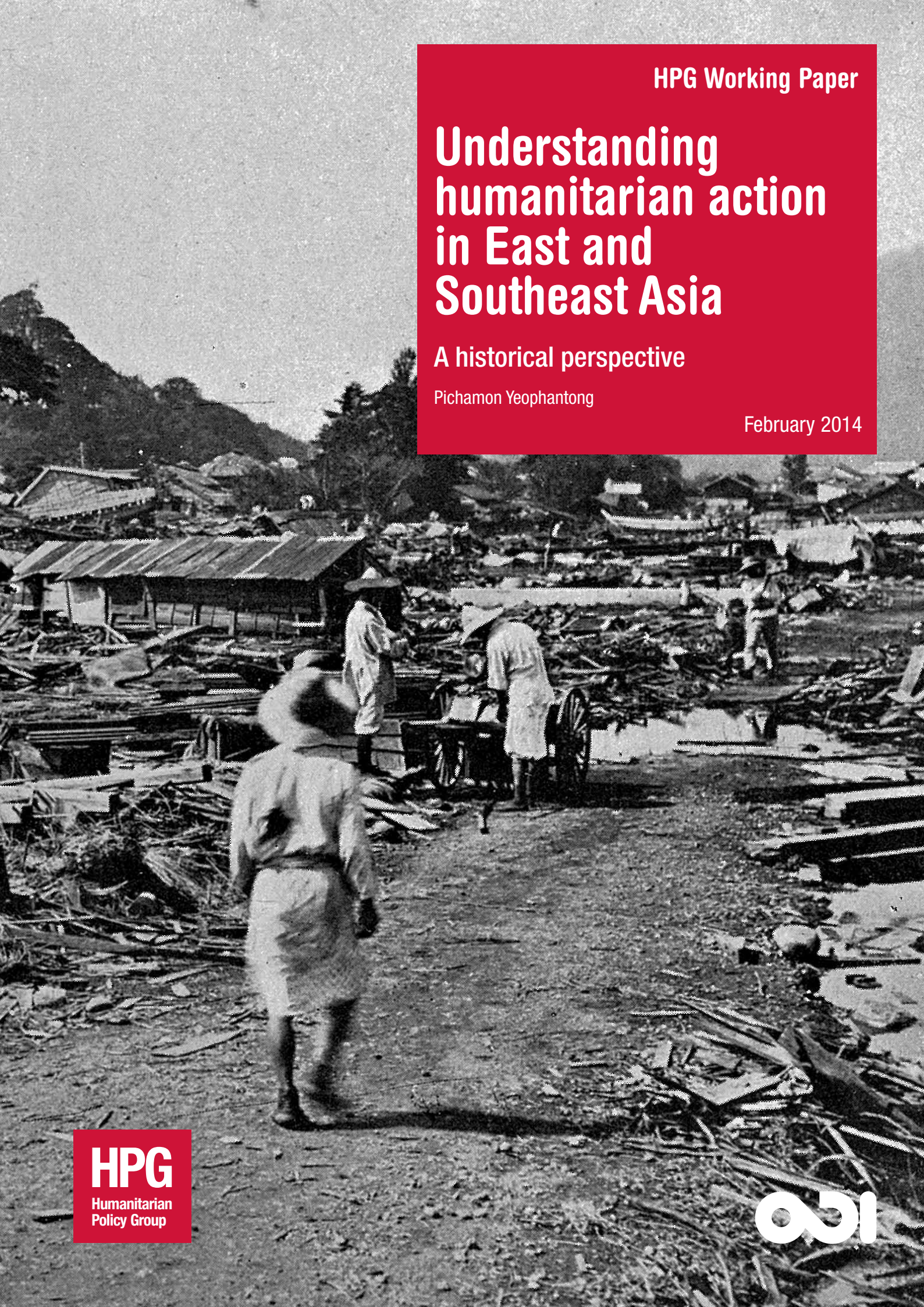# Understanding humanitarian action in East and Southeast Asia

A historical perspective

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Acknowledgements

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1 Introduction

What does 'humanitarianism' signify? And how have humanitarian practices evolved in different societies and at different points in time? It is frequently assumed that there exists a common, universal definition of this idea. While this is not a completely misguided belief, determining the normative and practical parameters of humanitarianism and humanitarian action has proved to be an exceedingly difficult and contentious process. What constitutes 'legitimate' humanitarian action, in particular, has been subject to heated debate, as different humanitarian actors tend to espouse varying interpretations of humanitarianism and, by implication, prioritise different humanitarian objectives. Denoting a way of thinking as well as a prerogative to act, 'humanitarianism' clearly eludes simple definition.

While there is growing recognition that to speak of a universal understanding of humanitarianism – whether at the national, regional or global levels – is inherently problematic considering the multicultural nature of any given society and the diverse actors involved in providing humanitarian aid, there remains a lacuna in existing scholarship on how this amorphous idea has been understood and acted upon in non-Western contexts. Especially in Asia, the dissemination of humanitarian values and ideals remains an understudied subject despite the tumultuous social and political history of the region. A study of the historical evolution of humanitarian action within such a distinctive political and cultural setting is, therefore, warranted in order to produce a more nuanced understanding of how indigenous sentiments of humanitarianism have interacted with Western-derived concepts to inform the development of modern humanitarian action in the region, and the extent to which the use of a common language of humanitarian obligation is feasible.

The expansion of European power during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, coupled with the arrival of Christian missionaries, is commonly linked with the spread of Western thought and the introduction of such seminal ideas as enlightenment, civilisation and sovereignty to the non-Western world.

