In this first year of my retirement from full-time university teaching, I find it timely and meaningful to be speaking before this gathering of Asian Studies specialists in Japan. For it was right here in Tokyo, visiting with my grandmother in June 1965, that I first encountered a nation-state beyond my own. The fleeting experience of another culture and history was enough to make me change my university major from engineering to the humanities, and to even study Nihongo for a brief period in 1966. The following year, after obtaining the bachelor’s degree from the Ateneo de Manila, I moved to Cornell University for further studies in Asian history and anthropology, and I have never looked back since. For the past 45 years I have met and worked with many scholars of various nationalities who would identify themselves as “Southeast Asianists.” I have observed, if not experienced firsthand, the many changes in this field of study since the 1960s. In this talk, I wish to share with you some of my current reflections on the field in the light of experience.

Let me start by calling your attention to an important book published in 2011, *Decentering & Diversifying Southeast Asian Studies: Perspectives from the Region*. In this volume, edited by Goh Beng-lan of the National University of Singapore (NUS), eleven scholars born and partly educated in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines recount their origins and development as intellectuals in their homelands as well as in the transnational world of Southeast Asian Studies. Arranged according to contributor’s age, the chapters begin with Wang Gungwu, who did his graduate training in England in the 1950s, and end with the Indonesian Fadjar Thufail, who went to the United States in the late 1990s and 2000s.

The autobiographies project that led to the book had its beginnings in a workshop held at the NUS in 2002, funded by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) of New York and the Ford Foundation. At that time Goh was a consultant of the SSRC as well as a professor in the Southeast Asian Studies Program at NUS. Although the book is basically the outcome of the SSRC project, Goh’s introduction makes reference to a second stage of the biographies project, which is important for her conceptualization of what she refers to as the “decentering” and “diversification” of the field. Stage 2 commenced in November 2004 with a workshop on the theme of “local scholarship and the study of Southeast Asia” held in the NUS with the support of the Toyota Foundation.

What was unusual about Stage 2 was that it brought together in a dialogue eight senior or “older” professors from the region—two from Indonesia, two from Thailand, and one each from Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines. Ranging in age from 63 to over 80 they...
belonged to the generation of local scholars trained in the late 1950s to the mid-1970s. They figured prominently in teaching, research and administration in the late seventies up to the 1990s, and now are either retired or have passed away. The aim of the workshop was for the “seniors” to talk about “their world”—their experiences in life and in the academe. Hopefully they would pass on to the younger participants something of value from their recollections.

In this presentation I bring together selected accounts from stages 1 and 2 of the project, in order to highlight some similarities and differences between the senior and middle generations of scholars. Owing to time constraints I can only talk about six of the senior and two of the middle generation of scholars, and I will limit the discussion to how “nation” and “empire” are addressed in their accounts.

“Senior Generation”

The youngest of the “senior generation” scholars I shall talk about is Thammasat University professor, Charnvit Kasetsiri. Born in 1941 of a provincial political family, and groomed to become an ambassador, Charnvit turned to Southeast Asian history in the mid-1960s after the anti-war movement in the US had begun to tear down his illusions about the so-called smiling, peace-loving Thai people, as he put it. In 1969 my classmate Charnvit and I joined other Cornell Asian students in Washington DC to protest against US intervention in Vietnam. Twenty five years later, I visited Charnvit in the office of the University Rector on Commencement Day, 1994. Nervously awaiting the King, who was to hand out the diplomas, my friend was all decked out in the white, military-style uniform of the Civil Service. His career as Rector (or Vice Chancellor) would last barely a year, however, for political pressures from within the university and without would soon force his resignation.

