



## Ear to Asia podcast

- Title:** Sculpting nations: the politics around statues in Asia
- Description:** In Asia as elsewhere, whom statues commemorate and whom they overlook comes down to power and politics. And while the early post-colonial period was the heyday of statue building in the newly minted countries of Asia, the practice is alive and well today with ever larger and more expensive statues being erected. Asia historians Dr Ruth Gamble and Dr Lewis Mayo join host Ali Moore to ponder the complex relationship between State and statue. An Asia Institute podcast.
- Listen:** <https://player.whooshkaa.com/episode?id=709400>
- Voiceover:** The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform under agreement between the Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.
- Ali Moore:** Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is ear to Asia.
- Lewis Mayo:** We are talking about the ways in which nations get inside people's heads and the elites that sponsor those nations use statues as a focus of their discourses about what those nations are, but they are also very much questions of what subordinated populations feel about these things.
- Ruth Gamble:** So if you're a Gujarati Hindu person who likes Modi, you're going to see the Statue of Unity and Sardar Patel as a massive hero and be very proud that your country has produced such an amazing world's tallest statue. But if you're one of the Adivasi people from that region who lost their land, who lost their sacred sites because of that statue being built, you see it as an abomination.
- Ali Moore:** In this episode, sculpting a nation, the politics around statues in Asia.
- Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialist at the University of Melbourne.
- Statues became headline news during the Black Lives Matter protest earlier this year with protesters in Western countries defacing, destroying, or removing statues of historical figures associated with slavery and oppression. While people around the globe watched the dumping of the sculpture of Edward Colston, a British slave trader, into Bristol's Avon river, few may be aware that half a world away Taiwanese protesters have a history of defacing statues of Chiang Kai-shek, officially the founding father of modern Taiwan. Throughout Asia, the early post-colonial period saw a flurry of statue building aimed at celebrating and commemorating key figures who won freedom for their people, often building over the top of freshly demolished statuary erected by the former colonisers.



- Ali Moore: And for those who think statue building merely a quaint historical practise, the reality is that ever larger and more expensive statues are being constructed today. Last year, for example, India unveiled its new 182 metre high statue of a Gujarati politician built at a cost of 320 million US dollars. So who chooses who gets a statue and who doesn't? And who decides when statues should fall? To help us delve into the complex relationship between state and stone, we're joined by Asia historians, Dr Lewis Mayo from Asia Institute, a regular guest here on Ear to Asia, and Dr Ruth Gamble from La Trobe University. As is the norm these days, we're conducting our interview remotely. Welcome back to ear to Asia Lewis, and welcome Ruth.
- Ruth Gamble: Thank you very much.
- Lewis Mayo: Hello, Ali.
- Ali Moore: Let's start with a big picture look at the role statues play across Asia. Ruth, what place do statues have and have they had through the ages?
- Ruth Gamble: So there's a very long history of statue building in Asia, mostly associated with religious traditions, particularly coming out of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions of South Asia, but also within China the Buddhist tradition that went to China, and then you also had statues in China and Japan associated with their more indigenous religious traditions like Daoism and Confucianism. There was always a sense of representing deities and representing humans who had transitioned into a more godlike status through statues.
- Ali Moore: And has that, in more modern times, translated into not necessarily humans who have achieved godlike status, but humans who play significant parts politically?
- Ruth Gamble: I'd say that there's a crossover there. I'd say that you still have echoes of that tradition, that a lot of the people that have been made statues from in a lot of places around Asia are afforded, because of that tradition of having statues of deities around, they're kind of afforded a form of divinity through the making of the statues. And in some places there's a kind of colonial legacy, but in other places, they're really playing into the divine statue building practises.
- Ali Moore: And Lewis, is it fair to say that just as we see debate around statues and who and what they represent in countries like the US and the UK, and indeed here in Australia, that it's no different in Asia? That a statue is not a fixed historical text.
- Lewis Mayo: I would certainly agree with that. And one thing, of course, that's important to remember in the context of Asia broadly, is that of course for Muslims, representations of any religious entity in incarnate form are subject to criticism of being complicit in idolatry in some form or other. So while what Ruth says represents a very important tradition within the broadly speaking dharma related Hindu and Buddhist religions, and also in the Daoists and Shintoist tradition, there's an equally powerful critique



of images and image building from Muslims within the Asian region. But as you say, in modern times, particularly with the formation of the nation state, you have a complex play between the production of national stories as heritages that are shared by a national citizen groups, often defined by the struggles against colonialism, and I guess earlier traditions of mythmaking, religion, and representation that precede those structures. So you have an awful lot of commonalities across the region, but as you can imagine with such a huge set of different cultural structures from one zone to another, a great deal of internal diversity and controversy,

