

Social Science

# How to Appraise the History of Asia?

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## I. Reactionary Bourgeois Scholars of the West Distort the History of Asia

ASIA is one of the cradles of the world's oldest civilizations. The Asian people have their honoured place among the people of the world. They have made outstanding contributions to the world's advanced cultures, both in ancient and modern times. Many of the winds of change in the modern world have swept out of Asia. Rich historical records and material remains furnish eloquent proof of the fact that Asian history has its brilliant and important place in the history of world civilization.

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But, it must be said that for quite a long time the history of Asia has not, in general, been appraised objectively. Reactionary bourgeois scholars of the West and their followers have in many ways wilfully distorted Asian history and minimized its importance. Up to the present time, one cannot discern any decisive change in this regard.

### Unscientific Attitude

The majority of Western historians still have an entirely unscientific attitude towards the history of Asia. They have no real interest at all in a true scientific appraisal of that history. From their writings, one finds it hard to get a real picture of many important Asian events, much less understand how history really develops.

**Histories of Asia, of the East and of the various Asian countries written by such Western bourgeois scholars usually propagandize two concepts. Firstly, that Asia has been "barbarous," "backward," "immoral" and "uncivilized" in all its ages. Secondly, that the progress and civilization of Asia in modern times have been favours generously bestowed on her by the West.** Deliberately distorting Chinese history in the U.S. White Paper of 1949, Dean Acheson, the former U.S. Secretary of State, wrote: "Then in the middle of the 19th century the heretofore impervious wall of Chinese isolation was breached by the West. These outsiders brought with them aggressiveness, the unparalleled development of Western technology, and a high order of culture which had not accompanied previous foreign incursions into China."<sup>1</sup>

That is how the Western bourgeois scholars generally approached Chinese history as well as the history of Asia. Did the West brutally invade Asia? This is not apparently what happened; the West "brought . . . a high order of culture" with it to bestow on Asia. The second concept is stressed in dealing with the modern history of Asia while the first concept is stressed in regard to both ancient and modern times. It would be unfair to say that such historical writings on Asia by venal bourgeois scholars of the West possess no striking features. These works invariably fling mud at the peoples of Asia and their culture, while doing their best to ignore or whitewash the innumerable crimes committed by imperialism in Asia. This is their most striking feature.

In the present paper, I propose to confine myself to modern Asian history. How shall we appraise it? We must analyse all problems in this field in accordance with the standpoint of historical materialism.

## **II. Two Aspects of Asia's Modern History**

**The modern history of Asia (18th century to the present time) records many events and struggles. But the main current of that history can be summed up in one sentence: This was a period of criminal activities by colonialist marauders and imperialists invading Asia and turning it into a colony or semi-colony and of struggles waged by the Asian people to oppose and expel these invaders and their lackeys. This is the central theme of the modern history of Asia.** All other struggles are inevitably subordinate to the struggle between these two opposites and their course of advance inevitably hinges on circumstances in that developing struggle.

Invaded and dominated by Western colonialism, Asia lived through a dark period of history. This lasted for more than a century.

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Department of State, *United States Relations With China*, 1949, p. v.

Colonialism and imperialism changed the colours of the maps of vast areas of Asia. From westernmost Persia and Turkey, through Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India to Burma, Indonesia, and the Philippines in South-east Asia and the countries of Indo-China, to China and Korea in the East—with the exception of Japan in the extreme East—these countries and nations with ancient cultures were successively turned into colonies or semi-colonies of Portugal, Spain, Holland, Britain, France, Russia, Germany and of the arrogant, present-day imperialism of the U.S.A. They were dismembered, their territories were cut away or annexed and their sovereign rights were seized by foreign hands. The final concentrated expression of the seizure of a nation's sovereignty by the imperialists is seen in the ruthless plundering of its material wealth.

Colonialist penetration and conquest in Asia, and the reducing of Asian countries to colonies and semi-colonies was accompanied by crimes and tyranny unprecedented in history. The rule of the colonialists and their lackeys is more ruthless and terroristic than that of ancient Rome. More than 100 million Asians were killed. Whole populations were wiped out. Magnificent palaces, temples and other structures, some of the finest in the world, were destroyed or reduced to ruins. Historical records and valuable works of art were put to the flames. Production stagnated or declined, industry and agriculture remained backward and social development was retarded.

In his 1834 report describing how the British machine-building industry had disrupted Indian social life, Lord Bentinck, the then British Governor-General of India, said that "the misery hardly finds a parallel in the history of commerce. The bones of the cotton-weavers are bleaching the plains of India." And this admitted crime was only one of those, uncountable as the sands in the Ganges River, committed by the colonialists. What part of the vast lands of Asia is not littered with the bones of Asian people murdered in modern times by the colonialists?