Notions of humanism and humanitarianism were also among those believed to have been transposed by the European imperial powers onto the ancient societies of East and Southeast Asia. While there is some truth to this claim, it is also misleading. Although the modern concept of humanitarianism constitutes a foreign construct that carries with it specific connotations for which there is no exact equivalent in the cultures of East and Southeast Asia, Western interpretations of humanitarianism should not be used as a predominant discourse against which non-Western understandings are judged or framed. Instead, it is important to make sense of East Asian notions of humanitarianism on their own terms first. As explored later, Chinese understandings of humanitarianism carry connotations that reach beyond the original Western-derived term, gaining for instance Confucian – as opposed to eighteenth-century Enlightenment – overtones. Here, traditions of charitable giving and social obligation, grounded in human empathy for the suffering of others, have deep roots in most Asian societies, being the products of complex social and religious systems.

Variations in the conceptions and practices of humanitarianism, as such, cut across cultural, social and political realms. Just as Chinese conceptions of humanitarianism, for example, have proven to be culturally distinct from predominant Western interpretations of the idea, so it has been possible to identify nuanced changes in how humanitarianism came to be defined and acted upon *within* Chinese society over time. Largely the result of contending social and political imperatives, it is also the case that humanitarian practices are given to variation according to the interests and responsibilities of the humanitarian agent. How the South Korean or Cambodian government conceives of humanitarian imperatives, for instance, is likely to diverge to a certain degree from how local civil society groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) make sense of a country's humanitarian obligations. In this way, although official policy discourses play a pivotal role in delimiting the parameters of legitimate humanitarian action, this does not mean that state-led discourses are always sanctioned at the societal or international level. International condemnation

of the Myanmar government's initial refusal of international relief assistance in the wake of Cyclone Nargis is a case in point. It is thus necessary to be wary of conflating national, regional and international perspectives with local ones, as well as vice versa.

At the same time, however, the commonality of humanitarian values and norms should not be underplayed. Disagreement over the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)'s seven core principles (humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality) notwithstanding (Pictet, 1979), in its broadest and most fundamental form the essence of humanitarianism can be distilled as the imperative to 'sav[e] lives at risk' (Barnett and Weiss, 2008: 11) and alleviate the suffering of others. This overarching notion arguably underlies the cultures and practices of humanitarianism in East and Southeast Asia. As observed by Michael Barnett, 'Humanitarian ethics are simultaneously universal and circumstantial' (Barnett, 2011: 11).

This Working Paper – part of the HPG research project 'A Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action' – explores how understandings of humanitarianism and humanitarian action have evolved in East and Southeast Asia. Reflecting the larger body of scholarship on humanitarianism in China and Japan the paper focuses on these two countries. Although it also highlights key trends in Southeast Asia, the literature on this region is less extensive, and so the analysis is necessarily more limited. This is not to suggest that issues pertaining to humanitarianism have no bearing on Southeast Asian policymakers and scholars. Rather, it is indicative of underlying geopolitical realities. Unlike Japan or China, major regional actors with considerable experience in engaging with the international humanitarian regime, the involvement of Southeast Asian countries in this area has been much more circumscribed due to the lack of comparable experience and resources.

Drawing on the available literature, the paper poses the following key questions:

1. How have notions of humanitarianism and, more specifically, of humanitarian obligation evolved and proliferated within East and Southeast Asia? To what extent does a common understanding exist?
2. What elements of continuity and change can be identified in contemporary discourses and practices of humanitarianism?
3. What challenges and opportunities does the existence of multiple – and at times contending – interpretations of humanitarianism present for the region?

This paper proceeds in four parts. Chapter 2 offers an assessment of current scholarship on humanitarian action in East Asia, drawing on both English and local language sources. It underscores gaps in the literature and examines the analytical contours of debates on humanitarian action within the region. Chapter 3 examines the conceptual history of humanitarianism in China and Japan. Conventionally considered as having been transposed to the region via Western philosophical thought and the work of Christian missionaries, understandings of humanitarianism have in fact been influenced by a myriad of factors originating from the longstanding traditions of these countries themselves, as well as from foreign contact. A main argument advanced is that, even though multiple conceptions of humanitarianism exist, there are still elements suggesting the existence of a common understanding. Chapter 4 gives an overview of humanitarianism in Southeast Asia, and Chapter 5 concludes the paper by summarising key observations on the study of humanitarianism in East and Southeast Asia, while highlighting aspects of both continuity and change, including the growing importance of non-state actors in redefining the parameters of humanitarian action.

2 Thinking about humanitarian action in East Asia: the state of the field

Given its intrinsic links to Western humanist thought, there are challenges to translating the idea of humanitarianism in a non-Western socio-cultural and intellectual milieu. Despite growing awareness in East and Southeast Asia of the unresolved questions to do with humanitarian action – in part gained from the many disaster-induced humanitarian crises experienced in recent years – with countries like China and Thailand becoming more involved in the provision of international relief and assistance, existing studies tend to be fairly limited in their treatment of these issues. Again, while this is not to suggest that Asian scholars and practitioners are completely unconcerned, it does mean that attention has so far been directed chiefly to matters relating to the technical and policy dimensions of humanitarian action.

That said, there are promising developments in the literature pointing to burgeoning interest in the cultural and historical underpinnings of humanitarian action. There have also been reinvigorated attempts at bringing 'people' back into the picture, which feeds into a broader trend concerned with highlighting the 'human face' of humanitarian emergencies and disasters. Such efforts have become progressively manifest in recent years, as evinced from news reports and official statements, where the language of 'human suffering' and 'human tragedy' is frequently used to convey the gravity of the situation at hand (see ASEAN, 2012). As reflected in the ASEAN Charter, member states are united as one 'caring' community, inspired by the ideals of a 'people-centred' approach that upholds 'the United Nations Charter and international law, including international humanitarian law' (ASEAN, 2008).

