

REVIEWS

ZHOU ENLAI: A MAN OF HIS TIME

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Chen Jian, *Zhou Enlai. A Life*, Cambridge, MA; London, UK: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2024, 817 pp. ISBN: 9780674659582.

Zhou Enlai (1898-1976), the former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Premier of the People's Republic of China (PRC), remains widely regarded abroad as one of China's most respected leaders, renowned for his diplomatic skills and modest lifestyle. His pragmatic approach to diplomacy is often invoked by analysts as a model for navigating the ongoing transition from American unipolarity to a multipolar international order through steady and cautious diplomatic engagement [Nixon Cox, Arnold 2025].

In the PRC, Zhou Enlai's legacy has seen a revival during the «golden age» of the Belt and Road Initiative (also known as the One Belt One Road, — 帶一路, *Yidai Yilu*). Both official discourse and scholarly works emphasise the continuity between Zhou's diplomacy —particularly his efforts to expand Beijing's ties with Asian and African nations and his Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (和平共处五项原则, *Heping Gongchu Wu Xiang Yuanze*) —, and current infrastructural and economic initiatives. His legacy is thus presented as a foundational model for China's peaceful rise, modernization, and openness [Liu 2024; Xinhua 2024]. On the 120th anniversary of Zhou's birth in March 2018, Xi Jinping praised him as an exemplar of discipline, responsibility, and dedication, implying that socialism with Chinese characteristics represents a long-term national project aligned with Zhou's vision [CGTN 2018].

Chen Jian recognises the importance of exploring the complexities of Zhou Enlai's political career and engaging with key historiographical debates, while refraining from delivering a definitive moral judgment on his political figure. Official Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) historiography has portrayed Zhou Enlai as a morally exemplary revolutionary, a skilled diplomat, and a moderating force who restrained the most destructive tendencies of Maoist

politics, often minimising his involvement in periods of political repression. In recent decades, however, scholars have challenged this narrative. Gao Wenqian's *Zhou Enlai's Later Years* portrayed Zhou as a tragic and compromised figure, suggesting that his unwavering adherence to Party discipline made him complicit in, and an enabler of, the regime's most destructive campaigns. His survival thus depended on his political submission to Mao Zedong [Gao 2007]. Barnouin and Yu Changgen pushed this argument further, underlining that Zhou was at times punitive, persecuting rivals, betraying comrades, and participating directly in political violence. The popular image of Zhou as a protector is a political myth that conceals his opportunism and cruelty [Barnouin, Yu 2006]. By contrast, Michael Dillon's biography, while acknowledging Zhou's personal dilemmas and constraints, presented him more sympathetically as a statesman and moral counterweight to Mao [Dillon 2020].

Chen Jian's biography moves beyond competing interpretations and tries to present a balanced portrait of a complex political figure. Departing from both the celebratory tone of official historiography and the critical stance of later revisionism, Chen offers a contextual and structurally grounded account of Zhou's life. Zhou emerges as a skilled political operator, striving to avert catastrophe and limit damage, yet constrained by Party discipline and revolutionary imperatives. Chen's portrayal, while still sympathetic, remains critical, emphasising Zhou's political skill but also the contradictions and moral compromises he made to build «New China». Rather than labelling Zhou a hero or villain, Chen focuses on how the CCP leadership functioned under extreme political internal and external pressures, showing a life that embodies both the «constructive results» (p.8) and profound contradictions of the Chinese Revolution.

The biography stands out from earlier works for its impressive length and the rigor of its research. Chen drew extensively on Chinese-language primary sources to reassess even well-studied phases of Zhou's life. Benefiting from the period of archival openness in the PRC in the late 1990s and early 2000s, he consulted Zhou's personal writings and correspondence, Politburo and Party records, materials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, and numerous provincial archives. Far from being a mere compilation of sources, this exceptional research offers a robust analytical framework for situating Zhou within the succession of revolutions that shaped twentieth-century China, portraying him as both an active agent and a product of these profound political transformations.

The book follows a clear diachronic structure coherent with earlier biographies and is divided into four main parts. The first examines his formative years, which proved pivotal in shaping his political consciousness and career (Part I: Early Years, pp. 11–68). The second focuses on his pre-1949 revolutionary activities and the path that led him and his comrades to the

foundation of the PRC (Part II: Making the Revolution, pp. 69–277). The third centres on his role as one of the leading political figures of New China, addressing internal challenges, intraparty disputes, and foreign policymaking (Part III: Building New China, pp. 279–542). The final part is dedicated to the last ten years of his life, marked by the hardships of the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath, as well as Zhou's achievements on the international stage (Part IV: Surviving the Cultural Revolution, pp. 543–690).

Chen devotes particular attention to Zhou's early years (1898–1924), demonstrating that he was very much *a man of his time*—a point reflected in the book's original working title [Wilson Center 2007]. Zhou's early trajectory is, in fact, closely intertwined with China's historical path: the decline of his mandarin family from Jiangsu mirrored the broader disintegration of the imperial order; his restless youth took shape during the late Qing, a period characterised by intense migrations and major social unrest (chapter 1). As a student at what would later become Nankai University in Tianjin, Zhou was shaped by the New Culture Movement and radicalised by Japan's Twenty-One Demands, which prompted his initial political engagement and fostered his nationalist feelings (chapter 2). Like many contemporaries, he went to Japan, initially seeing it as a model to emulate, but ultimately reflecting critically on its militarism, imperialism, and social inequalities (chapter 3). After returning to Tianjin in 1919, Zhou closely followed the May Fourth Movement and participated in related activities at Nankai (chapter 4). His later decision to sojourn in Germany, the United Kingdom, and France marked a decisive turning point: by the spring of 1922, Zhou had fully embraced communism, becoming deeply involved in the creation of new Communist organizations and embarking on the path of a «professional revolutionary» (p.62).

