

The Emergence of Asian Intellectuals¹

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Abstract

The paper takes a look at how a self-conscious community of Asian intellectuals came to be formed at the turn of the twentieth century, inspired by such factors as the rise of Japan as a world power and the advance of anti-colonial movements in various parts of Asia. It takes as an example the case of the Philippines where a sense of the ‘region’ was an integral part of the Filipino nationalist movement in the late nineteenth-century. In particular, the paper looks at the case of Mariano Ponce (1863–1918), who may well be called “the first Filipino Asianist.” In recounting his story, the paper underscores the importance of local histories of Asianism as a corrective to the tendency to locate in the West the beginnings of area studies.

Keywords: Asian intellectuals, Mariano Ponce, Pan-Asianism, Jose Alejandrino

RESPONDING TO THE QUESTION of what ‘Asia’ is in objective terms, the Indonesian writer Goenawan Mohamad has said: “Asia is like God. You cannot categorically deny or affirm its existence. No one knows where it begins, where it ends, or whether there is a way to define it” (quoted in Butalia 2006, 2). Mohamad’s witty remark is a reminder of the arbitrariness of categories. Such arbitrariness is particularly true of *Asia*: a word of uncertain etymology, variably used since the time of the ancient Greeks; a word effectively enforced by Europeans rather than by Asians themselves; a word of vast application, defining a geography fluid and imprecise.

All these, of course, do not quite explain how Asians themselves—and here I am speaking in particular of scholars and intellectuals—have come to take ‘Asian’ as a meaningful and important marker of their identity.

A recent book provides a highly informative account of how the idea of an Asian intellectual community came about. In *From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals Who Remade Asia* (2012), the Indian author Pankaj Mishra takes Asian public intellectuals as a definable formation. And he cites as a watershed event in the genesis of this formation Japan’s victory over the Russian navy in 1905, in the strait of Tsushima between Korea and southern Japan, in the course of the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905).² A major naval battle that marked the first time a modern Western power was defeated by an Asian nation, the victory was hailed by many Asian intellectuals in widely separated parts of the world—among them, Mohandas Gandhi (then an unknown Indian lawyer in South Africa), Mustafa Kemal (a young Ottoman soldier in Damascus, later known as Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey), Sun Yat-sen (at the time, a Chinese political activist sojourning in London), Rabindranath Tagore (then a teacher in rural Bengal), and many more. For Mishra, the Battle of Tsushima was a defining moment in the political and intellectual awakening of Asia.

This awakening, of course, did not happen overnight with a single battle. By stressing the impact of Japan’s military victory over Russia, Mishra glosses over two important facts. Asians already began to look towards Japan in the 1880s as Japan modernized during the Meiji Restoration by laying the foundation of an industrial economy, a modern educational system and state bureaucracy, and a constitutional government. Showing that an Asian country can modernize in its own terms, demonstrating its might in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), and terminating the extraterritorial rights enjoyed by Great Britain, the United States, and other Western powers in 1899, Japan inspired by its example Europe-dominated and colonized Asians from Turkey and Egypt to India and Indonesia.

What Mishra also obscures is that—though the rise of Japan was exceedingly important in Asia’s awakening—the move to imagine and

foster transnational or intraregional solidarities already began in many places in Asia even before the Russo-Japanese War.

The case of the Philippines is enlightening in showing how intellectuals in one Asian country positioned themselves in the world (I speak of the Philippines because it is what I am most familiar with, but I hope that “local” histories of the idea of “Asianness” can be done for other parts of the region as well).

A form of “Asianism” was already part of the Philippine nationalist movement from its beginnings in the 1880s. Broadly construed as a sense of a ‘home region,’ this Asianism had the agency-specific meaning of belonging (in the ‘civilizational’ discourse of the time) to the “Malay civilization,” and to that geographic region the late-nineteenth century schoolbooks called *Malasia* (today’s Southeast Asia)[Mojares 2008, 303–25; Mojares 2009].³ (We must recall that modern geography was a basic subject in nineteenth-century Philippine secondary schools and Manila’s University of Santo Tomas, the first European-style university to be founded in Southeast Asia.) *Malasia*, however, was a somewhat loosely-defined region, itself embedded in wider circles of cultural and political filiations.