Ali Moore: Ruth, you see that, don't you? You see very different traditions depending where you look on the spectrum of what we might call Asia.

Ruth Gamble: Yeah, definitely. I mean, more than half the world's population live in space, a lot of diversity, but yeah, three traditions, like what Lewis was saying. I would see one that's kind of a colonialist revolutionary tradition that talks about you replenish statues and they're used in a more secular way. And then the tradition from the Buddhist and Hindu and Shinto, Daoist traditions where statues have had a sacred and ongoing role. And then the Muslim traditions in which most statues are seen it as affront to Allah. It can be very offensive to people from that tradition. So you get these three very different ways of looking at statues. Because I think that's something that's really key to how we understand this whole statue debate. How people see them is really what changes over time and plays a key role in how they're treated.

Lewis Mayo: And I should add that of course Christians in Asia are in a complex set of different positions between those Christians who tolerate and accept and revere iconic representations of the divine and sainted figures in Christianity, and this is true in Orthodox Christians, such as the St. Thomas Christians in Southern India, that's true for Catholics, and for the very many Protestants in Asia, there's often a very strong critique of any form of representation of Jesus or Mary or the God Jehovah. So that adds another layer of that complexity to the story that Ruth has outlined there.

Ali Moore: I know that we we're trying to cover a very vast geographical area and very vast subject matter, but let's try and step through some of the various specific examples. I mentioned Taiwan in the introduction to this podcast. Lewis tell us about the statues of Chiang Kai-shek. His defeated nationalist government fled to Taiwan in 1949. There are literally hundreds of statues of him out there. Can you describe the sort of thing we're talking about?

Lewis Mayo: Sure. It's always important to just clarify who Chiang Kai-shek was. Chiang Kai-shek's prominent, of course, as Mao Zedong's great rival for leadership in the Chinese mainland. He's a mainland origin person, an army officer who was involved in the revolutionary overthrow of China's last dynasty, the Qing dynasty. He becomes the de jure ruler of the Republic of China in the 1920s and 1930s. He's allied with Mao Zedong in the struggle against the Japanese, 1937 to 1945. But in the post World War II era, what you see in the Chinese mainland is competition for power between Chiang Kai-shek and Mao. Even though we now associate



Chiang Kai-shek with Taiwan, the contest over Chiang Kai-shek's place in Taiwan history is very much related to the fact that prior to 1945, between 1895 and 1945, Taiwan had been a colony of Japan. So the period after Japan's defeats or retrocession of Taiwan, retrocession is the official term, the reuniting of Taiwan with the political entity on the mainland. And that was a political entity under the control of Chiang Kai-shek's forces.

Lewis Mayo: Chiang Kai-shek's forces came into conflict in the immediate two to three years after the retrocession of Japan, and this produced an uprising on the part of the local Taiwan population. This was followed in 1949 by Chiang Kai-shek's defeat on the Chinese mainland with a retreat of the nationalist authorities to Taiwan. So Chiang is a defeated figure on the mainland, regarded by advocates of Taiwan independence nationalism, which insists that Taiwan is not part of China as an invader, as someone coming in from the outside. He was the dictator on Taiwan from 1949 until his death in 1975. And during that period, a cult of his personality was sponsored, which was characterised by a huge production of statues and other representations of his image that were spread through whole of the country and military bases and in schools and other spaces like that.

