

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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The Making of Asian Public Intellectuals: Historical Reflections

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Of the three words that compose the caption to this gathering—*Asian public intellectuals*—the word that is most elusive is Asian. Perhaps the word does not have to be belabored: it can be assumed simply as a convenient marker of who we are, where we work, and what by our work we hope to understand better and change for the better. We need not even try to fix what Asia encompasses in geographic terms. As the Indonesian intellectual Goenawan Mohamad wittily remarks: “Asia is like God. You cannot categorically deny or affirm its existence. No one knows where it begins, where it ends, or whether there is a way to define it.”¹ It suffices, and perhaps it is best, that it is defined operationally and dynamically, according to where we have chosen to locate ourselves, and what range of action or imagining, for the present, is most feasible, meaningful, or necessary.

Yet, the notion of Asia remains beguiling and cannot be so quickly dismissed. That Asian public intellectuals constitute a “community” (an important assumption of this program) invites reflection on the idea and bases of such a community.

{2}

A recent book provides a highly informative account of the historical genesis of Asian public intellectuals. In *From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals Who Remade Asia* (2012), the Indian author Pankaj Mishra takes Asian public intellectuals as a definable formation, and cites as a watershed event in the genesis of this formation Japan’s victory over the Russian navy in 1905 in the strait of Tsushima, between Korea and southern Japan, in the course of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905).² A major naval battle that marked the first time a modern Western power was defeated by an Asian nation, the victory was hailed by many Asian intellectuals in widely separated parts of the world—Mohandas

Gandhi (then an unknown Indian lawyer in South Africa), Mustafa Kemal (a young Ottoman soldier in Damascus, later known as Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey), Sun Yat-sen (at the time, a Chinese political activist sojourning in London), Rabindranath Tagore (then a teacher in rural Bengal), and many more. For Mishra, the Battle of Tsushima was a defining moment in the political and intellectual awakening of Asia.

This awakening, however, did not begin with the Battle of Tsushima. By stressing the impact of Japan’s military victory over Russia, Mishra glosses over two important facts. Asians already began to look towards Japan in the 1880s as Japan modernized during the Meiji Restoration, by laying the foundation of an industrial economy, a modern educational system and state bureaucracy and a constitutional government. Showing that an Asian country can modernize in its own terms, demonstrating its might in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), and terminating the extraterritorial rights enjoyed by Great Britain, the United States, and other Western powers in 1899, Japan inspired by its example Europe-dominated and colonized Asians from Turkey and Egypt to India and Indonesia.

What Mishra also obscures is that—though the rise of Japan was important in Asia’s awakening—the move to imagine and foster transnational or intraregional solidarities already began in many places in Asia even before the Russo-Japanese War.

Here the case of the Philippines is enlightening in showing how intellectuals in one Asian country positioned themselves in the world. (I speak of the Philippines, of course, because it is what I am most familiar with, but I hope that “local” histories of the idea of being “Asian” can be done for other parts of Southeast Asia as well).

A form of “Asianism” was already part of the Philippine nationalist movement from its beginnings in the 1880s, as Jose Rizal and other intellectuals

sought to embed the Philippines in a wider “Malay” region, as part of the claim that—contrary to Spanish denigrations of Filipinos as “a people without a history”—Filipinos were inheritors of a “high” and “ancient” Malay civilization.³ In the early phase of the Filipino nationalist movement, however, “malayness”—or what was called *malayismo*—was deployed not as charter for separation and sovereignty but as an argument for recognition and the right to an autonomous status within the Spanish empire. It was an idea rather than a movement since Filipinos had little contact, if at all, with peers elsewhere in the Malay region and there was nothing comparable to the Filipino Propaganda Movement elsewhere in the region.

In the early 1890s, the focus of the nationalist movement was reform, “assimilation” and a status for Philippines as an overseas province rather than a colony of Spain. A revolution for independence was not as yet perceived to be a realistic option. Thus, the networks Filipino intellectuals built were not with fellow Asians but with liberal elements in Europe, and in particular with similarly situated Cubans and Puerto Ricans, to whom Filipino intellectuals felt bound by a shared grievance and purpose.