When it comes to studies of humanitarianism, East Asian contributions stand out. Since the middle of the twentieth century, Japanese scholars and practitioners have invested considerable effort in defining this elusive idea, producing substantial scholarship on the subject, with topics ranging from refugee policy to volunteer studies. A number of these studies explore the experiences of other countries in dealing with the provision of humanitarian assistance (*jindou enjo* 人道援助), reflecting the learning process Japan has gone through in developing its humanitarian response capabilities (Otani, 2009). The same is true for South Korean scholarship, where there is a strong inclination among Korean scholars to study humanitarianism through a comparative lens, as well as through the geostrategic prism of North–South relations, with the provision of humanitarian aid (인도적 지원) often identified as a pathway to reconciliation between the two Koreas (Kim, 2009; Hong, 2001; Yi and Kim, 2008; Yi, 2005; Yi, 2003). In particular, the focus has been on humanitarian responses to the North Korean famine (1994–2000), which some argue acted as a catalyst for improving North–South relations (Lee, 2005). Although South Korea does not have an 'official' humanitarian policy *per se*, disaster management, emergency relief and reconstruction have served as important themes in national policy and in local scholarship. This is consistent with Korea's participation in UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) teams and the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG).

Despite longstanding interest among Japanese scholars in the historical evolution of the Japanese humanitarian movement, especially key actors such as the Japanese Red Cross Society (JRCS) (Kurosawa and Kawai, 2009; Checkland, 1994; Kawamata, 1915), both Japanese and Korean scholarship tends to devote less attention to the philosophical or conceptual foundations of humanitarianism, and are much more inclined towards practical questions regarding the coordination and delivery of humanitarian assistance. This focus on the policy-related and technical aspects of humanitarian action suggests that the fundamental ideas behind humanitarian assistance have remained relatively uncontested in Japan and South Korea. This in part reflects public opinion in both countries, which is generally in favour of continuing – and

even increasing – contributions to international humanitarian efforts. As Makiko Watanabe notes, while for historical reasons controversy surrounds the overseas deployment of the Japanese Self-Defence Force (SDF) for humanitarian purposes (particularly to Iraq in 2004), the Japanese public are supportive of their country's 'civilian' humanitarian assistance (Watanabe, 2004). In South Korea, more than half of respondents in an opinion poll in 2011 agreed that Korea should give aid 'to contribute to global peace and stability' and as a 'moral responsibility as a global citizen' (Kwon and Park, 2012: 68). Although public support for humanitarian aid to North Korea is subject to some oscillation (Civil Peace Forum, 2012), a recent poll published by the *Dong-a Ilbo* newspaper showed that two-thirds of the public supported the continuance of aid 'regardless of the political situation' (Noland, 2013).

Processes involved in providing aid are, of course, contentious. Unsurprisingly tensions can be found in the relationship between the governments of Japan and South Korea and humanitarian organisations in these countries. Particularly for entities like the Japan Platform, a consortium of transnational and local Japanese NGOs, members of the business community and government agencies including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, manoeuvring between humanitarian imperatives and government restrictions can prove problematic. Due to its unique organisational structure, the Japan Platform has been criticised for its dependence on government and business funding, which supposedly renders it more susceptible to political pressure from the Japanese government, undermining the organisation's neutrality and impartiality as a humanitarian actor (Osa, 2012: 30).

In addition to work on humanitarian action at the national level, there is also a sizable body of scholarship on humanitarian action at the local levels, encompassing issues ranging from cultures of giving and the religious foundations of charity to histories of public health and urban environmental crises. The development of volunteerism within Japanese and Korean society, together with the growing role played by the private sector in providing humanitarian goods, has also attracted increasing interest from Japanese and Korean (not to mention Western) scholars (Imamura, Ide and Yasunaga, 2007; Aoki, 1999; Asano and Yamaguchi, 2001; Hur, 2006; Nakano, 2000; Brassard, Sherraden and Lough, 2010; Haddad, 2007; Rausch, 1998). In South Korea, sophisticated networks of religious and non-religious organisations

have proliferated, with Christian missionary networks playing a pivotal role in assisting displaced people and refugees in other countries, for instance along the Thai–Myanmar border, as well as providing humanitarian aid following disasters. Compared to Christian religious and humanitarian organisations, Buddhist organisations have had a more confined presence in South Korea's humanitarian movement (Ven. Pomnyun Sunim, 2013). Even so, organisations like Good Friends, established in 1996 as the Korean Buddhist Sharing Movement with the objectives of preserving peace, upholding human rights and helping displaced people and refugees, have been active in providing humanitarian assistance, especially to North Korea.

The dearth of studies dealing with the conceptual and normative dimensions of humanitarian action notwithstanding, the overall contribution of Japanese and Korean scholarship to the humanitarian field is noteworthy. Reports by organisations like the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in particular are valuable in contributing to a conceptual shift from an emphasis on the response phase of humanitarian emergencies, especially following natural disasters, towards a more proactive approach that emphasises capacity-building, resilience, prevention and preparedness (see JICA, 2006; JICA, 2008; see also Nakagawa and Shaw, 2004). Issues to do with post-crisis recovery and reconstruction processes are also prominent concerns in East Asian scholarship. Following major disasters like the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake, for instance, parallels were frequently drawn between these two occurrences to distil lessons for urban crisis management (see Goto, 1923; Ikeda, 1930; Yamada, 1974; Mochizuki, 1993; Akimoto, 2012; Hanes, 2000; Hirayama, 2000; Shaw and Goda, 2004; Imamura and Anawat, 2012).

