INTRODUCTION: DIVERSITY OF NATION-BUILDING IN EAST AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

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The current issue of the European Journal of East Asian Studies addresses the topic of nation-building. It has been chosen because the term ‘nation-building’ has been revived, so to speak, in the social sciences as well as in anthropology and history, for several reasons. It has also become a common term these days in the arena of international politics; its notion is positive and clearly distinguished from more ‘alarming’ terms such as ‘nationalism’. In the field of international relations, nation-building has gained a prominent position in the debate on failing or even failed states, conflict management and development theory. It is legitimate to say that nation-building has re-entered the debate, for it had been relegated to the backbenches during the latter half of the Cold War period—at least in the perception of Western observers. In Asia and particularly in the post-colonial nation-states of South and Southeast Asia, however, nation-building has been a constant part of the political agenda since the 1950s. The articles in this volume relate to this importance. The Western world turned its eyes back towards nation-building when the great conflict areas of the 1990s, such as Somalia, the Balkans, Afghanistan and lately Iraq, offered a gruesome picture of what state failure and societal fragmentation can mean to the inhabitants of an entity called a nation-state. On an international level, nation-building is currently discussed from an instrumental perspective. As Jochen Hippler points out, nation-building is regarded ‘either as a preventive political option to avoid the break-up of the state and social fragmentation, as an alternative to military conflict management, as part of military interventions or as an element of post-conflict policies’.¹ The instrumental character is obviously emphasised by external observers of processes of nation-building rather than by insiders. The view from within a

nation-state is significantly different, because those who have been and still are part of a process of nation-building are more or less directly affected by whatever effort is made to create a national identity. If perceptible as such at all, policies of nation-building are often intertwined with policies of socio-political development. They relate to ideologically loaded notions of integration and to a large extent to measures of state-building. While the concept of the nation-state implies that nation-building and state-building are twin processes, it is important to note that they need not go along with each other at all. Nations without a state, like the Kurds or the Palestinians, and states without a nation, like Afghanistan or Iraq, are ample cases in point to demonstrate the necessary distinction of both processes.

But what exactly do we mean by nation-building? The concept indubitably bears a normative notion in that it alludes to the achievement of an objective: a nation. Ideally, this nation then corresponds to a territory and a set of generally accepted rules, norms and principles. The citizens of the territory are formally bestowed with a nationality and, again ideally, identify themselves with the status of being the nationals of a certain state. The identification with a nation thus requires some sense of belonging and imagination. This is why one of the renowned theorists of the concept of nation in the twentieth century, Benedict Anderson, speaks of the nation as an ‘imagined community’. If the imagined community corresponds to what is defined and administered as the nation-state, the goal of nation-building is, at least theoretically, achieved. In practice, the process reveals itself to be much more difficult than the theoretical reflections suggest. Nation-building goes beyond pure implementation of policies and establishment of institutions. Even if the institutions that form the pillars of a functioning state (e.g. bureaucracy, judiciary, civil service and public facilities) are working effectively, a community’s national identity may still be shaped in separate affiliations. The Hutu and Tutsi communities in Rwanda, for instance, both feel a sense of national identity that is nurtured by their belonging to a particular ethnic community. Their formal nationality is Rwandan, but we may doubt the full-fledged identification with this status. Empirical research shows that the creation of a national identity becomes more difficult the higher the degree of racial, ethnic, religious or cultural pluralism within a state.