
*State Making in Asia* is a collection of eight essays authored by scholars of history, sociology, social anthropology, and political studies, based in the Netherlands, America, Malaysia, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom. The purpose of the book, as expressed in an erudite introduction co-authored by Richard Boyd and Tak-Wing Ngo, is to critique the universalizing essentialism of much contemporary state theory, that is, the projection of a western-style conception of the modern state construed by territoriality, citizenship, secularity, and sovereignty onto Asia and elsewhere. The authors, along with Laurence Whitehead who is charged with writing the concluding essay, bluntly emphasize that such a single state idea, which views the state as an accomplished fact, and has “no past, no personality, and no politics,” underscores the richer and more varied conceptualizations of stateness in world history. The authors demand a historical and empirical investigation into the foundations and processes of state making so as to emancipate Asia from the standardized western attributes of stateness, and instead, observe the state constantly in need of repair, renewal and reinforcement, of which economic development is only one aspect, and where the notion of indivisible sovereignty, the mastery of territory, and the conception of the nation-state compete with the individual state’s own particular legacy of institutions, understandings, and demarcations. While western state properties of structural permanence and institutionalized agency have been a target of imitation, the Asian states also possess their own long and separate traditions of self-reflection that must be recruited in theorizing about the nature of the modern state.

Mark Ravina and Richard Boyd’s essays on Japan demonstrate not only the evolution of Japan as a “hybrid state” but also how its state-bureaucracy relations are at variance with the Weberian and western characterization of bureaucratic administration. Ravina uses several examples to showcase Meiji Japan as an early instance of globalization in which the country attempted to balance its national essentialism and international isomorphism, that is, to remain sufficiently national and recognizably global (as opposed to simply western). However, if the best emerging global standards were western, and if the international legitimacy that Meiji Japan sought was essentially that bestowed upon by the west, then why de-emphasize Japan’s
western preferences? More persuasive are Boyd’s ideas of entrenched bureaucratic sectionalism and administrative transcendence to emphasize the tendency for administrative units in Japan to act independently, as laws unto themselves, with scant concern for formal hierarchies, with hostility to cede jurisdiction or to merge, with a penchant for both inter and intra ministerial rivalries, and without regard for compromise and consensus.

R. Bin Wong explains how in the absence of a tradition of municipal autonomy and corporatively organized elites, and the blighting of a public sphere by the invocation to defend the nation from perceived internal and external threats, China’s ethnically and culturally defined national identity prioritized shared beliefs in the forms of either the Confucian civilizing project or the Communist socializing project. With an arsenal of moral suasion, material advantages, coercion and repression, the Chinese empire survives, albeit with the possibility for economically inspired principles of interest to make their way more explicitly into politics. That economy may go against politics is more likely in Taiwan, where Jenn-hwan Wang explains how Taiwan transitioned from the local to the national, that is, from the authoritarian, clientelistic, state led capitalist, Chinese state discourse to one of more democracy, pluralism, interest politics, and a Taiwanese state discourse. However, Taiwan’s de-Chinalization and Taiwanization is jeopardized with deeper economic integration with China.

Using much field work, Ann Frechette demonstrates how the Dalai Lama’s exile administration has, in non-confrontational multiple sovereign arrangements, and with the usage of the “myth of return,” institutionalized its political, legal, economic, and social control over the Tibetan resettlement camps. However, while this Latent State is moving in the direction of accepting western-style uniform homogenous rights, the comprehension of such ideas remains problematic in a Tibetan language that is embedded with hierarchical legacies.

Finally, Shamsul A. B. and Sity Daud’s idea of examining the competing nations-of-intent in Malaysia is fascinating, but unfortunately we gain no comprehensive sense of the “contending discourse” between the indigenous bumiputera defined Bangsa Malaysia and the preference of the non-bumiputera for a pluralized nation, nor how such ethno-nationalism may strengthen, weaken, or disable a Malaysian Malaysia.

*State Making in Asia* is valuable in arguing that there is “no single privileged route to a single political model best represented by the modern state