

GLOBAL ASIA:

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Fort William Calcutta, 1735, by Elisha Kirkall (Creative Commons)

Colonialism and Imperialism in Asia

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Editor's note: This article is the third of four featuring pieces by Dr. Anand A. Yang.

Melaka (Malacca) stood at the crossroads of a thriving system of maritime commerce that extended from China to the Middle East and east Africa. That world of Indian Ocean trade changed after 1511 when the Portuguese seized Melaka. Other European powers—and later the United States—followed thereafter, transforming Southeast Asia, which they increasingly gained control of in the 18th and 19th centuries. During World War II, Japan occupied much of the region, briefly replacing the Western colonizers.

Colonialism and imperialism, terms often used interchangeably, refer to economic and political domination, to the process whereby a state exerts its authority and influence over another state and/or society. Western domination varied in form and effects across Asia, in part because Western incursions occurred at different moments in a country's history and for different lengths

of time, and in part because subject populations resisted and adjusted to their subordination differently.

What states and societies in Asia shared in common was their subjection to a Western-dominated world capitalist system that distorted and impoverished their economies by transforming them into producers of primary goods and consumers of manufactured goods generated by Western industrialization. Also comparable were the ways in which elites and subalterns across the entire region confronted ideas, practices, and institutions advanced by colonialism and instigated uprisings and nationalist movements that led to their independence.

In Southeast Asia, the initial Portuguese outposts were followed by a more formidable Dutch presence in the Indonesian archipelago in the 18th and 19th centuries. British power surged as well in that latter period, initially in the Malayan peninsula and subsequently in Burma (Myanmar). France, a presence in Vietnam in the 18th century, first overran the south and then the north in the late 19th century, its control complete by the 1880s. It also extended into neighboring Cambodia and Laos. Through a series of fortuitous circumstances, only Siam (Thailand) remained independent in the region.

In South Asia, as the Mughal Empire declined, Britain emerged as the major power by the end of the 18th century. In the early 19th century it consolidated its control through a system of direct and indirect rule: directly by controlling vast areas through its administrative and coercive apparatus and indirectly by sharing sovereignty in some 500 princely states with Indian rulers.

India was the jewel in the British crown: the most important colony in their worldwide empire. It was the "barracks" that supplied large numbers of soldiers to fight the empire's wars and it was also a source of goods, people, ideas and institutions that flowed to other parts of the empire, including the metropole. By the time India and Pakistan attained their independence in 1947,

their economies, polities, societies and culture had been transformed by almost two centuries of colonialism. China was still one of the most prosperous countries in the world in the 18th century as Britain gained the upper hand in India. That changed in the 19th century, however, as China experienced severe internal and external problems. Among the many peasant uprisings that shook the Qing Empire, the most dramatic was the Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864) that embroiled millions of people and led to millions of casualties.

China's growing weaknesses were also exposed by Western powers, whose military, economic and political might were enhanced by the Industrial Revolution. Shifts in trading patterns reflect that change in balance of power. In the early 19th century, Britain's longstanding trade imbalances with China gave way to handsome profits realized through the sales of opium smuggled in from colonial India. In the ensuing conflicts, China lost repeatedly; the Opium War in 1839-1842 was the first in a long line of setbacks that added up to a century of national humiliation still remembered with great bitterness in China today.

External domination never led to China's outright colonization but made it, in effect, a "semi-colony," to invoke a phrase employed by Sun Yat-sen, the founding father of the Chinese republic that was established in 1911. His revolution ended an imperial system that persisted for more than 2,000 years.

Over the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, China was increasingly split between supporters of the Nationalist (Guomindang) Party led by Chiang Kai-shek and the Communist Party dominated by Mao Zedong. Japan's invasion in the 1930s briefly eased their rivalry. However, at the end of World War II, an all-out civil war flared up that eventuated in the rise of a communist government in China in 1949 and the retreat of the Nationalists to Taiwan. In inaugurating the People's Republic from atop the Gate of Heavenly Peace (Tiananmen), Mao proclaimed that "the Chinese people have stood up," that is, decisively ended Western imperialism.

After decades and centuries of colonialism, Asia once again moved to the fore in the late 20th century, as the next article will underline.

