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Transnational and Global Processes in Modern Chinese History

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Prasenjit Duara. *The Global and Regional in China's Nation Formation*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2009.

Bryna Goodman and David S. G. Goodman, eds. *Twentieth-century Colonialism and China: Localities, the Everyday, and the World*. London and New York: Routledge, 2012.

If much of twentieth-century historical scholarship was preoccupied with the nation-state, then the early twenty-first century could be said to mark a new acceptance of the transnational and global as vital fields of inquiry. Although transnational studies in various disciplines have been present for decades, recent years have seen a decided expansion in the publication and popularization of such works. Two essay collections, Prasenjit Duara's *The Global and Regional in China's Nation Formation* and Bryna Goodman and David S. G. Goodman's edited volume *Twentieth-century Colonialism and China: Localities, the Everyday, and the World*, represent notable stages of this development. The former is a retrospective by a noted authority on modern Chinese history, marshaling and revising several of his previously published essays in service of a new global theoretical framework. The latter is an international and inter-disciplinary effort by a community of scholars, brought together by the mission to integrate colonial studies with histories of China's nationalism, modernity, and revolution.

Duara's signal contributions to Chinese historiography indicate a longstanding interest in questioning conventional boundaries in conceptions of the modern state. His *Rescuing History from the Nation* (1995) and *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern* (2003), in particular, interrogated orthodox ideas of national time and identities. In this volume, which is based on several of his major articles and book chapters that were published between the late 1980s to the 2010s, Duara reflects on the thematic linkages between these pieces in a vision that encompasses both the past and the future. He has revised these essays to highlight or rework specific points within them, and augmented them with new writings such as an introductory discussion of "The Global and Regional Constitution of Nations," as well as new chapters on "Historical Narratives and Transnationalism in East Asia" and "Between Sovereignty and Capitalism: the Historical Experiences of the Migrant Chinese." Together, these diverse but not disparate parts form a whole that illustrate the intellectual rewards of using regional, global, and comparative approaches to understanding Chinese politics and society.

The introduction states in unequivocal terms that Duara is "abandoning the national modernization narrative within which much past history was written," and is turning instead to an "historical globalization hypothesis" (5). Acknowledging the controversy that has dogged prescriptive applications of the globalization paradigm, he elects to focus instead on the descriptive and analytical potential of this worldview for historians. His argument is that global circuits of knowledge, society, economics, culture, and ideology have formed an infrastructure that has shaped nations and localities—an infrastructure that has hitherto been marginalized or obscured by nation-centered narratives. In this hypothesis, Duara concentrates on the extension and deepening of three major variables over the past 150 years: global capitalism, the nation-

state system, and “hegemonic modernity” (a hegemonic ideology that conceives of historical time as linear, progressive, and accelerating). Each of these three systems is governed by its own logic, and alternately colludes or clashes with one or both of the other systems. This hypothesis anchors Duara’s exploration of the global nation-state system and its changing character over the course of the twentieth century.

The book is divided into three sections. Part I attends to the complicated interactions between nationalism and imperialism in China and East Asia. Chapter 1, “The Global and Regional Constitution of Nations: the View from East Asia,” views China, Japan, and Korea as mutually influential societies bound together “in rivalry and interdependence” (21). In early twentieth-century Northeast Asia, nationalism and imperialism became intertwined concepts according to theories of Social Darwinist survival, especially given the dominance of a militarily ascendant Japan. Even as global categories of race and nation developed differently in different places, Duara posits that the historical and cultural interconnectedness of East Asian societies generated a regional framework for national competition, as well as the penetration of nationalism into all corners of each individual state. In Chapter 2, “The Imperialism of ‘Free Nations’: Japan, Manchukuo, and the History of the Present,” the author delves deeper into the implications of the national-imperial model by exploring late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japanese imperialism. Here, Japan’s “schizoid self-perception” led to its sense of identification with its fellow Asian nations, all oppressed by Western powers, even as it sought respect from and geopolitical membership among these same oppressors (40). Consequently, it created a “new imperialism” in which the benefits and costs of nationalist development were spread, albeit unevenly and with violence, across an empire, rather than in the traditional mode between colony and metropole. Chapter 3, on the other hand, shifts into a slightly different, historiographical gear. “Historical Narratives and Transnationalism in East Asia” relocates to the late twentieth century to explore how intensifying globalization, the end of the Cold War, and rapidly changing regional relationships have affected China’s “fundamentally nationalist narrative of history” (76). (The short answer: not much.)