Part II (Making the Revolution) traces Zhou Enlai's transformation from a young revolutionary to an indispensable party member during the turbulent years between 1924 and 1949. Chen reconstructs Zhou's early prominence within the United Front, highlighting his crucial roles at the Whampoa Military Academy and in the National Revolutionary Army, where he gained military and political credibility across the CCP and Guomindang (GMD) (1924–1931, chapter 6). The Shanghai years (1927–1931, chapter 7) represent a critical phase in which Zhou controlled the CCP's organizational and intelligence networks and consolidated his authority within the Party, even as the United Front rapidly collapsed. From this point onward, Chen places Zhou's complex relationship with Mao Zedong at the centre of the narrative. During the Jiangxi Soviet period (1931–1934, chapter 8) and the Long March (1934–1935, chapter 9), Zhou's conduct, particularly at the Zunyi Conference (1935), facilitated Mao's eventual ascendancy over both the army and the Party. According to Chen, Zhou's capacity to absorb responsibility, compromise in intraparty conflicts, and manage crises proved essential to the CCP's survival, but also reinforced his

subordinate position within Mao's emerging authority. The chapters that delve into the Second United Front and the Yan'an Rectification Campaign further stress this dynamic (chapters 9–11): while Zhou played a key role in negotiating with the Guomindang (Chinese Nationalist Party) to sustain cooperation against Japan, he endorsed Mao's leadership, accepting Maoist orthodoxy as a defining aspect of CCP political culture. By doing so, he secured his political survival and a place within the Party's inner circle.

Zhou Enlai's role in the newly founded PRC is examined in Part III (Building New China) through the interconnected lenses of intraparty dynamics, state-building policies, and diplomatic shifts. Chen convincingly argues that Zhou was never a fully internalised Maoist; rather, he enabled and sustained Mao's agenda out of a belief in compromise and institutional stability. Zhou's role in key campaigns was characterized by a dichotomy: he was an indispensable senior administrator and diplomat who helped establish consensus, but his influence was consistently curbed when Mao pursued a more radical policy. Chen acknowledges Zhou's complicity in political tragedies, while stressing the structural limits that reduced him to a policy conveyor rather than a principal decision-maker. Zhou's pragmatic interventions during periods of crisis, especially in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960), are framed as efforts to «prevent the vessel from sinking», (pp. 8–9) even as his ultimate loyalty to Mao became indisputable (chapters 15, 17, 19–22). At the same time, the book emphasises Zhou's comparatively greater autonomy in foreign affairs, where his diplomacy—from the Geneva and Bandung Conferences to managing relations with Moscow, Washington, Pyongyang, New Delhi, and Hanoi—reflected a sustained commitment to anti-imperialism and the nationalist cause, guided by a long-term perspective (see especially chapters 16, 18, 23, 28). On the eve of the Cultural Revolution, Chen portrays Zhou's alignment with Mao as politically inevitable but personally painful, rooted in the absence of any viable alternative narrative to Mao's political and ideological dominance (chapter 24).

Part IV (Surviving the Cultural Revolution) examines Zhou Enlai's final years through unprecedented political chaos. Following Lin Biao's death, Zhou emerged as China's *de facto* second-ranking leader (chapter 25–27): Chen portrays Zhou as aware of the devastation caused by Mao, striving to maintain essential administrative and executive functions, while also supporting Mao's campaigns and purges, thereby demonstrating a pragmatic, if at times cynical, vision for China's recovery. At the same time, these years marked Zhou's greatest diplomatic achievement: the Sino-American rapprochement. It not only altered the dynamics of the Cold War but also reaffirmed his lifelong dedication to diplomacy (chapter 28). Chen underscores the tragedy of Zhou's final years (chapters 29–30): gravely ill, politically isolated, subjected to renewed criticism and forced self-criticism, and denied timely medical treatment, Zhou's authority steadily eroded. The leader saw the decline of his political career, embodying the

paradox of survival and moral ambiguity that defines Chen's overall interpretation of Zhou's life.

Chen presents Zhou Enlai as a profoundly ambivalent figure: both a participant in the CCP's greatest tragedies and a statesman striving to mitigate their worst consequences. Balancing broad historical analysis with close reconstructions of key episodes, Chen's detail-rich narrative makes the book engaging even for readers with no prior knowledge of the subject, while maintaining its significance for scholarly research. The biography thus contributes to debates in modern Chinese historiography while offering a compelling narrative of China's transformations in the first part of the twentieth century. Could Chen's work be considered the ultimate biography of Premier Zhou? While no single work can claim that status, as opposed to previous biographies of Zhou Enlai, Chen's provides a more nuanced portrait of the long-time prime minister of the CCP, essential to understanding his life and legacy.

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THE TRANSLOCAL ISLAND OF OKINAWA.
ANTI-BASE ACTIVISM AND GRASSROOTS REGIONALISM

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Shinnosuke Takahashi, *The Translocal Island of Okinawa. Anti-Base Activism and Grassroots Regionalism.*, SOAS Studies in Modern and Contemporary Japan, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024, xii+180pp. (ISBN 9781350411531). £26.09 (PDF)

In *The Translocal Island of Okinawa*, Shinnosuke Takahashi brilliantly tells the story of the anti-base movements' struggles against the militarization of the Okinawan territory. He organizes an historical and anthropological analysis under the lens of «trans-localism». Takahashi decides to strip away the layers of «Cold War geopolitical reductionism» (p. 6) that have extensively been used to frame the general «Okinawan problem» in favour of a people-based, transboundary, and «anti-colonial/anti-imperial» (p.7) approach. The author builds his argument on the previous works of scholars such as Arasaki Moriteru, whose contributions analyse Okinawa's political history from the inside and from below, and who also played a major role in activist groups; equal importance is given to the contributions by Ewa Domanska and Tessa Morris-Suzuki on the pervasive «material aspects of traces» (p.8). These «traces», or «wounds» (p.8) in the case of Okinawa, helped in building bridges not only in between the islanders, but also across the institutional borders, making it possible to conceptualize a «We» upon a shared struggle. (pp. 8-9)

The author then introduces his original concept of Okinawa as a «translocal island», in which multiple and *diverse* activists and their actions built the foundation of anti-base politics (p. 10). The focus on the «local» is also exemplified by referencing to other scholars such as Miyume Tanji's *Myth, Protest and Struggle in Okinawa* (2006), Masamichi Inoue's *Okinawa and the U.S. Military* (2017), but also Yonetani (2004), Dietz (2015), Onishi (2013), Kosuzu (2008), and finally Kozue (2019). The commonality between these scholars is their focus on the Okinawan struggle outside of reductionist narratives and the adoption of cultural or constructivist approaches to the matter.

