

## **Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern** by

Prasenjit Duara

Reviewed by Pete Sweeney for SISEA590 Yue Dong

Duara's work on Manchukuo and the story of "a state in search of a nation" is clearly coordinated with prior readings of Liu, Rogaski, and Fitzgerald. Once again we find ourselves in the midst of a somewhat abstracted debate about the nature of abstractions like "nationalism," the way they are formed, and the way symbols and language are manipulated to shape them. Duara's work is particularly dense in its implicit reference to the theories of deconstructionism as advanced by Jacques Derrida. As with Derrida, we see in Duara a certain less-than-accessible style. Thus alas I must qualify whatever reactions I have to the more philosophical assertions of the book by noting that it is entirely possible I did not actually get what Duara was actually about here or there. And I do confess at times I feel that when I reduced the intricate language in some of his points, they did not appear to merit the complex language used to make them. Some words are very precise and can't be substituted, like *aporia* or *monopsony*, but why use "labile" instead of "unstable?"

Nevertheless, the historical picture is a fascinating and somewhat unique one. Manchukuo was, like opium, many things to many people. Duara's exposition of the fight over the definition of Manchukuo as a nation, a borderland, an imperial frontier, and a nation state is enlightening to the extent that it illustrates the diplomatic and governmental mechanisms by which nationalism is induced, manufactured, fabricated . . . and Duara is not averse to questioning the value of such fabrications. Indeed, his primary premise, that the thesis builds on, is that the association of the personal identity with a national identity is not a product of a scientific process, historical understanding, or of any genuine affiliation (or at least, regarding the latter, it doesn't have to be) but rather the product of governmentalizing elites who use the concept of nation for mobilization for the purposes of the state.

It is difficult to outright refute this premise and since I agree with it I won't try. I do, perhaps, question the necessity for Duara to belabor this point a bit; the work appears to exhibit a certain uncertainty in direction: are we going to look specifically at Manchukuo or are we going to merely use it as a springboard to attack other targets sideways? For example, his chapter on "Women and the Figure of Tradition within Modernity" is interesting, yes, but it scarcely requires the history of Manchukuo to support it, and Duara spends much time in this chapter wandering around the rest of China making points.

Nevertheless, Duara provides interesting quotations to illustrate the problem historians face when charged with validating the frequently inaccurate vision of national evolutions people adopt. He quotes Gu Jiegang: “We need to know if the capacity of China for unity has to depend on such a preposterous historical view”. Elsewhere Duara cites Benedict Anderson and others who talk of the need for “necessary forgetting” and the like. Nevertheless, the conclusion I take from them is that nationality is like religious truth; with the typical secular bias of an academia fond of functional analysis, Duara and his compatriots consider that the masses who rally around flags, churches, gods, and nations are essentially rallying around either lies or fables, depending on your view.

Yet these fictitious creations are at times beneficial as mobilizers; and Duara agrees that the independence movements in Asia that sought to rally people around national symbols were “necessary” to counter exploitative imperialism despite their ad hoc historical-symbolic foundations. The risk I see here is that if we are to accept that it is *necessary* to rally persons around manufactured symbols instead of actual truth (and Duara does not necessarily imply that it is), we legitimize a permanent role for image manufacturers and render national consciousness and coherence into a sort of marketing exercise. Regardless of whether Duara believes that the concept of the nation-state can and should be ultimately discarded—and I believe he does—to posit theories of “necessary fictions” is to assign an implicit responsibility to contemporary intellectual and creative classes I am not sure I am entirely comfortable with. Where Fitzgerald’s Sun Yatsen may have been conscious of his propaganda techniques when he “painted the tiger,” there is little question that he believed the tiger represented something real. Whereas from Duara’s perspective, an enlightened political and intellectual leadership would be akin a priesthood *consciously* preaching lies. One questions, ultimately, what benefit this consciousness provides beyond the ability to rule through hypocrisy, however compassionate? The alternative is to deny the necessity for mobilization around symbols.

However, Duara heavily qualifies this benefit nationalism can provide by distinguishing between modern nationalism and its independence-movement precedents. “We can scarcely retain a clear historical picture by pitting a world-emancipating anti-imperialist nationalism against imperialist forces,” he says. “The nationalisms of the twentieth century were too shaped by—and shaped to respond to—the ideals, tensions, and practices of the nation-state system, world culture, and global capitalism to generate long-term systemic opposition.”