Part II, on “Society and Religion,” examines certain conceptions and myths with long histories within China, through an interactive prism that reveals the impact of external influences and internal practices on one another. Reaching back into the Qing period, Chapter 4 offers an updated perspective on “Superscribing Symbols: the Myth of Guandi, Chinese God of War,” an article originally published in 1988. Duara argues for the simultaneously continuous and discontinuous nature of myths, which are thus able to offer legitimating power and a sense of identification to certain groups even as they undergo change. In the transition to Communist power, he sees the government’s assault on religious institutions such as the Guandi myth as self-damaging in the end, as this “undermined the very means of communicating their authority in Chinese society,” particularly in rural areas (95).

The next two chapters continue in the strain of subverting conventional ideas about the relationship between “inside” and “outside” the nation. Chapter 5, based on the classic 1995 essay “Deconstructing the Chinese Nation: how Recent is it?” showcases Duara’s fundamental disagreement with modernization theory as the best explanation for how nation-states came into being. He debunks two assumptions—first, that national identity was a radical and new form of modern consciousness, and second, that the nation is a collective historical subject. In so doing, he makes room for the thesis that modern nationalism is novel not because of its political self-consciousness, but rather because it engages with a world-system of nation-states that became globalized over the past century and “sanctions the nation-state as the only legitimate form of

polity” (103). In Chapter 6, “‘Tradition within Modernity’: Women and Patriarchal Regimes in Interwar East Asia,” Duara shows how some local women in the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo used redemptive (religious) and pedagogical women’s associations to create meaning and agency for themselves. Although some might view these associations as colluding with the occupying government, Duara suggests that these women were simply acting in a way that prioritized their spiritual and moral convictions, in a manner that happened to coincide with Japanese purposes (and which, incidentally, had not been defended by the Chinese nationalist state).

In Part III, Duara adopts a wholly comparative framework, ranging from India to Southeast Asia and to the United States, in order to offer examples of how global processes become localized and unique. Chapter 7, “Between Sovereignty and Capitalism: the Historical Experience of Migrant Chinese,” compares the experiences of ethnic Chinese laborers in the Dutch East Indies and in the US, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Focusing on a class of migrants who have struggled with economic and political uncertainty for more than a century, this essay contrasts the relationship that capitalism formed with colonialism and nationalism respectively. Without overstating the case, Duara proposes that nationalist polities have largely been more exclusivist because of their reliance on “a binary framework of rightful citizens and outsiders,” whereas colonial societies, while certainly “more brutal and racist,” also left more opportunities for self-governing communities that provided Chinese migrants with support and chances for upward mobility (166).

Chapters 8 and 9, on “Critics of Modernity in India and China” and “Visions of History, Trajectories of Power: China and India since Decolonization,” are united by the motif of “two vast empires trying to transmute into nation-states” (151). Here, Duara adopts a broad perspective that sweeps across time and space. In Chapter 8, he folds the oppositional stance to Western Enlightenment civilization discourse, turn-of-the-twentieth-century Confucianism, Marxism, Mahatma Gandhi, Mao Zedong, and Liang Shuming into one discussion, exploring how political and intellectual leaders in these two nations grappled with notions of linear history and advanced their own critiques of capitalist modernity in the mid-century moment. Chapter 9 carries the book’s thesis up to the postcolonial era, tracing the turbulent relationship between China and India as partners and rivals seeking to project their influence in Asia since the late 1940s. As both countries have shifted from the “idealism of the anti-imperialist decolonization movement” to the “*realpolitik* demands of the competitive nation-state system,” thus joining and perpetuating an unforgiving “neoliberal world order,” Duara continues to hold out hope that ongoing regional and global processes can create opportunities for individuals and communities to innovate new and more humane modes of society.