Takahashi therefore builds his historical reconstruction around the concept of «locality». This idea is described as a «fluidal articulation» that is not

represented by «institutional borders» but by a «more flexible and multidirectional» network of relationships «articulated on the ground level» (p. 12). He also introduces the notion of «grassroot regionalism» as a sum of actions and perspectives that «regionalize» mindsets and forge links across the institutional and geographical borders of Okinawa (p. 15). By focusing on the stories of individuals and communities, rather than on broader geopolitical and reductionist narratives, the author wishes to emphasize the role of people in «making, unmaking and remaking local activism» (p.17). The concepts of grassroot regionalism, combined with the idea of translocal island form the theoretical and methodological framework of this book.

The book is structured in seven chapters. The first chapter has been summarized and discussed above: it focuses on the previous literature and the theoretical foundations of the study. From chapters two to six, the author introduces the readers to various organizations and people who promoted the grassroot activism that took place in Okinawa since the 1950s. The last chapter contains the personal experiences of the author during his visits to other South Pacific islands that host military bases, and a final reflection on his research.

Chapter two covers the 1950s and 1960s and recalls the history of occupied Okinawa for its first half, while concentrating on two of the most prominent movements in the latter part: the «whole-island struggle» (*shima-gurumi tōsō*), and the «Association for the Return of Okinawa to Japan» (*Nihon Fukki Sokushin Kiseikai*). In particular, the «whole-island struggle» of 1956 represented an «unprecedented [...] island-wide protest, regardless of ideology, against the US occupation» (p. 34). The consequences of this protest, despite apparently beneficial to Okinawa, led to an unsatisfactory resolution that fuelled the subsequent mass protests in the 1960s demanding a revision of Okinawa's sovereignty. Here, the grassroot activism is visible in the participation of the most diverse local organizations in the political struggle against military occupation of Okinawa, but it also created the first divisions between pro-reversion and anti-reversion activists, highlighting the multiplicity and complexity of views that united under a common banner, and showing a fervent dynamism that «shaped Okinawa's anti-base struggle». (p. 43)

Chapter three documents how, after the return of Okinawa to Japan in 1972, and following developmental policies adopted by the Japanese government in the island, the «struggle» was reshaped and revitalized by rural citizens of Okinawa in response to the environmental degradation brought upon by new infrastructure projects. The focus of this renewed struggle was on the relationship between a community and its surrounding space and environment, with little relations with the «political binary» of Left and Right. It rapidly tied in the 1970s and 1980s with anti-base politics and pivoted around environmental issues, with multiple residents' organizations starting to organize around the regional concept of «Ryukyu Arc» (p. 58) and forging relationships with other local activist groups,

thus expanding the network of activism outside of Okinawa (p. 59). The main individual behind this first phase of regionalism is Arasaki Moriteru, and this expansion would be rooted in practical action based upon his concept of solidarity. It ultimately led to the foundation of a specialized research institution focusing its research on two scopes: the Ryukyu Arc, and the broader region of the Asia-Pacific.

This would have not been possible without the contribution of one specific individual whose contributions Takahashi extensively discusses in chapter four: Shimao Toshio. Through his work as an author, and its research on remote islands, Shimao managed to collect the «material aspects of traces» and experienced «the presence of the past» (p. 78). This «enacted» the theorization of the regional concept of «*Japanesia*», which celebrates the idea of a multipolar, multicultural archipelago against the idea of cultural homogenization perpetuated by the modern Japanese nation. This concept, explains Takahashi, enabled the discourse of the «Ryukyu Arc» as a critical concept, and allowed Shimao to travel to different islands in which a relationship between «islanders» and «mainlanders» shaped their histories, and witnessed both the traces of a colonial past, as well as the anti-colonial struggles. This, in turn, made the concepts of «Ryukyu Arc» and «*Japanesia*» a «home-grown version of decolonial cultural politics» (p. 87) that fundamentally shaped the Okinawan grassroots movements in their most recent phases.

Chapter five narrates the internationalization of one association that better upholds the legacy of previous grassroot movements, as well as embraces, in practical reality, Shimao's concepts through their activities. Takahashi recalls the diverse origins of the individuals who founded the Okinawa-Korea People's Solidarity: a mixture of mainland Japanese and Okinawans, as well as a Korean woman activist. The story of the group and their actions, including the struggles with internationalization and the heavy legacy of Japanese imperialism are reported thorough the chapter, including what the Okinawa-Korea's People Solidarity (*Okinawa Kankoku Minshū Rentai* - OKPS) experience means for younger generations and the future of trans-local activism in Okinawa.

Finally, chapter six focuses on the crucial individuals who permitted the development of such a «multifaceted regionalism» featured within the OKPS. Takahashi reconstructs the life of Arasaki Moriteru, whose life experience starting as a fervent nationalist and evolving into an anti-colonialist and promoter of cross-borders regionalism permeated the civic movements in Okinawa since their beginning after WW2; Takahashi Toshio, who abandoned its extreme leftist ideas to be accepted as a «local» by Okinawans and forged the first connections with Korean activists, keeping them alive throughout the years; Yu Yeongja, a native Korean who describes herself as a «bridge» (p. 131), and promoted civic activism both in Korea, Japan, and Okinawa since her younger years, despite her complex identity and the challenges brought upon by it. These life stories show

the real meaning of translocal activism, or «a civic movement that fosters a social imagination beyond local and national boundaries» (p. 137), and how these «translocal lives» formed the foundations of a social movement that operates outside of political binaries and institutional borders.