Similar to Japanese scholarship, Chinese studies on humanitarian assistance in disaster situations have gradually come to reflect a sharper focus on disaster risk reduction and management, indicative of an ongoing shift in the Chinese government's policy orientation following the Sichuan Earthquake in 2008 (see Yeophantong, 2012). Increased attention is also being given to the notion of cultural and material reconstruction, as seen from recent studies on the implications of post-disaster response and recovery for ethnic minorities following the Sichuan Earthquake and the Yushu Earthquake in 2010 (Zhu, 2008; Yan, Tan and Chen, 2009; Li, 2008). However, unlike

Korean and Japanese scholarship Chinese writing on humanitarianism has also been marked by extensive discussions of the philosophical and discursive dimensions of humanitarianism. Although the idea of humanitarianism (*rendao zhuyi* 人道主义) is a relatively 'modern' one to the Chinese mind, Chinese intellectuals have been prolific in their deliberations on humanitarianism, particularly in recent years as a result of Beijing's attempts to project the country as a 'responsible great power', and in line with the growth in Chinese contributions to international peacekeeping (Yeophantong, 2012; Long and Zhang, 2010; Luo and Liu, 2007; Pang, 2005; Li, 2008). Owing to the ambiguity of humanitarian concepts and their close relationship with sensitive human rights questions, Chinese analyses of humanitarianism and humanitarian action have, for the most part, been devoted to unravelling the nature and development of the idea, and the complex issues (e.g. humanitarian intervention) that flow from it.

From a survey of current literature, it is apparent that Chinese thinking on humanitarianism has been informed by two underlying trends in Chinese social and political thought: first, a preoccupation with adding so-called 'Chinese characteristics' to foreign ideas; and second, a pervasive and deeply-rooted scepticism toward ideas – of which humanitarianism is but one example – that originated with, or have been espoused by, the Western 'imperialist' powers. Although official records show relief assistance being sent from China to disaster-stricken countries during the 1950s and 1960s, such as hurricane relief to Cuba in 1963 (Yin, 2011), it was not until the 1980s that the People's Republic began formally to participate in international humanitarian operations, primarily within the framework of the UN's nascent peacekeeping regime. Prior to this, the PRC had largely refused to accept humanitarian norms for fear that the normative rules attached to them impinge on its sovereign rights. Although attitudes are changing – witness, for example, the PRC's support for collective action during the Libyan crisis – such reticence is still evident today in official Chinese attitudes towards humanitarian intervention (Liu, n.d.). Chinese commentators continue to be more wary than their Japanese and Korean counterparts in their analyses of what are deemed to be Western-derived humanitarian ideals, and may even, at times, seek to portray certain humanitarian concepts as a 'façade for Western imperialists to interfere in the affairs of developing states' (Yeophantong, 2012: 119).

Chinese expositions on humanitarianism from a socialist perspective, being products of the ideological orthodoxy of the post-1949 period, are largely of a theoretical nature and are typified by attempts to reconcile modern notions of humanitarianism, and the corollary concept of humanism, with Marxist thought so as to arrive at a distinctly 'Chinese' understanding of 'socialist humanitarianism' (*shehuizhuyi rendaozhuyi*). This line of thinking is exemplified by the work of Marxist philosopher Wang Ruoshui, who in the early 1980s sought to bring a humanist interpretation of socialism to bear on the state's orthodox Marxist–Leninist doctrines (Wang, 1983; Ru, 1980). While his attempt to 'free' humanitarianism from the hold of the 'bourgeoisie' was not well-received by the country's ruling elite, the idea of socialist humanitarianism (also known as 'revolutionary humanitarianism' and 'socialist humanism') has since gained wide resonance within Chinese discussions, especially in state-run media and think tanks. Treated as a 'new form of humanitarianism', distinct from Western humanitarianism grounded in 'bourgeois ideology', it is an idea which clearly complements the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s core principles of 'people-oriented' governance (*yiren weiben*). During the late 1990s and early 2000s, it was also seen as necessary for enhancing the development of the socialist 'three civilisations' (*san ge wenming*), first articulated during the Jiang Zemin era: 'material civilisation' (*wuzhi wenming*), 'political civilisation' (zhengshi wenming), and 'spiritual civilisation' (*jingshen wenming*) (Luo, 2004; Ma, 1996).

Of equal note here is the increasing volume of scholarship devoted to highlighting convergences and similarities between classical Confucianism and modern humanitarian ideals. Illustrating a broader trend in Chinese policymaking and academic circles (ongoing since the turn of the twenty-first century), where parallels are identified between modern 'international' ideas and Confucian thought in line with the Chinese government's reinvention of Confucianism as a state-sanctioned political discourse, Chinese scholars have drawn on key Confucian concepts like benevolence to demonstrate how 'humanitarian' values are not necessarily 'foreign' to Chinese society, but are in fact deeply embedded in indigenous cultural traditions (Lin, 2004).

Some have even suggested that elements of the logic of humanitarian intervention can be found in the thought of the fourth century BCE Confucian

philosopher Mencius, who espoused placing the needs and wellbeing of the people before those of the state, and contended that a ruler could rightfully be deposed by the people if the regime failed to protect and ensure the welfare of its subjects. As explained by Ni Lexiong, 'certain [of the] principles and key ideas that Western scholars relish in [their] international political thought [had], in fact, [existed] earlier [in the thought] of Confucian philosophers' (Ni, 2002). Here, contemporary notions of 'human rights before sovereignty' and 'sovereignty as responsibility' are tied to what some Chinese scholars have called the Confucian 'humanitarian spirit' (*rendao zhuyi jingshen*) (*Qiantan Rujia sixiang*, n.d.). Ni adds that Mencius also cautioned against the 'false benevolence of tyrants', who could misuse these principles to their own advantage (i.e. invading another country on the basis of 'humanitarian' ideals) – an observation that reflects the underlying scepticism prevalent in contemporary Chinese debates on the implications of humanitarian intervention for state sovereignty.

