

The Basis & Preliminary Examination for a Theory of Asian Anarchism

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Throughout my time as an anarchist, I have become intimately familiar with many schools and theories of anarchist thought. The most influential to me are that of anarchist communism, individualist anarchism, synthesis anarchism, and Black anarchism. Black anarchism was particularly influential to me for its unique perspective on how capitalism and the State intersect with racism to more extensively affect Black communities — along with its criticism of class reductionism within leftist movements. As an Asian American, Black anarchism led me to wonder if there was a similar tradition that involved ideas of Asian cultures and historical practices with anarchism, an Asian anarchism.

A few months ago, I began looking for an anarchist tradition that had stemmed from Asia or the Asian diaspora. While I was able to find various sources regarding anarchist actions in Asian countries, there was a shocking lack of any pan-Asian anarchist framework or theoretical analysis. This made little sense to me as both within Asian countries and the Asian diaspora, there is an abundance of cross-ethnic solidarity and revolutionary spirit as well as ideas that are unique to these people groups. The Asian diaspora has faced shared oppression in the experience of Asian peoples in the West due to the past and continued prevalence of colonialism, imperialism, and racism. From there and through more research, I have come to the conclusion that it is necessary to create a pan-Asian anarchist theory that builds on the revolutionary tradition of Asian communities and groups to add a new perspective that draws from historical praxis and theory while moving away from Western-centric thought.

There have been a significant number of libertarian socialist and explicitly anarchist movements in Asian countries, mostly across East Asia and Southeast Asia, with a minority in South Asia. Many of these movements were and are transnational. Despite the significance of these movements, there has been no shared anarchist tradition between these movements up to this point. However, through a historical analysis of these movements, certain influences of Asian cultures and philosophies, and current material conditions of Asians in both Asia and the wider Asian diaspora, I can only conclude that a unified theory of Asian anarchism is not only possible, but necessary — now more than ever. This article will begin a series on this topic, the first explaining why a pan-Asian theory of anarchism is needed, while the next expands upon what a theory of pan-Asian anarchism would actually look like.

However, before discussing a theory of Asian anarchism, it seems prudent that I first provide what is meant by 'Asian' in this context. I intend to derive my definition from three key sources: (1) the ideas of pan-Asianism to unify political and economic goals of Asian peoples, (2) the Asian Socialist Conference and their conception of Asian socialism, and (3) the use of solidarity by the Asian American Movement to unite groups from the Asian diaspora. It is important to note that Asian cultures are extremely diverse in character and should not be racialized as a homogeneous group. Building off of that, it must be said that a single unitary theory of Asian anarchism would not only be undesirable but also impossible. A theory of Asian anarchism would serve as a school of thought filled with a plurality of ideas that are pan-Asian — coming from throughout Asia and the Asian diaspora.

The idea of Pan-Asianism has had a long and storied history; here I will be primarily focusing on the idea of a united Asian front politically and economically while rejecting any associated ideas of nationalism, superiorism, traditionally hierarchical Asian values, ethnocentrism, and others that are inherently opposed to anarchism and its goal of deconstructing hierarchy. In order to later explore the composition of Asian anarchism and why it's needed, the historical precedent must be examined to get a sense of how the past can influence the present and future. In particular, I would like to emphasise the historical solidarity between Asian communities in resisting Western colonialism and imperialism along with the historical precedent of cooperation between China, Japan, and India to further this goal. Additionally, this idea provided some transnational support for anarchist movements in China and the Philippines. From this broad movement, we can derive early anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist, transnationalist, and revolutionary precedents within united Asian movements.

In the Asian Socialist Conference of 1953, the question of what an Asian socialism would look like was discussed by groups from twenty-eight different countries. However, the conference was able to agree on little regarding the questions of what constituted Asia or how Asian solidarity should manifest. As we can see, the trouble with defining these terms is not at all a new issue. The conclusion of the conference resulted in the members agreeing on little except for anti-capitalism, anti-colonialism, the pursuit of socialism, and the need for liberation movements. It also acknowledged the need to fight not only against the old colonialism but also against conformism, Soviet and Chinese hegemony, and the anti-socialist soul of the Soviet Union and its vessels — an orientation which is especially relevant to anarchism. These ideals are key in establishing the basis for any theory regarding Asian anarchism.