Jose Rizal and other Filipino intellectuals embedded the Philippines in the “Malay” region, as part of the claim that—contrary to Spanish denigrations of Filipinos as “a people without a history”—Filipinos were inheritors of a “high” and “ancient” Malay civilization. In the early phase of the Filipino nationalist movement, however, “Malayness”—or what was called *malayismo*—was deployed not as a charter for separation and sovereignty but as an argument for recognition and the right to an autonomous status within the Spanish empire. It was an idea rather than a movement, since Filipinos had little contact, if at all, with peers elsewhere in the Malay region and there was nothing comparable to the Filipino Propaganda Movement elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

In the early 1890s, the focus of the nationalist movement was reform, “assimilation,” and a status for Philippines as an overseas province rather than a colony of Spain. A revolution for independence was not as yet

perceived to be a realistic option. Thus, even as they proclaimed their being Malay, the networks Filipino intellectuals built were not with fellow Asians but with liberal elements in Europe, and in particular with similarly situated Cubans and Puerto Ricans, to whom Filipino intellectuals felt bound by a shared grievance and purpose.

It is thus that I cannot find a reference to Jose Rizal and other Filipino intellectuals forging links with fellow Southeast Asians. It would seem that their contact with Southeast Asia at this time was limited to transiting in Singapore or Saigon on their way to Europe. There is the story of Jose Rizal forming a friendship with the Japanese writer Suehiro Tetcho when the two found themselves traveling together in 1888 from Japan and across the United States to Europe. But while the experience inspired a “fantasy” of Asian solidarity in Tetcho, it did not quite have the same effect on Rizal (Hau and Shiraishi 2009, 329–88). There is also the story of Jose Alejandrino, a Filipino studying engineering in Belgium in 1894, having a Japanese schoolmate, the son of a Japanese diplomat, who spoke to him in Belgium of the need for “Oriental solidarity” against Westerners, but the idea did not really impress Alejandrino until much later.

In the Filipino political imaginary at this time, Filipinos saw themselves within the frame of “Greater Spain” rather than that of Asia. Hence, Filipino leaders—who were a group of highly Europeanized intellectuals—took a distanced, skeptical view of Japan’s call for “Asia for Asians.” Instead, they used, as the Filipino leader Marcelo del Pilar did, Japan’s rising influence as an argument for the closer integration of the Philippines to Spain, warning that if Spain did not introduce reforms, Japan’s redemptorist “Asia for Asians” policy would attract Filipinos, and the Philippines would gravitate towards Japan in the same way that Cuba and Puerto Rico were being drawn into the orbit of the United States (del Pilar 1894, 475–81).⁴

By 1895, however, the Spain-based Propaganda Movement had given up hopes that reform would come from Spain. And then in 1896, the Philippine Revolution began. The revolution radically changed the equation for Filipinos. Now turned revolutionary, the base of the Filipino

nationalist movement shifted—physically and intellectually—from Europe to Asia. The Propaganda Movement and the Aguinaldo government-in-exile set up headquarters in Hong Kong, and turned to Japan for political and material assistance in a struggle that had quickly changed in 1899 from a revolution against Spain to a war against U.S. annexation.

As the first nationalist revolution in Asia, the Filipino revolution stirred wide interest because of its implications for Western domination in the region. Leaders of the revolution were themselves aware of its regional implications. As Apolinario Mabini, the leading theoretician of the revolution, grandly declared in 1899, the revolution's "ultimate purpose" was "to keep the torch of liberty and civilization burning and bright in the Oceania, so as by illuminating the dark night wherein the Malayan race now lies degraded and humiliated, it may show to them the path to their social emancipation." He wrote that if the Philippine revolution succeeded, England, Russia, France, Germany, Holland, Portugal, and "other rabid colonizers" would "tremble for their colonial possessions and those they expect to have in the coveted partition of China in this troubled sea of the Far East." "The Philippine revolution," Mabini warned, "is contagious, very contagious" (Mabini 1969, 47–78; 79).

While Mabini makes geographic references to "Oceania" and the "Far East" (*Extremo Oriente*), it is clear that the primary foundation of an imagined solidarity is not so much geographic as political. This is shown in the organ of the Filipino nationalist movement, *La Solidaridad* (1889–1895), which may well be called a journal of comparative colonialism because of the attention it gives to drawing comparisons between the Philippine situation and that of other colonized areas in the world (like German Africa, British India, French Indochina, and the Dutch Indies).