In conclusion, the final chapter contains the personal reflections of the author regarding the «invisible threads of regionalism», the future of younger generations of activists, and how the experience of groups such as the OKPS were possible in the beginning, and replicable to other movements. Again, the individual stories of people engaged in activism ultimately play a crucial role in expanding the conceptual and spatial scope of a movement. The author suggests that an underlying sentiment of «feeling at home in an unfamiliar place and environment» (p. 144) makes it simpler to enable a «grassroot regionalism with other communities» (p. 145); this connection can be «fragile [and] disrupted by various structural, technical, logistical and personal problems», but it remains «crucial to initiating and developing grassroots cooperation». (p. 146)

In his book, Takahashi told the story of how social movements born in Okinawa moved from being «local» to «trans-local» mainly through the contribution of individual activists whose private life majorly influenced the development and evolution of a grassroot regionalism still existing at present time. The historical narration flows effortlessly and constantly engages the reader with new and innovative insights on how the story of social movements can (and should) be told, outside of reductionist binaries dictated first by cold war lenses, and now by regional and global rivalries. The mixture of an anthropological, sociological, and historical approach makes the reader attached to the stories of activists who remained either invisible or incorporated in bigger «us» vs «them» group narratives. In this regard, Takahashi breaches these generic discourses and emphasizes the linkages between activists of different backgrounds who together made possible the realization of an inclusive, trans-local, and people-based movement such as the OKPS. «*The Translocal Island of Okinawa*» not only contributes to the academic debate by adopting an original approach and departing from streams of literature that tend to reduce social movements to mere reflections of bigger historical events, but it may also serve as a manual for newer groups in their quest for internationalization and reaching of broader audiences who share one or more affinities. This kind of study could also be replicated by scholars focusing on other island and people-based movements, such as the anti-base group «A Foras» from Sardinia, whose activities closely resemble the ones carried by Okinawan anti-base groups. This book could well be used as a starting point towards a comprehensive study of the just mentioned movement, as well as serving as fundamental literature for a hypothetical comparative study of the experiences of Okinawa and Sardinia against military occupation.

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REFRAMING DISPLACEMENT IN COLD WAR ASIA

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Yumi Moon (ed.) *Cold War Refugees: Connected Histories of Displacement and Migration across Postcolonial Asia*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, xi+252 pp. (ISBN 9781503643130)

Over the past decades, scholars have repeatedly underlined the risks of treating the «refugee» as a universal humanitarian figure, and many have instead invited academic effort towards a reconceptualization tied to a more heterogeneous landscape of historical and geographical conditions that produce displacement [Gatrell 2013]. Such warnings are particularly critical in fields such as migration studies, the more circumscribed refugee studies, and Cold War studies that, by privileging state actors, diplomatic archives, and superpower rivalry as their primary empirical and analytical lenses, lure researchers into a Western-centric and ‘high politics’ epistemological trap.

In such a framework, *Cold War Refugees: Connected Histories of Displacement and Migration across Postcolonial Asia*, edited by Yumi Moon, proposes a significant reorientation of perspective, challenging the reproduction of the refugee as a placeless and timeless figure. As the title appropriately anticipates, this collection of contributions introduces and guides the reader through experiences of population displacement caused by Cold War conflicts in Asia – thus seeking to fill the void in the literature focusing on non-Western regions of the globe.

The collection advances a transnational and transimperial framework that embeds refugee movements within broader processes of partition, sovereignty formation, and geopolitical restructuring. At the conceptual level, the volume navigates the currents of two closely intertwined debates: the definition of the refugee as a legal and political category, and the historiography of the Cold War itself. In her introduction, Yumi Moon contends that the historiography of the Cold War has been overwhelmingly shaped by the decisions and strategies of «great powers» and political elites, a perspective that has relegated refugee experiences to the shadow of national and supra-national events. Against this backdrop, the book proposes a shift in scale and focus. Refugee displacements, it argues, were neither isolated nor purely national phenomena; rather, they

unfolded within a web of trans-Asian connections that linked crises across the continent both synchronically and diachronically. The United States' experience with Korean refugees, for instance, informed its position at the 1954 Geneva Conference when addressing the movement of Vietnamese civilians, illustrating how refugee governance circulated across contexts. The resulting partitions, in turn, played their role in determining and shaping such forced mobilities. Borders drawn in Korea, India and Pakistan, or Vietnam were not merely diplomatic settlements but historical forces in their own right – structures that reshaped societies, reconfigured political loyalties, and, in many cases, fuelled prolonged violence and civil conflict. However, despite embracing such a perspective, the volume then resists the portrayal of refugees as passive victims of geopolitical upheaval. Through what might be described as a form of «refugeetude», it explores how displaced populations internalised, reinterpreted, and, at times, strategically appropriated Cold War ideologies to navigate and reshape the political and cultural landscapes of their new environments.

With regard to the structure of the monograph, the introduction lays the theoretical framework by positioning refugees as historically marginalised subjects within state-centred Cold War narratives and by proposing a transnational analytical lens attentive to the interconnectedness of Asian displacement crises. It identifies three guiding threads, namely interconnected refugee trajectories, partition as a geopolitical instrument, and the political agency of displaced populations, which build the foundations for the subsequent chapters. The body of the volume then turns to five distinct, though analytically resonant, geographical contexts: Vietnam; the Dachen Islands and Taiwan; the Korean peninsula; Pakistan, through the spatial politics of Karachi; and Afghanistan. The epilogue departs from strictly historical analysis and offers a more philosophical meditation on statelessness, violence, and the ethical limits of Cold War humanism. Here, the refugee emerges as a figure that unsettles the presumed stability of sovereign borders and exposes the moral fragility underpinning modern political orders.

