What's the Deal With Asia?

Robert Scaife · Follow
12 min read · Jun 17, 2015

An Historical Perspective

"What do you really want from us?

Think hard first, then answer...."[1]

– *Anonymous*

At the conclusion of the Second World War, the countries of East Asia found themselves at a crossroads. Many of their colonial overseers had either withdrawn or were so weak militarily and financially as to be ineffective in maintaining positive control over the countryside.[2] This reduction of colonial influence from the Western colonizers was due to a myriad of factors. The main reason was that many the European states were focusing on rebuilding their infrastructure after the long and bloody war (e.g. France and Britain). This reduction of the Western presence in many East Asian states along with the rise of nationalism, a mythology of humiliation, and a desire for self-rule, further caused an erosion of Western power in East Asia.[3]

It should be noted that in a discussion on East Asia after the Second World War, Japan stands out as an anomaly. Besides the fact that Japan was beholden to Allied powers after the signing of the Japanese Instrument of Surrender, Japan was never "colonized" in the way other East Asian states were in the 19th century. That is not to say that Japan was not heavily influenced by the Western powers, indeed Japan was. Yet, Japan stood out with its ability to adapt to the nature of rapid industrialization and modernization.[4] Perhaps never considered a "true" equal by Western powers, Japan adopted many Western institutions from educational standards to a Napoleonic military structure, revealing a different relationship with the Western powers.[5]

After 1945, with Japan under the watchful eyes of the Allied powers, the rest of East Asia was, by and large, left to return to "business as usual." China, sharply divided along ideological lines, was running headlong toward full-scale civil war.[6] The Korean Peninsula, removed from Japanese control, was split between the United States and the Soviet Union as prescribed under the Yalta Agreements. French Indochina was preparing to assert its independence from French control with the declaration of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.[7] Indeed, the die for the shaping of East Asia over the next 30 years was cast at the 1943 Cairo Conference, where British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and President of the Republic of China Chiang

Kai-shek agreed upon the terms of the dismantling of the Japanese Empire upon the completion of the Japanese Surrender.[8]

At the close of the Second World War, the reality for many in East Asia was sense of a growing division between the East and the West. On July 14, 1956, Mao Zedong delivered a speech that echoed these sentiments, "Japan dislikes the United States because it oppresses her. None of the Countries in the East is free from US aggression. [...] All oppressed nations want independence."[9] This was indeed a fact that was bearing out by 1956. Mao was so incensed over US support of Chiang Kai-chek and the Chinese Nationalists that immediately after the conclusion of the Chinese Civil War, the United States was the focus of Chinese scorn.[10]

By 1956, Vietnam had defeated the French colonial forces at the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ, the Korean peninsula was enjoying a truce from a war that was the result of Japan's imperialist designs, and China was dealing with the beginnings of the Sino-Soviet Split after Nikita Khrushchev gave his "secret speech" denouncing Joseph Stalin in the XX Soviet Party Congress. Indeed, there was an entrenched sense among the states of East Asia that they had a right to self-determination, free from outside interference.

For China, humiliation from Western powers was a major impetus for its movement toward independence and a return as the East Asian hegemonic power. At the conclusion of the Second World War, Dean Acheson lead the US State Department in the publication of a white paper that spelled out the United States' view of Sino-American relations, to include "absolv[ing] the United States or responsibility for the fall of Chiang Kai-shek and the victory of the Chinese Communists."[11] In Mao's response, "'Friendship' or Aggression," Sino-American relations have been broken since the Treaty of Wanghia in 1844 "forced China to cede extraterritoriality."[12]

Mao goes on to write:

"All the "friendship" shown to China by U.S. imperialism over the past 109 years

(since 1840 when the United States collaborated with Britain in the Opium War), and especially the great act of "friendship" in helping Chiang Kai-shek slaughter several million Chinese in the last few years — all this had one purpose, namely, it "consistently maintained and still maintains those fundamental principles of our foreign policy toward China which include the doctrine of the Open Door, respect for the administrative and territorial integrity of China, and opposition to any foreign domination of China"."[13]

It's clear that by the very nature of US and Western involvement in Chinese and East Asian history, that quite a bit of resentment fomented leading up to a nationalistic fervor in the 1940s and 1950s. A similar view was echoed by Trường Chinh as the French were seen as collaborators with the Japanese "fascists" and accused of oppressing the Vietnamese people.[14] Similar rhetoric was heard between the various factions on the Korean peninsula, vacillating between the West and Communism.[15]

This resentment toward the Western powers has grown within China, in particular, toward a greater "historical consciousness" called *Bainian guochi,* or a "century of national humiliation."[16] This idea has ebbed and flowed through out China since the victory of the Chinese Communist Party over the Nationalists, indeed within the past 20 years has become fully institutionalized within the Chinese educational system through Chinese foreign policy.[17] Evidence of the idea of *Bainian guochi* can be seen as early as Mao's speech presented to the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on April 25, 1956:

First, in the past China was a colonial and semi-colonial country, not an imperialist power, and was always bullied by the others. Its industry and agriculture are not developed and its scientific and technological level is low, and except for its vast territory, rich resources, large population, long history, *The Dream of the Red Chamber* in literature, and so on, China is inferior to other countries in many respects, and so has no reason to feel conceited. However, there are people who, having been slaves too long, feel inferior in everything and don't stand up straight in the presence of foreigners. They are just like Chia

Kuei* in the opera *The Famen Temple* who, when asked to take a seat, refuses to do so, giving the excuse that he is used to standing in attendance. Here we need to bestir ourselves, enhance our national confidence and encourage the spirit typified by "scorn U.S. imperialism," which was fostered during the movement to resist U.S. aggression and aid Korea.[18]

Of course, this idea of national humiliation feeds into the very mythos associated with nationalism. This mythos of *Bainian guochi* coupled with Western progress is in direct conflict with the assumptions of the Confucian past of China, as ostensibly the majority of East Asia.[19] Paul Cohen states in his book, *History in Three Keys*, "When the past is treated at myth, its meaning is governed to an overwhelming extent by the concerns of the present."[20] Indeed, China has been successful is manipulating this for its own political aims, but such is the nature of nationalism.[21]

The Vietnamese found themselves in a similar situation, seeking to throw off the yoke of French control and regain their country from the Japanese. For the Vietnamese people colonialism was not an anomaly, but the defining experience that moved the Vietnamese people to have their own country.[22] Vietnam as a homogenous nation-state is the very essence of what Benedict Anderson was describing in his treatise on nationalism, *Imagined Communities*. Vietnam has very limited experience with both self-rule and homogeneity, having its histories dominated by some type of colonial or imperial rule.[23]

The peoples of China, Vietnam, and the Korean peninsula come from similar histories with regard to the past 150 years. This nationalism is borne of modernization brought by Western powers, the legacy of Confucianism, and a period of colonialism, which severely limited self-determination. Benedict Anderson would argue that these nation-states moved in to their adolescent stage, similar to the nascent German and Italian states of the 1920s and 1930s.[24] In addition, this post-colonial nationalism disguised itself as either Marxism or socialism to the end of building a greater community.[25]

Anderson defines four aspects to nationalism: *imagination*, that is members of a

nation cannot know all of their fellow members, but believe them to all be in communion; *limited*, as in the nation is not universal; *sovereign*, encompassing both physical territory and its ontological territory; and finally, *community*, "a deep, horizontal comradeship."[26] These aspects develop within China, Vietnam, and Korea during colonial times, not so much as organically, but as a response to the very nature of colonization. The mythology of humiliation creates this "imagined community" of individuals that have a shared experience and by that virtue are comrades striving for a common goal. Therefore, if one identifies oneself as being Chinese, that very idea encompasses the myriad of aspects and essences that it imbues.

This idea also brought with it the specter of authoritarian rule. Simply this is borne out through the single party apparatus in the People's Republic of China, the People's Republic of Vietnam, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Even up to 1960, the Syngman Rhee government was increasingly authoritarian up to the April Revolution.[27] In the nationalist development of an us/them paradigm, there must be a requisite reification of the past to further the idea of *community*. Through absolute authority, this nationalism paradigm becomes institutionalized more easily and becomes part of the overall essence of identity. [28]

Authoritarianism also serves the additional function of controlling a population that heretofore was not a homogenous population. For example, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam encompasses the Viet, Khmer, Thái, Tày, and many others. Many of these groups have a long and sometimes violent history and may not necessarily choose to work together. An authoritarian government, however, has the military and social tools to ensure compliance for "the greater good."

In the 1920s, Sun Yat-Sen described the Chinese people as a "loose sheet of sand," individuals unbound from the idea of "one country, one nation, and one language."[29] Sun Yat-Sen and the May Fourth intellectuals viewed the very essence of modernity to be, "a political and social life similar to those of the countries of western Europe."[30] Yet, these same intellectuals did not aspire to be European, but wished to achieve the nationalist will and determination of

formerly oppressed European states.[31] The May Fourth intellectuals knew that to achieve the "will and determination" to modernize, China would need to achieve the "one country, one nation, and one language" ideal without the aid of their colonizers.

The great irony is that nationalism and authoritarianism may have blocked the physical colonization of China, yet the colonization of the Chinese culture and ideology remain.[32] The inward turn of the authoritarian Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government, coupled with Marxist ideology, and their reification of history created a situation where increasingly Western thought was held as "universally valid."[33] As such, the West, "remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories."[34]

This is perhaps the most significant effect of decolonization on East Asia is a longing for a national identity. There is do doubt that the development of East Asia was greatly changed by the arrival of Western powers in the 19th century. In turn, a wave of rapid industrialization and modernization occurred along with two bloody world wars, not to mention a succession of regional wars between colonial powers and their subjects.

Within the mid-20th century, East Asia is long to deny the realities of the previous 150 years, yet objectifies that same history to spurn on increased devotion to the state and increased productivity. In many ways, from 1949–1979, East Asia was running from its own shadow, trying to create a reality different from the one that cannot be escaped. The legacy, however is a culture of humiliation, nationalism, authoritarianism, and rapid industrialization/modernization.