Lewis Mayo: But particularly in the years after 1975, through the 1970s, 1980s, there was an intense opposition to the authoritarianism of Chiang from the local Taiwan population in particular. And in the years of Taiwan's, I guess what we call full democratisation and the 1990s, there were calls for the eradication of all of the symbols of his rule with him being characterised as an oppressive dictatorial and indeed murdering figure in Taiwan. So what we have in Taiwan in this sense is a contested legacy and the statues have been the focus of very different representations depending on the group in question. The most significant action, of course, was that in the late 1990s, early 2000s, the statues were actually all collected up and put into a park where they now... Not all of them, but a large number of them. So they are there in this park, and they're often objects of, I suppose, respectful visits by those who were loyal to Chiang, a small number of people these days, but also objects of attack by people who are critical of his legacy.

Ali Moore: And in terms of how that contested legacy has played out in statues... I know that you said that many of them were gathered up and put in a park, but there was very many examples of statues decapitated, smeared with paint. There was a lot of very obvious manifestations of that contest, wasn't there?

Lewis Mayo: Obvious manifestations of the contest, but it's significant that the fall of Chiang was a slow fall, in the sense he sort of teetered over and then toppled in his legacy, and that his son took over, modified the system, then the son's appointed successor Lee Teng-hui moved things in another direction. So you don't have the toppling of statues analogous to the toppling of the statues of Saddam Hussein after the Second Gulf War or the toppling of statues in the end of the Cold War in Europe. Contestation is the right word. There's a kind of mockery, as well as an attack upon these statues. There are decapitations and other actions that are done in private, but not the kinds of mass actions that we saw with the



fall of Saddam Hussein or with the end of the Cold War in Europe. And this is not to underestimate the degree of pain that people who consider themselves to have been victims of Chiang's rule on Taiwan feel. But what it does show is I suppose this process being fought out between rival groups, really.

Ali Moore: And as you say, fought out over time. Ruth, is Taiwan a very good example of where it's, in some ways, generational change? It's a revolutionary environment moving to a post-revolutionary environment?

Ruth Gamble: Yeah, in some ways it seems to me that this process that it's going on in Taiwan is really much more resonant with what you see in Australia and other colonial places where you still have this contestation between a colonial legacy that presents itself as having been the developers of that area, and older traditions, more separatist traditions, which are arguing against that particular version of history. So it's much more aligned with something like the History Wars in Australia than what you have in other parts of Asia.

Lewis Mayo: The complexity is of course, is that in Australia, the discussion is between the indigenous first peoples and the settlers. In Taiwan, what you have is of course, an indigenous population, which contests the settler narrative, but this is a settler opposition to a state brought in without the consent of those settlers. So it has certain parallels, I think, with what you would have seen with the creation of alternative memories in the settler colonies in the New World, of course, of which the United States is the most prominent example. So that instead of having statues of King George III, you put up statues of Washington. So it's part of that dynamic as well as being associated with the critique of colonialist developmentalism. So it's got another interesting layer in there.

Ali Moore: And Lewis, in terms of parallels. What about Singapore? Let's move to Singapore. Are there parallels with Singapore?

Lewis Mayo: Singapore is a particularly interesting case because you could say that it's a society formed by migrants very much. So there is an acknowledgement of the first peoples, the Malay peoples in the Singapore story, but modern Singaporean narrative tends to focus on the foundation of Singapore as a free colonial port by the British figures sir Stamford Raffles in 1819. And Raffles continues to have his statue in the centre of Singapore. There have been calls for it to be challenged. The legacy of Raffles is more complex in some ways. Of course he's someone that outlawed slavery. So his role as a colonising enslaver and conqueror is not quite similar to that of someone like Cecil Rhodes or, indeed, Clive or other figures in India. This is a more complex set of narratives.

Lewis Mayo: That said, Singaporeans, I think, are keen to suggest that giving all of the credit to white men for the development of Singapore is wrong, and it's interesting that when Singapore celebrated its bicentennial in 2019, the Singapore government erected statues, temporary statues, around the famous Raffles statue in Singapore of other leaders of Sang Nila Utama, the namer of Singapore. Of Tan Tock Seng, the key pioneering Chinese



ally of Raffles. Munshi Abdullah, Malay ally of Raffles and a key figure in that area. Naraina Pillai, the founder of the Tamil community in Singapore. So in a sense, this is a commemoration of an officially endorsed developmentalist narrative in which all of these groups have contributed together to the building of Singapore from nothing.