This phase of the history of Asia stands out glaringly. It is wrong not to give an adequate exposure of it or to relate its true facts. It is impermissible to conceal or gloss it over.

### **Record of Anti-Colonialist Struggles**

However, this picture of darkness and decline is only part of the reality of modern and contemporary Asia. The whole picture of these times in Asia contains a record of magnificent and militant struggles of the oppressed. The Asian peoples are by no means standing on the flanks of the historical stage as unimportant actors, they are at the forefront or take the centre of the stage playing one of the leading roles in the drama of history. It is wrong to belittle this aspect of Asian history; it is all the more wrong to deny this aspect of Asian history.

**Modern Asia is, first of all, the most extensive battlefield in the anti-colonialist struggle being waged by the people of the world.**

The Asian people began their struggle against colonialism when Portugal, Spain and Holland first invaded Asia. The more ferocious became the subsequent attacks by the colonialists, the fiercer the people's resistance grew. The modern history of the various Asian countries is a lengthy chronicle of the people's struggles against colonialism. The insurrections of the people against foreign aggression and oppression and against feudal rule in their own countries have been almost continuous in the past centuries.

The struggles of the Asian peoples were formerly waged independently, but in the 19th century they began to be interlinked and one upsurge of the national-liberation struggle after another has followed. The first upsurge was in the middle of the 19th century. Among the large-scale struggles of that time were the Babist Revolt (1844-52) in Persia, the Taiping Revolution (1851-64) in China and the revolutionary uprising of the Indian people (1857-59). There was a succession of resistance movements in other parts of Asia. Marx at that time pointed out: "The revolt in the Anglo-Indian army has coincided with a general disaffection exhibited against English supremacy on the part of great Asiatic nations, the revolt of the Bengal army being, beyond doubt, intimately connected with the Persian and Chinese wars."<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the 19th century, a second upsurge of national-liberation struggles took place in Asia. The nationalist movement led by Malkom Khan (1890-91) in Persia, the revolt against the tobacco monopoly by the Persian people (1891), the people's uprisings in Assam and Manipur (1891) and the nationalist movement led by B.G. Tilak (1895-97) in India, the anti-French uprising led by Hoang Hoa Tham of Viet Nam (1891-98), the Dong Hak Party Uprising of Korea (1893-95), the resistance struggle of the people of the Ottoman Empire, the early Young Turkey Movement (after 1894), the Philippine revolution to overthrow Spanish rule (1896-98), the Chinese revolutionary movement led by Dr. Sun Yat-sen (after 1895) and the Yi Ho Tuan Movement (known as the "Boxers" in the West) (1899-1901) — all these are major manifestations of this upsurge. The broad masses of the labouring people and the political forces of the bourgeoisie took part in these struggles. Their common characteristic was that their spearhead of struggle was directed against imperialism.

The year 1905 was followed by the third upsurge of the national-liberation struggle. The Persian revolution (1905-11), the anti-British struggle by the radical wing of the All-India National Congress (1905-08), the

Turkish revolution (1908-09) and the Chinese 1911 revolution to overthrow the Ching Dynasty (1911-12), all belong to this time. In commenting on the significance of this upsurge, Lenin said: "Hundreds of millions of the downtrodden and benighted have awakened from medieval stagnation to a new life and are rising to fight for elementary human rights and democracy."<sup>3</sup> This was described by him as "the awakening of Asia."

The anti-colonialist struggle of the Asian people at that time not only encompassed vast areas but drew unprecedented numbers of people into the battle. The struggle was extremely fierce, with one upsurge following another. That is why we say that modern Asia became the most extensive battlefield of the anti-imperialist struggle of the people of the world. Africa and Latin America were also important battlefields of the world anti-imperialist struggle. The people's struggles in Egypt and the Sudan alarmed the imperialist world and voiced support for each other and were linked with the people's struggles in Asia because they all had a common aim.

Of course, many of those revolts, uprisings and revolutions were quickly crushed. But this does not in the least diminish their significance. **The frantic attacks launched against them by the colonialists and imperialists faced the Asian people with a question: whether or not to dare to fight and deal with and defeat the aggressors. The answer of the Asian people is: dare to fight and dare to make revolution; believe in the justice of your cause and be assured that your strength and wisdom will prevail over the aggressors.** The "authority" of the colonialists has been held in contempt, and the spirit of revolution has developed. Each struggle waged by the peoples has paved the way for their next struggle. The colonialists and imperialists turned Asia into a bastion of the colonial system and each struggle waged by the peoples has made another breach in the walls of that bastion, presaging its final and complete collapse. In their steadfast struggle, the masses of the people have become more awakened and grown stronger, while one by one the reactionary rulers are being driven off the stage of history. Thus, even if the people's struggles failed, the people have won in the final count. This is why these uprisings and revolutions have left their indelible mark on history.