There are, nevertheless, notable gaps in the East Asian literature on humanitarian assistance. Four stand out. First, there is often a disjuncture between theory-oriented studies and those concerned more with the practicalities of humanitarian action. Dialogue between these two types of scholarship promises, however, to yield important insights into the practical implications of 'Sinicised' understandings of humanitarianism, and could also help in sensitising humanitarian actors to the social and cultural specificities of different societies. Second, it tends to be the case that Chinese literature especially is prone to succumbing to the 'essentialist' trap of Chinese exceptionalism. While research attuned to the cultural and historical particularities of a society can be valuable, it is also important not to lose sight of potential commonalities. Third, there is a proclivity in existing work to focus on contemporary issues and problems at the expense of historical trends in how societies have developed their approaches to humanitarian action. For Korean and Japanese scholars in particular, who have devoted much attention to their countries' interactions with contemporary humanitarian norms and standards, deeper analysis of how the normative foundations of humanitarianism have evolved over time in their respective societies could open up new avenues of inquiry that stand to contribute to the global literature on humanitarianism (see as a noteworthy exception, Nishikawa, 2005). Finally, despite burgeoning scholarship, greater consideration of the role played by non-state actors (e.g. religious groups, civil society and the private sector) in the diffusion of humanitarian sentiments within the region is still needed.

3 Unravelling 'humanitarianisms' in East Asia: the evolution of a moral obligation

Humanitarian values – for instance of charity and compassion – are deeply embedded in East Asia's social, cultural and religious traditions. In particular, the notion that there is a moral obligation to assist others in need has resonated widely, transcending geographical and temporal boundaries. For this reason, in addressing historical conceptions of humanitarianism within this non-Western context, we should try, not only to uncover explicit articulations of 'humanitarianism' *per se*, but also to unravel articulations that display the sentiments underlying this idea. Concepts like righteousness are relevant here insofar as they pertain to the notion of helping others within and beyond one's perceived 'moral community'.

In examining conceptions of humanitarianism within the region and how they translate into humanitarian action, it is apparent that a variety of factors, including religious and (geo)political ones, are extremely important in influencing how East Asian societies conceive of the obligation to help others in times of need. This, of course, feeds into a key argument stated at the outset of this paper: conceptions of humanitarianism are invariably contextually contingent, such that it becomes more apt to speak of *humanitarianisms* as opposed to a single, monolithic understanding. To illustrate this, the following discussion considers the development of humanitarian thought and action in China and Japan from a historical perspective.

3.1 Moral statecraft and Chinese traditions of humanitarianism

A striking aspect of humanitarian sentiments expressed in East Asia is their strong communitarian tendencies. Asian societies are known for being founded on intricate webs of interpersonal relationships that subsume the individual within a complex social hierarchy. This is especially true of ancient Chinese society, which was highly hierarchical and characterised by relations of paternalistic authority, as epitomised in the Confucian notion of the 'Three Bonds and Five Relationships' that dictated how social relationships were to be appropriately maintained. Exemplifying a quintessential communitarian perspective, the bonds of moral obligation between members of a society were seen to emanate outwards in concentric circles, with one's foremost responsibility being to one's family unit, then the local community, society and ultimately the country (or, more precisely, the Chinese Emperor). These intersecting bonds of obligation defined the parameters of humanitarian action in Imperial China.

The act of helping others underlies a long tradition of charitable giving and national solidarity in Chinese society. As social values that directly speak to the core Confucian principle of humanity (*ren*), they have also been informed by Buddhist as well as Christian (through the work of foreign missionaries) thought on compassion and charity. Having served as the guiding philosophy of Imperial China, Confucianism had – and arguably continues to have – a profound influence on how the humanitarian responsibilities of the Chinese state and society were perceived. Ethical values such as benevolence, righteousness (*yi*) and humanity were firmly embedded in Confucian doctrines, and the concept of 'Confucian reciprocity' in particular dictated how one ought not 'do unto others what you would not have them do unto you'. It is in this way that indigenous Chinese interpretations of humanitarianism came to centre on the intersections between humanity, morality and obligation.

Unresolved questions concerning the extent to which such doctrines were practiced by the ruling elite aside, there are noteworthy instances where these discourses were put into action, suggestive of a form of 'proto-humanitarianism'. During the Great Famine of 1877–

78, for example, along with the Qing state's efforts at disaster relief, private citizens from the Jiangnan region (located to the south of the lower Yangzi River valley) were also engaged in humanitarian activism. The famine, which was responsible for the deaths of an estimated 13 million people in northern China, laid the foundations for organised charitable relief in the late Qing period. Spearheaded by the Jiangnan gentry, these philanthropists helped to raise relief funds, with some even travelling to famine-hit provinces in person to help with relief and recovery work (Zhu, 2008; see also Edgerton-Tarpley, 2008). With the late Qing regime already weakened by domestic maladministration and external threats, effectively rendering it unable to handle a disaster of such magnitude, the fledgling government had no choice but to permit Christian missionaries to assist in the provision of humanitarian aid to affected areas. Similar humanitarian sentiments also underpinned the establishment of the Shanghai International Red Cross Committee (precursor to the Red Cross Society of China) in 1904.

