Monarchy and Sovereignty in Twentieth-Century Asia
A Symposium
Organized by Prasenjit Duara and Adam Mestyan
Global Asia Initiative
Duke University
13 April 2018

Abstracts

Panel 1. Monarchy in the Colonial Age

Cemil Aydin (UNC-Chapel Hill)
“The Meiji Emperor and Muslim Monarchies in the Long Nineteenth-Century”

It is often forgotten that the story of the search for sovereignty in the age high imperialism by non-European states such Turkey, Japan, Thailand, Persia and China was also a story of struggles for legitimacy for monarchies in Asia. Over a century long evolution of dynastic and monarchical refashioning across Asia from Tanzimat reforms in the 1830s Istanbul to Meiji reforms of the 1870s and Persian constitutional revolution of the 1900s, European monarchies were not the only standard and model. In fact, there were significant inter-Asian conversations on relative success of reforms of monarchies, with large segment of Asian populations living under the rule of European monarchs comparing, and asserting connections with multiple kings and emperors of Asia. This paper will focus on a particular moment between 1905 and 1914, when many Muslim admirers of Japanese modernity wrote about virtues of Emperor Meiji. What did this literature on Meiji tenno tell us about the relationship between Muslim monarchs such as Ottoman Sultan, Egyptian Khedive, Persian Shah and their Muslim publics? Given that Chinese Muslims were always in the background of these Muslim discourses on Meiji emperor, what did this literature imply about the global image of Qing dynasty? How did the discourses on the success of Japanese monarchy influence and shape the destiny of dynastic families and monarchies in West Asia in the context of rising nationalism?

Bio: Cemil Aydin’s interests focus on both Modern Middle Eastern History and Modern Asian history, with an emphasis on the international and intellectual histories of the Ottoman and Japanese Empires. He is particularly interested in historical processes that shape transnational racial and civilizational identities, such as Muslim, Asian, African. His research and publications offer new ways to understand the historical roots of the contemporary world order by describing
the process of imperial era conflicts and decolonization, especially from the perspective of non-Western actors of the Muslim world and East Asia. Other research and teaching interests deal with questions of internationalism and orientalism, and modern world history.

Faiz Ahmed (Brown)
“Modern Muslim Kingship and the Islamic Nation-State: Royal Legitimacy, Religious Authority, and the Amani-Kemalist Dialectic”

As European mandates were dividing the former Ottoman lands of Greater Syria, a newly crowned king in Kabul was laying the foundations for a grand state-building program of his own. Amanullah Khan (1892–1960) had just led Afghanistan to independence from Britain, establishing the first fully sovereign Muslim-majority state after the fall of the Ottomans. Meanwhile in Anatolia, a Turkish war of resistance was gaining steam under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, with whom Amanullah would later famously meet in 1928. While the radical extent of Kemal’s campaign to remake Turkey into a secular republic was not manifest until several years later, in 1923 Afghanistan already stood apart as a virtual island of Muslim sovereignty in a region shattered by WWI and colonial rule.

The aim of this paper is to reassess the legacy of one of the most polarizing and arguably misunderstood Afghan rulers in modern history—Shah Amanullah Khan (r. 1919–29)—through a rare source attributed to his reign: a transcript of sermons he delivered in Qandahar in 1925. By providing a microhistorical lens to the Amani period based on this largely unexamined text, I ask: what was Amanullah seeking to accomplish in delivering these khutbehs? What new perspectives can they impart about his style of rule, genealogy of his reforms, and how he framed them to the people of Qandahar at the midpoint of his decade-long reign? Finally, what can they tell us about Amanullah’s model of leadership and rule as compared and contrasted to Kemalism?

Bio:
Faiz Ahmed is Assistant Professor of History at Brown University and a specialist in the legal and constitutional history of the modern Middle East. His first book, Afghanistan Rising: Islamic Law and Statecraft between the Ottoman and British Empires (Harvard, 2017) presents a transnational study of Afghanistan’s early constitutional history by uncovering the role of Ottoman, Indian, and Afghan jurists in producing the state’s founding national charter between 1877 and 1923.

Adam Mestyan (Duke)
“‘Like Sons to the Father’: The Codification of Dynasties in Arabic Constitutions, 1860-1940s”

This paper argues that the emergence of a monarchical order in the post-WWI Arab nation states included the legal codification of dynasties in constitutions and special royal decrees. This development was not entirely new and had been ongoing since the late nineteenth century. In Egypt, Iraq, and Transjordan, however, special courts were created in the 1920s to judge the civil affairs of the members of the ruling family. Furthermore, the codification of the order of
succession was a legal gesture of the secularization of political power through shari’a principles.

