
The contributors to Asian Freedoms explore the concept and reality of freedom and its absence in various Asian histories, cultures and languages. Some react to Orlando Patterson’s thesis that a unique Occidental configuration of sovereign, civil and personal freedoms arose out of the history of slavery in the West. All of them write within the context of the ‘Asian values’ debate of the mid 1990s.

The quandaries of defining ‘freedom’ in English are multiplied when considering translations in Asian tongues. Against the unambiguously positive English ‘freedom’ the Chinese 自由 and Vietnamese tự do have long carried negative connotations, of doing as one pleases and to hell with the consequences. In contrast Tony Reid shows that the Indonesian merdeka conjured and reflected the passion of revolution in the mid 1940s and that its deeper layers of resonance arose from the heritage of struggle against 300 years of colonial exploitation. With an eye to Patterson, Reid also notes Raffles’ surprise that the Bugis state of Wajo had developed as a republic before European contact. Thanet Aphornsuvan also traces semantic changes in the Thai ‘language of freedom’ to the ambiguous significance of Western influence, the threat of colonisation subsisting with an appealing vocabulary of liberation and progress. Considering the Burmese case, Silverstein argues that a high level of ‘grass roots’ freedom in pre-modern times, combined with Buddhism’s otherworldliness, meant that freedom was never theorised as politically problematic. This first occurred with colonisation and persists with the domination of the State Law and Order Restoration Council.

Ian Mabbett, Alexander Woodside and James Scott argue that some Asian traditions have enhanced freedoms in tangible ways. Although Buddhist doctrine is averse to involvement with the secular world, Mabbett demonstrates that in practice Buddhism has occasionally opened up liberatory potentials. For example, some orders have provided sanctuary for people fleeing from political persecution, creating a space in which they could live relatively freely. Woodside shows that the pre-colonial Vietnamese mandarin attained his position through passing civil service examinations that were open to all, routinely guided, and often criticised the Emperor. Bouillevoux
described this Vietnam as ‘an academic democracy’ (p. 205). Scott shows how Westernisation eroded freedom in Asia through the replacement of traditional systems of land use by a modern tenure system based on the cadastral survey and the priority of freehold title. Pre-modern Asian systems were very flexible, being readily adaptable to changing social needs and environmental conditions, with decisions being made by village communities on the basis of a detailed knowledge of their local surroundings. Modern tenure imposed uniform standards that were heedless of local conditions, whittling away usufruct rights and access to common lands.

Vera Mackie and Bill Jenner focus on the repressive nature of the states of Meiji Japan and mainland China respectively. Mackie shows that the early Meiji leadership tried to model the new state on the traditional patriarchal family, with political elites being figured as parents, and the common people as children. Liberals, socialists and feminists adopted Western ideas of freedom and moulded them into a persuasive critique of the new state and its ideology, arguing the inappropriateness of using a repressive private institution as a model for the state. This debate was part of the contestation of the definitions of state and society that gave Meiji era politics its significance and dynamism. Jenner argues that the Chinese state’s unparalleled power until the nineteenth century was a great achievement of sovereign freedom, whose cost was the poverty of civic and personal freedoms, which were only permitted in the realm of commerce. With his greater emphasis on modern Chinese history, and using a broader concept of freedom, David Kelly reveals a far more variegated texture, including libertarian trends in literature, Confucianism, Taoism and, of course, politics.

Whether in the United States, Vietnam or Hong Kong, the language of freedom was always ideologically loaded, a social and linguistic construction that was also a reconstruction with political significance and purposes. The authors in this volume collectively demonstrate that ‘in culture, cross-fertilisation is all’ (p. 8), which can be taken to mean that on questions of freedom it is just possible that we can learn something from Asian experiences. In short, ‘if Asia is the Antarctica of freedom it is thought to be, like the real Antarctica it turns out to be teeming with life under the forbidding coat of ice’ (p. 114). Exploring these depths is fascinating for those willing to take the plunge.

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