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978-0-521-69412-4 - Imperial Alchemy: Nationalism and Political Identity in Southeast Asia

Anthony Reid

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1 Nationalism and Asia

The mid-twentieth century marked one of the greatest watersheds of Asian history. The relatively brief Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia and much of China, and its sudden ending with the atomic bombs of August 1945, telescoped what might have been a long-term transition into a dramatic and violent revolution. In essence, imperial constructs were declared to be nation-states, the sole legitimate model of twentieth century politics, sanctioned in the 'sovereign equality' principle of the United Nations charter (1945).

The world system of competitive, theoretically equal sovereign states, inadequately labelled the 'Westphalia system', had been carried into Asia over several centuries under the 'organised hypocrisy' of imperialism (Krasner 2001), which held that only 'civilised states' could be full members of the sovereign equality club. After 1945 that exclusivist hypocrisy was replaced by a more optimistic one, which held that every corner of the planet should be divided into theoretically equal sovereign states, in reality an extension to the planet of the system of sovereign equality which European states had painfully learned to practise among themselves. In Asia, which had very different experience of international relations of a largely unequal kind, what units would emerge to play this game of nominally equal sovereign states?

The growing literature on nationalism would suggest that the winners from the collapse of empires would have to be ethnically homogeneous nation-states. Yet each major Asian state looks like an anomaly, failing to undergo the kind of culturally homogeneous national assertiveness that broke up empires in Europe and the Americas under the new pressures of industrialisation and print capitalism. Imperial borders were sanctified by China, India, Indonesia, Burma and the Philippines, though each has experienced modernity under radically different conditions. The British and Spanish/American empires in Asia democratised without fragmenting into ethnically based states; India was of course rendered asunder, but on religious, not ethnic grounds. China stalled on democratisation partly out of fear that it would endanger the sanctified

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maximalist borders of the Manchu empire. Indonesia also reversed its experiment with democratisation in the late 1950s on the basis of similar fears, but returned to democracy in 1998 with only a modest challenge of ethnic nationalism around the edges.

The failure of Southeast Asian attempts to vary imperial boundaries in the name of historical, cultural or ideological claims illustrates the power of the alchemy. Thailand's wartime annexation of western Cambodia, some of eastern Burma, and northern Malaya (1941–5), Indonesia's annexation of (Portuguese) East Timor in 1975–99, the division of Vietnam in 1954–75 (even though coinciding with its pre-colonial history of division), the regional rebellions in Indonesia (1956–62), Cambodia's probing of its south-eastern border in 1978 and Vietnam's subsequent invasion of Cambodia, all failed in the long run to dethrone the power of imperial boundaries. The succession of Malaysia to Britain's untidy empire in the Malay World was fought by Indonesia in 1962–6 and opposed by the Philippines (which laid a claim to Sabah in 1962), yet in the long run it was only the departure of tiny Brunei (1962) and Singapore (1965) that diminished the imperial heritage. Burma has been the least successful in defending its extended imperial borders, yet no rebellion has been successful against even such a weak state. Since 1975, the only legally acknowledged change to borders has been the reassertion of an imperial one, as Indonesia's occupation of (Portuguese) East Timor was deemed a failure and reversed in 1999.

How do we explain this difference from the fate of empires in Europe? It was the task of nationalism to invent the new nation-states for the post-1945 world, but was this nationalism a different beast altogether from that of Europe? Could we imagine nationalism in Europe sanctifying the multi-ethnic borders created by the Hapsburgs, Romanovs and Ottomans, as we do in Asia for the empires of British, Dutch, Spanish, French and Manchus? If Asian nation-states were to perform this transformation from the immense variety and antiquity of their ethnic, political and civilisational forms, without fragmenting the leviathans of imperial construction, they would require a kind of magic—the imperial alchemy of my title. The base metal of empire would have to be transmuted into the gold of nationhood.

Two kinds of alchemy were at work here. The revolutionary alchemist was the most daring, insisting that the ideal model of the modern nation state should be implemented within the imperial borders without delay. His gold comprised the sovereignty of the people, the equality of all citizens under a unified and centralised state, and a complete break with

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past loyalties. Indonesia is my primary case, but the much more complex shadow of China looms always in the background.