**Bio:** Adam Mestyan is assistant professor at the History Department, Duke University. He was a Junior Fellow at the Harvard Society of Fellows, taught at Oxford University, and received his PhDs from CEU and ELTE in 2011. His first monograph, *Arab Patriotism – The Ideology and Culture of Power in Late Ottoman Egypt* (Princeton UP, 2017) explores an experimental mode of Arab nation-ness in the Ottoman province of Egypt. He publishes about Islam and nationalism, the material history of Arabic culture, and the history of Eastern European Orientalism. His present project is *Modern Arab Kingship*.

Panel 2. Monarchy and Decolonization

**Milinda Banerjee (Munich/Presidency University)**

“Monarchic Idioms in Modern Indian Thinking about Sovereignty: European Challenges, Asian Solidarities, and Subaltern Militancy”

This paper argues that concepts of human, divine, and messianic kingship have played a crucial, if hitherto inadequately appreciated, role in modern Indian thinking about sovereignty, from debates among the Western-educated middle classes, to realms of peasant political thought. From the late nineteenth century, monarchic imaginaries occupied a central place in imagining a strong nation-state led by a powerful executive: apart from the British imperial context, German and Italian exemplars were also influential in India. Gradually, ‘Asian’ models began to occupy a wider place in anti-colonial intellection about national sovereignty: from Japan and the Ottoman Caliphate in the early decades of the twentieth century, to during the interwar years – Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Bali, Java, and Siam. Such monarchic thinking shaped the emergence of various nationalist, and often monotheistizing, political theologies, among a wide spectrum of Hindu and Muslim actors. The paper goes on to theorize about a certain gap: an excess of monarchic imaginaries, and a lack in practical programmes of building a pan-Indian national monarchy. Further, the paper emphasizes the plurality of visions of political authority which were inflected with kingly grammars, from authoritarian command-oriented thinking about sovereignty (whose political theologies often resembled those enunciated by the controversial German jurist Carl Schmitt), to democratic visions of collectivized kingship and divinity which supported peasant demands for empowerment. Finally, the paper examines the legacies of kingship-inflected thinking in the postcolonial decades, from Indian intellectual-political perceptions of West Asian monarchies during the early Cold War, to regional demands for political autonomy in Bengal and north-eastern India up to the present day. By contextualizing these Indian discussions within wider frameworks of global history, the paper theorizes about the absolute centrality of monarchic concepts in the transregionally-entangled emergence of modern nationalisms (even when kingships have lost practical political power).

**Bio:** Milinda Banerjee is Research Fellow at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich, and Assistant Professor, Department of History, Presidency University, Kolkata. His doctoral dissertation (from Heidelberg University), on concepts of rulership and sovereignty in colonial India (ca. 1858-1947), is now forthcoming as a book. He is also co-editor of *Transnational*
Histories of the ‘Royal Nation’ (Palgrave 2017), and author of several essays at the intersections of South Asian and transregional intellectual history. His current project at Munich relates to a global intellectual history of the Tokyo Trial (1946-48), focusing especially on debates about legal philosophy in contexts of Cold War and decolonization.

David Malitz (Chulalongkorn University)

“American Monarchism and Monarchical Anti-Communism: The Japanese and Thai Monarchies in the Beginning Cold War”

While symbolizing today the authenticity of their respective nations, the monarchies of Japan and Thailand are as much an outcome of nation-building projects starting in the mid-nineteenth century as are the respective modern states. What both monarchies have further in common is that their future was far from secure after the end of World War II. The Japanese imperial institution’s reputation was naturally in tatters abroad, but it had also suffered at home. Furthermore, trying the emperor for war crimes was certainly being discussed in the USA. In Thailand, the absolute monarchy had ended after a military coup in 1932. Throughout the better part of the 1930s and 1940s no king resided in the country, and the government actively limited the monarchy’s role in public life. The monarchy therefore had very little influence, when King Bhumipol became king in 1946. Also, the government continued to limit the institution’s influence and was very suspicious of the political aspirations of members of the nobility.

But with the beginning cold war, the United States discovered their love of monarchy in East Asia. This paper will compare the evolutions of the Japanese and Thai monarchies after World War II using a framework loosely inspired by the work of Antonio Gramsci. In the early Cold War, historical blocs of domestic conservatives and their US supporters emerged, who together were able to create modern hegemonies. The national monarchies became symbols of both authentic nations as well as of capitalist states firmly in the camp of the capitalist “free world”.

