

# Engaging the nation across borders

*Traveling Nation-Makers* addresses the overlapping ideological space between nationalist aspirations and transnational movements, and it does so focussing on the lives of less-studied political activists in Southeast Asia throughout the twentieth century.

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THE VOLUME'S "central organizing concept" is travel, "within and beyond Southeast Asia, and its transformative effect in individual lives and their intellectual, political, religious, and cultural projects, and on the trajectories of nationalist, Communist, Islamic, and other movements in the region" (5). And in the case of the Vietnamese writer Vu Trong Phung, it is the absence of physical travel, added to his engagement with "global modernity", that makes him a "provincial cosmopolitan" (127).

In the introduction, Caroline S.Hau and Kasian Tejapira advance a balanced assessment of the outcome of the "understandable frustration with the narrowness of national studies", by pointing out that the trend to "produce 'prehistories' of contemporary globalization, or [...] contemporary transnationalism and connections" has not induced a better understanding of the dynamics at play. "Relatively little sustained attention has been paid to the question of how nation-states themselves were constituted out of, and crisscrossed by, these multidirectional material, cultural, and intellectual flows, circulations, and interactions across space and time" (4).

The chapters cover most of the region (Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaya, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Shanghai and Hong Kong in China), addressing the late colonial period of the region (with the exception of chapters 9 and 10). The authors adopt a biographical approach and find their rallying points in "redress[ing] the imbalances in current research on travel", and in "question[ing] current theories that construct the nation as a bogeyman of cultural stasis and repressive entrapment in order to contrast it to the freedom and transformative agency of cosmopolitan mobility" (10).

The editors give a much broader perspective than the collective chapters, both conceptually and chronologically. They tackle the impact of travel on the anti-colonial, nationalist imaginations; invoke Susan Bayly's "socialist ecumene"; point to the ritual manifestations of Islam's transnationalism; and bring on the table the role of returning migrants throughout the century (6-8).

However, the volume struggles to live up to this. Most of the contributions deal with members of the Left (Chapters 2, 3, 5, 6, and to a certain extent 7). In fact, although Communists and leftist sympathizers had a "natural" predisposition towards transnational activities, the volume does not recognize Pan-Asian trends nor the role of religious networks in the shaping of nationalist movements. Transnational Islam is only called into question in the last chapter, as Shiraishi Takashi reflects on the impact of travel in the jihadist ideology of Imam Samudra, infamous protagonist of the Bali Bombings of October 2002.

Chapter 1 is arguably the most interesting and pleasant to read in the collection. Resil B. Mojares introduces us to Mariano

Ponce, "the last Propagandist". He epitomises all that the volume would like to address: a key personality of the anti-colonial movement in the Philippines, colleague of Jose Rizal and Marcelo del Pilar, yet a "barely visible" figure (33). Ponce travels across Asia and to Europe, he is an active participant and *formateur* of international networks, is inspired by Japan's "Asianism", yet remains focused on the need for national independence.

Chapter 2 looks at a Vietnamese revolutionary in 1920s Canton, whose "notions of travel, nationalism, and national boundaries" were shaped and "complicated" by the Concessions' system implemented in Southern China. Lorraine M. Paterson analyses the biography of Pham Hong Thai written by Phan Boi Chau. Himself a nationalist, this transforms the biography into somewhat of a hagiography, making the tomb a place of pilgrimage and a "sacred national space" (66). Biographies had become a popular genre, as they could circumvent censorship laws; at the same time, even though "the territorial space had to be definitely defined as French, then the icons moving through 'national space' could be universal figures" (79-81).

Chapter 3 also picks up on the European Concessions' system, and looks at travel between the various territorial units of Shanghai, in relation to nationalism and transnationalism. Onimaru Takeshi reconstructs the multiple lives and identities of Hilaire Noulens, an underground officer of the Third International. As liaison officer between the Comintern's headquarters in Moscow and all affiliated organizations in East and Southeast Asia, Noulens was able to keep his real identity and intentions hidden from the authorities for over a decade. Onimaru argues that this was possible only thanks to Noulens' skilful exploitation of Shanghai's modern infrastructures and its accessibility to and from other places, as much as to the extraterritoriality, widespread international communities, and gray zones (101-04).

Chapter 4 deals with the absence of travel, as Zinoman argues that "scholarship about the dynamics of cultural change under colonialism" has, among other things, "inflate[d] the significance of overseas travel" (126). To challenge this trend, he illustrates the formation of a provincial cosmopolitan, Vu Trong Phung, through engagement with literary global modernity. We are thus taken across the various streams of French literature that influenced Phung; yet Zinoman does not omit to stress their 'localization': "the category of 'realism' functioned for Vu Trong Phung less as an aesthetic (or even a political) category and more as an instrument to be deployed in what was essentially a local struggle with his critics" (137).