## Two Main Currents in Modern Asia

Two major historical currents of the world meet together in modern Asia.

Since World War II, there have been great developments in the history of the people's revolutionary struggles in Asia, Africa and Latin America. These areas have become the focus of various types of contradictions in the world. Imperialist rule in these areas

<sup>2</sup>"The Revolt in the Indian Army," *The First Indian War and Independence 1857-59*, Eng. ed., Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup>Lenin, "The Awakening of Asia," *Collected Works*, Eng. ed., Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1963, Vol. 19, p. 86.

has steadily weakened and one after another great movements of the people's revolutionary struggles have emerged and developed vigorously. **The national democratic revolutionary movement in Asia, Africa and Latin America together with the international socialist revolutionary movement form the two major historical currents of the present-day world.**

With these two massive forces of world history come together in Asia, no force on earth can now prevent Asia from advancing with giant strides. Since World War II, more than 50 countries in Asia and Africa have declared their independence. In Asia, independence was declared by some ten countries, including Indonesia, India and Pakistan — countries with large territories and populations, which were subject to colonial rule for several centuries. Since World War II, the People's Republic of China, the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea have embarked on the road of socialism. These are changes of epoch-making significance in the history of Asia as well as in the history of the world.

### **Significance of Chinese Revolution**

Among the changes which have taken place in Asia since World War II, the victory of the Chinese people in their democratic revolution and the start of the socialist era in Chinese history are historical events of the first magnitude. They have not only influenced Asia but have deeply influenced the whole world. The Chinese revolution has, in the first place, fundamentally changed the world's balance of forces between revolution and counter-revolution, between the socialist camp and the imperialist camp. The victory of the Chinese revolution delivered a crushing blow to imperialist domination. Yesterday's great rear of imperialism has been turned into a base area, into a forefront of the anti-imperialist struggle. Everything is turning into its opposite. China's area is approximately the same as that of Europe. China's population is larger than that of Europe. The forces of the world's revolutionary camp obviously exceed those of the world's counter-revolutionary camp.

In the second place, the victory of the Chinese democratic revolution and the advent of socialism in Chinese history have set a brilliant example for the colonial and semi-colonial countries of the world. The victory of the Chinese people over imperialism and its lackeys and the founding of the People's Republic of China have greatly inspired the people of many colonial and semi-colonial countries in their struggle for national independence and the complete victory of their people's democratic revolution. The Russian October Socialist Revolution served as an example for revolution in the oppressor nations, that is, for revolution in the imperialist countries; while the Chinese revolution set an example for revolution in the oppressed nations, that is, the colonial or semi-colonial countries. In studying the changes in Asian history since

World War II, we need to make an adequate appraisal of the path as well as the influence of the Chinese revolution. For it is of significance for the whole world, far beyond the East or Asia.

While the Asian people are attacking the imperialists and carrying history forward, the imperialists and reactionaries are not sitting back with folded arms. Since World War II, far from abandoning colonialism in Asia, Africa and Latin America, the imperialists are hanging on wherever they can. In this regard, U.S. imperialism is the most cunning and desperate. In face of the powerful struggles of the people of the world, the U.S. and other imperialists and colonialists have been compelled to change some of the old methods of direct colonial rule and introduce the "new" methods of neo-colonialism. They foster puppet regimes and practise various subtler methods of colonial control; organize military blocs and build up military bases, and plunder the wealth of countries by means of economic "aid" and various other forms of economic "exploitation." They engage in "spiritual" infiltration and cultural aggression; organize subversion and engineer military coups d'etat; they engage in direct armed intervention and launch large-scale armed aggression. U.S. armed aggression against Korea and the current U.S. armed aggression against Viet Nam and Laos are only two of these examples.

**In brief, imperialism has not perished, the anti-imperialist struggle of the Asian people is not over. Asia has been and still is a stormy battlefield of the anti-imperialist struggle.**

The modern history of Asia today appears at once more complicated and simpler than ever before. On the one hand, it has witnessed the impact of the two great historical currents of the national democratic revolutionary movement and the international socialist revolutionary movement; on the other, it is seeing the death-bed struggles and desperate attacks put up by U.S. imperialism and all the old and new colonialists.

