

Preface



Revisiting Pan-Asianism in the Decolonization of the Indo-Pacific: Inspiration, Order, and Democratization

There is definitely much that remains up for debate concerning the history of decolonization in Asia. Firstly, it is the largest continent on the face of the earth and although most of it was colonized in the 19th and early-20th centuries, this was done by a diverse group of colonizers, and the manner in which each territory was decolonized varied to a significant degree. Secondly, it remains up for debate whether or not decolonization in Asia has been completed and whether it may not be too soon to regard it as history. Finally, the history of decolonization in Asia remains mostly within the narrative of the victors. This has resulted in a rather lopsided analyses and evaluation of the different forms of colonization and decolonization in the modern history of Asia.

To begin to address this expansive historical controversy, we start by slightly narrowing the geographical site of investigation to cover only the eastern, southeastern, and southern regions of the Asian continent – an area that has gained notoriety through recent geopolitical developments. Referred to as the Indo-Pacific, this region, which straddles three sub-regions and two oceans, is joined, among other things, by the historical phenomenon of ‘pan-Asianism.’ First taking rise from Japan’s phenomenal victory in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 (Mishra 2012), pan-Asianism later inspired a whole generation of people of color across the globe to resist European and American colonial rule before culminating in the ill-fated Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere initiated by the Japanese Empire in the early-1940s. In short, its impact on the decolonization of nearly half the Asian continent was immense.

Pan-Asianism inspired the Asian elite in many colonies and semi-colonies to consider the possibility of resistance that could possibly lead to independence

and the rights to self-determination. Pan-Asianism that manifested in the form of Japan's Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere presented the empirical evidence that Asian forces could defeat European and American colonial rulers while encouraging local nationalist movements to realize their true potential in building independent modern nation-states and rule their own people with the legitimacy of their own sovereign power over their own ancestral homeland. Nevertheless, pan-Asianism has been largely left out of the mainstream narrative of decolonization in Asia. This is essentially because the Second World War was won by western imperialist powers. The defeated Japanese Empire was, therefore, thoroughly demonized and denied any credit for the large-scale decolonization that took place in the Indo-Pacific following the conclusion of World War II (Dower 1993). The mainstream narrative of decolonization in Asia, instead, became an account of newly emerging nations and East Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia gaining independence through the course of the Cold War and under the overwhelming influence of the two postwar superpowers: the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Ang 2018).

This mainstream Cold War narrative of decolonization in Asia, however, was plagued by inconsistencies and contradictions, as many problematic aspects of the colonial era continued through the latter half of the 20th century. The struggle for independence in many areas in the Indo-Pacific carries on even up to the present day. It is impossible to truly understand the history of decolonization in Asia without recognizing the full extent of European and American imperialist influence across the region, which started long before the dawn of the 20th century and, in many cases, continues long after the conclusion of the Cold War. To truly investigate this matter further it is necessary to bring pan-Asianism back into the historical narrative of decolonization in the Indo-Pacific. To this end, the international workshop on "Revisiting Pan-Asianism and Decolonization Attempts in the Transwar" (Hofmann and Ward 2022) was organized on 25 September 2022 at the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University. The main objectives of the workshop were to bring pan-Asianism back into the discussion of decolonization in Asia, and to expand the historical period of decolonization in Asia beyond the Cold War period – that is, beyond the latter half of the 20th century. The First World War, the interwar years, and the post-Cold War were also included. The workshop also set out to further problematize the working definition of 'colonialism' and 'decolonization,' through the investigation of more problematic cases, such as Thailand's semi-colonial status and its claim to be the only Southeast Asian nation never to have been colonized by the West (Wongsurawat 2019), whether or not Japan's establishment of Manchukuo or its invasion of Southeast Asia

in the early-1940s should be considered a form of decolonization from western colonial powers, and whether or not the Cold War should be considered as a form of neo-imperialism according to local narratives from the Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung in 1955 or even those of communist movements across the region in the 1960s – 1970s (Stolte and Lewis 2022).

The workshop ultimately resulted in a set of seven articles selected and heavily revised for this special issue of *Manusya Journal of Humanities*. This collection of articles is thematically divided into three parts. The first part reinvestigates the idea of pan-Asianism and further problematizes this concept in the context of decolonization of the Indo-Pacific. The first article by Andre Magpantay, “Asia for Asians: Revisiting Pan-Asianism through the Propaganda Arts of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,” provides an in-depth study of how the Japanese expansionist militarist government of the early-1940s understood what pan-Asianism was and how they then attempted to convince the populations of East Asia and Southeast Asia of the viability of this multinational project in expelling the European and American imperialists across the region. The article points to a clear sense of Japanese supremacy in these propaganda arts. While they were trying to convince their East Asian and Southeast Asian counterparts that the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was a pan-Asian decolonizing project, it appears that many among the Japanese elite perceived themselves as an imperialist power.

The second article of this section, “Anarchy against Order: French Elite Perception of the Conflict in Manchuria,” by Alexandre Barthel demonstrates how, despite the Japanese pan-Asian project being widely presented as an anti-European imperialist force, the French elite in the 1930s continued to sympathize with Japan more than China. According to Barthel, from the perspective of the French elite, the Japanese were more civilized than the rest of Asia and it would be easier to deal with Japan as they had a similar experience colonizing backward Asian peoples and fighting rising communist movements in the colonies.

