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INTRODUCTION



## Bandung humanism and a new understanding of the Global South: an introduction

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As one of the most significant events of the immediate post-colonial period, the 1955 Bandung Conference, officially known as the first Asia-Africa Conference (*Konferensi Asia-Afrika*), brought together delegates from twenty-nine newly independent states representing more than half the world's population at the time.<sup>1</sup> In addition to recent monographs and edited volumes,<sup>2</sup> special issues of academic journals were published in 2015 and 2016 on the occasion of fiftieth anniversary of the Bandung Conference.<sup>3</sup> While bringing important insights to our understanding of the Bandung Conference and its legacies, these recent studies have focused primarily on geopolitical, diplomatic, and global social justice issues. There remains a need to critically assess and unveil the dynamics, mechanisms, and impact of transnational flows of ideas and practices about culture, society, economic development, and governance within the Global South, which can be traced back to the mid-1950s.

This collection attempts to fill this gap. The three papers included were first presented at an international workshop held in June 2017 at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, jointly organized with Columbia University and the University of California at Los Angeles.<sup>4</sup> The workshop investigated progressive cultural and intellectual movements among the formerly colonized countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America in pursuit of political self-determination, economic independence, and racial equality. With a focus on the internal dynamics of the emerging Third World in the post-colonial period, the papers presented at the workshop revisited developmental cooperation, artistic exchanges, translation movements, and collaborative journalism that forged transnational linkages from Beijing to Tashkent, Jakarta to Johannesburg, and Hanoi to Havana.

The papers included here strive to reconstruct Bandung not merely as a temporal moment in 1955 but also as a multi-lingual, multi-cultural, and multi-faceted process

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<sup>1</sup>The conference took place from April 18 to April 24 in Bandung, Indonesia. The Bandung Conference also set the stage for the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

<sup>2</sup>See Tan and Acharya 2008; Lee 2010; Eslava, Fakhri, and Nesiah 2017.

<sup>3</sup>See *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 2016; *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 2016.

<sup>4</sup>The conveners of this workshop were Hong Liu, Taomo Zhou, and Songjian Zhang of Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Lydia Liu of Columbia University, and Stathis Gourgouris of UCLA. We are grateful for the valuable insights and comments by all the presenters and participants, especially Lydia Liu and Stathis Gourgouris for their intellectual initiatives and indispensable contributions. The workshop was partially funded by the School of Social Sciences at NTU and a Strategic Initiative Grant (M4081020) entitled "Plural Co-existence and Asian Sustainability."

with innate fragility as well as a longstanding legacy that continues to influence the Global South. As the starting point for previously voiceless Afro-Asian nations to demand autonomy during the Cold War, Bandung still speaks to the urgency and possibilities for socio-political change in the twenty-first century.

This collection begins with two articles addressing some of the mechanisms and institutions formed as a result of the Bandung Conference and their important roles in shaping the transnational flows of ideas among Asian-African nations. In his essay, “A world to win: China, the Afro-Asian Writers’ Bureau, and the reinvention of world literature,” Pieter Vanhove examines the Afro-Asian Writers’ Bureau (AAWB), which was established in 1957. Firmly rooted in the legacy of the 1955 Bandung Conference, the AAWB was envisioned as its main cultural exponent. Vanhove describes the crucial role of the then-revolutionary government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the Afro-Asian Writers’ Bureau’s endeavor to “restage world literature and universal culture” after decolonization. The writers and intellectuals associated with the AAWB set themselves the task of “winning a world” after centuries of colonial oppression, and they also sought to reimagine world literature and universality in their own image. In this process, they advocated what he calls “a radically new vision of worldliness rooted in Afro-Asian solidarity and cultural cooperation.”

In her article on the Afro-Asian Journalists’ Association (AAJA), Taomo Zhou examines the formation and evolution of this organization at the height of the Cold War. She argues that the AAJA was a part of transnational political and cultural movements among the newly independent countries, with its roots in Bandung. Through a detailed analysis of its three phases of transition in the 1960s, a decade of significant transformations both within Asia (including the September Thirtieth Movement in Indonesia in 1965 and the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in China in 1966) and beyond (the PRC’s admission into the United Nations in 1974), Zhou presents the changing images of the Global South as seen through the vantage point of the AAJA and its flagship magazine, *Afro-Asian Journalist*. Zhou describes how, due to the political turbulence in its host countries (first Indonesia, followed by the PRC), the AAJA struggled to adhere to its founding principles in the increasingly fragmented Afro-Asian movement.

Last but not least, this collection concludes with an essay by Geoffrey Aung entitled “Reworking Bandung internationalism: decolonization and postcolonial futurism in Burma/Myanmar.” Aung weaves through various historical episodes beginning in the 1930s in Burma/Myanmar and calls for creatively reimagining Bandung internationalism. As one of the key players in the historic 1955 gathering, Burma’s then-Prime Minister U Nu formulated what Aung calls, “Bandung-era developmental socialism” aimed at transforming the country from a farm to a factory, its people from peasants to proletariats, and its economy from an emphasis on “backwards” agriculture to “modern” industry. Aung further highlights “the long arc of decolonization, from formal state politics to subjectivity” and urges scholars to bring “insights drawn from struggles around dispossession” to contemporary discussions about Bandung’s legacies.

In conclusion, the essays in this special issue show, individually and collectively, the multi-dimensionality and fluidity of Bandung humanism in the evolving domestic and international landscapes. While it is useful to interpret the Bandung Conference as heralding a new era of global politics and diplomacy, it is equally important to recognize the nature and characteristics of the dynamic flows of ideas, cultures, and governance

practices beneath the surface of political and diplomatic realignments. As an on-going transnational intellectual project, Bandung remains centrally relevant not only because it laid a critical foundation for South–South Cooperation that continues to impact global politics, but also because it points to a promising direction to conceptualize and problematize non-imperialist experiences through the lens of the flowering of transnational knowledge and their policy implications.

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