

Beyond the nation? The transnational and its limits

Ethan Mark

Nationalism, as Benedict Anderson famously argued in his landmark 1983 *Imagined Communities*, has proven a most tenacious modern animal—however invented, imagined, or constructed it may be. Issuing a word of caution to a long line of scholars who had prematurely and naïvely predicted its demise—in particular those to the political left, who were the most numerous and hopeful among them—Anderson declared, “the reality is quite plain: the ‘end of the era of nationalism’, so long prophesied, is not remotely in sight. Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time”.



Yet in the period since Anderson issued his declaration, as the tensions of the Cold War cooled and were superseded by idealistic visions of a globalized ‘world without boundaries’—in a context of increasing liberalization and expansion of cross-border flows of human, economic, and intellectual capital—scholarship in the liberal arts and social sciences has moved increasingly towards a questioning of the nation and the nation-state as the dominant frame and determinant of history, identity, politics, economics, culture, and social life.

Across the academic disciplines, attention has turned to the transnational, the regional and the global, focusing on cross-border flows and dynamics that go ‘beyond the nation’.

The transnational and the national remain intertwined

The effort has yielded considerable breakthroughs in terms of broadened and redefined academic understandings with

regard to issues such as Eurocentrism and processes of social inclusion and exclusion, nation- and empire-building, colonization and decolonization, along with more general notions of society, culture and identity formation, with impacts both intellectual and political. Still, in a conversation on the subject among leading historians published in the *American Historical Review* in 2006, for example, it was observed that transnational history “is in danger of becoming merely a buzzword among historians, more a label than a practice, more expansive in its meaning than

precise in its application, more a fashion of the moment than a durable approach to the serious study of history”. The questioning and transcendence of the claims of the nation-state might be the trend in many (if not all) of the humanities and social sciences, but whether in scholarship or indeed in the structures and thoughts that organize and govern everyday life, leaving the nation behind is often easier said than done.

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Border-crossing discourses such as Pan-Asianism, for example, are often read romantically by growing numbers of contemporary scholars as representing agendas and worldviews genuinely transcendent of the nation. Upon careful examination, however, whether produced in the past or the present, Pan-Asian rhetoric often turns out to be much more about negotiating a place for one's own nation and its interests within a particular international configuration of power and prestige than about abandoning borders as such. Be they Asian or European, references to shared identities and interests among groups of nations rarely translate directly into a rejection of the tenets of nationalism, and can just as well serve to reinforce them. Institutionally meanwhile, in the context of an increasingly economically interdependent East Asia, for example, the prevalence of state funding available for research with a transnational theme is just one ironic example of how the discursive trend towards the transcending of national borders can itself be driven by old-fashioned national (or indeed neo-imperial) interests. As one Japan scholar noted in the mid-2000s, "nowadays every self-respecting Japanese university needs its own Asia (Pacific) center, and interdisciplinary research with a transnational focus has more or less become the norm for obtaining funding".

More generally in political, economic, social, cultural and institutional life, consciously or unconsciously, the nation-state and 'the national interest' remain very much at the center of things, both defining and constraining the terms upon which we engage the world beyond. In much of the global South, the liberalization and expansion of cross-border capital flows and the growing power of international institutions has not necessarily led to a strengthening of political or ideological trends in favor of a rejection of the claims of the nation-state; in places such as India and the Philippines, aggressive, unabashed nationalism appears to be making a resurgence. Meanwhile in the global 'North', as readily symbolized by the 2016 Brexit referendum result and the election of Donald Trump, unprecedented transnational and global interconnection and interdependence appear to have paradoxically contributed to an unheralded revival of nationalist sentiments, above all in many parts of the global 'North' that were, until recently, the loudest champions of a borderless world. The transnational and the national thus remain inextricably intertwined and mutually implicated.

The contributors to this Focus

Seeking to unravel such apparent paradoxes, graduate students and faculty from the eight universities that together comprise the Consortium of Asian and African Studies or CAAS (Leiden, INALCO, SOAS, the National University of Singapore, Hanguk University of Foreign Studies, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Shanghai International Studies University, and Columbia University) gathered in Leiden in the autumn of 2017 for the conference *Beyond the Nation?: The Transnational and Its Limits*. The conference was supported by the Leiden Asia Centre and the International Institute for Asian Studies. In their presentations and discussions, they asked: Across the humanities and the social sciences (as well as the wider world), how and why has the transnational been understood, imagined and pursued—and how and why might this be done in the future? Within a historical as well as contemporary world still largely bound by the institutions and interests of the nation-state, to what extent can the nation be transcended—and to what extent is this desirable? The selected papers that follow in this Focus engage such questions through a variety of thematic, disciplinary, and locational lenses.