Other imperial constructs decolonised and democratised in a series of federal compromises which left the outer shell of empire still able to act in the world as a nation-state with the same borders as the old. India is the classic case, but in Southeast Asia the example was followed in Malaysia's strikingly asymmetric form of federalism.

A burst of perceptive writing in the 1980s gave the phenomenon of nationalism a clear definition and a place in the history of the Western world. Benedict Anderson's brilliant *Imagined Communities* (1983), taken together with the work of Gellner (1983) and Giddens (1985), suggested that the West had sufficiently broken the spell of the nation-state and its assumptions to be able to analyse the phenomenon clearly.

The most striking feature of these three writers was their positioning of nationalism as the outcome of a certain historical conjuncture, which created homogeneities of readership, education, language, work-place and eventually, imagination. At a particular time the process of industrialisation called for a new ideology, which put the creation or maintenance of strong states corresponding with these homogeneities at the top of its priorities. 'A homogeneity imposed by objective, inescapable imperative [of industrialism] eventually appears on the surface in the form of nationalism' (Gellner 1983: 39).

These writers thereby stressed the essential modernity of nationalism and fatally punctured some common-sense ideas about its perennial naturalness. They did not proceed explicitly to predict the demise of nationalism as an outcome of the disappearance of these historic features, though the replacement of Anderson's 'print capitalism' by global electronic networks might have led in that direction. However, as Hobsbawm (1990) noted, the fact that nationalism aroused such scholarly interest in the 1980s was a sign that we could for the first time see beyond it.

There was a natural reaction on the part of those pointing to the durability of some ethnies, even without a supporting state, and to the ethno-linguistic foundation of most nation-states (Armstrong 1982; Smith 1986). But a larger scholarly industry developed around the quest to understand the unexpected outburst of ethnic violence in eastern and southern Europe as the Soviet and Yugoslav autocracies unravelled. Their question was 'why, at the close of the second millennium, there should be a resurgence of ethnic conflict and nationalism, at a time when the world is becoming more unified and interconnected?' (Smith 1995: 1). Journals, conferences and book series were initiated with titles

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like *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*.¹ Having been profoundly neglected for so long, the complex issues of nation and identity were suddenly central to social science.

Much of this literature sought to disentangle the positive, inclusive elements of nationalism from its divisive ones, by utilising the distinction between territorial or civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism. Hans Kohn had long ago pointed out how differently nationalism developed east of the Rhine. 'French nationalism was born (as English and American had [been] before it) in a wave of generous enthusiasm for the cause of mankind; the opposing nationalisms ... were directed to laudable but narrower goals, self-centred but antagonistic' (Kohn 1944: 572–3). Anthony Smith (1986) elaborated this distinction. Whereas older experiments with nationalism represented a geographically bounded state (Britain, the US or France) eventually creating a culturally coherent nation, the ethnic model was the other way around: an ethnic group of unclear borders attempted to acquire appropriate borders and political status.

Liah Greenfeld's *Nationalism* (1992) was a careful historical analysis of the relationship of these two types in the context of European history. She saw the concept of nation developing in sixteenth century England in the sense of a sovereign people, entitled to representation in the body politic. It was thus a concept closely wedded to the emergence of democracy in early modern Europe. As it spread eastwards through Europe in the eighteenth century, however, the unique quality of the nation became more marked than its sovereign or democratic character. The sovereignty of this type of nation was held to lie in its distinctiveness, not its participatory civic character. While in the civic variant 'nationality is at least in principle open and voluntaristic', in the ethnic variant 'it is believed to be inherent—one can neither acquire it if one does not have it, nor change it if one does' (Greenfeld 1992: 11). In general, her analysis of 'five roads' shows Germany and Russia following this ethnic path; England and the US (in common with most anti-colonial New World nationalisms) the civic path; and France a more ambivalent path eventually veering towards the civic. By implication, her five exclusively European roads to the nation-state were exemplary types, as if Asian experience were irrelevant.

Walker Connor (1994) made a sterner distinction between nation and state, two very distinct categories often conflated in popular parlance. He wished to limit the use of nationalism and nation to what

¹ The journals *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* and *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* date from 1995 and 1997 respectively.

