

UNWORKABLE FRATERNITY

The problem with Pan Asianism

By JEFF KINGSTON

PAN-ASIANISM IN MODERN JAPANESE HISTORY: Colonialism, Regionalism and Borders, edited by Sven Saaler and J Victor Koschmann. London: Routledge, 2007, 288 pp., £21.99 (paper)

Pan Asianism, the notion of creating a fraternity of Asians, provides insights on how transnational perceptions and policies toward Asia have been a powerful source of national identity among Japanese. Typically it is dismissed as a self-serving ideology aimed at legitimizing Japanese imperialism pre-1945. Japan's version of manifest destiny casts it in the role of liberator, joining forces with Asian brothers to throw off the yoke of Western colonialism.

After World War II, Pan Asianism has also been the source of an exculpatory and vindicating war memory, one in which Japan takes credit for the independence of its neighbors. The problem with Pan Asian idealism is that it has only been convincing to some Japanese and has not resonated with the alleged beneficiaries of Japan's self-proclaimed magnanimity.

Was Japan really the Light of Asia seeking to create an Asia for Asiatics? There is a consensus, at least outside Japan, that its "crusade" against the West was a fig leaf to justify its occupation of resource-rich colonies in order to win its ongoing war in China. Concerns about oil trumped liberation, and Japan's contributions to Asian independence were belated, limited and largely inadvertent

The 15 essays in this volume take the debate beyond how the ideology was instrumentalized and draw our attention to the intellectual history of Pan Asianism and how it morphed over the past century. These are detailed and complex scholarly essays that help readers understand that Pan Asianism was neither monolithic nor set in concrete.

Sven Saaler's excellent introduction probes the evolution of Pan

Asianism and explains how it "mutated into an extended nationalism." He writes, "While Pan Asianism was originally directed against Western influence and colonialism, it also functioned as a tool for legitimizing Japan's claim for hegemony in East Asia and Japanese colonial rule, i.e. as a way for Japan to deal with the emerging nationalisms of other Asian nations." Eiji Oguma adds that it, "always functioned as a mirror for Japanese efforts at defining Japanese identity."

The essential problem is that Pan Asianism is contradictory, proclaiming both equality and Japanese hegemony. Saaler points to a resurgence of nostalgic Pan Asianism among Japanese conservatives and efforts to beautify the past by revisionist historians. He connects these efforts to retrospectively rehabilitate Pan Asianism to the current controversies enveloping the Yasukuni Shrine and the adjacent Yushukan war museum.

In Saaler's opinion, "The often cited 'history-problem' Japan struggles with . . . [is] a major obstacle to the development of fruitful forms of Asian regionalism." In this context, Japan's latest foreign policy initiative in Asia, the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity, carries a lot of baggage, invoking the ghosts of the wartime Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

Many of the essays here closely examine Japan's ambivalence toward Asia and how assumptions of hierarchy inevitably undermined the idealistic rhetoric of equality. Kimitada Miwa notes Yukichi Fukuzawa's famous dictum that Japan needed to cast off Asia to modernize and catch up with the West. However, he also cites the popular press cheerleading for colonial expansion by making the most of shared roots, reminding readers that since, "most of the Japanese people are Korean in origin," they should populate the Korean Peninsula.

Kevin Doak examines the complex issues of race, ethnicity, identity and regionalism, arguing that, "Far more than race, ethnicity was crucial to the development of wartime regionalist ideology, and the appeal of ethnicity helps to account for much of the sense of legitimacy that was associated with calls to 'liberate Asia' during this era."

Roger Brown suggests that fixating on Pan Asianism as "false ideology" misses much of the meaning in pre-1945 discourse. Examining the national mission of exerting moral and cultural leadership in Asia is especially revealing about Japan and its quest for identity and dignity. Yasuoka Masahiro, a Confucian scholar and nationalist in pre-World War II Japan, provides an

interesting example in Brown's stimulating essay. However, erudite and well intentioned as Yasuoka may have been, in the world of diplomacy he seemed well out of his depth, as late as 1944 arguing that peace with China "depended largely on Chinese recognition of Japanese sincerity and the ultimate propriety of Japan's strategic objectives."

This volume is indispensable for understanding the intellectual history of Pan Asianism and to help understand current debates over Japan's wartime past. Recognizing the vast gap between rhetoric and reality, here the contributors help unravel the idealism that animated elite discourse and how this was used to indoctrinate and mobilize the Japanese people in a war that mostly victimized those who were supposed to benefit. One can only hope for a companion volume of similar quality focusing on regional discourse about Japanese Pan Asianism.

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