Second on our list is Professor Taufik Abdullah, who was born in 1939 in West Sumatra. He retired some years ago from the directorship of the Indonesian Institute of Scientific Research, or LIPI. One might think that his career had progressed in a straight line since he obtained his PhD in Southeast Asian history from Cornell in 1970. But when I visited him at his LIPI office in 1994 he was practically isolated in his barely furnished 5th floor office, since he and the Director (who was close to Suharto, and a Javanese to boot) were at odds with each other. Furthermore, a few years back he had affixed his signature to a letter critical of President Suharto’s policies. He was still paying the price for it years later. But such courage, or stubbornness, did not lead to Taufik’s permanent ruin, as one might expect in other circumstances. Not long after Suharto’s fall in 1998, he was made LIPI’s Director by President Gus Dur.

The next two of the workshop participants were already in their early 70s at that time. The Vietnamese historian Dao Hung had been a veteran of the war against the French in the early 1950s, before commencing the study of history in 1957. One cannot comprehend the development of postwar Vietnamese scholarship apart from the wars with the French and the Americans—this was clear from Dao Hung’s remarks. After retirement he continued to edit the Vietnamese journal, Past & Present. He spoke French throughout the workshop, reminding us that scholarship is still divided into distinct linguistic zones.

The other workshop participant in his seventies had no trouble conversing with Dao Hung: the Filipino anthropologist and historian Zeus Salazar. Born in 1934, Salazar was a “perfect product,” as he put it, of the American colonial educational system. But he consciously rejected this heritage, and instead pursued his PhD at the Sorbonne. Aside from being Francophone, Salazar shared with Dao Hung the experience of having been a Communist, at least in the early 60s. What had radicalized him most was the popular groundswell in Paris against the French presence in Algeria. As Professor of History, sometime Department Head, and sometime Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Philosophy at the University of the Philippines, Salazar’s
stamp on the intellectual life of the Philippines continues to be felt even today.

The two oldest participants in the 2004 workshop were born in the 1920s and have since passed away. Professor Adrian Lapian was born in 1929 and educated entirely at Gadjah Mada University in Jogjakarta and the University of Indonesia in Jakarta. The most profound insight in his career came while he was a historical researcher in the Indonesian navy in the early 1960s. Joining naval expeditions that crisscrossed the vast archipelago, he came to understand how the sea was what pulled the parts of Indonesia together, and this led him to pioneer a sea-centered history of Indonesia.

The most senior of the seniors, then over 80 years of age, was Professor Syed Hussein Alatas, the founding head of the Malay Studies department at NUS from 1967–1988, before becoming Vice-Chancellor of the University of Malaya from 1988 to 1991. I had heard about him while a student at Cornell in the early 70s. He had dared to publish a book in 1971 seriously questioning Sir Stamford Raffles’ lofty stature in history. In fact, I recall how the book on Raffles “degraded” the young Alatas in the eyes of my British teachers DGE Hall and Oliver Wolters. When Alatas’s book on Raffles appeared, alarm bells began to ring in the halls of Cornell and the University of London.

What were the major themes that cut across the individual life-histories of the senior scholars? One obvious common denominator was the experience of colonialism, especially among the older scholars. Adrian Lapian narrated how in February 1938 he was playing with his Dutch neighbors when the news arrived of the birth of Princess Beatrix, the late queen of Holland. Everyone was ecstatic, and so was little Adrian. He ran to his grandfather to announce: *Our princess is born, and she will be queen someday!* Grandfather immediately put such nonsense to rest: What do you mean by *our* princess, *our* queen? At that time, being Christian and going to Dutch schools a young boy like Adrian could quite easily think he was Dutch. A few years later, he recounts, Japanese soldiers helped to firm up people’s notions of who they were. When they came to his village they asked those they encountered: *Are you Indonesian or are you Dutch?* and not, *Are you Menadonese, or Balinese, or Bantenese?* Of course the people would answer in no uncertain terms, *I am Indonesian.*

Lapian looked back to his interest in the sea, or maritime history, as his attempt to “liberate [himself] from the colonial perspective.” The Dutch historian Van Leur had criticized Dutch historiography for looking at Indonesia from the deck of Dutch East India Company ships. Lapian gave this insight a local twist: Why not look at Indonesia from the deck of our own ships?

