Politics and Identity: Negotiating Power and Space in Asia

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Introduction

In May-June 2010, a brutal ethnic conflict deeply shook the region of southern Kyrgyzstan. The former Soviet republic is multi-ethnic, with the Kyrgyz majority and a number of minority groups including Russians, Tajiks, Uyghurs and Uzbeks. The incident took place in the cities of Osh and Jalalabad in the Ferghana Valley where the ethnic Uzbek are in the majority. The event was dramatic: hundreds of Uzbek houses were burnt down by angry ethnic Kyrgyz, around 2,000 Uzbeks were killed and many more were injured and/or forced to flee to makeshift refugee camps on the other side of the border with Uzbekistan. The tragedy, which followed the ousting in April of the former president Kurmanbek Bakiyev, was built on years of mistrust, economic disparity, ethnic rivalry and the quest for more autonomy for the Uzbek minority. Through many attempts to rationalize the event, rarely was it mentioned that the Soviet reorganization of the region during the formation of the Central Asian republics, when territories were divided as part of the suppression of self-determination movements, was at the root of the problem. In this respect, there is still much to learn from the region's past, especially with regards to the Soviet categorization and renaming of ethnic communities and tribes.

This ethnic crisis in the larger Asian region in 2010 reminds us that a community's identity can be shaped by the outcome of territorial disputes between countries or the socialization policies of a government in power. It also demonstrates that the formation of identity is linked intrinsically to the political process and is largely dependent on whether democracy and human rights are present to prevent oppression against a culture or a way of life. The articles in this special issue of the *Copenhagen Journal of Asia Studies* (*CJAS*), entitled 'Politics and Identity: Negotiating Power and Space in Asia', analyze this relationship in selected case studies from Central, East and Southeast Asia. The articles examine how minority groups in different Asian countries make use of

existing political and social spaces to negotiate and evaluate their own identity frameworks in these different contexts.

The core papers for this special issue were drawn from papers presented in August 2009 at the International Convention of Asian Scholars (ICAS) over two panels entitled 'Identity politics and the negotiation of social space among minorities'. Additional papers for submission were also sourced through the networks of the guest editors and *CJAS* and a final selection was made by the guest editors in consultation with *CJAS*. All papers were subjected to a peer review referee process. Overall the collection attempts to share some new insights on the production and management of identities in Asia in the context of majority-minority relations.

Themes of the Collection

All of the contributions address issues pertaining to subjectivity and to the processes of identity-making and of self-identification against the backdrop of governmental policies. Modes of ethnic or national identification signal allegiances to specific political communities, which in turn are connected to a set of power relations and more or less definite patterns of social hierarchy. Self-identification processes imply choosing to belong or not to belong to these political communities. Such choices over identity are often shaped by governmental policies that provide the framework for power relations between communities within a country. Each contribution, using a case study, explores a specific aspect of this process and addresses the relation between social space and power in the discursive construction of otherness and difference.

Identities are in this respect much more fragile and can be more unstable than they appear externally. Minority and majority are twin concepts that are relative and relational: a majority can exist only if there is a minority, and vice versa (Eriksen 2002 [1993]: 121). Furthermore, 'minority' can be extremely difficult to define as it might bear different meanings according to the context (Cao 2009: 13). As Cao points out, the term is nevertheless useful to describe disadvantaged communities (ibid). It is also in this context that we use the term in this collection. Majority and minority are also terms used to signify distinct collectives, but the implication is that minorities are most often marginalized by those in the centre of power. Balance and harmony between majority and minority in any state are rarely maintained without a basic awareness by all individuals involved of the key elements that represent potential

for tensions. As the contributions in this collection demonstrate, the state has an important role to play, not only in shaping identities, but in creating spaces - identity frameworks that can be reappropriated and re-invented endlessly - using official policies or political manipulations, even without any intention of doing so. Identity here refers mainly to ethnic identity, as ethnicity is always deeply politicized. Comaroff and Comaroff rightly remind us that 'Ethnicity – like ''identity'', with which it is often twinned – has become a taken-for-granted usage in the argot of everyday life across the planet' (2009: 38). Ethnicity is the most common collective identity framework inside state boundaries; ethnicization has to be seen as a political process, deeply entrenched in power relations. In this regard, Jenkins mentions that 'ethnicity is one of the most significant of identities with respect to the relationship between localities and their regional or national arenas and institutions' (Jenkins 2008 [1997]: 128).

