

Book Review

Sumit Guha, *Tribe and State in Asia through Twenty-Five Centuries*, Asia Shorts. Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies, 2021. Pp. xiv, 124. \$16.00 paper, \$15.99 e-book.

The “seemly simple concept of tribe” (99) and the social, cultural, and political formations that this term has represented over time all hold considerable significance in world history and its historiography. Drawing on examples from across Asia during the last 2,500 years, Sumit Guha (University of Texas, Austin) offers through this short book a deeply insightful discussion of the culturally-potent and polysemic English term “tribe,” Asian-language terms that are analogous to varying degrees, and the particular social formation(s) to which these terms have been applied, from a simple band consisting of a single cluster of few tents of nomads or shelters of swidden cultivators up to a complex confederation of thousands of such clusters. Part of the Asia Short series from the Association for Asian Studies, this accessibly written volume builds on leading scholarship about all regions of Asia, including the author’s own impressive primary research and influential publications about South Asia and its history.

Over this carefully organized book, Guha reconstructs the term and concept of “tribe” in its diverse historical and current meanings and also the range of social formations to which it has been applied, identifying their common and distinctive features. He begins with a persuasive analysis of the reasons that the English term “tribe” remains today so widely used in popular media, legal systems, and academic disciplines across the globe, with a range of connotations. While Guha concentrates his discussion on the English term (and much more briefly on its etymologically related Latin and French forms, *tribus* and *tribu* respectively), he also addresses the adopted uses of “tribe” into many Asian languages. Further, he explores the range of original Asian language terms that scholars and indigenous texts have used historically to represent social formations that to various extents have, or do not have, tribal elements. These terms include inter alia Chinese *buluo*, Central and West Asian *ulus*, and Indic *sangha* and, more recently, *adivasi*.

Further, Guha argues that, despite the “use and abuse” of the term “tribe” in the present, he can “extract the rational kernel...while demonstrating the mutability of all social organization over time” (3). Significantly, Guha advances beyond often prevalent presuppositions of several theoretical models that “tribes” were merely a primitive stage of human development that only persist today in economically, socially, and culturally backward enclaves that developing societies and states have not yet evolved beyond or assimilated. Instead, Guha highlights how and why “tribes” emerged in specific environmentally-defined Asian micro and macro regions, for instance in the steppes of central Asia or the forested valleys of South or South-East Asia. He also reveals how “tribes” frequently developed out of interactions with expansive states, especially empires: it was the community’s “‘ungovernability’ not their mode of production that determined their sociological label” (65). In many examples that Guha provides, tribal formations reshaped themselves to create the solidarity necessary for resistance against externally based imperial military, political, and/or cultural assertions. In other examples, states deliberately created (sometimes “cynically invented” [42]) tribal identities out of previously unrelated groups for the state’s own perceived military advantage or administrative expediency, or to conform to its dominant political ideology.

For Guha, one key recurrent component of tribal identity is patrilineal descent, either biological or putative. He mentions only briefly the reasons why endogamy could be a valued or necessary component in tribal solidarity. He could have productively expanded upon the consequences of exogamy when it occurred, either due to political or cultural policy or resulting from personal decisions. Women’s marriages, either from other groups into the “tribe” or from the “tribe” into other groups, often formed new intertribal or tribal-imperial biological, cultural, military, and/or political bonds without necessarily threatening tribal solidarity. Further, as Guha shows, in some instances, “tribe” was defined by religious faith, without patrilineal bonds being evoked.

Throughout, Guha expresses his sophisticated discussion and engagement with relevant scholarship, without using jargon or explicit evocations of abstract theories. Yet, his work reflects his mastery of the leading theoretical models that bear on his subject. This book will engage undergraduate and graduate students, scholars with expertise in any one or more Asian regions, and general readers. His evidence and insights will lead them to reconsider and more deeply understand this widely current and historically significant concept and its associated social formations in a long-term world history context.

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