For Dao Hung, colonialism of the French variety was something he had fought against as a soldier before studying history at the University of Hanoi. But becoming a scholar, it seems, only ushered in a new phase of the older struggle. “All the judgments of the French historians concerning the history of Vietnam,” he said, were viewed as “bearing the colonial imprint.” And so we had to reread and rework everything from the perspective of the colonized peoples. This was to him another, even more difficult kind of anticolonial war.

Colonialism could take different forms. For Charnvit, studying Southeast Asian history in the US during the Vietnam War dispelled the myth of Thai “colonial exceptionalism” that had been taught to him in school. Not only had the Thais been subtly colonized by the West, but the Thai kings themselves were colonizers in their domain. And so for Charnvit, domestic colonialism was a rather more pressing issue—confirmed rather dramatically by the outbreak of violence in Pattani at the time of the workshop.

Since the earlier generation of scholars had personally experienced colonialism in various forms, this subject informed much of their works. Alatas’ first publication in 1956 bore the title “Some fundamental problems of colonialism.” Salazar even stated flatly, “We are still in the colonial period. Singapore is still in a colonial period. The language in schools is still English.” This way of grouping Singapore and the Philippines became, as you might imagine,
the subject of a heated discussion.

Is the subject of colonialism a dead issue, or is it one that will continue to be raised and debated for as long as the domination and exploitation of one group by another continues? Lapian reminded us of the time when debates about such issues were rife. In 1961, as a junior scholar he attended the first international conference on Southeast Asian history held in Singapore. Sartono Kartodirjo (the pioneering Indonesian historian and Taufik Abdullah’s mentor) was discoursing enthusiastically about the topics of colonialism and nationalism when Professor Ken Tregonning, the head of the NUS history department, muttered in apparent disgust: “Colonialism is dead already.” Sartono, in typical Javanese fashion perhaps, did not dispute Tregonning’s remark, instead retorting meekly: “But I am a historian; I can talk about dead things.” This mild dispute was just the tip of an iceberg, however.

At the first meeting of the International Association of Historians of Asia (IAHA) held in Manila the previous year (1960), the dominant topics were colonialism and nationalism. The most effective “antidote” to this would come from John Smail at the 1961 Singapore conference where he presented the first draft of his widely-cited essay on the possibility of writing an autonomous history of Southeast Asia. The politics that underpins this essay is generally overlooked. Smail was critical of what he bewailed as the excessive preoccupation by Southeast Asian scholars with the “colonial relationship” and nationalism. He argued that the period of high imperialism and the anticolonial nationalist reaction to it, though intense, was relatively brief in the context of the region’s long history. Historians in the region must move on.

The difficulty with “moving on” was complicated by the fact that the older generation of scholars had themselves experienced the wars of the colonial era. Dao Hung’s narrative of Vietnamese historiography hinges around the experiences of war—“The study of history took on urgency,” he states, “in the light of mobilizing the patriotism of the people in the face of the two resistance wars against the French and then the Americans. Research work on the period called the Hung Kings, he recalls, “was at its height when the American attacks against north Vietnam reached a fierce phase towards the end of 1960s. To confirm that the Vietnamese nation had been formed during the period of the Hung kings, was to affirm that we have a history of several thousands of years, compared to the 200 years of history of the American nation, our principal enemy at that time. This showed that our struggle was one of civilization against barbarians. ... In reality, the Hung kings are nothing but mythical figures from the prehistoric period ...”

Adrian Lapian had studied in Dutch schools in the late 1930s, then the Japanese army came and he had to learn Nihongo, then the Dutch returned and imprisoned his father who had been involved with Thamrin in the independence movement. The Indonesian revolution, for Lapian, was part of lived experience. Alatas lived through the same epoch. Studying in Johore Bahru under the British, his father summoned him home to West Java at the outbreak of the Pacific war. The experience of the Japanese occupation period in Java—particularly the extreme poverty, hunger, corruption, and death that he saw around him—gave Alatas some of the fundamental insights into society and politics that he would develop later on as a scholar. War also enabled him to spend a few years of his life outside the formal educational system. Unlike Lapian he did not enroll in a Japanese school. Instead he spent his time reading anything and everything he could get from the libraries of his Eurasian friends. Reading outside the prescribed texts was a liberating experience, only possible in a time of war.