Anthony D. Smith argues that recent modernist scholars on nationalism, such as Hobsbawm, Gellner and Anderson, have minimized greatly the input of ethnicity in the making of the nation (2009: 16-17), giving it only a secondary thought, if any. In his most recent work on ethno-symbolism, he writes,

> Although nations may be partly forged by political institutions, over the long term they require ethno-cultural resources to create a solidarity community, mainly because of the critical importance for a sense of national identity of subjective dimensions (Smith 2009: 21).

It is through the interaction between the nation-state and the common people who are connected to it through different means such as citizenship, migration or territory claim, that solidarity communities are formed. These solidarity communities can be deeply entrenched in the state politics or drastically opposed to it, however, in most cases (if not all) they are infused with ethno-cultural elements. Nationalist ideology, cultural revival, naming of groups and territory, top-down ethnic designs and popular representation are all part of the process. Even trans-boundary ethnic solidarity movements are dependent upon the ethno-cultural frameworks that have developed inside each state's boundaries over time and through political means. One good example is represented by the Serumpun (one race) ideology movement that aims at linking Malays – in both Pribumi and ethnic Melayu senses - from Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia. However, being Malay in Singapore has little to do with being Malay (Melayu) in Indonesia (Faucher 2006). How ethnicity is enacted and experienced and how subjectivities interact

with the structural organization of selves to produce a multiplicity of meanings under one label are the questions that in our view deserve the utmost academic attention at this point.

Interestingly, although the primary idea of this special issue was to provide a fresh look at identity-making and power relations in the Asian context, it turned out that the particular coherence we were aiming at by focusing on one region of the world, turned out to be non-existent. Through the articles, we can notice not only vastly different processes of constructing identity but different ways of appropriating or rejecting these same identities. It should not come as a surprise, even more that the field of Asian studies has expanded recently to include Central Asia. It is, however, this particular absence of a common 'Asian' identity that accounts for the liberty with which each author of this collection has explored the issue of power and place in majority-minority settings. At the same time, these studies also suggest that an ethnic-based approach to self-identification in response to nation-building policies by governments can be the basis of a political response to the problem. In making the link between identity and politics, what is common to all of the articles is the reality that the political process plays a significant role in self-identification in the region.

Articles in the Collection

There are five articles in this collection. They discuss problems pertaining to the relationship between politics and identities emerging from territorial disputes, traditional and migrant flows of peoples and discrimination arising from nationalist discourse or racially based policies. The first two contributions look into the state construction of identity in the former Soviet Union and in Japan respectively. The third and fourth contributions examine self-identification processes among migrants in Thailand and in Japan, while the last article critically discusses the racial categorization policies in Singapore.

In his article, Bahodir Pasilov discusses the Bolshevik management of minorities in Central Asia and the suppression of social and political movements aimed at the autonomy of the region as part of the Russian 'making of a Soviet people'. His particular focus is on Uzbekistan, which was, and still is, the home of a complex make-up of ethnic groups and tribes of Turk, Persian, Jewish, Arab and Armenian origins, among others. Compelling people to think of themselves as belonging to an ethnic – or national - minority instead of a tribal community was central to the

Bolshevik strategy aimed at bringing diverse Central Asian populations into their political orbit. Pasilov demonstrates that the process of restructuration of national minorities implemented by the Soviet state proved to be effective mainly because local communities were drawn to take an active part in it. The development of important cultural markers such as language and local rituals proper to these new national minorities was given priority. Censuses were undertaken on a regular basis, and the local Bolshevik government divided the territory according to the distribution of ethnic majorities with the agreement of local leaders.