Given Duara’s extensive and well-developed vision of Chinese history from the outside-in, it is unsurprising that he is one of the twelve contributors to *Twentieth-century Colonialism and China*, edited by Goodman and Goodman. It seems appropriate that the fragmentary and diverse nature of colonialism in China should be best represented by a compilation of cross-disciplinary essays, by different authors focusing on a wide range of topics and perspectives that nonetheless cohere as part of a single world. While also offering an integrated thesis concerning the relevance of the colonial dimension in understandings of modern China, this volume finds its greatest strength in the specificity of the individual cases and sources in each chapter.

Part I, which explores “Colonial Governance and Questions of Identity,” does so via three essays that revolve around the development of institutions and the actors within them in China’s “contact zones.” Perhaps the most innovative topic comes from one of the editors, Bryna

Goodman, whose Chapter 3 on early Chinese stock exchanges in 1920-21 Shanghai considers them as venues for negotiating sentiments about “colonialism, nationalism, and cultural contamination.” The chaotic and ultimately ill-fated proliferation of these exchanges, which were based on Japanese and Western models, was driven by anti-imperialist rhetoric and creative manipulation of extraterritorial jurisdictions. All these factors combined to spark anxiety over the purity of Chinese national capital and modernization, reinforcing the stereotype of the “traitorous Chinese businessman” whose collusion with foreign profiteers might ruin the nation (73). Chapters 1 and 2 address more well established subjects but also offer interesting detail on each. In the former, Robert Bickers looks closely at that famously hybrid institution, the “Foreign Inspectorate of the Chinese Maritime Customs from the Mid-nineteenth to the Mid-twentieth Centuries.” The latter sees Klaus Muhlhahn examine “German Colonialism and Chinese Nationalism in Qingdao,” and highlights the wide range of responses by different groups of Chinese, over different periods, to German attempts at full control in this area.

The authors of Part II, “Colonial Spaces and Everyday Social Interactions,” provide yet more vivid examples that range in concerns from this world to the next. Issues of day-to-day life are tackled in Chapter 4, in which John M. Carroll follows the story of racial segregation on The Peak, an exclusive hilltop residential area in colonial Hong Kong, and in Chapter 8, in which Yixu Lu and David S. G. Goodman allow the colonial voice to speak for itself through the letters of one Elisabeth Frey, who lived in Tianjin from 1913-14. Both chapters illustrate the racial and racist attitudes of colonials seeking to make their homes in Chinese society, even as they were aware (very dimly so, in Elisabeth’s case) of the increasing unpopularity of such views and the importance of crafting a morally correct self-image. Chapters 5 and 7 by Maurizio Marinelli and Florence Bretelle-Establet respectively reflect on the paradox inherent in the sometimes forcible introduction by imperial authorities of what they consider to be ameliorating influences—the good things of empire, as Niall Ferguson might say. These include the supposedly benign model of an Italian “neighborhood” (as opposed to a colonial “settlement”) in Tianjin, and the benefits of modern French medicine in the treaty ports, concessions, and leased territories in far southern China.

Of particular note in this section, and book, is Chapter 6, Christian Henriot’s detailed, innovative, and moving exploration of “The Colonial Space of Death: Shanghai Cemeteries, 1844-1949.” His essay juxtaposes the oft-invoked cosmopolitanism of Shanghai with the clearly delineated barriers dividing various groups in death as in life. Bodies that may have interacted in life, however uncomfortably, were even more sharply divided by ethnicity, nationality, religion, and socio-economic class in death. The poignancy of segregation and discrimination in these cemeteries is brought home by examples such as the Vietnamese whose bones would automatically be disinterred after twenty years—sooner if deemed expedient by colonial authorities—and reburied in a common ossuary to make room for more burials on limited land. “Foreign” or colonial bones, on the other hand, were allowed to lay at rest in perpetuity (118).

