Detail from an illustration accompanying a Chinese Asianist publication from the early 1930s (Yin 1930).

Chinese Asianism Yesterday and Today

A Conversation with Craig Smith

Timothy CHEEK
Craig SMITH

Craig Smith's new book, *Chinese Asianism* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2021), examines Chinese intellectual discussions of East Asian solidarity, analysing them in connection with Chinese nationalism and Sino-Japanese relations. Beginning with texts written after the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894 and concluding with Wang Jingwei's failed government in World War II, Smith engages with a period in which the Chinese empire had crumbled and intellectuals were struggling to adapt to imperialism, new and hegemonic forms of government, and radically different epistemes. He considers a wide range of writings that show the depth of the prewar discourse on Asianism and the influence it had on the rise of nationalism in China. Asianism was a 'call' for Asian unity, Smith finds, but advocates of a united and connected Asia based on racial or civilisational commonalities also utilised the packaging of Asia for their own agendas. It was less a single ideology than a

field of contesting aspirations. Asianism shaped Chinese ideas of nation and region, often by translating and interpreting Japanese perspectives, leaving a legacy in the concepts and terms that persist in the twenty-first century.

Timothy Cheek: In your book, you tackle the topic of Chinese ‘Asianism’. How do you define this term?

Craig Smith: I define Asianism as a *call* for Asian unity, usually in the face of Western imperialism. This definition removes the focus from transnational identities and differs from earlier understandings of Asianism that focused on the implied meaning behind the concept. For example, Sinologist and cultural critic Takeuchi Yoshimi (1963) famously defined Asianism as ‘the intention of solidarity of the countries of Asia’. I am not convinced that all Asianists had this intention. Rather, I find they often used Asianism as a concept to further their own agendas, which ranged from the furthering of their personal power to the construction of the wealth and power of their nation.

This led me to write a conceptual history in the fashion of Reinhart Koselleck. I am interested in *how* Chinese intellectuals and the elite used the concept of Asianism in different times and places; how it garnered power through the early twentieth century; and how Japan’s loss in 1945 ultimately dissipated that power. Asianism has since generally been seen in a negative light, because of Japan, but perhaps also because the white West still harbours fears of the ‘Yellow Peril’ and a united Asia.

TC: In your book, you focus on the period from 1894 to 1945. Does this mean Chinese Asianism can be considered a closed experience, or do those ideas still reverberate today?

Cover of Craig Smith’s *Chinese Asianism* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2021).

CS: Asianism was a problematic but sometimes popular concept in the first half of the twentieth century, and because of its association with Japanese wartime ideology, most Chinese intellectuals relegated it to the dustbin of history. However, with the rise of China in the twenty-first century, the history of Asianism offers us ways of critically analysing the present and identifying continuities with the Republican period.

After Xi Jinping referred to Asia’s future as a ‘Community of Common Destiny’ (命运共同体) at the 2014 Boao Forum for Asia, critics jumped at the opportunity to compare the rhetoric related to China’s rise with that from the earlier rise of Japan and ideas such as the wartime ‘Greater East Asian Coprosperity Sphere’ that were used to justify Japanese imperialist ambitions. These criticisms

intensified with the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative, which is increasingly placing China at the centre of a growing infrastructure network that stretches across much of the continent.

Now it must be said that there are obvious differences between Japan's rise and China's rise. China is not invading other Asian countries with its armies and that is a crucial difference. This is connected to the Gramscian differentiation between hegemony of coercion and hegemony of consent. If anything, China's network has much more in common with American models of hegemony than with nineteenth and early twentieth-century European and Japanese empires.

So, yes, there are many discursive similarities between early twentieth-century Asianism and today's efforts towards Asian regionalism, but these should be connected to Chinese and Japanese writings, and perhaps to the Japanese Empire's economic aspirations but not to Japan's invasion of Asia. I am primarily interested in Chinese discourse, so I find it fitting to consider recent discussions in connection with the desire in the 1920s for Chinese global leadership.