The third and final piece in this first section is, “The Ghadar Movement in Thailand, 1914–1917: Overseas Indian Rebels and their Multinational Asian Assistants,” by Pimmanus Wibulsilp. This article looks at pan-Asianism through the lens of an expansive network of colonized people who came together for the purpose of sabotaging British rule in South Asia. The core group of the Ghadar Movement are identified as Indians, but their network spanned across the continent and included supporters from as far away as Germany and the United States. While some Japanese and French elite might have perceived pan-Asianism as just another form of Japanese imperialist aspiration, there

was evidently a significant part of the colonized people of Asia who really saw it as an inspiration for their independence movements.

The second section of this collection investigates the semi-colonial nature of Thailand and how its ruling elite, from the period of the Second World War to the earlier half of the Cold War, attempted to balance Thailand's relations with world powers despite being very clearly dominated by one imperialist power. The first article in this section is, "Military Study Abroad as Thailand's Foreign Policy Between the 1930s and 1940s," by Thep Boontanonda. This article demonstrates how the Thai government under the leadership of Prime Minister Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram attempted to balance Thailand's relations with world powers during the Second World War. Despite increasingly tending towards alliance with Japan from the late-1930s, the Thai ruling elite, including Phibunsongkhram himself, tried to send their offspring and subordinates for education and training in Europe and America as a way to avoid being completely dominated by Japan in their sensitive political decisions in the years leading to the World War II and throughout the war years.

The other article in this section is, "Prince Wan Waithayakon's Attempt for Rapprochement with the People's Republic of China at the 1955 Asian-African Conference at Bandung," by Wiraj Sripong. This article investigates the earlier part of the Cold War when Washington was highly suspicious of Beijing's intentions to spread communism across the Asian continent. During this time Thailand was squarely within the US-led 'Free World' camp. Premier Phibunsongkhram was most eager to receive American approval for his return to office in the post-war that he became the first among Southeast Asian leaders to contribute troops in support of the US-led UN coalition forces in the Korean War. Nonetheless, when a group of newly emerging Asian nations came together to propose the third way (eventually leading to the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement) in the 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung, the Thai government saw this as a chance to try to balance their relations with the US by attempting rapprochement with the People's Republic of China.

The last section of the collection investigates the long-lasting impact of pan-Asianism on the ongoing efforts of Thais to completely decolonize and their aspirations to rid their nation of the 'half-feudal, half-colonized' reputation. The first article in this section is, "Liberating Thai History: The Thai Past in an Asian Century," by Arjun Subrahmanyam. The article presents how the revolutionary Khana Ratsadon who instigated the Siamese Revolution of 1932, along with a whole generation of progressive minds, attempted to establish Thailand as a truly modern nation-state, completed with a democratic

political system and a more egalitarian social structure. In their quest for national liberation, it was necessary for the revolutionaries not only to stand up against the pro-imperialist absolute monarchy, but also to connect with anti-imperialist nationalist forces in neighboring colonies in Southeast Asia. The article demonstrates how 'liberating Thai history' is closely intertwined with the decolonizing narrative of Asia as a whole.

The last article of this section (and this whole collection) is, "Japan for Example: National Character as the Driving Force of National Progress in Thai Conservative Writings about Japan," by David Malitz. The article presents how Japanese influence on Thai conservative writings has consistently been employed to explain why Thailand was not ready for democracy or any other progressive governing structure. Consequently, despite the repeated political turmoil in Thailand throughout the 20th century, the kingdom failed to achieve more social equality than that of the authoritarian regimes both of the absolute monarchy and the military dictatorships through the Cold War period and even up to the present day. In this case, Japanese influence was not a liberating force at all and pan-Asianism could be an acceptable concept only because, in practice, it was completely under the control of the Japanese authoritarian regime. So long as the Thai public cannot be as orderly and trustworthy as the Japanese, it is probably best that they remain under authoritarian rule to avoid chaos.

The brief descriptions of each article in this collection come full circle when the Thai authoritarian regimes of the post-Cold War take inspiration from Japan and claim that Thai society – not yet being as orderly and trustworthy as the Japanese – would descend into chaos without authoritarian rule. This strangely resonates with Barthel's article, "Anarchy against Order," which highlights that the French elite preferred to deal with Japanese imperialists rather than the Chinese, because the Japanese were more orderly, and therefore, more civilized, despite their invasion of Manchuria in 1931. If there is one key theme that appears to tie all seven articles in this collection together it is that decolonization is very closely related to democratization. At least in the case of Thailand, the homebase of our investigation and the most enigmatic country in this study, authoritarian regimes cling to a colonial structure while revolutionary regimes attempt to build a more egalitarian society and fight imperialism through their pan-Asian connections. During the transwar period Japan was an anti-imperialist icon through its pan-Asian propaganda. Yet, later in the post-Cold War, when the authoritarian Thai elite returned to "Japan for example," they derive their inspiration from the imperialist authoritarian regime of Japan, resonating the views of the French elite from the 1930s.

Fortunately, by the end of this preface, we have successfully arrived at a suitable title for this collection, one that aptly represents our long and arduous academic journey in the production of this special issue, *Revisiting Pan-Asianism in the Decolonization of the Indo-Pacific: Inspiration, Order, and Democratization*.

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