The chapters in Part III, on “Late Colonialism and Local Consequences,” take a more conceptual approach to their respective topics. One of the strongest pieces is Chapter 10, in which John Fitzgerald achieves that elusive balance between transnational and nation-based historical dimensions in his essay on the “unequal treaties” of the nineteenth century. With an expert hand, he unpacks the many meanings of these treaties, and the creative responses of Chinese émigrés to concepts of equality and modernity raised by them, in the British colonial world. On one end, he acknowledges the importance of the national political borders that enabled international conflict and treaties in the first place. On the other, he historicizes and interrogates

various pieces of the puzzle. For example: the Chinese did not initially use the term “unequal treaties,” due to the assumption that an agreement made under duress did not qualify as a treaty between nations. Also, Chinese émigrés used the concepts of equality as expressed in the treaties to obtain not only better treatment and more secure belonging in British Australia—as one might expect of an immigrant population, and as illustrated by examples from Asian American court cases—but also greater mobility for people and capital. By not relying on overly abstract notions of semi- or other kinds of colonization, Fitzgerald is able to focus on the complexities of “equality” as a national and individual notion whose meaning in the Chinese world evolved significantly from the late nineteenth- to early twentieth centuries. His account literally and conceptually travels beyond China’s shores, and back again, with great effectiveness.

In Chapter 11, Prasenjit Duara builds on his vision of global and regional circulations as vital influences on China’s development, providing insight into post-World War II Hong Kong. He explores the tensions between local colonial bureaucrats and the metropole, both pre- and post-1945, and further reveals the disunity in British attitudes towards the return of Hong Kong to China. In his assessment, the particular development of nationalism (or lack thereof) in Hong Kong can be explained in part by the economics of new imperialism, which sought to balance greater political self-governance with closer economic integration; conflict between laissez-faire capitalism and imperialist intervention; and the influence of Cold War and non-aligned movement rhetoric.

The remaining two chapters turn to specific episodes in Chinese colonial society to illuminate dimensions of national identity, from both Chinese and Western angles. In Chapter 9, Wang Yiyang uses China’s First National Art Exhibition in 1929 Shanghai, and a related academic controversy over Modernism versus Realism, as an illustration of the limits circumscribing the agency and ambitions of the “semi-colonized.” The argument is intriguing, but seems as if it may not be complete. Wang ascribes the triumph of Realism over Modernism in art to the dominance of nation building as priority at this time. This could indeed be true, but also appears to be somewhat over-determined, as the drama unfolds largely around the senior members of the committee in charge of this national art exhibition. One wonders about the choices made by the individual artists, the responses by other members of the community, and indeed the dynamic relating the art world to the political sphere. Chapter 12 directs our attention to the late twentieth century and Cathryn Clayton’s challenge to the conventional depiction of the Portuguese in Macau as “hapless imperialists” (220). She re-interprets the seemingly meek and acquiescent colonial response to the “123 Incident” in 1966-67. Based on oral histories that she collected, Clayton presents a local view of Portuguese colonials who are still brutal and racist rulers in many ways, but who are also far less in control than their formal status would suggest. Indeed, she interprets the Portuguese colonial administration as having a long history of capitulation and accommodation with China, which gave them, if not strength, then at least longevity in their rule over Macau.

In sum, both of these volumes offer an expansive view of Chinese history that shifts away from a purely nation-centered approach without jettisoning the undeniable role of nationalism and nation-states in twentieth-century human experience. Rather, they emphasize the many and frequent ways in which global and regional processes have interacted with local developments and practices to produce the societies that have been, perhaps too simplistically and for too long, delineated by purely geographic borders. Reading either or (better yet) both of these essay collections provides an immersion in what it means to integrate such approaches in a new and re-energized understanding of modern China.