In the 1920s and early 1930s, popular elite intellectuals from the Kuomintang (KMT) made arguments for China to unite and lead Asia. Most of the top leaders, including Sun Yat-sen, Hu Hanmin, and Dai Jitao, made such calls for Asian unity under Chinese leadership. These arguments even detailed an 'international' to compete with the 'white imperialism' of the League of Nations and the 'red imperialism' of Moscow's Third International. Those internationals promised equality under the banners of liberalism and socialism, respectively, but inevitably came with their own forms of hegemony. KMT officials envisioned a united Asia based on Sun Yat-sen's ideas of 'nationalism' and called the 'International of Nations' (民族國際)—a third path with the oldest and largest nation at the forefront.

Ultimately, these arguments were designed to bolster domestic support for the KMT. They legitimised its rule in a way that connected Republican China to the country's past imperial glory while asserting its future position globally in a way that would re-establish the continuity of power. We can examine today's situation in connection with this past discourse.

TC: What did the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) think of Asianism in the period you examine in your book?

CS: Most members of the CCP were very clear about their rejection of Asianism from the mid-1920s, and this only intensified with Wang Jingwei's support of Japan and wartime Asianism in the 1940s, but one of the outliers is particularly significant.

One of the first Chinese intellectuals to write influential articles about Asianism was CCP cofounder Li Dazhao. As in most Chinese writing on Asianism, Li firmly rejected a Japanese-led Asianism. In

fact, Li was initially compelled to write about Asianism in 1917 to declare his rejection of the ‘New New Asianism’ advocated by Ukita Kazutami—one of his former teachers from Waseda University. Li then advocated his own ‘New Asianism’, based on Leon Trotsky’s proposal for a United States of Europe, and focused on the idea of a leaderless union. While Li’s ideas were not as influential as Sun’s at the time, his position as CCP cofounder has resulted in an inescapable legacy.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, when KMT intellectuals were writing about Asianism in journals such as *New Asia* (新亞細亞) and *Asian Culture* (亞洲文化), none of the CCP’s intellectual leaders wrote about Asianism. In 1925, Lin Keyi, a CCP member just returned from two years of study in Moscow, cofounded Beijing’s Asian Nations Alliance (亞細亞民族大同盟). But the organisation veered towards cooperation with Japanese Asianists shortly after its founding and Lin and other leaders were the subject of angry editorials by famous figures such as Lu Xun and Li Dazhao. I think Chen Duxiu (1924) really captured the leftist feelings on Asianism: ‘What we call for is not a union of all the nations of Asia, but a grand union of all the oppressed common people of Asia, excluding the Japanese, the Chinese warlord governments, and all the privileged classes!’

TC: What about today? I wonder whether you see any echoes in the speech on China, Asia, and the world that Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi recently gave at the Symposium on the International Situation and China’s Foreign Relations?

CS: Yes, we can make connections between Wang Yi’s speech on 20 December 2021 and early twentieth-century ideas on Asianism, but we should first look at Wang’s earlier writing. In 2006, while he was the ambassador to Japan, he made a speech on Asianism and published it in *Foreign Affairs Review* (外交评论). Like Ukita and Li Dazhao, Wang called his ideas ‘New Asianism’. The astounding lack of creativity in naming the different forms of Asianism points to the malleability of the concept. It meant very different things to different people and was by no means an ideology or consistent approach. However, Wang drew heavily on earlier Japanese and Chinese ideas, particularly emphasising Sun Yat-sen’s and Li Dazhao’s writings on Asianism. Yet for the twenty-first century, Wang outlined three principles to guide and represent ‘Eastern civilisation’ (东方文明): ‘cooperation’ (合作), ‘openness’ (开放), and ‘harmony’ (和谐). Harmony is no longer the keyword it once was, but Wang mentioned ‘openness’ and ‘cooperation’ in the same sentence five times in his December 2021 speech. And the spirit of harmony remains. In his speech, Wang explained:

[F]acing people's call for peace and development, we have joined force with our neighbors to build a beautiful homeland and uphold regional peace and tranquillity. Asia is the most vibrant region in the world. To promote regional peace and common development is the shared aspiration of countries in the region ... China has always followed the principle of amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness in relation to its neighbors. We will continue to work with neighboring countries to deepen cooperation and pursue tangible progress in bilateral and multilateral ties. (Wang 2021)

'Amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness' (亲诚惠容) are the Xi Jinping-era keywords/buzzwords for China's relationship with Asian countries. The discursive similarities with the Republican period are interesting, but is this Asianism? Wang also discusses Africa, Latin America, and many other places in this speech. The connection to the above discourse from the 1920s resides in the continuity of assertions of the legitimacy of Chinese moral leadership and of China's long history as a peaceful and supportive neighbour. Just like Li Dazhao, Wang repeatedly asserts the equality of nations and the importance of peaceful cooperation rather than hegemony and competition. CCP leaders have consistently made these arguments that Chinese leadership is not intended to be hegemonic.

TC: It appears that Sino-Japanese relations are at the heart of Asianism, but what about other Asian countries?

CS: Since the nineteenth century, most calls for Asian unity concentrated on Sino-Japanese relations. Getting the largest powers to cooperate was usually seen to be at the heart of Asian unity, but not always.

Working with India returns to this narrative again and again. I discuss this in a few chapters, but especially in Chapter 3, where I examine Zhang Taiyan's work with Indian revolutionaries in the Asiatic Humanitarian Brotherhood on the eve of the 1911 revolution. India sometimes offered a viable alternative for strategic partnership, but many intellectuals accepted the concept of Asia as some sort of meta-geographic identity and discussed the future unity of the entirety of Asia.

KMT publisher Ye Chucang may have been the first to write a lengthy discussion of Asianism and use the term 'Asianism'. Of course, we have texts written about Asian unity going back much earlier, but Ye wrote a series of articles specifically titled 'Great Asianism' (大亞細亞主義), serialised in the *Minli Bao* (民立報) in 1913. In his vision, a united Asia from Turkey to Japan would have a common military and economy. Sun Yat-sen's geographic under-

standing of Asianism was the same as Ye's, but in his famous 1924 speech on 'Great Asianism', Sun concentrated on the Sino-centric cultural commonality of benevolence as Asia's principle of unity.

TC: Your book focuses on Asianism as articulated by Chinese thinkers and political actors. How does this focus add to our understanding of Asianism and Asian regionalism?

CS: With a few exceptions—most notably, Prasenjit Duara's work—previous discussions of Asianism or prewar Asian regionalism have focused on Japanese writings. My book shows that, although the context and content were different, vibrant discussions on regionalism were commonplace in early twentieth-century China. This was particularly true in the 1920s and 1930s, when Chinese intellectuals formed Asianist organisations across the country and published numerous books and journals on the idea of an Asian Union.

This *zeitgeist* of regionalism is like the European timeline. In 1923, Count Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi published his seminal book *Pan-Europa*, which is now seen as one of the key inspirational works for the formation of the European Union. Transnational regionalism was not limited to Europe, and Asianism was not limited to Japan.

TC: Your narrative focuses on the relationship between Asianism and nationalism, as well as the role of 'civilisation'. How do you make sense of this mix?

CS: Although one might logically expect Asianism and nationalism to be at odds, I found that every expression of Asianism in the early twentieth century was laced with nationalist intentions. In the book, I refer to this as the 'imbrication of nationalism'. Assertions of Asianism were designed to further the wealth and power of the nation. In fact, Asianism could not have existed without nationalism.

