

REVIEWS

Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire. Tim Harper. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021. 864 pages. ISBN 9780674724617.

In the mid-1920s, Canton (present-day Guangzhou) attracted Asian revolutionaries, nationalists, communists, and some of the region's formidable anarchists, who in Vietnamese nationalist Phan Bội Châu's words, were "suffering from the same sickness" (15). It became a training ground for boycotts, strikes, and protests against Western presence in an Asian territory in the modern world. Canton, however, was only a tiny piece of a network of "back-alley" systems. Tim Harper's new book traces the activities of these revolutionaries in an "underground network" stretching from Europe to Asia. From different viewpoints, Harper narrates the survival of lesser-known yet important figures during the period of protracted rebellions and revolutions against imperial powers at the dawn of the 20th century.

The book consists of 14 chapters, including a prologue and an epilogue structured into two- to three-year periods rather than themes. The first few chapters narrate the exodus of Asian intellectuals who found themselves in exile from imperial capitals beginning in 1905 (39). From the early stages of the Chinese civil war to the incarceration and expulsion years of Asian revolutionaries who "stepped out of the back-alleys" (555) to incite a "permanent revolution" in Asia (579), the book ends with the violent years of 1926 and 1927.

Overall, the book centers on "the lives that were lived at the interstices of empire, and of struggles that did not see the nation-state as its sole end or as the natural ordering of a future world" (xxviii). Although it focuses on simultaneous political upheavals in Asia quelled by Western powers, it also examines the underside of empire from the perspectives and lives of revolutionaries like Nguyễn Ái Quốc (Ho Chi Minh), Tan Malaka (Indonesia), and Manabendra Nath Roy (India), among others. They were Asian intellectuals who journeyed with false identities, carrying with them

only banned literature and infinite hopes for humanity's emancipation. It is commendable how Harper studied the personal diaries, correspondences, and unpublished works of these revolutionary intellectuals who learned from what was available outside their homelands and returned to their backyards, seeking to turn fantasy into reality. *Underground Asia* is an intellectual anticolonial history of Asian revolutionaries in a particular period of history where modernization and the concept of the nation intersect.

Also worth noticing is how Harper gave significance to the overflowing number of ports, ships, and newly constructed railways that allowed Asian revolutionaries to hop from one border to another. Emphasizing these innovations further supported his "underground network" framework (283). Like José Rizal, Philippine national hero, who toured 19th-century Europe and acquainted himself with liberal ideas, these young Asian revolutionaries, as Harper claims, were charmed by a mix of ideologies ranging from anarchism and communism to nationalism (19).

Like Nicole CuUnjieng Aboitiz's illuminating work, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation: A Global Intellectual History of the Philippine Revolution, 1887-1912*, Harper's *Underground Asia* takes a global transnational perspective. He introduces Asia in the 1920s as the "front line of the global revolution (xxvii)." He also cites two "milestones" that were vital to Asian revolutionaries that occurred in the West: the First World War and Bolshevik Revolution. From these events, Harper theorizes that European powers are vulnerable, and these revolutionaries "believed that the solidarities... born from a shared history of oppression and exploitation, and of negotiation of borders and exclusion—would prevail over the narrowness of nations and usher in a common utopian destiny" (19). He was able to examine not only their dangerous lives through private letters and documented confessions, but also the intellectual underpinnings of the revolutionaries' validation of an Asian revolution.

Harper then concludes that stories about this global revolutionary "underground network" soon vanished because of "ideological exhaustion" (617). Even though this is the case, some relatively unknown figures still resonated, such as Mewa Singh (India and Canada) and Phạm Hồng

Thái (Vietnam), who were both revered rather than hated for their acts of vehemence as revolutionary activists or anarchist internationalists. Others, like Tan Malaka, were “never forgotten” (658).

Underground Asia is a perfect companion to John Sidel’s (2021) new book, *Republicanism, Communism, Islam: Cosmopolitan Origins of Revolution in Southeast Asia*, which also helps us appreciate further the cosmopolitan and transnational aspects of the region at the start of the 20th century. Like Sidel, Harper shows that the study of empire, mass movements, and radical politics could never be detached from the history of Asia. He is right to claim that his book was an attempt to write a history “from within and from below” (xxx). His interpretations heavily relied on the perspectives of the revolutionaries and was minimally supported by colonial documents.

At present, Tim Harper is Professor of History and Director of Centre for History and Economics at the University of Cambridge, and is one of the most compelling Asianists working on the region’s larger role in global history. Among all his books, *Underground Asia* is perhaps the most gripping read. With Harper providing new directions in approaching anticolonial intellectual history, the book is a new addition to the existing body of literature in modern South and Southeast Asia history. While *Underground Asia* shares stark similarities to previous works in terms of scope and degree of attention to (hitherto) little-known Asian personalities, the book differs in terms of approach. Apart from being focused on intellectual biographies, it gives a panoramic view of Asia’s “global revolution” while also recognizing its failure. Harper’s advantage is his coherent recounting of the distant past showcasing his rigorous training as a historian. From underground movements in Asia and beyond, it is exciting to see what is next for Tim Harper—what historical narratives are left uncovered behind the curtains of empires in the region?

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