While the solidarities are wide-ranging, Filipino revolutionary leaders knew that, in practical terms, the foreign material and political support they needed could only come from Japan. Thus in 1898, the Filipino nationalist Mariano Ponce was posted in Yokohama as the Aguinaldo government's representative in Japan (Mojares 2011, 32–63). In his three-

year stay in Japan, Ponce actively networked with Japanese “pan-Asianists” in and outside government, publicized the cause of Philippine independence, and initiated two clandestine (and failed) attempts to smuggle arms and ammunition from Japan to the Philippines.

It is important to note that Ponce was in Japan at a time that saw, arguably for the first time, the emergence of a ‘community’ of ‘Asian public intellectuals.’ Drawn by Japan’s growing power and the example it had set for how Asians can find their own path to freedom and civilization, assorted students, political agents, exiles, and refugees from the Middle East and South, East, and Southeast Asia converged in Japan. It is quite remarkable that if one draws up a list of those who visited or sojourned in Japan at the turn of the twentieth century (say, 1890–1910), one has a roster of leading anti-colonial intellectuals in Asia. As Mishra writes,

[i]n the early years of the twentieth century, Tokyo became a Mecca for nationalists from all over Asia, the centre of an expanded Asian public sphere...

The advance of imperialism everywhere forced Asian elites into anxious sideways glances as well as urgent self-appraisals. Very quickly in the early twentieth century, a transnational intellectual network grew, bringing Asian intellectuals into dialogue with each other (2012, 166; 168).⁵

In Japan, societies were organized to stimulate intellectual exchanges and promote the spirit of pan-Asianism. Through various societies and gatherings in Japan, Filipinos, Chinese, Koreans, Indians, Thais, Vietnamese, and Japanese met to exchange views and celebrate their solidarity. Ponce himself met fellow political refugees, like Park Yong-hyo and Yu Kil-chun, leaders of the Korean reform movement, Kang Youwei, the famous Chinese reformer and scholar, and Sun Yat-sen (with whom Ponce had the closest ties).

Illustrating the value of these networks, Ponce caused to be published in Tokyo in 1901, in Japanese translation, his book on the

Philippine independence struggle, *Cuestión Filipina: Una Exposición Historico-Crítica de Hechos Relativos a la Guerra de la Independencia*, a work that was also translated into Chinese and published in Shanghai in 1902 and reissued in 1913. Now little known in the Philippines, this book was, according to Rebecca Karl, an American scholar on Chinese nationalism, “perhaps the single most influential text for post-1902 Chinese interpretations of the global and Chinese significance of the Philippine revolution” (Karl 2002, 84;103; 247). Even more important, it influenced Chinese intellectuals in recasting China’s anti-dynasty struggle as a modern nationalist movement.

This was an intellectual high point. But political conditions quickly changed, both in the home countries of these traveling Asian intellectuals, and in Japan. “Pan-Asianism” was never a unitary or homogeneous movement (Saaler & Koschmann 2007). There were deep divisions among the Japanese as to the policy their government should pursue with regards to the rest of Asia, and deep suspicions among other Asians over Japan’s expansionist ambitions.

In the Philippines, the dream of an Asian republic faded with U.S. annexation. In the same way that the effective ‘world’ for Filipinos shifted from Greater Spain to an Asia that had Japan as its axis, the orientation in the Philippines now shifted from Asia to the United States—to such great effect that Filipinos came to have the reputation as the most “Americanized” among Asians.

Asianism would persist as an intellectual current in the Philippines. Mariano Ponce, who returned to the Philippines in 1907 after a twenty-year exile, continued to cultivate a scholarly interest in Asia, publishing a monograph on Indochina and a biography of Sun Yat-sen, which is credited as the first book by a Filipino on China. In 1915, Ponce founded together with Jose Alejandrino and leading Filipino intellectuals, *Sociedad Orientalista de Filipinas*, which launched in 1918 a monthly journal of Asian affairs, *Boletín de la Sociedad Orientalista de Filipinas*. These are the first Asian Studies society and journal independently established by Southeast Asians.

The Asian society founded by Ponce and Alejandrino was short-lived. But Asianism would continue in various forms. There were ambitions early in the twentieth century to build the Philippines as an “intellectual and commercial center” for the Malay region—an ambition that did not materialize because the Philippines was unable to build the needed material and intellectual resources, and because it was an ambition undermined by the Philippines’ dubious position as an American surrogate in the region (Kalaw 2001, 175). “Asia for the Asians” became the dominant theme in Manila’s intellectual life during the Japanese occupation—but it was an ideal warped by the reality of Japan’s imperial domination.