Lewis Mayo: That said, there have been calls, particularly from Indo-Singaporeans, for a dethroning of Raffles and a challenging of his legacy. And it may well be that this is in part because Indo-Singaporeans have a much stronger set of cultural connections to the critiques of colonial statuary in South Asia than do Chinese Singaporeans who have a different set of legacies in the statute traditions, particularly associated with the cult of Sun Yat-sen, the founder of modern China, whose statues dot Singapore and other places. So Raffles is an interesting point of mediation between the different groups who make up Singapore, with there being, of course, a very small population of what we might call British Singaporeans, very few people who are actually loyal in any cultural sense to Britain, who might see Raffles as symbolic of their heritage.

Ali Moore: And Ruth, talking about those who sees Raffles as symbolic to a small group's heritage, a newspaper columnist in Singapore wrote recently that few nations would fondly remember, much less glorify a former oppressor. Is it unusual, the situation in Singapore, where the coloniser is revered by at least some of the colonised?

Ruth Gamble: It's definitely not what happens in India, where there was a very different approach to the colonisers there. In India, and I've noted in the Indian press of late, they've said that people in the West should learn from how we dealt with statues and approach it in that way. And the Indian approach was generally to round all the statues up and put them in a park or in a museum on the outskirts of Delhi. There's one in Delhi. There's one in Mumbai. Where people, if they wanted to, it sounds like the same as the Chiang Kai-shek statues in Taiwan. If you want to pay respects to those colonisers, you're still able to go there, but they're not in the view and they're not in the mainstay, they're not in the national monument areas, and they're not supposed to represent India.

Ruth Gamble: It's interesting though, for me, the differences between that approach and Singapore in that there wasn't as brutal and long lasting independence movement, as far as I understand it, in Singapore as in India. So for Indian people, there was a lot more antipathy towards these statues and they'd already been objects of anger for many years before Indian independence. But then there's one more thing, I think, that needs to be brought into this. Old traditions of statues were still embedded in this. So for example, there was people who started trying to destroy British statues and particularly statues of Queen Victoria before independence. But there was other people that said that those attempts to destroy the statues had allowed Victoria or caused Victoria as a deity form to attack them with plagues and so on. Someone tried to, err, daubed in tar the queen Victoria statue in Kolkata in the late 1880s, and quite soon after that, there was a bubonic plague outbreak in India. And there was many



people that suggested this was Victoria's revenge on the Indians for disrespecting her statue.

Ruth Gamble: So you see how these two traditions, on the one hand wanting to get rid of the colonial statues, but on the other, having an inbuilt respect for statues within the culture, that meant that they needed to be disposed of respectfully.

Ali Moore: You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore. And I'm joined by Asia historians Dr. Lewis Mayo from Asia Institute and Dr. Ruth Gamble from La Trobe University. We're talking about the politics around statues in Asia. I want to go to India, as Ruth brought up, in just a minute. But first of all, let's look at China, mainland China and the communist revolutionary leader Mao Zedong. His portrait, as everybody knows, hangs over the Heavenly Gates in Beijing. But Lewis, what about Mao commemorated in statue? How does the Chinese Communist Party view statues?

Lewis Mayo: So the Mao cult, I think we can see as typical of a radical republican statue cult. The Chinese Communist Party, interestingly, was an iconoclastic party, an anti-idolatry party. It was committed to the idea that statues were not sacred, that they represented non-deities. And Mao's own legacy, and it's often seen that Mao is an idol who was venerated and that particularly people both cite the presence of Mao's statues in people's homes as surrogates for god worship, where a family might have an altar with deities on it in its own place, in the cultural revolution and in earlier periods under Mao's rule, this was replaced with Mao.

Lewis Mayo: Replacement, I think, is the key idea, that the Mao statue system, by the people who understood it was meant to me an alternative to that traditional religious engagement with representations of deities. And it's very significant that a very large Mao statue was erected recently by peasants, by farmers, in Hunan province, in central China, and actually demolished as a result of the orders of the government of China on the grounds that it was too much like idol worship. So there's an interesting tension between, I suppose, the idea that Mao is a person, not a god, and a tendency for those other traditions of statue reverence, the idea that the statue possesses power, that it's embodied with a kind of capacity to bring wealth, to offer protection, to resist plagues, that it can do all of those things. And Maoism was poised between those two poles. And I think it's very close to the situation with Stalin and Lenin in the Soviet Union.