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he specified as ethno-nationalism. An identification with a state should be distinguished as patriotism, so that the nation can be restricted to 'the largest human grouping predicated on a myth of common ancestry' (Connor 1994: 214). The nation is fictive kin; not a true descent group (since most **felt** nations, such as the English, Chinese or Thai, are immensely plural in terms of biological descent). Connor seeks to deal with the obvious fact that modern educated Europeans are fully aware of the ethnic diversity of their national backgrounds by claiming that despite this book knowledge, 'at a more intuitive or sensory level, they [English, French and Germans] "know" their nation is ethnically, hermetically pure' (*Ibid.*: 215).

This is unconvincing. Like many authors, Connor rightly associates the term nation with the dream of belonging, and seeks to separate it from states. But he creates further problems by seemingly accepting that state-created or state-dependent identities are nations despite his attempt to narrow the definition to fictive kinship.

In this book I propose to avoid the term 'nation' except as used by its advocates, as too profoundly emotive and ambiguous to be helpful in analysis. I will follow Smith in labelling a group which imagines itself kin as an **ethnie** and its political assertiveness as **ethnie nationalism**. By contrast the strong identities which modern states have been able to evoke through education, state ritual and the media I will call **state nationalism**. This is not intended to have the negative connotation which Anderson (1991: chapter 6) gave his 'official nationalism'. All modern states, democratic or authoritarian, ethnie-based, multi-ethnic or imperial, have powerful means at their disposal to evoke solidarity, for good or ill.

A typology for Asian nationalism

When we turn to Asia, it is immediately apparent that neither of these nationalisms covers the way the term nationalism was most frequently used in the twentieth century. Indian, Indonesian, Filipino, Sri Lankan and Burmese 'nationalisms' were all multi-ethnic solidarities directed against alien rulers, and in this sense without clear parallel in Western Europe or the Americas. This type we must qualify as anti-imperial nationalism. Once it had succeeded in replacing the imperial authorities in power it began to change into state nationalism, but retained for some time the emotional pull generated by successfully ending the painful racial humiliation of imperialism. It certainly has a great deal more potency in Asian states than is suggested by Smith's dismissive characterisation of what he calls 'colonial nationalism' as still-born, imitative and elitist (Smith 1991, cited in Tønnesson and Antlöv 1996: 11).

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This tripartite typology of nationalism—ethnie, state and anti-imperial—has similarities with the three categories adopted by Tønnesson and Antlöv (ethno-, official and plural). Their tentative fourth category, class struggle, is much less convincing as a category of nationalism (Tønnesson and Antlöv 1996: 20–2). I also see the need for a fourth category, but rather to make better sense of nationalism in independent Asian states both before and after the high colonial period. I call this outrage at state humiliation (OSH), a category which is characteristically Asian as a reaction to the humiliations the state was seen to have undergone over two centuries at the hands of barbarians.

Each of these four categories is intended to be analytic rather than prescriptive. The distinction made by Kohn, Greenfeld and others is extremely important, between an exclusive ethno-nationalism which marginalises minorities and an inclusive civic nationalism which embraces all. But this is primarily a qualitative question of whether a particular nationalism is seen as malign or benign. Ethnie nationalisms may gain power in a vengeful mood which makes them ethno-nationalist, but they may also seek alliances and accommodations leading to a fruitful civic nationalism. I will retain the distinction between ethnie nationalism, as an analytic category, and ethno-nationalism, as a qualitative judgement.

This book is designed to make recent advances in understanding nationalism more helpful in understanding Asian phenomena by looking empirically at Southeast Asian cases. Southeast Asia has the great merit of diversity, with examples of almost every type of phenomenon to be found in the broader world outside Western Europe and its New World offshoots. These latter cases have generated the great majority of the careful analytic work, even that of Southeast Asianist Anderson. The immigrant societies of the Western Hemisphere are clearly atypical as purely territorial movements sharing language and culture with the imperial power. Even post-enlightenment Western Europe, though more helpful in its wide range of possibilities, represents one extreme, a system of compact and competing nation-states, within the broader Eurasian spectrum. While the categories generated from European examples are helpful, the work of adapting them to Asian experience largely remains to be done.