In the Filipino political imaginary at this time, Filipinos saw themselves within the frame of “Greater Spain” rather than that of Asia. Hence, Filipino leaders—who were a group of highly Europeanized intellectuals—took a distanced, skeptical view of Japan’s call for “Asia for Asians”. Instead, they used, as the Filipino leader Marcelo del Pilar did, Japan’s rising influence as argument for the closer integration of the Philippines to Spain, warning that if Spain did not introduce reforms, Japan’s redemptorist “Asia for Asians” policy would attract Filipinos and the Philippines would gravitate towards Japan in the same way that Cuba and Puerto Rico were being drawn into the orbit of the United States.⁵

By 1895, however, the Spain-based Propaganda Movement had given up hopes that reform would come from Spain. And in 1896, the Philippine revolution began. The revolution radically changed

the equation for Filipinos. Now turned revolutionary, the base of the Filipino nationalist movement shifted—physically and intellectually—from Europe to Asia. The Propaganda Movement and the Aguinaldo government-in-exile set up headquarters in Hong Kong, and turned to Japan for political and material assistance in a struggle that had quickly changed in 1899 from a revolution against Spain to a war against U.S. annexation.

As the first nationalist revolution in Asia, the Filipino revolution stirred wide interest because of its implications for Western domination in the region. Leaders of the revolution were themselves aware of its regional implications. As Apolinario Mabini, the leading theoretician of the revolution, grandly declared in 1899, the revolution’s “ultimate purpose” was “to keep the torch of liberty and civilization burning and bright in the Oceania, so as by illuminating the dark night wherein the Malayan race now lies degraded and humiliated, it may show to them the path to their social emancipation”. He wrote that if the Philippine revolution succeeded, England, Russia, France, Germany, Holland, Portugal, and “other rabid colonizers” would “tremble for their colonial possessions and those they expect to have in the coveted partition of China in this troubled sea of the Far East”. “The Philippine revolution”, Mabini warned, “is contagious, very contagious”.⁶

In practical terms, however, the revolutionary leaders knew that the foreign material and political support they needed could only come from Japan. Thus in 1898, the Filipino nationalist Mariano Ponce was posted in Yokohama as the Aguinaldo government’s representative in Japan.⁷ In his three-year stay in Japan, Ponce actively networked with Japanese “pan-Asianists” in and outside government, publicized the cause of Philippine independence, and initiated two clandestine (and failed) attempts to smuggle arms and ammunition from Japan to the Philippines.

It is important to note that Ponce was in Japan at a time that saw, arguably for the first time, the emergence of a “community” of “Asian public

intellectuals'. Drawn by Japan's growing power and the example it had set for how Asians can find their own path to freedom and civilization, assorted students, political agents, exiles and refugees from the Middle East and south, east and southeast Asia converged in Japan. It is quite remarkable that if one draws up a list of those who visited or sojourned in Japan at the turn of the twentieth century (say, 1890-1910), one has a roster of leading anti-colonial intellectuals in Asia. As Mishra writes:

In the early years of the twentieth century, Tokyo became a Mecca for

nationalists from all over Asia, the centre of an expanded Asian public

sphere...

The advance of imperialism everywhere forced Asian elites into anxious sideways glances as well as urgent self-appraisals. Very quickly in the early twentieth century, a transnational intellectual network grew, bringing Asian intellectuals into dialogue with each other.⁸

In Japan, societies were organized to stimulate intellectual exchanges and promote the spirit of pan-Asianism. Through various societies and gatherings in Japan, Filipinos, Chinese, Koreans, Indians, Thais and Japanese met to exchange views and celebrate their solidarity. Ponce himself met fellow political refugees, like Park Yong-hyo and Yu Kil-chun, leaders of the Korean reform movement, Kang Youwei, the famous Chinese reformer and scholar and Sun Yat-sen (with whom Ponce forged the closest ties). Illustrating the value of these networks, Ponce caused to be published in Tokyo in 1901, in Japanese translation, his book on the Philippine independence struggle, *Cuestion Filipina: Una Exposicion Historico-Critica de Hechos Relativos a la Guerra de la Independencia*, a work that was also translated into Chinese and published in Shanghai in 1902 and reissued in 1913. Now little known in the Philippines, this book was, according to Rebecca Karl, an American scholar on Chinese nationalism, "perhaps the single most influential

text for post-1902 Chinese interpretations of the global and Chinese significance of the Philippine revolution".⁹ It influenced Chinese intellectuals in recasting China's anti-dynasty struggle as a modern nationalist movement.