My book has chapters devoted to the concepts of race and civilisation because these concepts were adopted and used to understand and further the idea of a united Asia. The conceptual history of civilisation is particularly interesting as the term initially indicated a singular and linear form of civilisation when it entered the Chinese lexicon in the late nineteenth century. However, soon after this, Chinese intellectuals found the concept useful in differentiating between Western civilisation and Eastern civilisation. In what often appeared to be a self-Orientalising process, intellectuals defined the self in opposition to its other. Prasenjit Duara (2000) made sense of this change by differentiating the two forms as capital-C 'Civilisation' and small-c 'civilisation', with the former indicating the idea of a singular Eurocentric (and undoubtedly Christian) Civilisation and the latter indicating the potential for multiple civilisations, and therefore multiple paths to modernity. Of course, Chinese intellectuals still limited this to two civilisations, East and West.

This process of defining the East in opposition to the West was crucial for understanding Asia and Asianism, and it is still significant today. In the 2006 Wang Yi speech that we just discussed, he makes repeated references to the characteristics of Eastern civilisation, mirroring the arguments Sun Yat-sen made for Great Asianism in 1924.

TC: Ultimately, I find you are giving a grounded, nuanced, and thoughtful account of ideas (or concepts) moving across cultural frontiers. You are also showing how these ideas were used pragmatically by actors in different societies for their own purposes. This is an enduring question in intellectual history. How do you see your example contributing to our understanding of this important process in global history?

CS: Just as Philip A. Kuhn pointed out in his study on the ‘Origins of the Taiping Vision’ back in 1977, as concepts are translated between two different cultures, they take on different meanings and significance. How this happens is important for intellectual historians. Kuhn identified three factors: ‘the precise language of the textual material’; the relevant historical circumstances; and the process by which the ideas are widely taken up. I agree with Kuhn, but I would put much more emphasis on the process of translation, which Kuhn only hints at. Intellectual history is almost always a history of translation. We need to be more explicit about this, and we need to pay more attention to this process. For example, the all-important concept of ‘nation’ (民族) famously entered the Chinese lexicon through the Japanese term *minzoku*, which was often used to translate the German term *volk*. Along the way, the term took on different meanings and characteristics that enabled it to be useful to intellectuals in different times and places. For much of the twentieth century, being of the same *minzu* indicated sharing the common ancestor of the Yellow Emperor, and shared bloodlines were an important part of the concept, just as they were for German and Japanese intellectuals.

The power imbalances between China, the West, and Japan provided the historical contexts for Asianism, just as they did for nationalism. As concepts such as ‘race’, ‘civilisation’, and ‘Asia’ arrived in China, East Asia was facing an onslaught of Western imperialism. Although the Europeans claimed to be operating as individual empires, they often appeared as a united group. The white peril was very real and Chinese intellectuals looked both inward and outward for solutions to the crisis, adapting these concepts to the needs of the day and constructing binaries, such as East and West, yellow and white, to make sense of the historical contexts and protect themselves and their countries.

Translation played a crucial role in formulating these responses, as it did in other intellectual changes. Most articles in many, if not most, late-Qing journals were translations, yet few intellectual histo-

rians spend time thinking about translation and comparing texts in different languages. I hope my book will show the possibilities associated with this approach.

TC: And finally, how did you get interested in this topic?

CS: Before beginning my PhD, I studied Taiwan's literature at National Chung Cheng University. The Institute for Taiwan Literature had a number of young academics working on the Japanese colonial period, and it was these teachers and scholars who first brought about my interest in regional identities. During World War II, regional identities were forced on the Taiwanese and occupied China. However, some of the writers we looked at appeared to accept an East Asian identity and that piqued my interest. In particular, I read the works of Zhang Wojun (張我軍), a Taiwanese writer living in Beijing from the 1920s to the 1940s.

When I started on the PhD, I had a conversation with Timothy Brook about Zhang and his collaborationist writings. Brook discussed researching his own book about the Nanjing Massacre and said that we can never really know whether those under the occupation believed in anything they wrote or whether they were simply doing what was needed at the time. Of course, this indicated that wartime Chinese Asianism would also be impossible to truly unpack. In response, I spent years looking at the 50 years leading up to the war, tracking continuities and similar discourse to try to find the intellectual contexts needed to understand collaborationist and Asianist writings. That is how I fell down this rabbit hole. ■

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