Ethnie nationalism

An ethnie will be defined as a group with a strong sense of being similar. As simplified by Smith (1986: 22–31), this belief in similarity is likely to consist of most or all of the following six elements:

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a collective name,
 a common myth of descent,
 some shared history or set of traditions,
 a distinctive shared culture, usually including language or religion,
 an association with a territory, either present or past (though one of sacred sites and centres rather than boundaries),
 a sense of solidarity.

For Asia in particular, **ethnie** has the advantage of escaping the positive emotive associations of ‘nation’, the currently negative (but once positive) ones of ‘race’, and the necessarily sub-national ones of ethnic group. Most Asian languages do not have these distinctions, or have them differently. When the Chinese term *minzu*, or its analogue in Korean (*min-jok*), or the Thai word *chat*, or the Malay/Indonesian word *bangsa* were developed into the object of modern national striving, they could be translated equally well as race or nation. These terms are still used in many Asian countries to exhort loyalty and devotion. It sounds shocking in English if they are translated as race; acceptably patriotic if they are translated as nation. To modern American, Australian, or West European ears the two concepts seem quite distinct, even if in the nineteenth century they did not. To Malays or Khmers they still do not.

State nationalism

The royal dynasties that dominated human history before the modern age had little need of nationalism. They ruled by divine right, not as representatives of a people; their armies, their officials and their subjects were diverse, often by design. For the most part therefore state nationalism is a feature of the post-Enlightenment regimes in the West and of twentieth century ones in Asia, which needed to rule in the name of a people and therefore to define and mould that people. In general only these modern regimes believed it their business to build homogeneity by providing a uniform education syllabus and monolingual media, and to persuade their people to fight and die for the national cause.

There are however some older Asian examples of identification with king, dynasty or territory which have features of state nationalism. Pre-modern Chinese described their collective identity by reference to a dynasty—‘People of Han, or Tang, or Qing’. Nevertheless, the state’s requirement that officials be recruited through examinations of certain classical texts created an unusual uniformity of high culture (see below).

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Vietnamese and Korean rulers, although using similar examinations of the Chinese classics for their bureaucracy, placed great emphasis on the unique distinctiveness of their country from China. In Vietnam, later literati used the emperors who had successfully resisted China as the epitome of 'Vietnameseness'. The role of the rulers, in turn, 'was supposed to be that of a moral teacher whom the whole society revered and imitated' (Woodside 1976: 16).

In southern Asia monarchs often used religion to create homogeneities of culture. Southeast Asian kings exercised a power more charismatic and spiritual than bureaucratic and temporal, and they sought to build, patronise and control the most sacred sites and symbols of the land. A new religious order could be used to expand royal power by overriding local cults and spirits. Islam played this role for a time during the 'gunpowder empires' that accumulated unprecedented power in the sultanates of Aceh, Banten, Makassar and Mataram in the seventeenth century.

Theravada Buddhism proved more useful in the long term, however, in building a common consciousness among subjects of Thai, Lao, Khmer and Burmese kings. The monkhood (*sangha*) was a popular and widespread force in education, ritual and building a common mentality, and kings made it their business to patronise and reform it in the direction of state-directed homogeneity. The Mahavihara form of ordination practised in Sri Lanka proved an effective means for kings, from the fifteenth century to the eighteenth, to 'reform' the *sangha* along uniform foreign lines, and thereby bring the population into a similar mould under a royally appointed patriarch.

I argue therefore that state nationalism was a factor in some pre-modern Asian states. It came into its own, however, in the high modernist era of the 1950s to 1970s, when it sought with remarkable success to transform ancient Asian civilisations through mass education, state ritual and revolutionary rhetoric.