The others in the group also experienced war, but a rather more complex and ambiguous one—the Cold War. Salazar was already at the University of the Philippines studying history when President Magsaysay, with the help of the CIA, finally defeated the Communist-led Huk rebellion by the mid-50s. The Left, however, brought the struggle over from the hills to the classrooms where the fierce debates over interpretations of the colonial era, the revolution, and Filipino national heroes were nothing short of another kind of war. Salazar, like most bright
young men and women of his generation, was drawn into this ideological war. Upon his return from France with a PhD in 1968 he became a leading figure in the student movement culminating in the uprising of January 1970. He tasted life in prison when martial law was declared in September 1972.

Charnvit Kasetsiri’s conversion to historical studies came through his experience of the anti-war movement in the United States. At that point he resigned from his job in the Thai Foreign Service, from which he had taken leave. Upon his return to Bangkok in 1973 this fresh PhD graduate from Cornell parachuted straight into the midst of the student revolt which quickly drew him into its ranks. Charnvit’s unique contribution to Thai historiography is inseparable from the opening up of the field of social science—especially history—during the brief moment of untrammeled democracy from 1973 to 1976. With the coup of 1976 and the return of the generals, Charnvit had to literally flee the country, finding refuge at the Kyoto University, Center for Southeast Asian Studies.

The similarities and differences among these senior scholars from various parts of Southeast Asia became pretty clear in the course of the workshop. They shared common concerns and goals, but their actual experiences were shaped by local circumstances, local histories. What can we conclude, in the most general terms, about the effects of colonialism and war on the scholarship of this generation?

I will mention the obvious point: The experience of colonialism and war made it clear to these scholars that the acquisition and production of knowledge cannot be divorced from issues of power and domination. If we accept this in Vietnam’s case, then their highly politicized scholarship during the 1960s’ and 70s’ war years can be understood as a survival issue, and so can the present attempts to produce a kind of scholarship better suited to this postwar and post-colonial age, which is Dao Hung’s task. Salazar introduced the term “comprador scholarship” to the workshop, sparking yet another round of controversy since he also pointed to the Philippines and Singapore as the finest exponents of this. Alatas spoke of the danger of “captive minds” and the continuation of colonialism in other forms. Taufik spoke of the “greedy state” that hijacked scholarship—even the ideas of Geertz and Anderson—in order to colonize the Indonesian people.

There is only so much that I can say in this brief talk about this interesting group of scholars, but there is something I must not omit to mention: their relationship with the state. All were caught up in some form or other in the project of nation-building, and thus their scholarship became entangled with the needs of government. For all his activities as a communist in France and as a guiding intellectual in the student revolt of 1969–72, which landed him in Fort Bonifacio with other political prisoners, Salazar is condemned by the Left today for his collaboration with Marcos, no less. For after his detention he was asked to write a multivolume history of the Filipino people under Marcos’s signature. This topic inevitably surfaced in the workshop, and Salazar explained to us his experience of critical collaboration with the state. I had my own agenda, he declared: to bring the prehistoric past back into national history. I was using the Marcos history project for this limited end. I was to have nothing to do with the last volume, where Marcos figures, and besides, this volume was never written.

Salazar’s words may have been taken with a grain of salt, had not Taufik Abdullah chimed in: Yes, it was the same with me! Taufik had been part of the Indonesian national history project, another multivolume history, under Suharto’s patronage. This was written independently by scholars like him, as a way of improving the state of national historiography. But volume 6 on the revolution and the emergence of Suharto’s New Order, clearly followed the government’s line and gave the wrong impression that the whole project was controlled by Suharto. Taufik himself came under fire. He withdrew from the project and his volume was published without his permission. After the Suharto period, and particularly under the presidency of his friend Wahid or Gus Dur, Taufik became fully a part of the Indonesian state system.
And Charnvit Kasetsiri? As Rector of Thammasat University, in 1994, Charnvit was part of the government establishment. Like Salazar he saw this as an opportunity to push for change through critical collaboration with the state, but he did not succeed and resigned after a year.