The Asian American Movement was an effort to unify people of the Asian diaspora living within the United States in the late 1960s to the early 1970s. At this point in history, Asian American culture had already incorporated activism against oppression as many Asian Americans had been part of the Civil Rights movement, the New Left, the women's liberation movement, and the movement against American involvement in the Vietnam War. Due to the direct Asian connection, the anti-war movement was especially influential in generating pan-Asian solidarity among the Asian diaspora in the United States. Additionally, many new Asian activist leaders began focusing on the collective identity of Asian Americans rather than on nations of origin. The movement proposed solidarity among the Asian diaspora of all ethnicities and nationalities, choosing to disregard those differences in search of a united front.

As anarchism has reemerged as a predominant trend within left-wing thinking, the aforementioned countries as well as the Philippines, Vietnam seeking decolonisation, and India in its fight for independence have continued past anarchist movements and been introduced to new

ones. While there has not been enough research conducted on my end to extensively cite specific groups and movements, a preliminary analysis of Asian communities even before the twentieth century provides us with groups that sought liberation under anarchic if not explicitly anarchist principles: for example, agricultural living arrangements that resemble commons. These historical movements provide clear practical actions and ideological trends to look at in our analysis.

Now that we have looked at these points of Asian solidarity, I will provide what I feel is an acceptable working definition of what Asian identity entails, especially within an anarchist context. An Asian identity has two requirements: being from an Asian country or part of the Asian diaspora and choosing to identify as Asian. While there is no specific event or ethnic identity that ties together the entirety of the Asian diaspora or those that live within Asian countries, our shared experiences of oppression at the hands of Western colonial and imperialist powers and subsequent resistance are a starting area to draw from. Additionally, traditional hierarchies within Asian cultures such as sexism, ageism, and the family model, along with past intra-Asian colonisation such as Japan's conquests in China and Korea as well as current Asian xenophobia towards people moving between nations contribute to ever growing need for solidarity. These experiences, and many others, have led to the themes of transnationalism, anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and interethnic solidarity, being prevalent within prior Asian unity movements. From an anarchist perspective, particular focus will be placed on revolutionary precedent, transnational Asian networks, and rejection of statism as points of reference. I will also briefly mention the idea of pan-ethnicities, which serves as an umbrella term for a multiplicity of individual ethnic backgrounds and is another idea that could potentially be incorporated into the idea of 'Asian,' as well. While this is by no means the final word on who is considered Asian and how Asian identity is tied to anarchism, this outline hopefully provides a broad enough foundation to proceed with theoretical development.

As a final note before delving into Asian anarchism itself, it is important to consider Black anarchism and how a theory of Asian anarchism would and would not be analogous. I will first mention that within all schools of anarchist thought, including Black anarchism, there exists many differing ideas and theories and no school has a body of work with fully agreeing and non-contradictory ideas. Some of the ideas that make up the foundation for Asian anarchism are derivative of Black anarchism, such as the recognition of a common experience across a multi-ethnic diaspora. Those ideas, along with looking at the intersectionality between hierarchies such as the State, capital, and white supremacy, are where Black anarchism and a potential Asian anarchism would be analogous. Similarly, Black anarchism was heavily critical of class reductionism and the failure of white Anarchists and Socialists to understand the position and needs of the Black poor and working class. In this aspect as well, Asian anarchism would be mindful of and actively fight against the idea that there can be the dissolution of class without the dissolution of race. However, where Black and Asian anarchism would differ comes in the examination of Asian-specific historical precedent, material conditions, how our position within society differs, and numerous other conditional and specific factors. Thus, while there are shared areas of oppressive hierarchies within both Black and Asian history, the ways those hierarchies manifest are vastly different. So while it could be said that a theory of Asian anarchism would be analogous to Black anarchism, I would say it is more accurate to say that ideas of Asian anarchism were inspired by Black anarchism and, therefore, Asian anarchism owes much to it.

Now that the essential context and basis have been established, we can address the next question: Why is a theory of Asian anarchism necessary? The reasons that I believe it is important to create a theory of Asian anarchism can be boiled down to the following points.