It is particularly in this concluding chapter that the author, Aishwary Kumar, broadens the volume's scope by moving from historical reconstruction to philosophical reflection. He challenges the familiar narrative that portrays the Cold War as a stabilising force that prevented a third world war in Europe, suggesting instead that such a view obscures what he describes as an ongoing «civil war of colonial origins» (p. 168) that unfolded across Asia and Africa and whose effects have not fully receded. Here, the apparent geopolitical equilibrium of the postwar era coexisted with - and in many ways depended upon - forms of protracted violence in the decolonising world. Kumar also offers a pointed critique of what he terms Cold War humanism. The humanitarian framing of refugees, he argues, often abstracts displaced populations from their political histories, recasting them as universal and ahistorical figures of suffering. In doing

so, it risks erasing the very conflicts, borders, and power relations that produced their displacement. The epilogue concludes on a stark note: we now inhabit what Kumar calls a «planet of refugees» (p. 193), a world in which vulnerability to displacement, disposability, and even extinction has become a shared - if profoundly unequal - condition.

Considered collectively, the case studies illuminate both the structural convergences and the contextual divergences that characterised refugee politics across postcolonial Asia. Nguyen's analysis of Vietnam's partition situates population transfer within a broader genealogy of imperial boundary-making, illustrating how civilian mobility was transformed into a diplomatic instrument. Yang's examination of the Dachen evacuation demonstrates how displacement was folded into anti-communist state-building in Taiwan, even as refugees confronted precarious conditions of resettlement. Moon's study of northern refugees in South Korea shifts the focus to the domestic political consequences of cross-border migration, revealing how refugee activism contributed to the consolidation of militant Cold War nationalism. In a different register, Muzaffar's chapter on Karachi foregrounds spatial governance, arguing that urban planning and refugee resettlement operated as mechanisms for managing instability within a Cold War framework of territorial control. Finally, Nasser and Crews complicate depoliticised humanitarian narratives in the Afghan case, showing how displaced populations were simultaneously framed as passive recipients of aid and acted as consequential political agents.

The principal strength of the volume lies in its capacity to provincialise state-centric Cold War historiography without collapsing into a celebratory account of refugee agency. By proposing the realm of displacement as a structural dimension of postcolonial order-making, the collection bridges diplomatic history and critical refugee scholarship. Its multi-archival foundation and broad geographic scope provide a significant degree of empirical soundness, while the emphasis on partition as a recurring geopolitical tool offers a compelling lens for reassessing mid-twentieth-century Asian transformations. At the same time, the volume's comparative ambition might be seen as raising questions about the degree of integration across the individual contributions. While the introduction compellingly frames refugee movements as interconnected across the region, the chapters tend to engage these connections implicitly rather than through sustained cross-referential dialogue. However, this is not easily achieved in edited collections, and this does not weaken the coherence of the collection, as it rather reflects the diversity of methodological and regional approaches assembled within it. Similarly, the broad conceptualisation of the «refugee», which proves analytically generative throughout the volume, also invites further reflection on definitional boundaries: as displacement emerges as a pervasive feature of postcolonial politics, the relationship between legal refugee status and broader forms of forcible mobility could perhaps be elaborated more explicitly. Finally,

although the collection acknowledges the limited attention devoted to movements toward socialist states, this asymmetry points less to an omission than to the enduring archival and historiographical unevenness that continues to shape the field. These considerations, far from detracting from the book's contribution, instead highlight its capacity to stimulate further comparative and theoretically nuanced scholarship on displacement in the Global Cold War.

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RICE, POWER, AND POLICY LEGACIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Jamie S. Davidson, *Rice Politics in Southeast Asia: Legacies of the Green Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2026, 332 pp. (ISBN: 9781009624640)

Jamie S. Davidson's *Rice Politics in Southeast Asia* offers a compelling and ambitious re-interpretation of the political economy of rice in three key Southeast Asian states: Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Moving beyond conventional explanations rooted in culture, rent-seeking, or electoral politics, Davidson advances a historically grounded and theoretically innovative argument that the enduring protectionism in rice sectors across these countries is best understood as a legacy of the Green Revolution's success rather than its failure. By foregrounding the long-term institutional and ideational consequences of a transformative developmental episode, the book positions itself at the intersection of comparative political economy, historical institutionalism, and Southeast Asian studies.

The book is structured in two main parts, preceded by a substantial introduction and followed by a comparative conclusion. The first part reconstructs the preconditions and transformative effects of the Green Revolution in the late 1960s and 1970s. Davidson begins by outlining the structural constraints faced by rice-deficient Southeast Asian states, emphasizing geographical limitations and demographic pressures that rendered full self-sufficiency elusive. Beyond explaining technical agricultural factors, the author shifts the analytical focus to the political and economic implications of this structural condition. In doing so, he highlights the centrality of rice both as a staple food and a politically charged commodity intimately tied to questions of legitimacy, development, and state capacity.

The core of Davidson's argument emerges in his treatment of the Green Revolution as a «critical juncture» that fundamentally reshaped both policy trajectories and political regimes. The dramatic increases in rice production were facilitated by technological innovations such as high-yielding varieties, irrigation systems, and chemical inputs. Davidson does not treat these developments merely as agrarian achievements. Instead, he presents them as important sources of

political legitimacy. In Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines alike, the success of state-led rice production programs contributed to regime consolidation, poverty reduction, and broader processes of structural transformation. Crucially, Davidson contends that this success generated a durable institutional and ideational legacy that would outlast the immediate gains of the Green Revolution.