In Japan, the years that followed the Russo-Japanese War saw Japan’s “altruistic” pan-Asianism turn towards a more aggressive, self-interested posture as Japanese officialdom entered into treaties and agreements that committed Japan to recognizing the claims of Western powers in the region; at the same time, this assured for Japan certain prerogatives as an accepted member of the imperialist club in Asia. These would culminate, as we know, in World War II with the establishment of the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” under Japan. While Japan’s influence galvanized anti-Western feelings and boosted decolonization movements in Burma, Indonesia, Malaya, and India, it also raised the specter of another domination and dispelled the old romantic notions of Asian solidarity (Mishra 2012, 248–51).

How did Filipino intellectuals locate themselves in the world in response to these changes? The response was quite complex, given the pressures of changing global and domestic conditions. But one early and exemplary response was given in a lecture on “pan-Orientalism” on 23 March 1917, by Jose Alejandrino, a Filipino Asianist who also sojourned in Japan, like Ponce, at the turn of the century (Alejandrino 1918, 17–41).⁶ In that lecture in 1917, Alejandrino lamented that Japan’s “sentimental, altruistic, and noble pan-Orientalism has been substituted at the present historical moment by the aggressive and imperialist.” In spite of this, Alejandrino kept his faith in the original, emancipative spirit of pan-Asianism.

This Asianism however—Alejandrino suggested—must be built on new foundations. Speaking of the Filipinos, Alejandrino said that their experience with colonialism for three centuries had cultivated in them a tendency towards dependence on others to determine their future. Nations, he said (and here his immediate reference may have been both to Japan and the United States), are not a “nation of angels, without passions, who come solely animated by the altruistic proposition of working for our happiness.” Hence, the tendency towards dependence should be surmounted. What is imperative, Alejandrino argued, is that Filipinos themselves strengthen their own society and government and build a nation independent, progressive, self-reliant, and one that would command the respect of other nations. While he continued to hark back to the old romantic notion of Oriental solidarity, it is clear that Alejandrino was looking as well to a future when such solidarity would more securely rest on relations of parity and mutuality among nations that are mature, progressive, and free.

Alejandrino’s dream will remain problematic for so long as nations are divided by stark inequalities of power, economic, political, and military. But an Asianism multicentric and dynamic is a worthy ideal to pursue.

Asia has grown exceedingly complex; it can no longer be imagined as a totality, and the imperatives for action lie on many fronts and can no longer be reduced to the stark, racist East-West binaries of the past. In a time suspicious of absolutes, “pan-Asianism” should remain a name for a historical artifact rather than a current agenda, since the word—like “pan-Arabism,” “pan-Islamic,” or “pan-European”—has a hegemonic sound to it. Today, it suffices that intellectuals in Asia are connected in many ways on the basis of shared issues, advocacies, ideologies, and professional concerns. Such connections, however, need to be built up, particularly across issues, disciplines, and sectoral concerns.

In a recent essay, Caroline Hau and Takashi Shiraishi have proposed that it is best to think of Asianism as a “network” of dynamic linkages that can appear and disappear over time and space; thin out or thicken as hubs

of “people at the right place at the right time,” of people of shared sympathies and sometimes different persuasions. “A network, in other words, allows us to see Asianism in synchronic and diachronic terms of multiple agents, ideas, institutions, and practices without rigidly fitting them into categorical boxes” (Hau & Shiraishi 2009, 329–88). Such view, they say, will be a corrective to viewing “Asianism” as if it were Japan- or China-centered, or one fed simply by the “social fantasy” of shared and common origins, culture, and destiny.

To think of “networks” (instead of “community,” a word that has mystifying effects) is indeed a more precise and pragmatic view of how people come together. Yet, words like “networks,” “contacts,” and “linkages” also seem self-interestedly instrumental and morally barren. It says very little about what advocacies and ideals bring people together. There is something to be said as well (as Hau and Shiraishi themselves acknowledge) for the virtues and necessities of “fantasy”—even as we are watchful of its dangers—and for the affective values of friendship, respect, mutuality, and community.