### **Focal Point of Struggle**

Asia has become a focal point of struggle in the present-day world. The struggle between the two opposed forces mentioned above, its development and outcome, has a bearing not only on the destiny of the Asian peoples but on the destiny of the peoples of the whole world. The modern history of Asia is by no means a local question but a question that concerns the immediate course of world history. In commenting on modern world history it is impossible to get to the heart of things if one avoids mention of the two above-mentioned historical currents. Similarly, in commenting on the modern history of Asia, if one avoids touching on the operation of the two big currents of history in this area, on the relentless struggle between revolution and counter-revolution, which affects the whole picture of world history, one will not be able to give an insight into the truth of things.

What conclusion is to be drawn from the above analysis? It is that since the invasion by Western colonialism, there actually exist two Asias, one is a dark and backward Asia under colonialist and imperialist rule, and the other is a great and militant Asia, making brilliant advances. They exist side by side, but stand sharply opposed to each other. There is little truth about this in the works of those reactionary Western bourgeois scholars. By exaggerating Asia's backwardness, they try to cover up and whitewash the unprecedented crimes and obscurantism of the rule of the colonialists and their lackeys in Asia; using the same methods, they have also tried to obliterate knowledge of the struggle of the Asian masses and to denigrate the people's role in carrying forward mankind's history. The dark things in the history of Asia have been masked and falsified by them; the bright things have been obscured by them.

Now, with the fabrications and distortions exposed, the history of Asia presented to us is one which encompasses not only enslavement, darkness and humiliation on the one hand, but struggle, and great and brilliant advances on the other. The veil has been torn off and the true features of history are being revealed. As time goes on the opposing forces and the trends of development of the two Asias will be revealed more clearly.

In this short review I cannot deal with the outstanding contributions made by the Asian people in the cultural and spiritual fields, and the fact that the feudal society of the Asian states was itself pregnant with the embryo of capitalism and that even without invasion by Western capitalism, they would have gradually developed into capitalist societies.

### III. Colonialism's Western Centred History

Reactionary Western bourgeois scholars invariably refuse to admit that history other than that of Europe — to which North America is now added — has much importance in the history of world civilization. The golden rule followed by such Western bourgeois historical science is that history must be centred on Europe or West Europe. This "theory" is rotten to the core, but it is still being spread and still enjoys a certain audience.

Take the following lines from *Modern History* by two American authors for example. "From the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans down to the present day, the leading roles in the drama of human history have been taken by the white men of Europe. It was in Europe, the smallest of all the five continents, that what we call modern civilization arose; that the common people first dared wrest the sceptre of government from diademed autocrats; that nations learnt patriotism; that inventors harnessed nature's forces to drive machines of iron and steel or to move man's ships and cars; that bullets and explosives were first made deadly weapons

of warfare; that scientists explored the heavens with their telescopes or learnt the secrets of chemistry, physics, biology, and medicine; that public schools and automatic printing presses opened to all the kingdom of knowledge."<sup>4</sup> It uses insulting labels for Asian and African peoples speaking about the "retrogressive yellow race in the Far East" or the "illiterate African Negroes." This pernicious propaganda is widely spread in cheap editions.

The absurdity of this theory held by many Western historians manifests itself in teaching practice, which simply excludes Asia from world history. Chester Bowles states in his *Ambassador's Report* that lectures given at American schools on so-called "world history" start from Egypt and Mesopotamia, go on to Greece via the Island of Crete and then through Rome, to end in France and Britain. Students are asked to memorize one hundred of the most important dates in "world history." Only one of them concerns Asia — 1857, when Commodore Perry, an American naval officer, "opened up" Japan.

The way the Western bourgeoisie look at world history is just the way the ant, described in the fable, looks at the world. The ant thinks itself ruler and sole master of the world. In its eyes everyone else is insignificant. The historical idealists have surpassed all records in this respect.

For quite a long time, such historians have described Europe or West Europe as occupying the centre of world history. This is simply a product of the views of the egocentric, out-and-out aggressive forces of Western capitalism. It strikingly reflects the view of Western colonialism which constantly commits aggression against the Eastern countries and seeks to enslave the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America. In ancient times, imperial Rome looked on the Germans and Gauls (French) as "inferior races" and "barbarians" and concluded that these peoples should for ever submit to the rule of the "superior race," namely, the rule of the Roman Empire.

