Yasemin Nuhoğlu Soysal

*Transnational Trajectories in East Asia: Nation, Citizenship, and Region.*


Two contradictory forces circulate in East Asia. In the last two decades, the region appears to have moved towards a more collaborative political climate, greater democratization, and increasing engagements with global ideas like human rights, through the intensification of trade, migration, and cultural flows that are increasingly connecting East Asian countries to each other and the world. However, this push towards liberalism is countered by a stress on the nation. Regional disputes over territory, economic opportunities, geopolitical gains, and cultural positioning are expressions of this growing emphasis on national uniqueness, the stridency of national assertiveness, and public vocalizations of nationalistic sentiments. Resolutions of these tensions are complex as they require addressing the colonial and war legacies of the region, and accommodating the geopolitical influence of the United States.

This edited volume explores the consequences of these paradoxical developments. Arranged in four parts, the collection consists of thirteen chapters and includes contributions from anthropologists, cultural-studies specialists, historians, political scientists, and sociologists.

Yasemin Soysal explains in Chapter One that the volume aims to conduct an “empirical enquiry” (13) into how interactions between “national” and “transnational” forces re-shape East Asian ideas about nation and citizen over time (1). To highlight the interactive nature of these engagements, the authors adopt the term “transnationalization” as an analytical node and understand it as referring to “transformations of what is historically organized and conceptualized as national, rather than simply reforming at a different level, and may or may not lead to regional or global arrangements” (2). This conceptual move is important. Embedding East Asian nations and actors within a transnational context enables thinking about the “national” and “transnational” as inseparable and constitutive of an interdependent state system (3).
doing so, this volume makes two arguments about the formation of transnational trajectories in East Asia. It suggests that East Asian nations adopt transnational models of nationhood and citizenship in order to affirm state legitimacy to its citizens and the wider world (4). At the same time, these adopted models are systematically differentiated through articulations of national uniqueness (6). In these processes, the “national” is shaped by and shapes the “transnational.” Furthermore, this volume suggests that individual and citizenship orientations in East Asia reflect greater attention to transnational models and ideas, and are re-shaping how individuals understand their place in the family, community, workplace, and nation (8).

The first section, “Institutionalised Projects,” explores the ways through which transnational models of nationhood are institutionalized through educational policy, scientific governance, and the shaping of an East Asian regionalism. Soysal and Suk-Ying Wong contrast curricular content in Japan and China from the 1940s (Chapter Two). They argue that, since the 1980s, citizenship education goals in these countries have increasingly converged around an emphasis on individual autonomy, personal development, and acquiring the skills for participation in a globalized world. Joy Zhang turns to a discussion about the developmental trajectory of China’s life sciences (Chapter Three). Pointing to the emergence of a cosmopolitan mind-set amongst Chinese scientists, she argues that this “contextual reflexivity towards global alternatives” (57) re-shaped governing dynamics between the state and the Chinese scientific community. David Leheny draws on the Asian values debates in the 1990s and the transnationalization of Japanese and South Korean popular culture to illuminate the politics underlying the shaping of an East Asian regionalism (Chapter Four). He argues that the formation of East Asia emerged out of reactions against Western-led globalization and the struggles by states to define themselves as East Asian by connecting value orientations to a cultural background perceived to have shared roots in Buddhism, Confucianism, and communitarianism.

The second section, “Mobilities,” explores the movement of people and food. Adrian Favell compares the international travel trajectories of two generations of Japanese contemporary artists (Chapter Five). He observes a shift away from the gaisen koen, a colonialist paradigm where the artist finds fame in Japan only after achieving success abroad, towards a less hierarchized artistic world where binaries between the national and transnational have broken down. The dissolution of these binaries among younger artists, Favell argues, produces an art that challenges Japan’s developmental model and narratives of a rising Asian modernity. Instead, it offers a different way in which East Asian societies interact with national and transnational forces. Focusing on the movement