Bio: David Malitz is a lecturer at the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok. He holds a double master degree in business administration and Japanese studies from the Universities Of Mannheim and Heidelberg, Germany, and a doctoral degree in Japanese studies from the University Of Munich, Germany. David’s research interests lie in Japanese-Thai relations, the Thai and Japanese history of ideas, as well as in ritual and cognitive studies.

Axel Michaels (Heidelberg)

“The Śāha Monarchy in Nepal’s Constitutions (1854 – 2016)”

Scholars working on the Śāha Monarchy in Nepal (1768-2016) have mostly stressed that the Śāha king, being regarded and crowned as an incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu, had a divine status and kept this symbolic and ritual authority even during the usurpation of power by the Rānā aristocracy (1848-1951) thus significantly contributing to Nepal’s coherence and sovereignty. However, new research on and recently discovered historical material of the 19th century has shown that this rhetoric is but a limited perspective. It ignores that power in Nepal was often shared by several competitive political and religious agents: the little kings within the kingdom,
the Brahmin, the prime minister, the (Maoist) rebel, and even colonial British India. Moreover, as early as in the (Mulukī) Ain of 1854, Nepal’s first constitution of 1854, the king’s legislative and penal power became more and more restricted through the gradual introduction of the rule of law.

In my paper, I argue that in the long 19th century of Nepal which lasted until the mid-twentieth century, Nepal had never been a sovereign state. Though formally independent, it was under British patronage for long, and thus indirectly influenced by both colonial and postcolonial forces. For most of the time, it nurtured a shared or dual sovereignty, allowing for little kingdoms to exist within the Kingdom. Having no clearly demarcated territory, no unified constitutive people, no national and cultural identity, it was many ways a state with many peoples and ‘countries’.

The paper follows the decline of the Śāha monarchy through its various constitutions and argues that it was neither Nepal’s non-postcoloniality (Mary Des Chene) nor the lack of sovereignty that made the state almost a failed state but ‘transnational’ circuits of entanglement and a special historical and structural weakness to join symbolic authority with political power.

**Bio:** Axel Michaels, is Senior Professor of Classical Indology at the South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg and vice president of the Heidelberg Academy of Science and Humanities. In 2001, he was elected as the Spokesman of the Collaborative Research Centre SFB 619 "Ritual Dynamics”. From 2007 to 2017 he was one of the Directors of the Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe in a Global Context". Since 2006, he is head of the project “Religious and Legal Documents of Pre-modern Nepal”.

Current fields of interest are social history and history of Hinduism, theory of rituals, life cycle rites of passage in Nepal as well as the cultural and legal history of Nepal.


**Panel 3. Monarchy and Global Transformation**

**Ervand Abrahmian (CUNY)**

“The Iranian Monarchy: An Anachronism?”

The fall of the Pahlavi Monarchy in February 1979 was one of the most dramatic upheavals of
the second half of the twentieth century. An institution claiming 2,500 year heritage, bolstered with the largest and best equipped armed forces in West Asia, flushed with unimagined oil revenues, and credited with many socio-economic reforms came crashing down after a mere fourteen months of street demonstrations and every-growing mass protests—almost all peaceful. Much has been written to explain the revolution. Some claim the Shah was too modern and forward-long for his medieval and traditional-minded subjects. Others argue that the Shah could have weathered the storm if he has acted more decisively and resolutely—i.e. crushed the protestors with overwhelming force. Others insinuate that the American Administration, led by President Carter, “lost Iran” by sending mixed messages—some days encouraging political liberalization, other days military crackdown.

The main argument of the paper will be that the revolution was foreseeable, inevitable, and long overdue mainly because the Iranian monarchy was an anachronism. In an age of republicanism, it harped back to ancient monarchy. In an age of neutralism and non-alignment, it tied itself to the chariot wheels of the First World—especially the UK and the US. But, most important all, it an age of nationalism, it was deemed by its own public to lack national legitimacy precisely because it owned its power to the 1953 CIA-MI6 Coup—the military coup that had overthrown Mossadeq, the idol of Iranian nationalism. The Shah owed his throne not to just any foreign powers but to ones perceived to be colonial-imperial ones. The Shah, haunted by Mossadeq, tried to compensate for the 1953 “original sin” by reforms, grandstanding on oil prices and on the world stage, and using—or rather misusing—ancient history. These attempts compounded rather than alleviated the problem of national legitimacy.

