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Book Reviews



Caroline S. Hau and Kasian Tejapira

(2011) *Traveling Nation-Makers: Transnational Flows and Movements in the Making of Modern Southeast Asia*. Singapore and Kyoto:] Press / Kyoto University Press. 310 pages. ISBN: 978-9971-69-547-7 (pbk.).

How was the formation of nationalist consciousness conditioned by the travels and dislocations of its protagonists? In the context of Southeast Asian studies, this question has typically been examined in ways that are confined to a nation-state-centric mode of analysis. The authors of this volume seek to “complexify” our understanding of the topic by encouraging us to examine “how flows in, through, and across Southeast Asia enabled forms of identification and activism among different political actors in ways that promoted thinking, feeling, and making nation during much of the twentieth century” (p. 5).

This is not a statistical account of regional flows of people, nor a macro-intellectual survey of diffusive ideas about nation-building framed from a high analytical altitude. These themes are fleshed out through ten biographical essays, or as the editors call it, “inscriptions of lives”, which trace the dialectic between individuals and the larger itinerant milieu in which they circulated (p. 12). But instead of focusing on the biographies of the most well-known nationalists in Southeast Asia, the volume gives refreshing and timely attention to those characters who do not often receive as much coverage as their more illustrious counterparts. The individual profiles depicted here are varied in temporal and cultural contexts, but together they shed light on the broader question of how travel has both constrained and made possible certain political, intellectual or soteriological outcomes.

It is not the intention of the authors to apotheosise these travelling nation-makers. In fact, the authors provide a very human, warts-and-all profile of some very interesting characters across the Southeast Asian region. We get a glimpse into the lives of “outlaws” pursuing their ideological and religious agendas in Lorraine M. Paterson’s examination of the life of Vietnamese hero/terrorist

Pham Hong Thai; in Onimaru Takeshi's investigatory peek into the clandestine affairs of perennial fugitive Hilaire Noulens in Shanghai; and in Shiraishi Takashi's analysis of the religious and intellectual self-fashioning of "Bali bomber" Imam Samudra. We also get a sense of the complex business of forming nationalist and revolutionary consciousness in four brilliant essays: Peter Zinoman's unpacking of the intellectual voraciousness of Vietnamese inter-war author Vu Trong Phung; Kasian Tejapira's account of the tenacity of Thai revolutionary Ruam Wongphan's discursive imagery; Caroline S. Hau's depiction of the intimate struggles of ethnic Chinese author Du Ai; and Resil B. Mojares' treatment of the uprooted itineraries of Filipino publicist and lobbyist Mariano Ponce. Finally, the volume casts an insightful gaze into the frustrations and successes of political activism, which we see in Khoo Boo Teik's essay on ethnic Indian left-wing politician and activist James J. Puthuchery; Odine de Guzman's discussion of the life and struggles of transnational worker activist Connie Bragas-Regalado; and Yamamoto Hiroyuki's look at the life of Sino-Thai Buddhist Peranakan-turned-Malay Muslim writer, poet and journalist Tenh Beng Chuan.

All ten biographies provide much-needed human depth and nuance to political scientist Benedict Anderson's ideas in the book *Long Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics* (1992), which examined how the displacement of nation makers often led to vexed and ambivalent investments in nationalist projects. Some have interpreted Anderson as being largely sceptical of exilic nation-making, given that many of the region's nationalists have, in living uprooted lives, become less accountable to the motherland (Aguilar et al., 2011). What shines through from reading the volume's biographies, however, is the haunting tenacity of ideas of home even amidst the physical and intellectual dislocations of its protagonists. The various challenges that they faced, the many obstacles they conquered, and indeed the frustrations and failures they experienced evoked not a diminished commitment to home, but a sensibility "anchored in a stable sense of home as origin and designation" (p. 55).

In making this argument, which is conceptualised very insightfully as "routes and roots," the volume makes two very important contributions to our understanding of nation making. Firstly, it presents intriguing insights into the "thrown together" contingencies of long-distance nationalism. Mojares' essay, for example, describes the exilic solidarity between Filipino nationalist Mariano Ponce and fellow travellers, like Sun Yat Sen, Kang Youwei and Korean reformers in Hong Kong and Yokohama. It is not just complementary and intersecting ideologies that forged these solidarities, but the common experience of displacement under circumstances that often lead to the formation of what

Hau describes as “communities of fate” (p. 158). That nationalism arose out of such conditions is not to romanticise it, but simply to acknowledge nationalism’s inheritance in happenstance, serendipity, fate and chance.

Secondly, the volume encourages a questioning of prevalent assumptions about cosmopolitanism, which is often thought to be contingent upon a purposeful (and elitist) traversing of space. In his depiction of Vu’s autodidactic interest in foreign novels and dated French newspapers, Peter Zinoman demonstrates a form of “provincial cosmopolitanism” that had a massive impact on the formation of nationalist consciousness, even while its main protagonist does not physically displace himself from his home.

Traveling Nation Makers is volume of significant importance in advancing our understanding of the formation of nationalist consciousness in a way that does not privilege the nation state. Hau and Tejapira have shown exemplary editorial stewardship in bringing together ten very interesting and very human portraits of Southeast Asian nation makers, who are richly depicted beyond the rigid lenses of their ideological, political or religious agendas. The book is crucial for those interested in nationalism, but I would suggest that it would also be very valuable to those pondering larger questions about home, belonging and the vagaries of dislocation—themes that we can all relate to in one way or another, regardless of our disciplinary inclinations.

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