Anti-imperial nationalism

In twentieth century Asia and Africa, this facet of nationalism became so dominant that it was popularly thought to be the only valid variant. Most of the literature on South and Southeast Asia labels it 'nationalism' without further need for questioning. The uncolonised variants of nationalism, Chinese, Japanese and Thai, were wholly different in nature, combining state and ethnic nationalisms in different degrees. Yet because they were contemporary with the anti-imperial phenomena of southern Asia, they have been considered part of Asian nationalism

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when they have been analysed at all. Chinese nationalism, the most problematic case for the analyst, often presented itself as anti-imperial and occasionally sought common cause with anti-imperial nationalism elsewhere. The target of this anti-imperialism, however, quickly moved away from the Manchus who had very successfully colonised China for 250 years but were swiftly removed in 1911. More immediate antagonists then became the powers (European, American and Japanese) which had 'humiliated' China and dominated its Treaty Ports, and the Japanese who occupied militarily much of eastern and northeastern China from 1931 to 1945. This is more properly considered OSH (see below) than anti-imperial nationalism.

Further confusion is caused by the popular and political use of 'nationalist' as the label for anti-communist governments and parties in China, Korea and Vietnam. This obscures the way in which communist movements mobilised anti-imperial and ethnic nationalism against the state nationalism of the governments they opposed.

Yet anti-imperial nationalism was absolutely crucial as the key ingredient for the alchemy that sought to turn empires into nations in the middle of the twentieth century. It can be categorised by the following features:

- Reversal of the racial hierarchies of late imperialism, which had Europeans (or Japanese in Korea and Taiwan) at the top, outsider Asians (Chinese, Indians and Japanese in Southeast Asia) in the middle and 'natives' at the bottom.
- Adoption of the boundaries and unities created by the imperial power as the sacred space of the new national identity, within which all 'indigenous' people should bury their differences.
- A radically modernising agenda, condemning traditional monarchies and customs as 'feudal' and artificially sustained by colonialism.
- Glorification of one or more ancient polity deemed to represent the national essence before its humiliation or dismemberment.
- Support for economic self-sufficiency, a national language and national education, as keys to creating prosperity for the new national identity.

More than the other two forms, anti-imperial nationalism was the child of very specific conditions in the first half of the twentieth century. Imperialism changed its nature profoundly in the decades before and after 1900, as colonial governments extended their sovereignty to internationally agreed boundaries and assumed most of the unitary functions of nation-states elsewhere. The twentieth century imperial combination of creating a structure that looked like a modern nation state but lacked

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some of its key features (democracy, widespread education, equality before the law), and beginning to educate increasing sections of the population in modern Western ideologies, ensured the success of anti-imperial arguments. Marxism was attractive to many as a seemingly rational, non-racist and above all optimistic form of anti-imperial nationalism, using the arguments of Hobson (1902) and Lenin (1916) to show imperialism as a doomed form of capitalism.

Outrage at state humiliation (OSH)

This is an emotive variant very salient in the proud independent states of Asia. Although entangled with all three other types, it requires a separate categorisation because it cannot be subsumed into any of the other three. It is distinguished from mainstream ethnic nationalism in that its focus is the perceived humiliation of a state, rather than an ethnic, before outsiders deemed to be unreasonably powerful. It is not anti-imperial nationalism because it operates particularly in states that are formally independent, yet not as successful or powerful as their citizens demand. It is not state nationalism because it lives so uncomfortably with the compromises made by the state, and can be a major factor leading to its destabilisation or overthrow. As Jing Tsu (2005: 222) puts it, 'Beneath the surface of modernity and enlightenment lies an unabated restlessness expressed as passionate discontent with the self and nation.' We may understand the salience of this factor in Northeast Asia as a product of the success of state nationalism over many centuries in making the state unusually central in the self-identification of subjects. Although, or perhaps because, subjects had little influence on the remote and bureaucratic Confucian state, they accepted it as the principal feature of political identity in the competition with outsiders. State nationalism had done its job over many centuries in both China and Korea making the bureaucratic state more central to political identity there than in most European societies before the French Revolution. OSH nationalism therefore sought to recreate the state more powerfully, not to build a new polity more reflective of the ethnic.

The Boxer movement (1899–1900) and the May Fourth movement (1917–21) are the most spectacular formative manifestations of OSH in China, representing opposite rural/mystical and urban/reformist sides of Chinese outrage. The acceptance by the Yuan Shikai government on 9 May 1915 of Japan's twenty-one demands led quickly to protests around the country against 'national humiliation' and the demand