GLOBAL ASIA Book Reviews

**Giant Figures from A Faraway Place**

**Makers of Modern Asia**
By Ramachandra Guha, ed.
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**Reviewed by Christopher Capozzola**

FIFTY YEARS AGO, readers curious to meet the leaders of the decolonizing world could easily find newsy, gossipy essay collections that explained the “New Asia” to Westerners. Thankfully, *Makers of Modern Asia* is not that kind of book. Ramachandra Guha, a historian and public intellectual based in Bangalore, India, has instead gathered from an impressive stable of writers short biographies of 11 crucial figures in 20th century Asia. Mahatma Gandhi and Mao Zedong are here, of course, along with figures less known outside their own countries, such as Indonesia’s Sukarno or Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan. The author’s aim is not to explain Asia to the West, but to grapple with the political and economic legacies of Asia’s 20th century, with Asian audiences in mind. “What does an average Indonesian businessman know about Bhutto or his politics?” Guha asks in his thoughtful introduction. “Or the typical Chinese professional about Gandhi and his ideas? Often nothing at all.”

*Makers of Modern Asia*’s first task is to convey what modern Asia was (and is), and then convince readers that these 11 men and women were the leaders who made it so. These days, when Asia’s rise is understood economically, Guha and his fellow authors demonstrate the political roots of Asia’s economic power. To understand “where Asia is today, and where it might be headed tomorrow,” Guha writes, “the politics matters just as much as the economics.” And — perhaps not surprisingly, given that each of the 11 subjects was born under European colonialism or in pre-1911 China — the politics in question is anti-colonial nationalism.

Out of the distortions of imperialism and the ruins of the Second World War came “anti-colonial revolution” and “nationalist consolidation.” In the 20th century, these were two sides of the same coin, often to the dismay of emerging leaders who inherited territories that hardly cohered as states, let alone as nations. “In every major Asian country,” Guha notes, “the struggle for national unity was an arduous process.” “Many glib things have been said about nation-building,” observes James R. Rush in his highly engaging essay on Sukarno. “But in 1950, Indonesia was clearly a nation that still needed to be built.”

**KNOWLEDGE-SEEKERS**
From adolescence, the men and women featured in *Makers of Modern Asia* looked for models of political and economic thought. (If anything, the book provides distressing evidence that politicians read almost nothing after the age of 25.) They studied Marx and Lenin, read Leo Tolstoy, Rabindranath Tagore, and the sacred texts of Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. “My boyhood was spent eavesdropping on America’s founding fathers,” Sukarno told a western journalist. Some, like India’s Nehru and Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, came up through colonial education systems, outscoring the colonists on their own exams. Others understood Asia only by leaving it: Gandhi to South Africa; Nehru to Britain; Ho Chi Minh and Deng Xiaoping to France. Or, as in the case of Chiang Kai-shek and Zhou Enlai, by going to Japan, a nation whose trajectory in this history of nation-building and economic growth is so unique that Guha — questionably — left it out of the volume altogether.

They searched most eagerly for the key to economic growth. In the mid-twentieth century, each of these Asian leaders grappled with the challenge of feeding millions of people while developing an economy distinct from that of former colonial powers. Each believed that economic growth was a precondition, not only for personal political survival but for national sovereignty. That consensus, though, generated policies that spanned the political spectrum. Nehru
None of the men and women here turned ethnic and religious pluralism into a national asset; none teach how to thrive in a political environment shaped by social media. Their obsession with nation-building offers little in an age of globalization and diaspora, and even Gandhi’s villages won’t save us from climate change.

he called India’s “fissiparous tendencies.” Even when it succeeded, a single-minded focus on economic growth did not always yield political progress. Lee Kuan Yew micromanaged the Singaporean economy with methods that Michael D. Barr describes as “more akin to those of an authoritarian socialist than those of a democratic liberal.” Odd Arne Westad similarly notes that Deng Xiaoping made China “richer and freer than it had been at any other point in its recent history,” but “failed in setting a political course for China that would have made it a better-governed country.”

These figures were not only building modern nations, they were also making modern Asia. One of the book’s strengths is the seriousness with which the authors contemplate their subjects’ foreign policies, and not simply by lining them up next to those of the Cold War superpowers. By the 1970s, Deng was looking to other Asian nations (particularly Japan and Singapore) as models for his “socialist market economy.” Bhutto likewise believed that “Islamic socialism” could chart a middle course for Pakistan and make him into Asia’s leading spokesman (although one shudders to think what future Bhutto, owner of one of the world’s largest collections of Napoleon memorabilia, thought he was leading Asia into).