Ali Moore: But I guess when you talk about interesting and intense tensions and statues in mainland China, Ruth, for an officially atheist country, China also has statues like the Spring Temple Buddha. It's 153 metre tall statue. Isn't there a fundamental contradiction here?

Ruth Gamble: There's a lot of contradictions there. The Chinese state or the Chinese Communist Party really wants to own the Mao statues. It puts them where it wants to in the centres of town and create spaces around them. But I think there's different stages in the Chinese state's relationship with



statues. So there was the iconoclastic stage during the Cultural Revolution where they tried to destroy all the other statues and promote officially sanctioned Mao statues. And then since the end of Mao's reign, we've had more of a accommodation between the two different groups, where the Communist Party has tried to present itself as the protector of particularly Buddhist traditions, which they associate more with the statues. But there's also a big push to get the statues of Confucius reinstated in places. But their relationship with the Buddhist tradition is quite interesting because, in similar ways to their relationship with the Catholic tradition, and the building of statues has been a way to promote a state sanctioned form of Buddhism, as opposed to other forms of Buddhism that represent a power competition.

Ruth Gamble: So for example, the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, particularly headed by the Dalai Lama, is seen as an alternative power structure that needs to be gotten rid of, but the statues that the state has built are seen as a way to represent themselves as the protectors of Buddhism and therefore aligned with it. So there's a massive statue of Vairocana Buddha in Henan province, but they're all over the place. One of my favourite ones is... You know the Tibetan prayer wheels, where you turn the wheel and it's supposed to say prayers for you? There's a massive one of those in a town that they renamed Shangri-La, if you don't mind. And instead of having Buddhist prayers on this wheel, it's all inscribed with the sayings of the founders of communism. So you turn the prayer wheel and instead of releasing Buddhist prayers, you're releasing the sayings of Mao Zedong, and the sayings of Jiang Zemin. So it's like this real intense entanglement between the Buddhist tradition and the Buddhist practises and the power of the state. Also the state mandates who can be reincarnated. It's a very intense entanglement that manifests in all of these different ways, including statues.

Ali Moore: We talked at the outset, Ruth,, you discussed the blurring of the lines often between the secular and the religious, where human heroes are treated like gods. If we go to India now, tell us about this apparently very good example of this sort of thing in the enormous and incredibly expensive Statue of Unity.

Ruth Gamble: Yeah, so the Statue of Unity was inaugurated in 2018, and it's a statue of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, and he was one of the heroes of the Indian independence movement, and in India is almost as famous as Nehru and Gandhi. He's a well known figure. There's a lot of streets in India called Patel Drive or Patel Crescent or so on. So people know about him quite well. And he has been chosen by the current Hindu nationalist government of India as their favourite founding father, for want of a better word, because he represents an alternative to the Jawaharlal Nehru dynasty tradition, which is associated with their political rivals, the Congress Party.

Ruth Gamble: So Patel, they put forward as being this mythical man of steel or iron, the word's quite similar in Hindi, and he represents India's future as a strong dominant country, a very kind of masculine form of nationalism. And it's put up in contrast to Gandhi, who's kind of sometimes portrayed as being



a bit wimpy. Also Jawaharlal Nehru, there is this idea that they're not quite masculine enough, not strong enough, not iron enough to handle what India has to deal with now. There are so many resonances with statues, so many resonances with semi-divine figures in Indian history that I would say all of these founders are presented within that kind of religious tradition of semi-deities and viewing either saints or secular leaders as having some kind of divine power throughout Indian history.

Ali Moore: In fact, you've written, Ruth, that Modi's use of Patel as a unifying figure is at least as much an act of erasure as it is of creation.