This mobilisation of humanitarian action resonates with an enduring aspect of the traditional Chinese socio-cultural system: the notion that one's obligation should be commensurate to one's position or status within society (Yeophantong, 2013: 335–36). According to this logic, those with the authority to govern had a responsibility to ensure the welfare of those whom they governed. A dynasty's ruling legitimacy came to be predicated upon the fulfilment of its humanitarian obligations, defined in terms of an overarching duty to mitigate the suffering of others, with the Chinese state constituting a primary humanitarian actor. More specifically, given his position at the apex of the socio-cosmological order, the Emperor was expected to shoulder the greatest burden of responsibility for ensuring the welfare of his subjects. In times of famine, drought and floods, the main responsibility for responding therefore lay with the country's ruling elite. Failing to deal in a timely and efficient manner with such crises had the potential to undermine the regime's credibility, as well as the moral legitimacy of the 'Son of Heaven' (*tianzi*). In extreme scenarios, failure could even see a dynasty's mandate to rule (*tianming*) being revoked altogether, as natural disasters were often viewed as portents that signalled Heaven's displeasure. Indeed, a key strength of the Confucian government of the early Qing dynasty (1644–1911) was its attention to public disapprobation.

A range of measures had been adopted by imperial Qing administrators to prevent and mitigate disasters, including flood control through water conservancy and hydro-engineering projects and famine relief through the distribution of grain loans, all of which arguably served as early forms of state-led humanitarian action (Yeophantong, 2013: 338). This outlook that associates political legitimacy with effective leadership in crisis situations remains pertinent today, as seen from references to then Premier Wen Jiabao after the Sichuan Earthquake as 'Grandpa Wen' – a display of public affection towards Wen as he stood by earthquake victims amid the rubble and debris (Sutton, 2009: 98). Of course, to gauge the importance of the Chinese state to humanitarian efforts, one need only consider the consequences when the government fails to fulfil its humanitarian obligations to its people. A case in point is Chairman Mao's Great Leap Forward campaign (1958–61), which created one of the most devastating famines in human history, leading to the deaths of millions of people. The result of a lethal combination of man-made errors and natural hazards, the failures of the Great Leap Forward are a potent reminder of how the state can be complicit in exacerbating the human toll of disasters (Dikotter, 2010).

Even though the concept of 'humanitarianism' as such had yet to enter into Chinese discourse (let alone the Chinese language), humanitarian sentiments were already present in Imperial China's social and political traditions. Yet the country's encounter with European powers, particularly during the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, would result in an influx of foreign ideas – including democracy and humanism – into Chinese society. Channels of economic, religious and cultural exchange had of course existed between China and the West prior to the nineteenth century. In fact, the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries are often regarded as China's 'Missionary Era', with over 800 Christian missionaries arriving on the mainland during this period. Missionaries provided relief and shelter to victims of a flood in Zhaoqing in the 1580s and during a famine in Shanxi in the 1630s. Chinese history abounds with other examples of the role that missionaries played in the orchestration of humanitarian assistance, alongside the Chinese state. It was, nevertheless, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that novel, foreign concepts gained considerable currency among the country's intellectual elites, prompting a renegotiation of Chinese understandings and practices of humanitarianism.

This period saw the founding of the Shanghai International Red Cross Committee amid the Russo-Japanese war in Manchuria in 1904–1905. The predicament of Chinese civilians caught up in the conflict prompted a group of Chinese political and business leaders to adopt the Red Cross symbol in order to send in relief under the banner of neutrality. The organisation became the Red Cross Society of China (RCSC) following its admission to the ICRC in 1912. During the second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45), what became the Shanghai International Committee of the RCSC played a major role in establishing hospitals and camps to tend to the sick and wounded, as well as raising funds for the relief of refugees displaced by the war. Aside from providing relief in wartime, the organisation also conducted a range of activities during peacetime, including the orchestration of humanitarian assistance in the wake of natural disasters in China and abroad.

With the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, communist orthodoxy and a pervasive distrust of ideas deemed 'Western' (and consequently labelled 'bourgeois' and laden with imperialist intent) came to dominate mainstream modes of thinking. Especially during the late 1950s and 1960s, the activities of the Chinese Red Cross Society were tightly regulated and constrained, while the discourse of humanitarianism was discounted as a tool of the bourgeoisie, purportedly used to 'cover up capitalism's merciless exploitation … and to deceive the proletariat' (Hirono, 2008: 5). Anti-Western sentiments were at their height during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), and were apparent in the Chinese government's refusal of foreign offers of assistance in the wake of the Tangshan Earthquake in 1976. Such scepticism towards humanitarian ideas subsided by the 1980s, in part due to the political transition that was underway in the country, with the country's leadership shifting to the more progressive Deng Xiaoping (who would later instigate China's 'reform and opening up'). Meanwhile, a series of large-scale disasters – including a combined drought and flood in 1980 – alerted the government to the need for external assistance. The emergence of a more open intellectual sphere further contributed to increased acceptance of modern humanitarian values, with philosophers such as Wang Ruoshi advocating a novel strain of 'socialist humanitarianism'.

While such concepts as the responsibility to protect and humanitarian intervention continue to be regarded with a degree of mistrust by the Chinese, the idea behind humanitarianism itself – that is, the imperative to respond to the suffering of others within *and* beyond one's borders or community – is by no means foreign to China, and has retained its resonance in contemporary Chinese society. Especially following the Indian Ocean tsunami and the Sichuan Earthquake, there has been a marked increase in Chinese volunteerism as well as charitable giving to distant others. Now, more than ever before, delivering humanitarian assistance has become as much a state responsibility as a moral obligation of all members of society.