Whether or not these senior scholars succeeded in influencing the state, they exemplified in varying degrees the phenomenon of academics circulating between the university and the state, a characteristic of the Southeast Asian scene in the past half century. To supplement this picture, Alatas, drawing from a half-century of experience reminded us that at least in this part of the world, the character of government will inevitably filter down to the university. The relationship is very close, he said. We should therefore operate within this realization and also try to shape the kind of state we want.

“Middle Generation” and Beyond

Drawing a line between the senior and middle generations can be a tendentious task because the careers of long-lived academics are often nonlinear in character, and preoccupations can shift with the passage of time. Nevertheless, Goh’s preliminary attempt to theorize the generations makes sense in the light of the “big events” of the 1940s to the 1960s that clearly shaped the intellectual preoccupations of the senior generation. World War II and the Japanese occupation broke the hegemony of the Western powers and led to anticolonial and independence struggles throughout Southeast Asia. Intellectual work, says Goh, was a “decolonizing tool” for this generation—harnessed to forge new communities and build viable nation-states in the wake of colonial rule. Scholarship also bore the imprint of competing ideologies and visions of socioeconomic transformation characteristic of the Cold War.

Goh temporally frames the increasing divide between “senior” and “middle” generations with the ending of the Cold War in the 1980s and early 1990s and its repercussions in domestic politics. The scholars who went to the West from the 1980s on were exposed to “newer critical ideas emerging from the post-structuralist and postcolonial turns in the human sciences at a time when the West was beginning to deconstruct its own meta-narratives and hegemony.” They became more questioning of their inherited nation-state projects, more reflexive about their subject positions within official national narratives. I cannot possibly do justice in this lecture to the richness of the intellectual biographies of the nine scholars that constitute Goh’s “middle generation” and beyond. Let me focus, then, on two scholars whose autobiographies conform best to Goh’s theorization of the middle generation.

The first is Professor Patricio Abinales, born in 1956 in Ozamiz City, in the north of Mindanao populated by immigrant Visayans like his family. He moved to Manila in 1972, the year Marcos declared Martial Law, in order to commence his university education at the University of the Philippines. Although too young to have been involved in the radical student movement of the late sixties that culminated in the uprising of 1970, Abinales remembers it as a watershed event. As a student in the UP, he was politicized by his teachers—veterans of the student uprising—to oppose the Marcos dictatorship. He even joined the Communist movement, but only briefly for he became completely alienated by the Party’s policies and henceforth would become a staunch critic of the CPP.

In 1988, Abinales journeyed to America to undertake graduate studies at Cornell; “to get some breathing space and take stock of my life,” he writes. He became a student and disciple of Benedict Anderson, who encouraged him to leave aside his interest in Philippine communism and the military, and instead focus on the political histories of Mindanao. His PhD thesis uncovered the “lingering positive memories of the American colonial presence in the Muslim communities” in Mindanao—“something that went against the grain of Filipino nationalist arguments.” This demolition of “nationalist” scholarship would become a dominant motif in his work.
Upon obtaining his doctorate, Abinales did not return to the Philippines and instead commenced his career at the University of Ohio. In 1998, he and his American wife were invited to take up positions in the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University, where Abinales became professor. But by 2010, he was back in the US as Fellow in the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington DC. From there he moved on to a Professorship in the University of Hawaii, where he has started to play an influential role in the development of Philippine and Southeast Asian Studies.

Our second example, Professor Goh Beng-lan herself, was born in 1960 on the island of Penang where, as in other parts of Malaysia, immigrant Chinese had settled in large numbers during British rule. Although very young at the time, she can remember the Penang racial riots of 1967, followed by the May 1969 riots that devastated the Chinese community. She learned early in life, she writes, that ethnicity was becoming a “determining factor of the socio-economic and daily life of my country.”