Within this legacy, the seeds for the next 25 years were sewn. By 1979, there is a softening of authoritarian rule within China, with Sino-American relations normalizing in 1979 and China gaining preferred trading partner status in the 1990s. Vietnam set on a course of rapid modernization in the 1980s through the Đổi Mới policy of introducing market economic reforms following the reunification of North and South Vietnam.[35] The Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the United States normalized diplomatic relations in 1995 and trade relations

in 2007. South Korea has been modernizing since and through the Second World War, however it has changed from an authoritarian government to a more liberal democracy since the *April Revolution* of 1960.[36] North Korea, unfortunately remains a bastion of inward-looking authoritarianism and nationalism with limited relations with states both within and without East Asia.

Indeed, throughout the period of 1949–1979, East Asia modernized and industrialized seemingly overnight. This modernization was coupled with a rejection of colonial history while at the same time reifying it and codifying it for a nationalist narrative. This colonial history has been used to shame the population in to "national ideas" that in turn drive the national discourse in many East Asian authoritarian states.[37]

Understanding these events, allows one to reach a better understanding of East Asia with regard to security studies. These states tend to take a longer view than many Western states do, so it may be surprising to find out that in the national discourse of China, the events of the Boxer Rebellion still hold sway over foreign policy and economic policy. To many in the West the Boxer Rebellion was just another bloody conflict on the way to progress, however for the Chinese (and many other Asian states) the Boxer Rebellion, amongst other events, is the past, present, and future of the Chinese state. Understanding that nuance, is key to understanding the Western relationships with East Asian states.

[1] "What do you really want from us?" *Washington Post,* May 18, 2008, accessed 2 May 2012, http://tinyurl.com/4br8eze

[2] Mitchell Bernard, "States, Social Forces, and Regions in Historical Time: Toward a Critical Political Economy of Eastern Asia," *Third World Quarterly* no. 4, vol. 17 (1996), 656.

[3] Lei Guang, "Realpolitik Nationalism: International Sources of Chinese Nationalism," *Modern China* 31 (2005), 493.

[4] Marius B. Jansen, "The Meiji State: 1868–1912," in *Modern East Asia: Essays in*

Interpretation, ed. James B. Crowley (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1970), 105.

[5] Meirion Harries and Susie Harries, *Soldiers of the Sun: The Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army*, (Random House: New York, 1994), 20–22.

[6] Peter Gue Zarrow, *China in War and Revolution, 1895–1949*, (Routledge: London, 2005), 337.

[7] Barbara Wertheim Tuchman, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam*, (Ballentine Books: New York, 1985), 242.

[8] *Cairo Communique*, December 1, 1943, accessed April 2, 2012, http://tinyurl.com/cgt9o7p

[9] Mao Zedong, "U.S. Imperialism is a Paper Tiger," given as part of a talk with two Latin-American public figures on July 14, 1956. http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_52.htm

[10] Rana Mitter, *A Bitter Revolution: China's Struggle with the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 183.

[11] William A. Rentz, "Failure of the China White Paper," *Constructing the Past* 11 (2009), 1.

[12] Mao Zedong, "'Friendship' or Aggression," August 30, 1949. http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-4/mswv4_69.htm

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] Trường Chinh, *Primer for Revolt* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publisher, 1963), 5–7.

[15] Ki-baik Lee, *A New History of Korea*, trans. Edward W. Wagner and Edward J. Shultz (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 376–379.

[16] Zheng Wang, "Never Forget National Humiliation," *The Newsletter*, 59 (2012), 32.

[17] Zheng Wang, "National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Cmpaign in China," *International Studies Quarterly* 52 (2008), 785, 79.

* In the Peking opera *The Famen Temple*, Chia Kuei is a trusted lackey of Liu Chin, a Ming Dynasty eunuch. Cf. http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_51.htm

[18] Mao Zedong, "On The Ten Major Relationships," speech given on April 25, 1956 to an enlarged meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. Link located above.

[19] Mitter, 117–118.

[20] Paul Al Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 238.

[21] Wang (2012), 33.

[22] Vong Tu, "Vietnamese Political Studies and Debates on Vietnamese Nationalism," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2, 2 (2007), 181.

[23] *Ibid.*, 198.

[24] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 1996), 115–116.

[25] *Ibid.*, 5–7.

[26] *Ibid.*, 7–8.

[27] Lee, 384.

[28] Wang (2012), 33.

[29] Rebecca E. Karl, "Creating Asia: China in the World at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century," *American Historical Review* 103 (1998), 1101.

[30] Shaobo Xie, "Rethinking the Problem of Postcolonialism," *New Literary History*, 28 (1997), 13.

[31] Mitter, 127.

[32] Xie, 13–14.

[33] Mitter, 122.

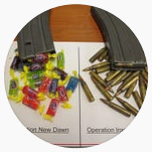
[34] Xie, 14.

[35] Vuong Quan Hoang and Dung, Tran Tri, " The Cultural Dimensions of the Vietnamese Private Entrepreneurship," *The IUP Journal of Entrepreneurship Development* 6 (2009), 56.

[36] Lee, 345–389.

[37] Wang, 33.

Asia Nationalism Expansion



Follow