{3}

Political conditions, of course, quickly changed, both in the home countries of these traveling Asian intellectuals and in Japan. "Pan-Asianism" was never a unitary or homogeneous movement.¹⁰ There were deep divisions among the Japanese as to the policy their government should pursue with regards to the rest of Asia and deep suspicions among other Asians over Japan's expansionist ambitions.

In the Philippines, the dream of an Asian republic faded with U.S. annexation. In the same way that the effective "world" for Filipinos shifted from Greater Spain to an Asia that had Japan as its axis, the orientation in the Philippines now shifted from Asia to the United States—to such great effect that Filipinos came to have the reputation as the most "Americanized" among Asians.

Asianism would persist as an intellectual current in the Philippines. Mariano Ponce, who returned to the Philippines in 1907 after a twenty-year exile, continued to cultivate a scholarly interest in Asia, publishing a monograph on Indochina and a biography of Sun Yat-sen, which is credited as the first book by a Filipino on China. In 1915, Ponce founded together with Jose Alejandrino and leading Filipino intellectuals, *Sociedad Orientalista de Filipinas*, which published a monthly journal of Asian affairs, *Boletin de la Sociedad Orientalista de Filipinas* in 1918. These are the first Asian studies society and journal independently established by Southeast Asians.

The Asian society founded by Ponce and Alejandrino was short-lived. But Asianism would continue in various forms. There were ambitions early in the twentieth century to build the Philippines as an "intellectual and commercial center" for the Malay region—an ambition that did not materialize because the Philippines was unable to build the needed material and intellectual

resources and because it was an ambition undermined by the Philippines' dubious position as an American surrogate in the region.¹¹ "Asia for the Asians" became the dominant theme in Manila's intellectual life during the Japanese occupation—but it was an ideal warped by the reality of Japan's imperial domination.

In Japan, the years that followed the Russo-Japanese War saw Japan's "altruistic" pan-Asianism turn towards a more aggressive, self-interested posture as Japanese officialdom entered into treaties and agreements that committed Japan to recognizing the claims of Western powers in the region, at the same time that they assured for Japan certain prerogatives as an accepted member of the imperialist club in Asia. These would culminate, as we know, in World War II with the establishment of the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" under Japan. While Japan's influence galvanized anti-Western feelings and boosted decolonization movements in Burma, Indonesia, Malaya and India, it also raised the specter of another domination and dispelled the old romantic notions of Asian solidarity.¹²

How did Filipino intellectuals locate themselves in the world in response to these changes? The response was of course quite complex, given the pressures of changing international and domestic conditions. But one early and exemplary response was given in a lecture on "pan-Orientalism" on 23 March 1917, by Jose Alejandrino, a Filipino Asianist who also sojourned in Japan, like Ponce, at the turn of the century.¹³ In that lecture in 1917, Alejandrino lamented that Japan's "sentimental, altruistic and noble pan-Orientalism has been substituted at the present historical moment by the aggressive and imperialist". In spite of this, Alejandrino kept his faith in the original, emancipative spirit of pan-Asianism.

This Asianism however—Alejandrino suggested—must be built on new foundations. Speaking of the Filipinos, Alejandrino said that their experience with colonialism for three centuries had cultivated in them a tendency towards dependence on others to determine their future. Nations, he said, are not

a "nation of angels, without passions, who come solely animated by the altruistic proposition of working for our happiness". Hence, the tendency towards dependence should be surmounted. What is imperative, Alejandrino argued, is that Filipinos themselves strengthen their own society and government and build a nation independent, progressive, self-reliant and one that would command the respect of other nations. While he continued to hark back to the old romantic notion of Oriental solidarity, it is clear that Alejandrino was looking as well to a future when such solidarity would more securely rest on relations of parity and mutuality among nations that are mature, progressive and free.

Alejandrino's dream will remain problematic for so long as nations are divided by stark inequalities of power, economic, political and military. But an Asianism that is multi-centric and dynamic is a worthy ideal to pursue.