Goh entered the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in 1980, the same year Mahathir Mohamad became Prime Minister and launched the country into a period of “rapid economic transformations” that was accompanied by “growing socio-political and ethno-religious fragmentation in Malaysian society.” Like Abinales at UP, Goh picked up “leftist political ideals” at USM, only to end up disavowing them. She then went on a scholarship to Japan to do an MA at Ochanomizu University; she characterizes this period as “progressing with feminist perspectives.” She returned to Malaysia only to discover that she was “born a little too late and into the wrong ethnic group” to pursue an academic career in her homeland. Like Abinales, she felt a deep frustration in the academic environment of her own country.

Goh’s academic breakthrough came in the form of a scholarship to do a PhD in Anthropology at Monash University in Australia. The pinnacle of her intellectual development, however, came in the form of a postdoctoral fellowship at the International Center for Advanced Study at New York University in the mid-1990s. At New York, she also became involved with the SSRC, comparable to Abinales’ stint at the Wilson Center, both of which depend on private foundations and the US government for their funding. From the United States Goh returned to Asia to take up a teaching position not in Malaysia but in the National University of Singapore. Now Associate Professor, she heads what is arguably the best-endowed Department of Southeast Asian Studies in the region.

There are some interesting parallels in the intellectual biographies of Abinales and Goh. First, let us look at their take on the nation-state. Abinales highlights the fact that he came from the periphery of the Philippine nation-state. Moving from this periphery to the center to study in the main campus of the University of the Philippines, he “was immediately associated with [Mindanao’s] political and social instabilities, criminals and exiles, its informal economies, complemented by Manila’s fear of ‘Muslims’ and its bigotry against non-Filipino speakers.” The “Filipino” national language based on Tagalog was alien to the native Cebuano speaker. Nevertheless, the young Abinales was able to brush such prejudices aside owing to the “attractiveness of the revolution and the idea that despite our diverse origins we were one with the ‘Filipino people.’”

There is an unmistakable parallel here with Goh’s experience of discrimination by the Malay-dominated state against ethnic Chinese, despite which she pursued her university degree entirely in the Malay national language. She even “internalized the national ideology,” accepting its privileging of the position of Malays in the country. The adherence to nationalist ideals of both Abinales and Goh was short-lived, however. They write of being excluded, marginalized, and discriminated upon by their national majorities or nation-state capitals. When, exactly, did this alienation take place? Is it mere coincidence that their positions changed during the time of the Cold War’s ending and the inception of a unipolar world? This was the time when critiques of nationalism and the nation-state project happened to be sweeping through the academe, at
least in the West. This would have substantially reshaped their self-understanding.

Abinales is unequivocal about how his extended “exile” (he left the country in 1988) led to his “increasingly denying the legitimacy of the nation state in favor of subaltern sentiments.” He is critical of “imperial Manila” (borrowing from Anderson) and is quite happy for Mindanao to break away from the nation-state. Goh on her part was spurred by her experience of “dislocation within Malaysian society” to seek solutions in knowledge from the West. Her mid-1990s stint in New York, “at the heart of the American intellectual world,” she writes, made her appreciate “the relevance of subaltern theory to [her] own work and thinking” through the global comparison of modernity. The novel concept of subalternity would also have reconfigured her experience as an ethnic Chinese from Penang.

Goh’s intellectual debt to NYU and the SSRC in New York is characteristic of how “America” figures heavily in the intellectual biographies of the scholars from the middle generation and beyond covered in Goh’s book. They were all “trained” in the Anglophone world from the late-1980s on and drew their intellectual energy largely from their American university experience. In contrast, according to Goh, in the intellectual makeup of senior scholars trained in the 1950s and 60s, “ideas from the various colonial powers—Dutch, British, Spanish, and American—were prevalent, but so were other influences from France, Germany, Italy, and Russia, as well as China, India, Japan, and the Philippines.”

