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Watson, J. (2021), *Cold War Reckonings: Authoritarianism and the Genres of Decolonization*. New York: Fordham University Press

Miguel Filipe Silva* e Abiud Bosire**

pp. 147-148

Introduction

In this thought-provoking book, Jini Kim Watson addresses two critical topics spanning the turbulent Cold War era; decolonization and the authoritarianism that resulted from it in East and Southeast Asia. Throughout *Cold War Reckonings: Authoritarianism and the Genres of Decolonization*, Watson uses artefacts of material culture, especially dissident texts, film, and contemporary literature, to counterpose authoritarian regimes with the so-called “free world” of independent non-communist Asian countries within which they were located. Four regimes are scrutinized: Park Chung-Hee’s South Korean dictatorship (1961-1987), Ferdinand Marcos’s Philippine rule (1965-86), Lee Kuan Yew’s illiberal Singapore (1959-90), and Suharto’s Indonesian regime (1965-98). Watson’s focus is the fictional cultural productions that emerged from these places.

Watson focuses on PEN Asian writers and PEN International Asian Writers Conferences between 1955 and 1988 to highlight the debates and agendas regarding decolonization. These conferences (Manila 1962 and 1981, Bangkok 1964, and Taipei 1970 and 1976) brought together critics, academics, and dissent writers to exchange ideas within a pan-Asian framework. Furthermore, she provides a condensed cultural history based on these writers’ attempt to theorize a decolonized Asian sphere by using the imagined nature of freedom and autonomy, in which freedom is caught between communist takeovers and their betrayal in the form of authoritarian regimes. She references the United States’s role in these developments with the decision by President Richard Nixon in 1971 and 1972 to further open diplomatic ties to the People’s Republic of China by supporting its application for a seat in the UN Security Council. Watson also highlights underdevelopment problems as another form of unfreedom.

Watson underscores the role of Cold War dissidents such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973) and *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962), Soviet writer,

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and uses the works of Asian writers such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer (*House of Glass*, 1988), Kim Chi-ha (poetry), and Ninotchka Rosca (*State of War*, 1988) to critique Cold War notions. Euro-American concepts, such as human rights, promoted the global economy while many countries remained police states, despite the transition to a post-colonial world. For the author, authoritarianism was not the exact opposite of liberal capitalism.

Post-1990 fiction helps contextualize Cold War history and its aftermath. In Watson's opinion, the "Bildungsroman" as a genre within the decolonization process is evident in the works of Mohamed Latiff, Jeremy Tiang, and Hwang Sök-yōng, whereby Watson relies on Gary Wilder's discussions of freedom and politics.

The author also uses these writers' productions to question the present times and existing narratives of Cold War authoritarianism, reminding "decolonization's" origins as an imperial restructuring approach and, for instance, Tan Pin Pin's *To Singapore with Love* to cross-examine the after-effects of the Cold War times, political repression, and regression in Southeast Asia, despite (or because) the economic growth.

Watson moves to inquire about the logic of post-colonial historiography and the apparent economic triumph of neoliberal capitalism. Tan's film rejects the parallelism between authoritarianism and capitalist democracy. Watson adds that these regimes cannot be the departure point toward capitalist democracies.

Cold War Reckonings: Authoritarianism and the Genres of Decolonization is a handy book to question the Post-Cold War's hegemonic narratives and to examine the post-authoritarian transitional justice damages resulting from anti-communist violence in Southeast Asia. The downfall of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China's hybridized form of state capitalism is not, for Watson, the death of communist ideology. While mentioning the intrusion of capitalist democracies in Southeast Asia, Watson prefers to focus on the violence of the "free world" oppressive policies applied in Asia during and Post-Cold War and the mass persecution and massacre of communist followers with the complacency and tolerance of the United States and European liberal democracies. Watson's book reveals how this Post-Cold War neoliberalism and hegemonic economic development were *foreseen* to shape the Global South through the fusion of Cold War and violence.

Nevertheless, a topic remains unanswered. What about communist autocratic states in other Southeast Asian nations? How the Cold War injustices evolved in those states? What is their story regarding free-world authoritarianism or capitalist democracy?

In resume, the book offers readings emerging from those on the "wrong side of history"-referencing those leftists, communists, and radical nationalists who were imprisoned, exiled, or oppressed by the right-wing regimes in the Cold War era but whose imaginaries still offers transformative possibilities for our present.

Due to its well-grounded nature and discussion of the bipolar Cold War logic, I recommend *Cold War Reckonings: Authoritarianism and the Genres of Decolonization* as a valuable addition to the debate on *Cold War* and *Post-Cold War*, providing a blueprint to promote the discussion on the history of authoritarianism past (and present).