{4}

Asia has grown exceedingly complex, it can no longer be imagined as a totality, and the imperatives for action can no longer be reduced to the stark, racialist East-West binaries of the past. In a time suspicious of absolutes, "pan-Asianism" should remain a name for an historical artifact rather than a current agenda, since the word—like "pan-Arabism", "pan-Islamic" or "pan-European"—has a hegemonic sound to it. Today, it suffices that intellectuals in Asia are connected in many ways on the basis of shared issues, advocacies, ideologies and professional concerns. Such connections, however, need to be built up, particularly across issues and sectoral concerns. It is here where an undertaking like the "Asian Public Intellectuals Fellowship Program"—a program undertaken in the spirit of consultation and participation—is most valued and needed.

In a recent essay, Caroline Hau and Takashi Shiraishi have proposed that it is best to think of Asianism as a "network" of dynamic linkages that can appear and disappear over time and space; thin out or thicken as hubs of "people at the right place at the right time" of people of shared sympathies

and sometimes different persuasions.¹⁴ “A network, in other words, allows us to see Asianism in synchronic and diachronic terms of multiple agents, ideas, institutions and practices without rigidly fitting them into categorical boxes”.¹³ Such a view, they say, will be a corrective to viewing “Asianism” as if it were Japan- or China-centered, or one fed simply by the “social fantasy” of shared and common origins, culture and destiny.

To think of “networks” (instead of “community”, a word with mystifying effects) is indeed a more precise and pragmatic view of how people come together. Yet, words like “networks”, “contacts” and “linkages” also seem self-interestedly instrumental and morally barren. It says very little about what causes bring people together. There is something to be said as well (as Hau and Shiraishi themselves acknowledge) for the virtues and necessities of “fantasy”—even as we are watchful of its dangers—and for the affective values of friendship, respect, mutuality and community.

Let me illustrate these values—and end this lecture—with the story of the Filipino Mariano Ponce, the person I mentioned earlier and who can justly be called the “first Filipino Asianist”. Sojourning in Japan for three years, caught between feelings of optimism and despair about his mission of enlisting Japan’s help for the fledgling Philippine Republic, Ponce lamented how the world is driven by the currents of “positivism”. “There is no nation today”, he said, “that moves unless driven by its own interest”.

Yet, Ponce remained open to the world and genuinely admiring of the Japanese as a people. While in Japan, he immersed himself in Japanese culture and history—dressing up and living like a Japanese in Yokohama and even marrying a Japanese woman. In 1906, purely out of personal interest and on his own account, he visited Indochina (Vietnam) and tried to learn all he could about the country, alert to what Filipinos themselves could learn from Vietnam’s experience. In Vietnam, he tracked down Filipinos who had settled there, remnants of the Franco-Spanish expeditionary forces that occupied Vietnam

in 1858-62.¹⁵ Ponce recounts a moving encounter with one of these Filipino soldiers, who had settled in Vietnam and married a local woman, in which the Filipino confessed that it was only when the Philippine revolution began in 1896 that he realized how wrong he and the other Filipinos were in helping the French against the Vietnamese who were, after all, only defending their own country. This realization, he said, had deepened his affection for the Vietnamese.

Back in the Philippines after 1907, Ponce promoted knowledge about Asia even as he was actively engaged in the political and cultural life of his own country. He was on a trip to visit his friend Sun Yat-sen in China and to revisit Japan when he died, while transiting in Hong Kong, in 1918. (There is more to this story. Ponce’s wife, Okiyo Udangawa, raised their family in Ponce’s hometown in Baliwag, Bulacan, took a Filipino name and during the Japanese occupation, protected her town-mates in Baliwag from abuses by Japanese soldiers. An old family photograph shows her looking very much like a Filipino matriarch, dressed in traditional Filipino dress, surrounded by her children and grandchildren).

This is just one story, and perhaps a bit romanticized, but it is a story worth telling for showing what, at the most personal level, being an “Asian public intellectual” can mean.

NOTES:

¹ Quoted in Urvashi Butalia, et al., eds., *The Community of Asia: Concept or Reality* (Metro Manila: Anvil Publishing, 2006), 2. See Mohamad’s essay in this volume.

² Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals Who Remade Asia* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012). Mishra takes Asia in its original Greek sense, as the continent divided from Europe by the Aegean Sea and from Africa by the Nile.