Caroline Hau's contribution, investigating the revolutionary flows between China and the Philippines in the 1940s, and their relevance to contemporary dynamics, is another gem in this volume. She extensively delves into the relation between the Communist spirit of internationalism and the guerrilla's goal of national liberation, giving an insightful local perspective on Communism's polycentrism. And she does so by focusing on the "Chinese historical participation in the Filipino revolutionary movement and the contested place of Maoism and China in the development of Filipino Communism" (153-54). The state's criminalization and marginalization of leftist groups, which included the Wha Chi, was reverted in the late 1970s, yet

"this official recognition glosses over the Wha Chi's historical connections with the global and regional socialist-cum-colonial network" and only focuses on its national relevance (156).

Kasian Tejapira's chapter appears as an odd-fit in this volume. His narrative centres on the representation of the Communist Party of Thailand as "Mother", thus leading to an interesting opposition with the depiction of Prime Minister Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat as "the Father of the Thai nation" (202). Sure, travel and transnational connections are present here too. Tejapira follows Ruam Wongphan's life from the countryside in central Thailand to political training in Bangkok first and Beijing next, and then back to his hometown to mobilize the local peasantry. It is in Ruam's 'Farewell Letter to Mother' that the image of a caring, peace-loving, truthful, sympathetic, Mother is introduced as a metaphor for the CPT (198-99).

Chapter 7 brings the volume's focus once again at centre-stage, as Khoo Boo Teik takes James J. Puthuchery's life story as a laboratory to analyse the "inflows, outflows, and internal flows" that "washed into Malaya" (209) and shaped this region's political outlook. An Indian from Malaya, Puthuchery returns "as an Indian nationalist" in the early 1940s; yet, feeling that he "had been de-culturalised almost completely" (215), he moves to Singapore. Here starts Puthuchery's (dis)adventure with the PAP, which would ultimately make him return to Malaysia. It is then, in the 1960s, that he reflected on "the counter-hegemonic fallacies" of the left-wing movement, a consequence of "Asian nationalism, [which] originating in China, India, and Indonesia, had washed over colonial Malaya only to leave behind no ideological synthesis" (220).

Yamamoto Hiroyuki's contribution follows the journalistic career of K. Bali, a Sino-Thai Buddhist from Kelantan who moved to North Borneo, Sabah, to live as a Malay-Muslim. Influenced by the Indonesian attempt at 'Unity in Diversity', in the 1950s K. Bali became committed to spread the notion of a local "*bangsa Sabah*", grounded on the observation that the region was "free of ethnic polarization and that people lived in harmony in spite of ethnic diversity [and] that Malay was widely used as the lingua franca of the region" (239).

The volume has a chronological focus on the early twentieth century, but the lives of Puthuchery and K. Bali propel us towards the latter part of the century, when the activities of the Filipina overseas contract worker (OCW) Connie Bragas-Regalado, and the jihadi Imam Samudra are instead set. If one retains the perspective of nation-building, the story that Odine de Guzman tells is one made by nation-makers *in absentia*. Connie Bragas-Regalado became a leader for the Migrante Sectoral Party after several years as a domestic worker, mostly in Hong Kong. This chapter is grounded on the recognition that women migrant workers have carried the burden of Philippines' unemployment and economic deficit, whilst receiving little acknowledgement for the sacrifice. Odine de Guzman does a good job at introducing the reality of migrant workers in Singapore and Hong Kong. And even more so at addressing the issue of return, from the mythology of the *balikbayan*, the state discourse of OCWs as heroes, and the difficulty of reinsertion in the original family and its traditional roles. Thus, Connie's political activism should be seen in the frame of re-asserting female migrant workers' voices "at home".

Shiraishi Takashi's chapter is the only contribution addressing Islam's transnational networks, but it is a pity that these should be mentioned within the discourse on terrorism, and the "thinness of [Imam Samudra's] language". The chapter is based on the life of one of the mastermind behind the Bali Bombings of 2002, Imam Samudra, and it "suggests the centrality of his Afghan experience in shaping his life" (284). Here Shiraishi reads between the lines to pin-point those instances where the 1990s journey and sojourn in the training camps affected Samudra's vision of Islam, religious activism, and ultimately jihad.

Overall, the volume has its coherence in the fact that all contributions use biography as the narrative thread and deal – each in their own way, and to a varying degree – and engage with (the absence of) physical travel and flows of ideas. As it is often the case with edited volumes, some chapters read better than others, and space has not been evenly allocated to the ideological variations of nationalism. Nonetheless, readers across the board will enjoy it. The introduction offers a well-constructed criticism of post-national studies; various chapters touch upon the key topics related to colonialism in a way easily understandable and entertaining even for an undergraduate and general audience. Scholars will find stimulating the continuous engagement with the two faces of anti-colonial movements, national identity and transnational networks.

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