### Bourgeois Historians Serve Their Class

This is exactly how the Western colonialists regard the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America. They look on Asia as a place without any "genuine civilization" or history, as a place to dump their goods, plunder raw materials and exploit cheap labour. The European-centred approach to history is a blatant reflection of such a colonialist view. According to this view, the Western colonialists' domination of Asia and all other "backward" regions is perfectly reasonable. This is how bourgeois historians serve their own class. This is exactly how matters stand whether or not those historians are aware of it.

<sup>4</sup>Carlton J.H. Hayes and Parker Thomas Moon, *Modern History*, The Macmillan Co., New York, 1928, p. 651.

Social consciousness is determined by social being. Decadent conceptions will all finally and inevitably be shattered by convincing facts. This outcome is only a matter of time. The struggle being waged by the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America to transform the world is shaking the earth. No matter how he may try to seal himself off from the outside world, no one can escape this cataclysm. Confronted with this fact, these Western bourgeois ideas of a world centred on Europe or West Europe will come to quick end.

When we say we must oppose such ideas of a European-centred world, we naturally do not mean that the history of Europe should be treated with indifference, not in the least. To do so would cause people to swing from one anti-scientific extreme to another.

The history of Europe enjoys a fixed position. The bourgeois revolution in the Netherlands in the 16th century, the British bourgeois revolution in the 17th century, and especially the French bourgeois revolution at the end of the 18th century added lustre to the history of Europe. The French bourgeois revolution particularly did a great service to the bourgeoisie. It can be said that the 19th century as a whole passed under the sign of the French revolution. The era of ascending capitalism and bourgeois revolution in Europe witnessed a rapid advance in world history. There is not a shadow of doubt about this. However, no sooner did it gain power, than the European bourgeoisie began to change quickly into a conservative and reactionary class. With the advance of the proletarian revolutionary movement in Europe and the development of the national democratic revolutionary movement in the East, the European bourgeoisie has become more and more reactionary, clinging desperately to the world order which is based on backwardness, barbarous cruelty, privilege and the exploitation of man by man.

It is because the advanced European proletariat entered the historical arena that the history of Europe has continued to advance. Holding high the banner of socialist revolution in utter opposition to the desires of the bourgeoisie, they continue to carry the history of mankind forward. The proletariat of Asia will always be grateful to the advanced proletariat of Europe.

The proponents of a European-centred world have been energetically publicizing the leading role of Europe, but judging from so-called Christian civilization and the like which many people talk so glibly about, they do not, in fact, really know where the progressive nature of Europe lies. This is why the bourgeois remains a bourgeois.

### **Our Tasks as Historians**

As the subject of scientific research, history has its objective course as well as its objective laws of development. Events do not change according to the likes and dislikes of historians. It is unthinkable that any serious historian should "transform" history in accordance with his subjective ideas. In appraising Asian

history objectively, the aim is to restore its original features which have been besmirched and distorted and not to prettify or whitewash them. In studying the history of a region or an age, we must adhere to historical materialism and oppose historical idealism. The same holds good for the appraisal of Asian history. It is futile either to embellish or to blacken history, this would be an anti-scientific approach.

History is all inclusive. The development of the social productive forces and class struggle, oppression by the rulers and resistance by the masses of the people, the dark and backward things left over from the past, the bright and forward looking things representing the advancing line of history — all these are closely interwoven, sometimes sharply distinct and sometimes obscured in a maze of confusion. The historians' weighty duty is to give an accurate judgment on these questions, putting things in their right place and correctly expounding their mutual relations.

**To present the history of Asia in the light of this requirement, we hold that the following essentials must be fulfilled:**

**First, we must elucidate the world significance of the long and bitter class contradictions and class struggle in this region;**

**Second, we must give the masses of the people their rightful place in history;**

**Third, we must affirm all the bright and new-born things which represent the line of the advance of history;**

**Fourth, we must unremittingly repudiate and expunge all distortions and fabrications of Asian history by the Western colonialists and their followers.**

The history of Asia has long been described as dark and circumscribed. But, in fact, those who break out from the blind alley of bourgeois idealism and lift their heads, see a magnificent sight, and vast new vistas unfold before them.

The history of Asia forms an integral part of world history. A scientific appraisal of Asian history will help the people of the world to a correct understanding of world history and of the present situation. In spite of all difficulties, the oppressed people throughout the world are waging a struggle to transform the present situation and the world. It is imperative that they understand the present situation in the struggle of the people throughout the world and have a scientific approach to world history. The rewriting of the history of Asia to elucidate its true features will help people to free themselves from mental enslavement by imperialism and fully emancipate their minds. Therefore, it may be put this way: the way one looks on the modern histories of Asia and of Africa and Latin America, is not only a question of one's approach to history, it is also a question of one's approach to the present struggle.