The influence of “America” in shaping the middle generation’s thinking is clearest perhaps in Abinales’ account. He discovered, through doing a minor in American Studies, that “the American imperial adventure century turned out to be motivated by reasons other than economic exploitation and colonial racism.” Although he makes passing reference to the destruction wrought by the US military in its pacification of Mindanao, his work is about excavating the lingering “positive memories” of many Mindanao people towards their former colonizers and explaining “the remarkable resilience of pro-American sentiments among many Filipinos.”

For Abinales, US colonialism is not any worse than domestic colonialism, and may actually be more desirable for those in the peripheries. This point surfaces prominently in his research, conducted on behalf of the Wilson Center, on the positive attitudes towards civic-action projects conducted by the US military in Mindanao during the anti-terror war. Abinales’ account may be paradigmatic of Goh’s thesis on the divide between senior and middle/younger generations: domestic nationalism and revolution are now the primary targets of critique, eclipsing the colonial question that so absorbed the seniors.

Goh adheres to the pattern in sidestepping the issue of British colonialism while belaboring the internal colonialism of the Malay-dominated state, manifested concretely in the way her career suffered from the “exclusionary effects” of Mahathir’s pro-Malay national policies. It would have been useful to dig deeper into the British Empire’s policies that led to her experience—something that Alatas would have done. The absence of such analysis can be explained by Goh’s professed aim to move beyond the “fixation” with the “empire/colony binary”—an outlook she attributes to her stint in New York.

Look not at what the empire does but at Southeast Asian realities from the ground up, Goh suggests. This is sound advice, since critics of empire often ignore the specific realities of the objects of imperial predations. Nevertheless, we need to think about how the “exceptionalism” that continually renders a progressive tilt to America’s self-definition and justifies its interventions in Asia, can place limits on what elite universities and corporate-funded think tanks can say about “empire.”

**Concluding Thoughts**

During the workshop in 2004, the consensus of the senior participants was that colonialism is
not a dead subject. Alatas gave it a contemporary twist when he stated: “There is more colonialism after independence than before. We were freer during colonial times than now. At least in those days we knew what we were not allowed to do; if they wanted certain cash crops, we would give them the cash crops. But now they are imposing all sorts of things, controlling us even much more than ever.”

Colonialism and imperial power, prominent in the stories by the senior generation, either vanish or are reconfigured positively in the accounts by the scholars who did their postgraduate or postdoctoral studies in the United States in the post-Cold War era. Post-nationalist (or even antinationalist) and globalist paradigms seem to render the anti-colonial agenda irrelevant.

The fading of nation and empire in the academic discourse of the middle generation onwards appears to be an effect of these scholars’ sojourns in America. This was a defining stage of their careers, liberating them from the backward and repressive conditions—political as well as academic—in their homelands. Their exposure to cutting edge scholarship was joined with the push for progressive and democratic changes back home: bringing down the dictators, emancipating women and minorities, demolishing artificial borders, and transforming peripheries into new centers with a global rather than national connection.

The end of the Cold War saw the academe being reconfigured in order to move away from Area and Country Studies. Instead, thematic research with a global scope, tightly integrated with the traditional social science disciplines, was to be pushed. Yet at the time that the academe was being reconfigured in this seemingly progressive environment, the Empire was itself being reconfigured. The end of the Cold War saw the Empire flexing its economic and military might in order to subdue those remaining bastions of sovereign nation-states resisting its drive to control markets and resources. This ongoing war, however, would be framed by liberal and emancipatory ideals, just like the recent destruction of the Libyan state and the murder of its “dictator” in the name of democracy and humanitarian intervention, or the fate of Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Afghanistan a decade earlier. Closer to home, the Empire has recently “pivoted” to Asia to contain the rise of “Communist” China, fomenting acute tensions in border areas and disputed maritime zones. The fading generation that lived through wars and revolutions will sense something familiar in all this.

A borderless world with debilitated and fractured nation-states is the dream setting for an imperial order that scholars can unwittingly help to consolidate. What we need is a more careful and sympathetic reading of the “senior” generation’s preoccupation with empire, colonialism, revolution and nation-building so that lessons can be learned from a past that lives on in the present.

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