The second part of the book examines the post-Green Revolution period, focusing on the persistence of rice protectionism through state-controlled import regimes and continued intervention in domestic production. Through detailed country studies, Davidson demonstrates how policies such as import monopolies, price controls, and subsidies remained remarkably resilient despite sustained pressure from international financial institutions and domestic reformers advocating market liberalization. While the Philippines eventually implemented partial liberalization in 2019, Indonesia and Malaysia maintained more robust protectionist frameworks. This comparative perspective allows Davidson to highlight both common patterns and national divergences, particularly in the institutional configurations and political coalitions underpinning rice policy.

One of the book's most original contributions lies in its conceptualization of «production nationalism». Davidson introduces this term to describe a coalition of state elites, bureaucrats, and allied actors who derive both material and symbolic capital from the pursuit of rice self-sufficiency. These actors are shaped by their involvement in the Green Revolution. They exhibit what the author terms an «emotional belief» grounded in pride. This refers to an affective commitment to the idea that national dignity is tied to domestic production capacity. This conceptual move represents a notable departure from standard rationalist accounts in political economy, as it foregrounds the role of emotion and identity in sustaining policy regimes over time.

Methodologically, the book employs a comparative historical approach, combining archival research, secondary literature, and fieldwork insights. Davidson situates his analysis within the framework of historical institutionalism, drawing on concepts such as path dependence and critical junctures to explain policy continuity. At the same time, he engages extensively with alternative explanations. These include culturalist interpretations of rice as a symbolically charged commodity, agricultural political economy models, and rent-seeking theories. While acknowledging their analytical value, Davidson ultimately argues that these approaches fail to adequately account for both the timing and the durability of protectionist policies.

The strengths of *Rice Politics in Southeast Asia* are considerable. First, the book makes a significant theoretical contribution by linking the legacy of the Green Revolution to contemporary policy regimes in a systematic and persuasive manner. By reframing a widely studied developmental episode as the foundation of long-term institutional persistence, Davidson opens new avenues for understanding how policy success can generate path dependence. Second, the

concept of production nationalism is both innovative and analytically productive. It provides a useful lens for examining how state elites internalize and reproduce development paradigms, bridging the gap between material interests and ideational commitments. Third, the comparative scope of the book enhances its explanatory power, allowing for nuanced cross-national analysis while maintaining a coherent overarching argument.

Nevertheless, the book is not without its limitations. One potential concern lies in the extent to which the Green Revolution is positioned as a near-deterministic explanatory factor. While Davidson convincingly demonstrates its importance, the emphasis on this single historical juncture risks overshadowing other dynamics that may have contributed to the persistence of rice protectionism. For instance, the role of contemporary political coalitions, evolving global market conditions, and shifting patterns of rural-urban relations could have been more fully integrated into the analysis. In this regard, the dismissal of alternative frameworks at times appears somewhat overstated, particularly those grounded in agricultural political economy and rent-seeking.

A related issue concerns the operationalization of «emotional beliefs», exceptionally the role of pride in sustaining production nationalism. While the incorporation of affect into political economy analysis is a welcome and innovative move, the empirical grounding of this concept remains uneven. The extent to which pride can be systematically identified and measured across different actors and contexts remains unclear. This ambiguity raises questions about its analytical robustness. In some instances, the argument relies on inferred motivations and offers limited demonstration of causal mechanisms.

Furthermore, although the book foregrounds state elites and policy frameworks, it pays comparatively less attention to the agency of farmers and other subaltern actors. Given that smallholders constitute a significant portion of both producers and consumers in the rice economy, a more detailed exploration of their responses to and interactions with state policies would have enriched the analysis. This is particularly relevant in light of the book's acknowledgment that many smallholders are net consumers of rice and may not uniformly benefit from protectionist measures.

Finally, the comparative design is a major strength, but it also raises questions about generalizability. The focus on three net-importing countries provides a coherent analytical frame, yet it leaves open the question of how the argument might apply to rice-exporting states in mainland Southeast Asia or to other staple crops in different regional contexts. Expanding the comparative horizon could further test the broader applicability of Davidson's theoretical claims.

Despite these limitations, *Rice Politics in Southeast Asia* stands as a significant and thought-provoking contribution to the study of development, political economy, and Southeast Asian history. Its central insight – that policy

success can generate enduring institutional legacies – offers a valuable corrective to narratives that focus primarily on failure and dysfunction. By integrating historical analysis with theoretical innovation, Davidson provides a framework of interest not only to Southeast Asia specialists but also to scholars concerned with the long-term dynamics of development policy more broadly.

In sum, this book represents a rigorous and original intervention in the literature on food politics and state formation. It contributes meaningfully to the historiography of development in Southeast Asia, particularly by reinterpreting the Green Revolution as a technological, economic, and political episode with lasting institutional consequences. By situating policy continuity within a historical framework of path dependence and elite belief formation, Davidson productively bridges development history and political economy. While some claims invite further scrutiny, its analytical ambition and empirical richness make it an important reference point for future research.

THEOLOGY AND THEOCRACY IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

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Mehran Kamrava, *How Islam Rules in Iran: Theology and Theocracy in the Islamic Republic*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024, (ISBN 9781009460880).

Mehran Kamrava's *How Islam Rules in Iran: Theology and Theocracy in the Islamic Republic* extends a long research agenda on the Islamic Republic's historical formation and legitimacy narratives. The author's extensive list of books on the topic underscores this trajectory, listing (among recent titles) *Righteous Politics: Power and Resilience in Iran* (2023), *A Dynastic History of Iran: From the Qajars to the Pahlavis* (2022), and *Triumph and Despair: In Search of Iran's Islamic Republic* (2022), alongside other works.

For an area-studies journal such as *Asia Maior*, the book's value lies in its fusion of internal religious–legal debate with a clear account of how those debates become governance. It avoids treating Islam as cultural essence or mere ideological ornamentation; instead, it reconstructs the doctrinal moves and institutional pipelines through which Shi'i jurisprudence becomes political authority—and through which dissenting interpretations are disciplined.