Let me illustrate these values with the story of the Filipino Mariano Ponce, the person I mentioned earlier, a person who can justly be called the “first Filipino Asianist.” Sojourning in Japan for three years, caught between feelings of optimism and despair about his mission of enlisting Japan’s help for the fledgling Philippine Republic, Ponce lamented how the world is driven by the currents of what he called “positivism.” “There is no nation today,” he said, “that moves unless driven by its own interest.”

Yet, Ponce remained open to the world and genuinely admiring of the Japanese as a people. While in Japan, he immersed himself in Japanese culture and history—dressing up and living like a Japanese in Yokohama, and even marrying a Japanese woman, Okiyo Udangawa, the daughter of a samurai. In 1906, purely out of personal interest and on his own account, he visited Indochina (Vietnam) and tried to learn all he could about the country, alert to what Filipinos themselves could learn from Vietnam’s experience. In Vietnam, he tracked down Filipinos who had settled there,

remnants of the Franco-Spanish expeditionary forces that occupied Vietnam in 1858–62 (Ponce 1916, 68).⁷ This is now a little-known episode. More than a thousand Filipinos participated in the French occupation of Vietnam, as recruits of the French navy and soldiers in the Spanish expeditionary force that fought with the French. Ponce recounts a moving encounter with one of these Filipino soldiers, who had settled in Vietnam and married a local woman, in which the Filipino confessed that it was only when the Philippine revolution began in 1896 that he realized how wrong he and the other Filipinos were in helping the French against the Vietnamese, who were after all only defending their own country. This realization, he said, had deepened his affection for the Vietnamese.

Back in the Philippines after 1907, Ponce promoted knowledge about Asia even as he was actively engaged in the political and cultural life of his own country. He was on a trip to visit his friend Sun Yat-sen in China and to revisit Japan when he died, while transiting in Hong Kong, in 1918. There is more to this story. Ponce's wife, Okiyo, raised their family in Ponce's hometown in Baliwag, Bulacan, took a Filipino name, and, during the Japanese occupation, protected her townmates in Baliwag from abuses by Japanese soldiers, even as she played the role of 'mother' to the young Japanese soldiers stationed in the town. An old family photograph shows her looking very much like a Filipino matriarch, dressed in traditional Filipino dress, surrounded by her children and grandchildren.

This is just one story, and perhaps a bit romanticized, but it is a story worth telling for showing what, at the most personal level, being an "Asian intellectual" can mean.

Notes

- ¹ Keynote paper presented at the Eleventh API Public Intellectuals Workshop, *Engage! Public Intellectuals Transforming Society*, on 25 to 29 November 2012 in Tagaytay City, the Philippines. http://www.api-fellowships.org/body/keynote_mojares_tagaytay.pdf. It was also presented at *Asia Across the Disciplines*, the 9th International Graduate Students Conference, Asian Center, University of the Philippines, Quezon City, 7 December 2013.
- ² Mishra takes *Asia* in its original Greek sense, as the continent divided from Europe by the Aegean Sea and from Africa by the Nile.

- ³ “Malayness” was both a racial and geographic construct, referring as it did to that region late nineteenth-century geographers called *Malasia*, roughly corresponding to Southeast Asia today. Fluid and indeterminate, the notion of the “Malay world” had (for Filipinos) the Malay archipelago as its core, and radiated outwards to other parts of Asia, to include countries like Siam and Cochinchina.
- ⁴ Other articles by del Pilar on the Sino-Japanese War are in the issues of 15 Apr. 1893, 15 Aug. 1894, 30 Sept. 1894, 15 Nov. 1894 – 15 Feb. 1895, 15 Jan. 1895, 30 Apr. 1895, and 15 May 1895.
- ⁵ Among those who visited or sojourned in Japan at the turn of the century: Chinese leaders Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and Sun Yat-sen; Lu Xun (a student in 1905; later China’s foremost modern writer); Abdurreshid Ibrahim (most prominent pan-Islamic intellectual of his time; a political refugee in 1909); Egyptian Ahmad Fadzli Beg; and Vietnamese nationalist Phan Boi Chau (1905).
- ⁶ A Belgian-educated engineer active in the nationalist movement, Alejandrino was involved in the effort in 1896-98 to procure in Japan arms for the revolution. He recounts that he was first made aware of “pan-Orientalism” around 1894 when, as a student in Belgium, a Japanese schoolmate, the son of the Japanese envoy in Holland, spoke to him of the need for Orientals to unite to combat Occidental arrogance.
- ⁷ On Filipino participation in the French occupation of Vietnam, see Rodriguez 1929.

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