

**Modern lessons on disappointed idealists**  
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**A recent book by an Asian observer of Asian societies breathes new life into some old(er) ideas.**

I SPENT much of the 1990s either writing or reading about the Asian Values debate. It's hard to imagine now, but in the years leading up to the 1997 financial crisis, books by Pakistan's Muhammad Iqbal and Iran's Ali Shariati, not to mention our very own Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, were top of my reading list.

So, it was with a degree of dismay that I first picked up Pankaj Mishra's latest book: *From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia*. Fearing a repeat of those tiresome, discredited arguments, I turned the pages warily.

However, Pankaj's spritely account of turn-of-the-century Asian intellectual life approaches the subject from an altogether more exciting vantage point. For a start, he begins with an account of the Battle of Tsushima in May 1905 of the Russo-Japanese War.

Over a century ago, the result seemed a foregone conclusion. How could the Japanese possibly overcome the sheer might of Imperial Russia? Everything seemed to favour the Europeans as they systematically subjugated the Asiatic world.

However, and almost unbelievably, Admiral Togo's fleet was to emerge victorious. In one fell swoop, Korea, Manchuria and much of the western Pacific were to become an extension of Japanese power – setting in motion a series of events culminating with the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki 40 years later.

Nonetheless, Japan's victory was also to have an enduring impact intellectually across Asia – galvanising a generation. Men such as the Iranian-born pan-Islamist Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani, Liang Qichao of China and the Indian Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, the chief protagonists of Pankaj's book, had witnessed their civilisations endure a succession of humiliating defeats.

For them and others – Sun Yat Sen, Ataturk (then known as Mustapha Kemal) and Nehru – Tsushima brought hope. It allowed them to imagine what their peoples were capable of if they embarked (like the Japanese) on a journey of political and economic transformation.

Interestingly, in an era long before the advent of mass democracy, all three men recognised that enlightened (and perhaps despotic) leadership was critical in order to achieve societal change resilient enough to repel the Europeans.

Uttar Pradesh-born and Allahabad-trained Pankaj Mishra has produced a remarkable book - something that we were striving for back in the 90's but never produced.

*From the Ruins of Empire* is essentially an Eastern canon of political thought – linking Indian, Chinese and Arab/Muslim figures and ideas. Pankaj reveals how their responses to the ignominy of colonialism were to shape their future nation-states.

This heir of V.S. Naipaul's mantle is in fact very similar to his three chosen subjects. Growing up on a diet of the American critic Edmund Wilson, Pankaj is himself a firm believer in the power of ideas and it's this commitment to intellectualism (unlike Dr Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim who trusted in raw power) that propels his narrative.

Moreover, as a world-class traveller and essayist, Pankaj's writings have a certain contemporary resonance. He traces the skein of ideas, like the growth of Wahhabism and its intermingling with specifically Egyptian experiences of Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb – a process that was to lead to the swift globalisation of Wahhabi thought.

At the same time, Pankaj's trio were conscious that a blind adoption of Western modes would rob Asia of its cultural heritage and turn the Occident's vices into its own.

Each of the men sought a "middle-path", calling on their societies to equip themselves with modern science and thinking but to reject the grosser aspects of Western modernity with greater cultural confidence.

Sadly, all three men were to be grievously disappointed. Whilst they sought to find an acceptable compromise between East and West, they were not to live to see any of their ideas come to fruition, besides which their intransigence was to come at great personal cost.

Al-Afghani, arguably the father of political Islam, lived a life of constant re-invention. Dying in obscurity, this latter-day "Scarlet Pimpernel" was to rue his focus on traditional Muslim elites, most of whom ignored his call for a pan-Islamic revival.

Liang, whose reformist activities made him a wanted man in Qing-dynasty China, wound up a Confucian conservative arguing after a disillusioning trip to America that "...the Chinese people must for now accept authoritarian rule; they cannot enjoy freedom."

Even Tagore's calls for Asia to maintain its cultures was violently rejected by revolutionary-minded thinkers (including a young Mao Zedong) during his lecture tours of China, a prelude to the destructive Cultural Revolution.

Their failures are warnings for Asian leaders today. As Pankaj argues in his excellent Epilogue, China and India have now unthinkingly bought into the gospels of globalised capitalism which "...looks set to create reservoirs of nihilistic rage and disappointment among hundreds of millions of have-nots."

Pankaj's book is hence not some simplistic paean to "Asian values." He warns that we Asians should not gloat over the West's decline and our prosperity.

Rather, the failure of our elite to, in Pankaj's words, forge a "...convincingly universalist response ... to Western ideas of politics and economy, even though the latter seem increasingly febrile and dangerously unsuitable in large parts of the world" condemns us to repeat the mistakes of the West.

This is a prophetic book that cannot be ignored by Asia moving forward. How I wish Pankaj had written it all those years ago. It would have saved me a lot of effort.

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