Kamrava begins with an explicit gap statement. Although there is no shortage of books on Iran, the «intricacies» of state–religion relations, especially the jurisprudential underpinnings of theocracy, remain «highly understudied», leaving a «gaping hole» in our understanding (Preface, p. vii). The book's stake is that regime resilience cannot be explained through coercion, patronage, or constitutional design alone; it also depends on sustained ideological production in which Shi'i jurisprudence is politicized, reinterpreted, and embedded in institutional practice.

The introduction frames contemporary state–religion relations through three features. First, the state's foundations rest on an innovative reworking of *velayat-e faqih* into supreme political leadership, largely associated with Ruhollah Khomeini's reinterpretation of guardianship (Introduction, p. 1). Second, the state's jurisprudential claims have been persistently contested by clerics and lay thinkers, despite extensive bureaucratization and control of the clerical establishment (Introduction, p. 1). Third, after 2009 the state «reasserted»

an idealized state–religion relationship and institutionalized an «official orthodoxy» that the author labels «Khameneism», characterized as conservative in jurisprudence, authoritarian in politics, and security-paranoid in its intolerance of dissent (Introduction, p. 2).

The book is organized as a periodized account of the «journey» of Iranian Shi‘ism from revolutionary mobilization through wartime consolidation, reformist rethinking in the 1990s, and later conservative retrenchment (Introduction, p. 2). The table of contents signals a deliberate staging: early chapters establish the institutional setting and the clerical establishment, then move to jurisprudence and the evolution of guardianship, followed by chapters on religious guardianship/guidance and Islam as a source of social protection, the relationship between Islam and democracy, and the competing sources of legitimacy, before culminating in «Khameneism» and religious authoritarianism and ending with a forward-looking chapter on the Islamic Republic’s trajectory (Contents, pp. v–vi).

A key conceptual move is to treat ideology as an ongoing process with identifiable arenas. Kamrava argues that the regime’s theoretical underpinnings are continuously «produced and reproduced» across three «sites of ideological reproduction»: official state institutions; semi-governmental bodies (research institutes, media outlets, and the theological establishment); and clerical/lay theorists whose ties to the state are «loose and indeterminate» (Introduction, p. 4). The boundaries between these sites, he adds, are «highly blurred», often making it difficult to determine where one ends and another begins (Introduction, p. 4).

Methodologically, the author signals deep engagement with Persian-language debates and a commitment to accessibility, providing a glossary of religious terms to facilitate the understanding to non-specialized readers (p. 312). For an area-studies readership, this combination—internal discourse plus clear scaffolding—enhances the book’s reach beyond a narrow circle of jurisprudence specialists.

One of the book’s strongest contributions is its insistence that jurisprudence is constitutive of governance. Kamrava argues that Iran is not a «run-of-the-mill authoritarian system»; its institutional complexity is partly a product of designing a system that is simultaneously Islamic and republican, requiring detailed theoretical scaffolding articulated by senior clerics who move between religious and political establishments (Introduction, p. 4). This framing is a useful corrective to analyses that treat ideology as mere rhetoric appended to security-state rule.

The three-site model is analytically useful because it avoids two distortions: leader-centric accounts that treat ideology as emanating exclusively from the apex, and culturalist accounts that treat ideology as an ambient, undifferentiated religiosity. By naming semi-governmental research institutes,

media, and the theological establishment as intermediate arenas, Kamrava clarifies the institutional pipelines through which doctrine becomes policy, enforcement routines, and public pedagogy (Introduction, p. 4). The framework is also readily deployable for interpreting later episodes of tightening, recalibration, or partial opening.

«Khameneism» captures post-2009 orthodoxy and enforcement, but the author explicitly notes that Ali Khamenei is «hardly [the] sole intellectual architect» of the doctrine that bears his name. Khamenei's prolific articulation of Islamic rule operates alongside supportive institutions and a broader cohort of jurists who provide theoretical exposition and justificatory depth (Introduction, p. 5). This helps the reader see consolidation as an ecosystem rather than a single-actor project.

The book demonstrates that doctrinal disagreement produces enforceable boundaries. The introduction's discussion of Mohsen Kadivar and Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari—including trials before the Special Court for the Clergy, imprisonment/defrocking, and professional exclusion—shows how the state regulates the permissible range of theological argument (Introduction, p. 9). This linkage is crucial to the book's overall claim: jurisprudence is not «background», but a regulated arena of struggle.

For non-specialists, the commitment to limiting jargon and providing a glossary makes a difficult subject teachable. For specialists, the value lies in synthesis: Kamrava draws disparate internal debates into a coherent narrative about how theocracy is maintained through ideas as well as institutions, without reducing one to the other.

In the concluding chapter Kamrava suggests that the state increasingly relies on «forced compliance» with only a «small percentage» adopting the official ideological agenda voluntarily while many comply publicly and reject privately; he adds that exact proportions are «indeterminable under authoritarianism» (Chapter 9, p. 298). The caution is responsible, but it marks a boundary of the approach: the book is strongest on ideological production and institutionalization, less on fine-grained measurement of belief, practice, and everyday negotiation across regions, classes, and generations.

How Islam Rules in Iran delivers a coherent and conceptually disciplined explanation of how Shi'i jurisprudence is operationalized as governance in the Islamic Republic, and how theocratic authority is reproduced through an interlocking ecosystem of institutions and authorized interpreters. For an area-studies readership, its main contribution is to reposition regime durability as simultaneously institutional and jurisprudential: ideas are not merely invoked, but built into administrative routines, legal boundaries, and the policing of dissent. If some of its most consequential claims—especially the extent of intellectual «standstill» and the reach of «Khameneism» as a unifying category—invite

further specification and debate, that is also a measure of the book's value: it sets an agenda that future scholarship can test, refine, and extend.