Ruth Gamble: It's an erasure of so much. There's an erasure of the Congress role in the development of the Indian tradition. There's this idea of putting forward Patel instead of Gandhi and Nehru. But there's also, in the actual building of this statue, it's built right next to a dam, a big dam on the Narmada river, which was also controversial. And both of these are seen as big moments of Indian nation building, and they're both associated with development and the Gujarat model that is also associated with Modi. And building those, not only overshadows, literally, the memories of Gandhi and Nehru, but also they had to remove all the indigenous people that lived in the area, the Adivasi people, and take them away from their sacred sites. They'd already been moved for the dam and now they were moved again for the statue so that that area could be cleaned in order to build this massive statue.

Ali Moore: Given the complexity of the political narrative and indeed the size and the sheer cost of this particular statute, is it a contested statue?

Ruth Gamble: Yeah, very contested. I mean, it's contested on so many different levels. For example, as I said, the fact that these people had to be moved away from their sacred sites. The second thing is that it was supposed to be built by the offerings from the people who are really invested in Sardar Patel and this didn't quite work, so the Gujarati government and the federal government had to step in and offer funds. And there was also issues, it was supposed to be a representation of how modernity can be used to build statues. And I was thinking, this is also the case with the Vairocana Buddha, the Spring Buddha in China, you have this combination of technical feats as well as this is showing what India and China can do as nation states, as developed nation states with lots of power, as well as being a representative of a cultural heritage.

Ruth Gamble: This statue was supposed to show a technical feat for India, but in order to finish it, they actually had to bring in Chinese artisans to do some of the work on the iron, on the steel, on the bronze casting for the statue. And there was also the idea of why are you building a statue to Patel? He was a bit of a controversial figure. He's always seen as the strong man, but also he respected Gandhi. Why is he being promoted instead of Gandhi? India is such a diverse and complex sub-continent, but here literally the idea of a statue of unity, it's a very homogenous version of India that is being promoted here.



Ali Moore: In fact, Lewis, there's another statue planned in India of a warrior king which will be even bigger than the Patel Statue of Unity. Tell us about the Shivaji, and this statue, which I think is actually planned for the Arabian Sea, is that right?

Lewis Mayo: That's right. And as Ruth points out, the fascinating thing in these Indian stories is not simply the national level and the imagination of India as a nation, and I think it's important in a state that defines itself in confrontation with its Northwestern neighbour, Pakistan, that veneration of statues as a sign of particularly conservative Hindu interpretation of what Indian identity is all about, that Shivaji is a Marathi leader from the 17th century, who is promoted by Hindu nationalists, not simply for being a warrior figure, who was, like all warrior figures, a figure of armed resistance and of state building, but actually someone whose power arose in opposition to the Mogul empire, the central Asian-Turco-Persian dynasty that in the sense of unified in the year and the period prior to the British, that this is an alternative to an image of Muslim rule, but significantly also a symbol of local nationalism of Marathi regionalism.

Lewis Mayo: So Shivaji has been promoted by Marathi speakers in particular in Mumbai, India's largest city, in opposition to foreigners in a lot of cases, including Gujaratis, which is significant in the sense that the Sardar Patel statue, sponsored by Modi, both Gujaratis, is a strong assertion of the Gujarati role in the formation of India. That historically the Shivaji cult has been not simply one of opposition to Islam and an assertion of a Hindu militancy, but also of Marathi localism. It's significant too, that there's another large statue going up in Mumbai, which is the Statue of Equality, the statue dedicated to the figure BR Ambedkar, who is in fact a convert to Buddhism on the side of the Dalit or the scheduled caste, the socially demeaned section of the Indian population.

Lewis Mayo: So we can see that competing representations of what modern Indian nationalism means involve multiple religious identifications. But one could argue that one of the unifying points, of course, is a distance from Islam and particularly because of Islam's caution about representations of human beings and particularly to any form of veneration of images that might move them onto the religious plane. Shivaji is important as a figure that, I suppose, can fulfil that militaristic image of modern India, and also be seen as a defender of Hindu values. Iconophilic visions of religion, as opposed to iconophobic or iconoclastic ones, and that this is part of this complex politics that is also, as Ruth said, just all about building big things.

Ruth Gamble: Yes. What you're dealing with now is this very mega statue complexes. In my head I keep thinking of them as the big bananas.

Ali Moore: That's a very Australian comment.