Also drawing from an historical perspective, Alexander Bukh's article explores the construction of Ainu identity in the context of Japanese discourse on modern Japan's identity. In reframing the issue, Bukh argues that the 'emergence of the Ainu voice in the public discourse' in the 1970s was a direct consequence of the tensions between the proponents of the conservative and the progressive definitions of Japanese identity. Within only a few years the Ainu were thrust to the centre of the debate, cast by both the conservatives and the progressives as the 'original Japanese' living in harmony with nature and possessing the 'fighting spirit' essential to Japanese economic development. Through their specific design, both narratives were relocating Ainu as part of the 'Japanese self', in a position equal or 'even superior' to the Japanese (Yamato). Ainu activists were thus provided a platform enabling them to articulate their own identity through a powerful counter-narrative that incorporates, among other features, their tragic history as colonized people and the loss of the islands of the Northern Territories.

The two contributions that follow explore the management of identities among migrants from an anthropological perspective. Carole Faucher's article investigates the subjective experience of tertiary-educated Burmese migrants in Thailand. Among Burmese living outside Burma, the choice of using Burma or Myanmar to identify their homeland has became a source of misunderstanding and deep rivalry, a strong political statement for many, and a rejection of ethnic identification for others. For educated Burmese migrants in Thailand, who must face mistrust and discrimination on a regular basis, locating their Burmeseness is a primary concern. In her article, Faucher examines the process of self-identification of these migrants through the unfolding of their narratives of everyday life interactions. She argues that feeling of belonging to the host state is not always a necessity nor a desire for migrants, no more than the quest to reconcile with the different meanings attached to their own ethnic and/or national identity. Alternative modes of identification, such as

victimhood, can be perceived as even more viable, a sort of way out from the divisive modes of identification. Through this process, Burmeseness is reappropriated by the concerned Burmese migrants themselves and acted upon according to their own design and rules.

The fourth paper of the collection addresses the multiple 'imaginings' of homeland among Filipinos in Japan. Drawing from Anderson's long-distance nationalism, Reggy Figer examines the narratives of members of an online community, Malago.net, through which Filipino diaspora members seek useful information and advice on practical matters in connection to their life in Japan. The site also provides a space for the Filipino netizens to exchange their perceptions about their homeland. In only a few years, the site has become extremely popular, providing a powerful platform to enact their attachment to their homeland, as well as to become a 'space for imagination and apparatus for nation-formation'. The author describes the online users above all as storytellers. However, interestingly, their narratives do not convey ideas of identity loss or of displaced people; they are not displaced, but 'emplaced' in Japan, a country that can fulfil their need for financial independence as long as their homeland remains incapable of doing so. When the time comes, they will go back to the place where they were born. The desire for 'coming home', according to Figer, has always been there.

James Gomez, in the final paper, looks at the debate around politics, race and identity in contemporary Singapore. The island republic is a city-state and during the period following independence in 1965, a nation-building program was undertaken based on race-centred policies. The author argues that research shows that the basis for racism is anchored in the role of ethnic identity and how it frames the formulation of policies related to immigration, housing, education and politics. The People's Action Party (PAP) government insists that it follows a tolerant approach towards different races and that it promotes the ideas of multiculturalism and meritocracy. However, ethnic minorities in Singapore complain that they are being discriminated against on a daily basis based on their race and ethnicity. It is in this context that the paper evaluates the first visit of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on racism to Singapore at the invitation of the PAP government in 2010. The paper discusses racism in the context of Singapore's political framework and the United Nations' efforts to eradicate racism. It suggests that ultimately even the UN is unable to influence the PAP government to change its racially based policies. Only the people of Singapore have the power to affect this change politically.

Conclusion

This collection brings the reader through the complex variables around identity formation and self-identification in a variety of states in the Asian region. Although the circumstances in each of the countries studied differ, there is nevertheless a common underlying feature. Ultimately, it is 'power' that provides the communities the ability to shape their own identity and this power can be the basis for identity politics. In contemporary Asia, these articles show that the role of politics in identity formation is still central.

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