Asia, though, consistently evaded continental unity or willing followership. Nonalignment and pan-Asianism appear here as utopian fantasies or euphemisms for Indian or Chinese or Japanese regional hegemony. None of these leaders pursued regional unity with any sincerity. Guha and his colleagues thus don’t persuade us that in the 20th century there was anything we might reasonably call “modern Asia,” as distinct from two dozen postcolonial nations transformed by rapid economic growth in the midst of the Cold War. The book would probably have been better titled Makers of Modern Asian Nations.

he worried that India lagged “in the march of technique,” and privileged scientific and technical developments in the hope of overtaking the West. In 1930s China, Chiang Kai-shek embraced central planning to forestall Japanese expansion. Mao and Zhou would later bet — disastrously — on rapid industrialization. Indira Gandhi created an Indian state that Srinath Raghavan here calls “more regulatory than developmental.” In the grimly modernist parade of industrialization, import substitution and agricultural output maximization, only Gandhi’s romance of village life marched to a different drummer.

Each of these rulers used political power to guide economic growth. Some embraced socialism while others merely flirted with it. None — not even Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew — completely rejected it, and every one of them embraced planning as a path to national consolidation. Nehru hoped rising incomes would counter what in 1952
goods on which her regime’s political legitimacy depended — shrewdly manipulated India’s citizens and then, during the 1975 Emergency, silenced them. Chiang Kai-shek simply repressed them. And those are just the tip of the iceberg. Largely absent from *Makers of Modern Asia* are leaders we might deem morally or economically bankrupt: Thai politicos building roads to nowhere; Ferdinand Marcos pocketing millions while “salvaging” opponents of martial law. We meet Sukarno, but not Suharto, and hardly a general crosses the stage. Pol Pot appears only in passing, Kim Il Sung not at all.

**ANY LESSONS TO LEARN?**

Does 20th-century Asia have lessons for the Asia of today? Guha and his fellow authors believe it does, although they know they are fighting an uphill battle. For Asian youth — born after the 1997-1998 financial crisis not to mention the Cold War or Tiananmen — many of these figures exist solely in untrustworthy history books dismissed with dutiful nods or classroom yawns. Gandhi’s ruralism and backward-looking preaching carry precious little weight in contemporary India; Sophie Quinn-Judge notes that “Ho’s saintly persona appears increasingly doubtful or irrelevant to young Vietnamese.”

Critiques abound. Zhou Enlai, described by Chen Jian as “the personification of China’s tortuous path toward modernity,” comes across very badly here, successful at nothing more than surviving under Mao (admittedly no small feat). Barr believes that “Singaporeans have paid a high price” for Lee Kuan Yew’s vision. The cost of prosperity was “a sterile, soulless, racist society that has little respect for ordinary human values, let alone human rights.” Mao’s legacy presents a particular challenge. Jay Taylor thinks Chiang Kai-shek’s “pragmatic but authoritarian Confucianism” is more important for China today than anything written in the *Little Red Book*. Westad makes a similar case for Deng’s relevance over Mao. But Mitter counters wisely, noting that the shapeshifting Chairman’s most significant legacy may be his cultivation of a culture of radical newness rather than his prescriptions for state socialism.

Several of the authors, though, seek to rescue their subjects from the condescension of history. Chiang, Taylor tells us, would have implemented more reforms had he not been hamstrung by depression and war. Ho Chi Minh’s achievement of national unity appears remarkable to Quinn-Judge given that Ho spent nearly half his adult life on the run from colonial officials and military officers. Lee’s efforts to skew the Singaporean state in favor of ethnic Chinese was, in Barr’s view, “ruthlessly practical,” shrewdly aimed at “plugging Singapore into the rise of China.” Even Srinath Raghavan, in his otherwise bitingly critical essay on Indira Gandhi, admits that her “tenure in office should not be reduced to a morality play.”

Others see roads not taken, with a particular fondness for forgone cosmopolitan alternatives. Rush writes admiringly of Sukarno’s vision of an Indonesia that could accommodate nationalism, Islam and Marxism. Nehru’s legacy of religious pluralism, parliamentary democracy and scientific research has been “progressively undervalued after his death,” overshadowed by his descendants’ middeeds. And if Sukarno is not much revered these days, at least “Indonesia has endured.”

Well, let’s just say it: perhaps there are very few lessons here for today’s leaders and the tasks they face in the 21st century. None of the men and women here turned ethnic and religious pluralism into a national asset; none teach how to thrive in a political environment shaped by social media. Their obsession with nation-building offers little in an age of globalization and diaspora, and even Gandhi’s villages won’t save us from climate change. Thus chastened, perhaps we can begin by taking solace in an accurate history, one that understands that it was the mass movements of anti-colonialism and national liberation that built the foundation on which today’s booming Asian economies stand. Too much talk of leadership can obscure the contributions of ordinary people. You’d never know that at times these figures reacted to, chased after, or were blindsided by the men and women whom they lived to intoxicate. Led, guided, repressed or betrayed, the citizens of modern Asia built it themselves, and on them, rather than their leaders, the 21st century now depends.

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