In a special, updated and shortened version of his keynote lecture 'Identities in the transnational lifeworld: individual, community and nation', Pralay Kanungo surveys an increasingly global diversity of transnational actors who nurture roots in two or more national spaces, weighing a complex of variables that determine the push and pull of transnational flows: the roles of multi- and international organizations and NGOs versus those of national states, the 'top-down' of government policies versus the 'bottom-up' of civil society. Conversely, he calls for greater attention to the role of transnational forces in fostering nationalism, not only among the relatively privileged populations of the global north but also among the 'subalterns' of the global south.

In 'Translating culture to transcend the nation', Masato Kato probes the ironies and limits of the transnational as reflected in the activities and rhetoric of Tenrikyō—a Japanese religious movement that reckoned with a problematic wartime history of national affiliation by ostensibly distancing itself from the nation—as practiced in a postwar France exhibiting a growing interest in things Japanese. "The ambiguity surrounding Tenrikyō's cultural identity in relation to Japan," he argues, "means there is a discursive vacuum in which social actors can interpret the relationship between Tenrikyō and Japanese culture" in diverse ways.

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Ulug Kuzuoglu unveils the 'transnational narrative of the making of pinyin'.

In 'The Eurasian origins of pinyin', Ulug Kuzuoglu unveils a transnational narrative of the making of the modern Chinese national script stretching from the Ottoman Empire to the Soviet Union, thereby affirming the innovative potentials of a transnational approach to histories hitherto hidden within national boundaries. Highlighting a complex competition and co-optation not only of linguistic and technological agendas but also of politics and worldviews, Kuzuoglu's multilingual and multiregional research seeks to unravel the history of Chinese scripts as a cross-border history of information and communications.

In 'The rise of the capital state and neo-nationalism', Alexander Svitych deploys a classic work of political economy by Karel Polanyi as a lens through which to analyze and compare populist reactions to neo-liberal reforms in three Asian cases not normally compared in conventional scholarship: Australia, Korea, and Japan. Nor are Japan and Korea conventionally the first nation states that would come to mind in scholarly considerations of populism, but Svitych finds strong reasons for assessing them via an 'old' analytical framework that would indeed seem to carry renewed regional and global relevance.

In 'Encountering Chinese dialect opera among the twentieth century Southeast Asian diaspora', Beiyu Zhang reveals an ambivalent interplay of the national and the transnational as highlighted in the historical rise and fall of a local Chinese performing art form that thrived precisely through the crossing of state borders between China and Southeast Asia, even as its main audience comprised emigrants with roots in the same Chinese subregion. In the context of the Cold War and the processes of postcolonial nation-building that together reshaped the global and regional order in the second half of the twentieth century, however, state agendas, identifications, and loyalty demands were redefined and intensified. Adaptation to such developments brought new opportunities but also an eventual displacement and undermining of the Teochew opera's original appeals and identity.

In 'Revisiting the Calcutta Improvement Trust in early 20th century Calcutta', Tania Chakravarty surveys the transnational and its limits as revealed in ideas and debates surrounding issues of city planning in late colonial British India. In the approaches of civil engineer E.P. Richards and sociologist Patrick Geddes, she thereby highlights the field of urban planning in this specific time and place as a terrain characterized by globally shared interests in health, and the reduction of poverty and overcrowding that had potential to transcend the conventional colonizer/colonized boundary. Yet when it came time for putting ideas into practice, such boundaries inevitably returned with a vengeance, as it were the "imperatives of the imperial economy" that prevailed, "downsize[ing] planning schemes into an underdeveloped and extractive model that saw people as subjects and not citizens".

Finally in 'Strange intimacies: reading for migration and prostitution in Kang Young-sook's *Rina* and Oh Jung-hee's *Chinatown*', Joo Kyung Lee explores how the themes of migration and prostitution converge in two works of modern Korean literature, thereby participating in what she calls "a post-nationalist discourse of displacement" that simultaneously highlights the role of nationality, race, gender and class in both constraining and compelling mobility. While the narrative pattern of interaction between them may be irregular, Lee nevertheless observes a "perverse relationship between migration and prostitution, which renders movement erotic and prostitution migratory". Drawing upon Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault, she thereby seeks to interrogate why literary representation so often reduces female bodies in movement to prostituted bodies, and highlights the irony of the contemporary migrant body as the body upon which "the most regulatory power is invested" even as it is not subject to the biopolitics of any single nation.

Ethan Mark, Leiden Institute
for Area Studies, Leiden University
e.mark@hum.leidenuniv.nl



Alexander Svitych analyses and compares populist reactions to neo-liberal reforms.