Firstly, the movements of anarchism that currently exist within Asian countries have historically been intertwined and transnational. This provides not only a pre-existing framework for a broad theory of all-encompassing Asian anarchism, but also has the potential to create stronger pan-Asian solidarity.

Secondly, historical Asian anarchist movements had many unique successes and failures that differ from the anarchist movements in the West. Hence, a theory of Asian anarchism would have a new mode of analysis on organisational practices, past and current projects, potential paths forward, and fatal missteps.

Thirdly, Asian philosophies such as Taoism and Buddhism have had a significant influence on all anarchists and have made major contributions to anarchist theory. Putting more emphasis and finding more philosophical precedents would surely recover old ideas and inspire new contributions to the body of anarchist theory.

Fourthly, the unique experiences of Asian peoples as a result of colonialism and imperialism that they have been subjected to provide a unique outlook on these struggles. Rather than only opposing and pointing out the inherent evils such as capitalism and the State, Asian anarchism would draw from historical experience and lasting effects of Western colonialism such as British rule in India and China.

Fifthly, as we advance into late-stage capitalism and are forced to live under neoliberal principles, many things that Asians hold valuable such as our cultures, the environment, and our social relations are being destroyed. By forming a theory of Asian anarchism through the lens of important values, we can effectively address the immiseration that Asian communities are dealing with.

There are numerous other reasons why a theory of Asian anarchism would benefit the anarchist tradition and Asian people as a whole. The strength of anarchism is that it can address problems faced by people living anywhere because of the all-encompassing critique of hierarchy. That being said, historically anarchism has been a Western movement wherein movements and contributions from Asian countries are frequently overlooked. Therefore, reframing anarchism in an Asian context will be valuable to approach hierarchy across additional axes.

Recently, I organised a group of Asian comrades to begin research and development of a theory of Asian anarchism. While we are still in the preliminary stages of research and developing theory, I will share some ideas on what a more developed historical theoretical basis of Asian anarchism would entail. Crucially, I must emphasise that this theory will not only consist of the process of recovering ideas and history that apply to current conditions, but also of creating new ideas that build upon what was previously established.

Within our collective, members have proposed ideas for both Asian anarchism and a specific Asian American anarchism. I will be discussing the ideas of broader Asian anarchism first as they are the groundwork of the project and will apply to the theory of Asian American anarchism in parallel.

Culturally, values such as respect for authority, elders, and social harmony along with prior systems such as Confucianism and the caste system have led to extreme amounts of hierarchy within Asian societies. Even the basic level of the family unit within Asian cultures is traditionally hierarchical. While the push for accepting authority and hierarchy can lead to subservient

attitudes, it also provides a breeding ground for hatred of and a desire for complete removal of hierarchy. Building off of that, intersectionality stemming from being oppressed by capital, the State, racism, colonialism, imperialism — and, in many cases, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia — creates a perspective that can incorporate a huge amount of hierarchies into analysis. We can look at how these factors multiply each other to make the situation worse for Asians around the world and challenge the tendency toward class reductionism. This is, however, only a brief and non-expansive reflection that will be elaborated on in future essays.

One of the most important points to consider is how Asian anarchism might influence broader anarchist praxis. It is currently hard to say how exactly the Asian lens will affect praxis but it would logically be derived from both historical movements and projects as well as theoretical analysis. In particular, our praxis would focus on the deconstruction of multiple systemic hierarchies at once, namely capitalism, the State, racism, colonialism, and sexism as we recognise how intertwined they are in the oppression of not only Asian peoples, but the world at large. More specifically for Asians, Asian anarchism would have a heavy emphasis on the deconstruction of hierarchy within our cultures and especially family structures to begin reforming our societies on the most basic level. As anarchism is an ideology of action, our praxis will be expanded on with the ideas of direct action and mutual aid at the forefront of the mind.

To conclude, here I have laid out a reasoning for why a pan-Asian theory of anarchism is necessary while providing some historical context. In the future, I will continue to expand thinking upon this topic and what a framework for pan-Asian anarchism would actually entail. I will end this article with a quote from Ray Jones, in an interview from *Anarchist Voices*: ‘I think I was born an anarchist. The idea was in me from the start. Anarchism is still the most beautiful ideal, and I think someday it will come.’

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