — the PRC might well have pursued such opportunities to export its communist ideals and economic ties without a Bundung conference.

In terms of the aftermath of the Bandung Conference, Mackie says in *Little histories* that although enthusiasm was expressed for further Asian–African meetings, 'no specific arrangements were made to that end' (p. 21). There was, in fact, a flurry of Afro–Asian activity after the Bandung Conference. In February 1956, the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE)[8] met in Bangalore, India, with the PRC in attendance, despite the fact that it was not a member of the United Nations, and an Asian Solidarity Committee was established in Beijing. In March 1956 the Asian Regional Conference of the International Press Institute met in Tokyo and in April the Commission of Asian and Far Eastern Affairs, part of the International Chamber of Commerce, met in Bandung. Then in May–June 1956 there was 'Little Bandung', an Asian–African Students' Conference, and in November an Asian Socialist Conference was held in Bombay. An Asian Legal Consultative Committee was also established, its members including the governments of Burma, Ceylon, India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan and Syria.[9] The first Asian Writers' Conference met in December in New Delhi with nearly 275 writers from Asia and the Middle East attending.[10] The following December an Afro–Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO) Conference was held in Cairo, declaring: 'We have been motivated by one feeling only — cooperation and unity among our peoples and close friendship with all the peoples of the world.'[11]

This marked the beginning of the AAPSO, which significantly broadened the reach of the 'Bandung Spirit' across the Afro–Asian world by 'including a range of political and cultural organisations as opposed to official delegates from African and Asian states' (Lee, p. 17). Contrary to Mackie's view, AAPSO, the formation of a 'third world' unity, and the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement, were all attributable to the 'Bandung moment'. This unity was based around a common experience of resistance to Western oppression and claims for self-determination, but it also came from a shared desire for retrieval of cultural authenticity. The conferencing phenomenon inspired by Bandung, which was manifest in a variety of forms from socialist solidarity, to the strengthening of legal and economic frameworks, and the reconnection of cultural ties, therefore forms a part of the legacy of the Asian–African Conference.

Mackie also believed that the Bandung Conference did have an impact on the Cold War, but cautioned that 'it would be unwise to exaggerate the impact' (p. 19). The fact is, there has not been a comprehensive enough study undertaken to establish

8 In 1974, ECAFE became ESCAP, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, doing away with the anachronistic 'Far East' in its title.

9 'Asian Legal Committee established', *Ceylon Daily News*, 16 Nov. 1956, p. 42.

10 'Asian Writers' Conference opens on Dec. 23', *Times of India*, 14 Dec. 1956, p. 41.

11 'Afro–Asian Peoples Solidarity Conference documents', *New Times*, 16 Jan. 1958, p. 3.

whether the Bandung Conference really did forge a third way through the Cold War to issue such a caution. Nor can either of these volumes substantiate such a claim because neither examines the foreign policy dynamic at Bandung and the contending forces at play — communism, non-alignment expressed through the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and the alignment stratagems promoted by the United States. In conclusion, the moments and little histories presented in these works make valuable contributions to the retrieval of the Conference. Its breadth and complexity, nevertheless, remain obscured amid the fragments. Ultimately, this will remain the case until someone tackles a comprehensive history of the Bandung Conference that accords it its rightful place as a pivotal event in twentieth-century history.