3.2 Three belief systems and the evolution of Japanese humanitarianism

Like the traditional Chinese value system, Japanese society was characterised by a strong communitarian ethic. Loyalty to the state, coupled with a moral duty to other less fortunate members of one's social group, constituted core values embedded in the fabric of Japan's socio-cultural system, which was shaped by a constellation of religious beliefs, cultural traditions and philosophical thought processes. In particular, three major influences were critical to the development of Japanese humanitarian thinking: Shintoism, Confucianism and Zen Buddhism (Lehmann, 1983).

Prior to the Meiji period (1868–1912), which is commonly considered the era of Japan's modernisation, Japanese society and culture had remained largely insulated from the outside world and, by implication, from foreign ideas. Feudal Japan during the Edo period (1603–1867) pursued a 'closed-door' policy – also known as the 'national seclusion' (*sakoku*) policy – where the Tokugawa Shogunate had with very few exceptions closed off foreign relations. Lasting for approximately three centuries, this self-imposed isolation (which ended when Commodore Matthew Perry forced Japan to open its trade to the United States in 1853) allowed the shogunate to exert tight control over foreign trade and exercise a cultural monopoly over Japanese society. One of the major results of this policy was to prevent the spread of Christianity in Japan. Aside from the *sakoku* policy, the Tokugawa Shogunate is also known for implementing the social policy of *shinokosho*, which formally sanctioned the hierarchy embedded within

Japanese society, comprising the Emperor, shogun and lords and the warrior class – the *samurai* – followed by farmers, artisans and merchants. Informed by Confucian ideas, this system imposed social order – and, by extension, established political stability – by strictly delineating the rights and responsibilities of the different classes within Japanese society.

The warrior class was governed by a distinct code of conduct. Known as the *Bushido* ('way of warriors'), this moral code, derived from an amalgamation of Neoconfucian, Shinto and Buddhist thought, emphasised humanity and the forging of bonds of obedience and obligation (*giri*) between members of the same society (Kamishima, 1961). The warrior, with his privileged position in society, was regarded as a moral exemplar, and was expected to behave in a way appropriate to his status as a 'guardian' of peace and stability within the Japanese empire. This apparently resonates with the Chinese notion of fulfilling responsibilities commensurate to one's social status. Just as the concepts of benevolence, humanity and righteousness were central to Imperial Chinese conceptions of humanitarianism, so they likewise proved central to feudal Japan. Indeed, three of the eight principles of the *Bushido* speak to overarching humanitarian sentiments: *jin*, developing sympathy for people; *gi*, maintaining correct ethics; and *tei*, caring for the aged and those of humble station (Yamamoto, 1980).

As discussed above, the normative foundations of Japanese society rested substantially on elements borrowed from Buddhism and Confucianism, both of which had been gradually internalised into Japanese culture after their arrival from China. The Neoconfucian variant of Confucianism, in particular, became the guiding state philosophy during the Tokugawa era, while Buddhism, which had been introduced to Japan in the sixth century, developed into a national religion. As they were adapted to the specific culture of Japanese society, both Confucianism and Buddhism came to carry distinctive Japanese characteristics. Together they institutionalised a belief system where attention was primarily directed to preserving harmonious interpersonal relationships through the fulfilment of one's moral obligations as a member of the social group *and* a fellow human being. The exact nature of this duty depended on one's standing within society, so that the greatest responsibility in ensuring the welfare of the people and the country rested with the ruling elites. Reinforced by Buddhist values regarding compassion towards

other living beings and overcoming suffering (*dukkha*) in relation to both oneself and others, this discourse linked good governance and national prosperity to the people's wellbeing. It was in this sense that the government in traditional Japanese society became an early humanitarian actor. In the wake of the 1855 Ansei Earthquake, for example, the military government (*bakufu*) at the time shouldered primary responsibility for distributing relief to affected areas. Aside from food and medical aid and the construction of temporary shelters, the government arranged neighbourhood surveys on the scale of the damage and casualties caused by the earthquake. Officials also enlisted the assistance of businesses and the wealthy, who were publicly encouraged to contribute donations.

Furthermore, like traditional Chinese perspectives on natural disasters, which associated them with Heaven's discontent with the ruling regime, the prevailing outlook on disasters in Edo Japan was similarly informed by Confucian and Daoist thinking (Smits, 2006), with the Ansei Earthquake perceived by the local population as having resulted from an imbalance in *yin-yang* forces, as well as from official corruption (which exacerbated this imbalance). As such, it was only 'natural' for the government to be held accountable for rectifying matters following the disaster. These bonds of moral obligation were reciprocal, running vertically and horizontally from the state and the privileged elites to the Japanese people, as well as from citizen to citizen. The communitarian ethic prevalent in Japanese society made it such that the individual was deemed to be equally bound to other members of their society, with society amounting to an extension of one's family unit in a way reminiscent of the Confucian adage that 'within the four seas, all men are brothers'. Again, a manifestation of this sentiment can be taken from the aftermath of the Ansei Earthquake, which saw ordinary citizens also contributing extensively to relief efforts through private donations and the provision of goods and services.