Ruth Gamble: Yeah, a very Queensland comment. Sorry about that. But they're tourist icons. They will draw people in. But before that movement to the mass statues, for the past few decades, you've kind of had competitive statue building on a more local level. And one of my favourite stories about this



is Mayawati, who was the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, and she was the first woman and the first Dalit to be the chief minister of a major state like Uttar Pradesh. She's under investigation at the moment for corruption, because she took to building statues of herself and distributing them around Uttar Pradesh. And her argument for this was that there aren't enough statues of women, there aren't enough statues of Dalits. I'm an important woman. I'm a Dalit, let's build statues of me. And she took this on herself to do, but used herself as the model. Whole parks dedicated to her.

Ali Moore: And Ruth, I guess it really raises that question of who decides when a statue falls. We started the conversation talking about the very gradual slow contestation in Taiwan, if you like. But who gets to decide? Who is the arbiter on when a statue stands and when a statue falls?

Ruth Gamble: So understanding of statues is based on the viewer, on what they see. So you can have people from different traditions looking at exactly the same statue and seeing something completely different. People can look at the history of a person or the idea and say that, for example, with Captain Cook in Australia, people can argue, he wasn't that bad a person, but if you're an indigenous person, you grew up with Cook as being like a nightmare. That's how you understand it.

Ruth Gamble: It's the same in Asia. There's people that grow up and have a cultural tradition that sees one statue in one way, and then other people will look at the same statue in a completely different way. So if you're a Gujarati Hindu person who likes Modi, you're going to see the Statue of Unity and Sardar Patel as a massive hero and be very proud that your country has produced such an amazing world's tallest statue. But if you're one of the Adivasi people from that region who lost their land, who lost their sacred sites because of that statue being built, you see it as something very different, as an abomination. So who gets to decide basically is who has the power, really. But then if you're in a democracy, that should be a deliberative process, as opposed to coming mainly through force.

Ali Moore: Lewis, how do you see that question of who decides what falls?

Lewis Mayo: I guess this is also to do with, I suppose, the nature of modern types of states in which popular will has to be invoked by the governing powers. But in all of these contemporary contexts, there are plural views of what the history of that state should be. And I guess the authorities are not in the kind of position that you would find in pre-modern contexts, where they, in a sense, build the statue and the populace decides what to do with it. We're looking at a situation in which the populace, and as Ruth has pointed out, that it's not simply that the statute represents authority and power. There's also popular engagement with it, and we can say that that's true for other iconophilic traditions, such as Catholicism or orthodoxy.

Lewis Mayo: But in the contemporary period, of course, we are talking about the ways in which nations get inside people's heads and the elites that sponsor those nations use statues as a focus of their discourses about what those



nations are, but they are also very much questions of what subordinated populations feel about these things. Indeed, the desire for statues to be erected is one thing that is an example of popular will. We actually have a very interesting example of this, and I hope it's not embarrassing to him to admit, but Muhammad Kemal, who is my colleague and has been a guest on Ear to Asia podcast, actually had a statue of himself made without his knowledge in Kurdistan to honour his contributions to Kurdish culture. And that's clearly a case, I guess, of it's not the authority is creating the statue, but people with a genuine respect for a living individual who is a person of absolutely exemplary humility, and that we were delighted that Kemal had a statue put up to him. So that's an interesting Ear to Asia angle on the story.

Ali Moore: It is, Lewis. There are just simply so many different aspects, but as I said, I think the one thing that you've illustrated beautifully is the relevance of this conversation and the relevance of statues today. A huge thank you to both of you. Thank you, Lewis. And thank you, Ruth.

Ruth Gamble: Thank you.

Lewis Mayo: Thank you.

Ali Moore: Our guests have been Asia historians Dr Lewis Mayo from Asia Institute and Dr Ruth Gamble from La Trobe University. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne, Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple Podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify, or SoundCloud. If you like the show, please rate and review it on Apple Podcasts. Every positive review helps new listeners find the show. And of course, let your friends know about us on social media. This episode was recorded on the 22nd of July, 2020. Producers were Kelvin Param and Eric van Bommel of profactual.com. Ear to Asia is licenced under Creative Commons, copyright 2020 at the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore. Thanks for your company.