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Massimiliano Vaghi, *Claude-François-Parfait Boutin en Inde et aux Mascareignes (1782-1786). La France en Asie à l'époque de la révolution américaine*, Sesto San Giovanni, Mimésis, 2024, 220 pp. (ISBN: 978-8869764196).

Massimiliano Vaghi is currently one of the leading specialists on French policy and presence in India in the eighteenth century, a subject to which he has devoted several studies, including *La France et l'Inde: commerces et politique impériale au XVIIIe siècle* (Mimésis, 2016). In his new book, he offers an edition of the journals of Claude-François-Parfait Boutin, who travelled in the Indian Ocean between 1782 and 1786. This source shows that, despite the reduction of the French presence in India to five trading posts after 1763, the French continued to take an interest in India, even though the British had clearly become the leading European power in the region.

There was at this time, however, no question of reviving a colonial war on the subcontinent; rather, the aim was to rethink France's role on the scale of the wider Indian Ocean region. It is precisely within this perspective that the ideas of Claude-François-Parfait Boutin should be understood. He advocated relying on the Mascarene Islands (Bourbon and Île de France, now Réunion and Mauritius) to develop an economic system that would serve as a foundation for restoring the French presence in India. This outlook must be seen in the broader context of the American War of Independence and Great Britain's loss of its thirteen North American colonies. Boutin clearly perceived that this major shift within the British Empire would lead the London government to refocus its attention on the Indian Ocean.

Massimiliano Vaghi's book opens with a lengthy contextualisation of the situation in India and the Mascarene Islands in the mid-eighteenth century. The author first provides a very thorough historiographical overview, effectively tracing the evolution of research in this field in recent years. He shows clearly how the final decades of the eighteenth century were long neglected by French historiography, as they were marked by a sense of decline following the defeat in the Seven Years' War. However, he also notes that recent studies have reassessed the French presence and its role in the Indian Ocean in a more positive light. It is

within this renewed historiographical context that the edition of Boutin's journals takes its place.

Claude-François-Parfait Boutin, born in 1759 into a family of the robe nobility, embarked at Cádiz in 1782 to join the French troops in the East Indies under the command of the Marquis de Bussy. At that time, the Mascarene Islands were closely linked to the French establishments in India, and much thought was given to how these bases might develop synergies and help strengthen the French presence in the Indian Ocean. When the American War of Independence broke out, the government at Versailles decided to send an expedition to India, thereby helping to extend the conflict on a global scale. The explanation provided for the motivations behind this expedition, however, leaves the reader somewhat unsatisfied, especially when compared to the level of detail offered elsewhere on points of lesser importance for understanding Boutin's writings. Nevertheless, it is clear that, in French thinking, the Indian theatre formed part of the vast stage of the war against Great Britain that had begun in America. Readers unfamiliar with French policy in India will no doubt find of interest the pages that Massimiliano Vaghi devotes to Bussy's diplomacy in India and to the military events. The lengthy contextual section (pp. 17–101) includes passages that are highly useful for understanding Boutin's travel journals, while the contribution of other sections—such as the one on contemporaries' perceptions of the Franco-Anglo-Indian wars (*La perception des guerres franco-anglo-indiennes par les contemporains* (and not « *contemporaines* »)—appears less evident.

Boutin's journals are preserved at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal in Paris. They consist of four sections: *Voyage from France to the Indies* (1782–1783); *Voyage from the Isle de France to Pondicherry* (1785); *Voyage from the Isle de France to Bourbon* (1785); and *Tour of the Interior of the Isle de France* (1786). Boutin's adventure began on 11 May 1782 with his departure from Paris for Spain by land. He embarked at Cádiz as part of a convoy that left Spain on 16 July. After a month-long stop at the Cape of Good Hope, Boutin set sail again and arrived at Porto Novo on 17 March 1783. He then provides a detailed description of the Battle of Cuddalore and the subsequent engagements in June 1783.

Thereafter, Boutin travelled throughout the Indian Ocean, spending a year and a half on the Isle de France before moving on to Bourbon, which he describes in detail, including its different regions, its agriculture, and its inhabitants, whom he observes—regretfully—to be of mixed descent, born of unions between white settlers from France and Black populations. His final journal is a description of the Isle de France, in which Boutin once again displays his curiosity, particularly in his observations of nature. He notes above all that the island was insufficiently exploited due to a lack of enslaved labour. Boutin's observations clearly show him to be a man of the Enlightenment, endowed with wide-ranging curiosity. This aspect might perhaps have deserved further

development. The journal ends somewhat abruptly, prompting questions about its original intended purpose.

Boutin's journals are of interest in three main respects: first, for the information they provide on navigation; second, for their account of military episodes in India during the final year of the American War of Independence; and third, as travel narratives offering descriptions of the Mascarene Islands. Boutin does not, however, address broader political considerations, leading Massimiliano Vaghi to wonder to what extent he was aware of the major international issues at stake. The principal contribution of Boutin's writings lies in his observations and reflections on the economic potential of the Mascarene Islands, which could have made possible the reconstitution of a French empire in the Indian Ocean that would be more economic than political in nature.

Although the source itself is undeniably valuable, the volume as a whole suffers from a general weakness in its use of the French language. One notes linguistic errors, confusion between masculine and feminine forms for certain words, misspelled proper names (Rousselot de Surgy, not de Sourgy, p. 85), and above all inconsistent capitalization—for example, the systematic use of «Océan indien» instead of the correct form «océan Indien». One may also point to some surprising assertions, such as: « [Au XVIIIe siècle] l'Européen...conquiert l'espace asiatique et le rend sujet aux lois et aux canons occidentaux » ? (p. 103). Despite these reservations, Massimiliano Vaghi's book remains a valuable contribution to our knowledge of French policy in the Indian Ocean in general and, more specifically, in the late eighteenth century—a period largely neglected by French historiography.