Bio: Ervand Abahamian (B.A, Oxford University. Ph.D., Columbia University) is a historian of the Middle East specializing in modern Iran. He has taught at the universities of Oxford, Columbia, New York, and Princeton, in addition to the Graduate Center in the City University of New York and over forty years at Baruch College. His book publications include: Iran Between Two Revolutions (Princeton University Press); The Iranian Mujahedin (Yale University Press); Khomeinism (University of California Press); Tortured Confessions (University of California Press); A History of Modern Iran (Cambridge University Press); and The Coup: 1953, The CIA, and the Roots of Modern US-Iran Relations (New Press). His books have also been published in Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Polish, and Italian. He is now working on a book on the 1979 revolution in Iran. In 2011 he was elected a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Wasana Wongsuravat (Chulalongkorn University)

When Deng Xiaoping embarked on his first tour of Southeast Asia in 1978 following the conclusion of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, his first destination was Thailand and the first Southeast Asian head of state he encountered was King Bhumibol Rama IX. Shortly after his royal audience with the king, Deng was also invited to the ordination ceremony of the then Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn (now King Vajiralongkorn Rama X). This also marked the beginning of a long and intense friendship between the People’s Republic of China and HRH Mahachakri Sirindhorn who started her lessons in Putonghua in 1980. The establishment of
formal diplomatic relations between Thailand and the PRC in 1975 has often been perceived simply as an obedient shift following the US’ move to secure Chinese alliance in the Second Indochina War after the historic Nixon-Mao encounter in 1972. The Thai military would then move to support the Khmer Rouge regime in its war efforts against socialist Vietnam and, in turn, received support from the PRC in dismantling the Communist Party of Thailand through the early 1980s. However, the special relationship between the Thai royal family and the government of the People’s Republic of China went far beyond the immediate pro-US agendas in the Southeast Asian Cold War. As Deng Xiaoping was leading China to become the most capitalistic socialist nation at the dawn of the 21st century, the Thai monarchy, with King Rama IX and HRH Sirindhorn as the major driving forces, was consolidating its political power and undermining leftist dissidents through development policies manifested in the king’s countless royal projects and the princess’ seemingly endless knowledge of and intensely friendly relationship with the PRC—one among the kingdom’s greatest Communist threat during the Cold War. While the largest Communist state in Asia moved towards joining and dominated the global capital market, the Thai monarchy consolidated its political position through peasant organization in the guise of the king’s ‘sufficiency economy’ initiatives and spectacular building of Bhumibol’s cult of personality, which bore alarming similarities with the Maoist cult of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. This is the story of post-Cold War Asia, where Communist China becomes capitalist and the Thai monarchy regaining political power through peasant organization and socialist propaganda.

Bio: Wasana Wongsurawat is a historian of transnational Asia and the Chinese diaspora. She currently teaches the modern history of China and Japan at the Department of History and serves as the Director of Thai Studies at the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand. Wasana has also been a research fellow at the Asia Research Institute (ARI), the National University of Singapore, in the China-Southeast Asia Interaction Cluster, and at the Faculty of Humanities, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR. She has edited and co-edited collections related to the transnational history of Asia, including Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, Identity and Culture (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and Sites of Modernity: Asian Cities in the Transitory Moments of Trade, Colonialism, and Nationalism (Springer, 2016)

Noriko Kawamura (Washington State University)
“Emperor Hirohito and the Cold War in Asia”

Emperor Showa, better known in the United States as Emperor Hirohito, became one of the most controversial figures in post-World War II Japanese history. During the war he was sovereign of the state and commander in chief of the armed forces as well as the manifestation of divinity and a symbol of the national and cultural identity of the Japanese Empire. However, after Japan’s surrender, under the U.S. led Allied occupation (1945-1952), Hirohito was spared from the Tokyo war crimes trial and underwent an extraordinary transformation from a divine absolute monarch to a humanized symbolic monarch with no political power under the new democratic constitution written by the U.S. occupiers. As the U.S.-Soviet rivalry escalated into the Cold War, Hirohito continued to reign in postwar Japan until his death in 1989, the year of the fall of Berlin Wall. Hirohito arguably served as the symbol of demilitarized new Japan that allied with the United States to defend Japan from communist threats throughout the duration of the Cold War. My paper will focus on the early years of the Cold War in Asia and examine how and why
Emperor Hirohito emerged as a staunch supporter of Japan’s alliance with his former enemy, the United States. It will highlight the transformation of Hirohito into a symbolic monarch and examine the paradoxical role he played during the U.S. occupation years as the Cold War intensified in Asia and the trans-Pacific world. My study will suggest that despite his new status as a symbolic monarch, Emperor Hirohito continued to play an important role in both domestic politics and U.S.-Japanese relations as the Cold War escalated in Asia. Beneath the stereotypical portrayal of Hirohito as a shrewd survivor and a passive collaborator of the U.S. occupiers, he acted as a major player in U.S.-Japanese diplomatic negotiations behind closed doors.