The least abstract part of the work—the geographical location around which it is organized—is Manchukuo. Duara provides us with a narrative that shows the Chinese and the Japanese both fighting over symbolic and interpretive scraps to demonstrate to the League of Nations that Manchukuo should be somehow included in their evolving nations. Manchukuo's vague status— as a violent “borderland” of unstable status (per Japan) or as an imperial frontier (per China) at the time of the Lytton commission lent itself to various interpretations. The central question Duara asks and answers is, why did Japan seek to make Manchukuo a sovereign, “authentic” nation state in symbol, if not practical reality, instead of simply calling it a colony and using it as such? Because Japan self-consciously chose to create a nation-state, or the appearance of a nation state (and I don't believe Duara acknowledges a significant difference between the two), Duara argues that the Manchukuo case study illustrates something true about the way concepts of nationhood, sovereignty, and authenticity themselves are manufactured elsewhere— that the self-consciousness fakery of the Japanese effort is typical for its fakery if not for its self-conscious quality. He proceeds to illuminate the irreconcilable challenges the Japanese faced; to produce an independent country that was in fact profoundly dependent; to create authenticity through inauthentic means; to create a rigorous independent economy and then erect trade barriers against Manchukuo exports to Japan. The devolution of the Japanese approach in Manchukuo from idealism to exploitation is illustrative, but one does wonder about counterfactuals. Had Japan not engaged in a massive war with the United States, might they have succeeded in their project? Given his discussion of the “dynamics of scalar identity”, it seems possible that the manufacture of a national ideal requires *internal* metaphorical consistency— such as the usage of the awakening trope in China, or the image of the Constitution in the American mind—but little else.

To Duara's mind, modernity— the East Asian Modern— is the ultimate construction of this process, this discourse between China, Japan, and other stakeholders in the process, including of course the “Manchurians” themselves . . . of whatever self-identified “ethnic” origin. Modernity is something achieved. According to imperialist logic, sovereignty is something earned by modernity/civilization. Authenticity, on the other hand, requires timelessness, the sense of something essential preserved. Thus Duara takes trouble to illustrate the conflicting ideals of authenticity proposed by various Japanese, the Qing, the CCP and the KMT (here his description of the KMT's murder of “modern” women is particularly cogent to his point). The Japanese approach was particularly strange. On the one hand, Japan saw itself as a modern world power and the natural center of an emergent pan-Asian order. On the other, they deliberately rendered

certain groups in Manchukuo to a more primitive state, evicting the Oroqen from their farms and sending them back to a more “pure” existence in the forests. One is reminded of Fitzgerald’s discussion of the museum’s role in delineating modernity. In order to draw a line between their “authentic” antecedents while still laying claim to “modern” sovereignty, the Japanese sought, in effect, to put their “ancestors” in a living museum.

I did not understand Duara’s comments about capitalism in the introduction and don’t feel they were adequately pursued. Duara associates capitalism and modernity and in some cases opposes capitalism to authenticity. He goes on to imply that authenticity-oriented groups like The Taliban are therefore fighting both modernity and capitalism at the same time. I would have liked to know more about what his distinction was between the two, particularly in the context of Japanese capitalism in Manchuria, which exploited Manchurian resources in the context of “strategic autarky” and semi-command economy. In fact, Duara himself notes that a primary concern of the Western powers was the Japanese inhibition of free trade. One wishes for more details (or a clearer explanation) of how capitalism as a construct worked against authenticity in Manchukuo, given Duara’s assertion that the Manchukuo economy “with regard to infrastructural development [implemented by imperialist states] . . . it’s achievements were greater than most other states.” By economic standards, Manchukuo had a clear claim to be more integrated with the Japanese economy than the Chinese economy, and also an independent economic entity (capable of competing with Japanese businesses, and necessitating the erection of a Japanese trade barrier). Yet the Japanese did not use this to legitimize Manchukuo, turning instead to arguments about the Manchu rule over China, the national consciousness of the Han Chinese population there, and the state of the Chinese government(s).

My final reaction to the work is that while I found the point worth making and the area worth studying, I find myself continually alienated by the way deconstructionists write, and I confess I suspect a mild hypocrisy in one who writes about how national images are manufactured by elites . . . who then goes on to write for an audience of image-manufacturing elites in language that excludes participation by the uninitiated.