³ See Resil B. Mojares, “Claiming ‘Malayness’: Civilizational Discourse in Colonial Philippines”, *More Hispanic Than We Admit*, ed. I. Donoso (Quezon City: Vibal Foundation, 2008), 303-25; Idem., “Early ‘Asianism’ in the Philippines”, *Ideya: Journal of the Humanities*, 11:1 (2009).

“Malayness” was both a racial and geographic construct, referring as it did to that region late nineteenth-century geographers called Malasia, roughly corresponding to Southeast Asia today. Fluid and indeterminate, the notion of the “Malay world” had (for Filipinos) the Malay archipelago as its core, and radiated outwards to other parts of Asia. Men like Rizal, T.H. Pardo de Tavera, and Pedro Paterno claimed cultural affinities between the Philippines and countries like Siam and Cochinchina. Rizal even speculated on the Malay origin of the Japanese and the existence of “an ancient civilization, common to all the races which lived in that [Far Eastern] region”.

⁴ See Caroline S. Hau & Takashi Shiraiishi, “Daydreaming about Rizal and Tetcho: On Asianism as Network and Fantasy”, *Philippine Studies*, 57:3 (Sept. 2009), 329-88.

⁵ M.H. del Pilar, “Hispano-Japanese Treaty”, *La Solidaridad*, trans. G.F. Ganzon & L. Maneru (Metro Manila: Fundacion Santiago, 1996), VI:138 (31 Oct. 1894), 475-81. Other articles by del Pilar on the Sino-Japanese War are in the issues of 15 Apr. 1893, 15 Aug. 1894, 30 Sept. 1894, 15 Nov. 1894-15 Feb. 1895, 15 Jan. 1895, 30 Apr. 1895, and 15 May 1895.

⁶ Apolinario Mabini, *The Philippine Revolution (With Other Documents of the Period)* (Manila: National Historical Institute, n.d.), 47-48, 79.

⁷ On Ponce: Resil B. Mojares, “The Itineraries of Mariano Ponce”, *Traveling Nation-Makers: Transnational Flows and Movements in the Making of Modern Southeast Asia*, ed. C.S. Hau & K. Tejapira (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011), 32-63.

⁸ Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire*, 166, 168. Among those who visited or sojourned in Japan at the turn of the century: Chinese leaders Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and Sun Yat-sen; Lu Xun (a student in 1905; later China’s foremost modern writer); Abdurreshid Ibrahim (most prominent pan-Islamic intellectual of his time; a political refugee in 1909); Egyptian Ahmad Fadzli Beg; and Vietnamese nationalist Phan Boi Chau (1905).

⁹ Rebecca E. Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 84, 103, 247.

¹⁰ See Sven Saaler & J. Victor Koschmann, eds., *Pan-Asianism in Modern Japanese History: Colonialism, Regionalism and Borders* (London: Routledge, 2007).

¹⁰ For the reference to the Philippines as a regional center, see Teodoro Kalaw’s 1927 article in *Spiritual Register: News Columns of Teodoro M. Kalaw in La Vanguardia*, 1926-27, trans. N. Joaquin (Metro Manila: Anvil Publishing, 2001), 175.

¹¹ Mishra, *Ruins of Empire*, 248-51.

¹² Jose Alejandrino, “Conferencia acerca del pan-orientalismo celebrada en el ‘Club Democrata’ el 23 de Marzo de 1917”, *Boletín de la Sociedad Orientalista de Filipinas*, I:1 (Jan. 1918), 17-41. A Belgian-educated engineer active in the nationalist movement, Alejandrino was involved in the effort in 1896-98 to procure in Japan arms for the revolution. He recounts that he was first made aware of “pan-Orientalism” around 1894

when, as a student in Belgium, a Japanese schoolmate, the son of the Japanese envoy in Holland, spoke to him of the need for Orientals to unite to combat Occidental arrogance.

¹³ Hau & Shiraiishi, “Daydreaming about Rizal and Tetcho”, 329-88.

¹⁴ Mariano Ponce, “Ang mga Pilipino sa Indo-Tsina”, *Sa Labas ng Tahanan at sa Lilim ng Ibang Langit* (Maynila: Limb. ng “La Vanguardia” at “Taliba”, 1916), 68. On Filipino participation in the French occupation of Vietnam, see Eulogio B. Rodriguez, *The Services of Filipino Soldiers in Foreign Lands during the Spanish Regime* (Manila: General Printing Press, 1929).