

Depending on the Nation-State

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Generous funding from the Sasakawa Young Leaders Fellowship Foundation enabled me to conduct four months of dissertation research in Taipei on anticommunist relations between the Republic of China (ROC) and the Chinese in the Philippines after World War II, and especially after the ROC's flight from mainland China to Taiwan in 1949. My project asks how each of these non-nation-state entities – an ethno-cultural community on the one hand, and (after 1949) a government-in-exile pretending to be a nation-state on the other – exploited “anticommunism” as a form of transnational symbolic capital in order to survive in a world divided along ideological lines and characterized by the internationalization of the nation-state.

After several years spent teaching modern Southeast Asian history at my high school alma mater in Singapore, I entered the International and Global History doctoral program at Columbia in the fall of 2011 with a keen interest in how postcolonial nation-states in Southeast Asia were shaped by the Cold War, developments in China, and transnational dynamics such as migration and regionalism. Anticommunism as a historical phenomenon intrigued me for several reasons, not the least of which was the apparent contradiction between the extreme nationalist ideologies of anticommunist movements and their ability and willingness to function transnationally. Leveraging many years spent studying Chinese in Singapore, and mindful of how my mother's family fled Shanghai for Hong Kong in 1949 to escape Mao's communists, I set out to understand the relationship between the ROC after 1949 and Southeast Asia's Chinese.

It became apparent quickly that the Philippine Chinese were exceptionally vocal in their support for Chiang Kai-shek's ruling Kuomintang (KMT) on Taiwan. Why was this so? Who within the Philippine-Chinese community was pro-ROC – and who was not? Why did Chinese anticommunists in the Philippines conflate opposing communism with supporting the ROC on Taiwan? One could easily be anticommunist and anti-KMT, as my maternal great-grandfather certainly was (having been kidnapped and nearly killed by the KMT's Green Gang thugs in Shanghai in the 1930s). And, as my professors at Columbia have drummed into me, so what? Why was this particular relationship important? Rather than looking to simply “fill a gap in the

scholarship,” historians should aspire to reframe how scholars and the general public think about the past and present. (Fortunately, I am not working in medieval Byzantine history – not that there is anything wrong with that – and thus the gap between the “past” that I study and the “present” that I occupy is only a few decades and easier to bridge.)

I began my research year with questions such as the above on both the intricacies and larger meaning of anticommunist relations between the ROC and Philippine Chinese. After spending most of last year in Manila and Taipei, I have some tentative answers. In a few years, I will hopefully have better ones.

My dissertation takes as a starting point the postcolonial international order during its incipient years in Asia after World War II, but rather than examining interactions between nation-states, as historians of the Cold War and decolonization tend to do, it asks how two anticommunist entities that were *not* nation-states relied on each other in order to come to terms with this system.

For the ROC, exiled from mainland China and a Cold War partner of the United States, Chinese communities like those in the Philippines were not only sources of economic capital, but a means by which “Free China” asserted its legal and cultural sovereignty over “Chinese nationals” abroad, and in doing so proclaimed its anticommunist “nation-stateness” to the rest of the world. (The ROC’s 1929 Nationality Law stated that all ethnic Chinese living overseas were ROC citizens if their fathers had been born in China.)

Chinese elites in the Philippines after 1949 were cut off from mainland China by the communists’ victory in the Civil War and the anticommunist policies of the Philippine state. In the face of anti-Chinese economic and educational legislation enacted by their newly-sovereign host country, the community turned to the ROC as an external source of support and an authentic source of cultural “Chineseness.” More than that, propagandizing one’s ties to the anticommunist ROC helped Chinese individuals and institutions in the Philippines prove their ideological correctness to the state and ward off accusations of being communists.

My research in Taipei, particularly at Academia Historica and the Institute of Modern History at Academia Sinica, has yielded valuable insights into Philippine-ROC intelligence and legal cooperation in the Philippines. The ROC Foreign Ministry memoranda, correspondence, and reports that I read at these archives shows how suspected Chinese communists in the Philippines from the 1950s-70s were investigated, arrested, tried, and, if found guilty, deported

to Taiwan for further trial (bearing in mind their status as citizens of the ROC). This was a lengthy, flawed, and acrimonious process, exploitable by all parties involved. The ROC treated deportations of Chinese suspects to Taiwan and their trials there as bolstering its claim to being the sovereign government of “China” in the world, while for Chinese in the Philippines, aiding the Philippine authorities in their efforts to root out Chinese communism (for example, through the provision of translation services) could help solidify one’s credentials as an ally of the Filipino nation.

Like so many historical projects, mine seeks to defamiliarize what so many of us take for granted: in this case, the contemporary nation-state order. Today, what needs explaining is not the fragility of this system, but rather its continued resilience and adaptability in the face of forces such as global capitalism, environmental change, information flows, pan-religious movements, flows of refugees and displaced persons, and separatist and irredentist groups. In a small way, I hope to contribute to our understanding of why the system persists. By rewinding the clock a few decades to a time when Asian nation-states were in their infancy, I hope to historicize the allure of the nation-state – not by tackling its proliferation head on, but by focusing on a little-known relationship between two entities that sought to come to terms with it and what it stood for.