With the end of the Tokugawa era and the beginning of the Meiji period, Japan came into closer contact with foreign ideas, chiefly from the West. Influenced by the belief that Japan could strengthen itself by learning from Western traditions, members of the Japanese political elite sought to bring humanitarian ideals, as grounded in Western ethics and Christian values, to Japan, viewing this as a means through which the country could be 'modernised' and better

integrated into international society. One of the most notable examples demonstrating this desire to learn from the West was the Iwakura Mission, which brought a delegation of senior Japanese officials to Europe and the United States in the 1870s. The implications of these developments on the evolution of humanitarian action and thought in Japan cannot be understated. As these 'borrowed' ideas became fused with indigenous Japanese traditions, they would subsequently lay the foundations for Japan's humanitarian movement. At the same time, prominent thinkers such as Fukuzawa Yukichi (author of the canonical work *An Outline of a Theory of Civilisation*) also helped to draw parallels between Japanese ethical values and Christian humanitarian values, illustrating how the Christian ideals which arrived in Japan following the Meiji Restoration were not new but had already existed – albeit expressed differently – in Japanese society.

The beginnings of this movement were marked by Japan's formal entry into the Geneva Convention of 1864 in November 1886 and the establishment of the Japanese Red Cross Society in 1887. Its predecessor – the *Hakuaisha* or 'Philanthropic Society' – had been founded by Count Sano Tsunetami in 1877 as a relief organisation intended to aid people injured during the Satsuma Rebellion (a revolt of *samurais* disenchanted with the Meiji regime). Japan's admission to the ICRC was significant for a number of reasons, not least because it signalled a willingness on Japan's part to be bound to an emerging body of international humanitarian law. The Japanese (and Chinese) Red Cross provided international relief assistance to another country for the first time following the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906 (JRCS, 2008), and worked to ensure the humane treatment of Russian prisoners of war during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05.

Having said this, recent Japanese history is also marked by less than 'humanitarian' conduct. The Great Vietnamese Famine of 1944–45, which witnessed the mass starvation and deaths of millions of people in Japanese-occupied northern Vietnam, serves as but one example. Recent scholarship has revealed a higher degree of Japanese culpability (more so than the French) for the famine than conventionally believed (see Gunn, 2011). Not only is there little evidence substantiating the existence of a subsistence crisis in Tonkin due to bad weather and natural disasters, but the Japanese are shown to have directly contributed to reducing rice production in northern

Vietnam, as they forced the cultivation of industrial crops like cotton and jute in the place of vital food crops. In addition, the Japanese had stockpiled rice for their own use (up until their surrender) and for export back home to Japan despite knowledge of widespread starvation among the local Vietnamese population (see Bui Ming Dung, 1995: 573–618).

Other potent examples include the Nanking Massacre between December 1937 and March 1938, resulting in the deaths of approximately 300,000 Chinese at the hands of Japanese military forces, and the killing of thousands of Koreans in the aftermath of the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake (see Ryang, 2003: 731–48). As rumours circulated in Tokyo about an impending 'Korean revolt' (*Chosen-jin sawagi*) – in the service of which ethnic Korean residents were accused of poisoning drinking wells and carrying bombs – vigilante groups, police and soldiers orchestrated a wave of killings of Koreans in the disaster-affected area. Apparently, Koreans targeted during the massacre were not perceived by their assailants as being members of the same moral community, deserving of humanitarian assistance. It is estimated that 6,000 Koreans were murdered (Kitabayashi, 2013). A degree of complicity on the part of the Japanese government has since been posited by scholars such as Shoji Yamada, who argue that the government helped to fuel the killings by declaring martial law (leading to the mobilisation of armed security and military forces) and failing to stop the spread of false rumours (see Yamada, 2011).

The period following the Second World War would, nevertheless, mark an important phase in the evolution of Japanese humanitarian action, as Japan became both a provider of assistance (mainly in the form of economic and technical assistance) and a recipient of development and humanitarian assistance that contributed to the country's post-war reconstruction efforts. According to Yukiko Nishikawa (2005: 63), Japan's present role as a major donor of aid can in part be explained in light of this post-war experience. By the mid-1950s, the Japanese government had commenced the provision of official development assistance (ODA) – which, due to its ambiguous definition, could also be seen to refer to humanitarian assistance under certain circumstances – to neighbouring countries. During this period the Red Cross Volunteer Corps was established, with the country witnessing a steady growth in humanitarian NGOs domestically ever since. The 1980s and early

1990s, in particular, saw Japan broadening the reach of its humanitarian assistance outside of Asia. In 1992 the government enacted the International Peace Cooperation Law, which formally authorised the participation of the country's armed forces in international relief operations. Meanwhile, the Great Awaji-Hanshin Earthquake of 1995 precipitated an outpouring of volunteerism, making it another key event in the maturation of Japan's humanitarian activism (see Tatsuki, 2000: 185–95).

Communitarian perspectives prevalent in Japanese society in the past largely persist today, as exemplified by the sentiments of solidarity and unity that ran high in the aftermath of such disasters as the Tohoku Earthquake. Arguably, this sense of solidarity has been extended to those suffering in other parts of the world,

as these 'distant strangers' are seen to fall within Japan's expanded moral community. In this regard, it would seem that contemporary Japanese perspectives on the imperative to engage in humanitarian action have been undergoing a gradual shift, from an outlook grounded in the traditional communitarian ethic to one based on a more cosmopolitan worldview. In part, this shift can be attributed to globalisation as well as to the pervasive influence of Buddhism in Japanese society. While Shinto and Confucian beliefs have significantly influenced how Japanese society historically conceived of the humanitarian obligations that existed between members of the same community, Buddhist notions of compassion and charity are now seen to resonate more deeply with the globalising experience of modern-day Japan (pers. comm., 10 August 2011).

4 Southeast Asian perspectives on humanitarianism

Southeast Asian writing on humanitarianism tends to emphasise the technical and policy aspects of humanitarian action, such as the delivery and coordination of humanitarian assistance, more so than the normative content of humanitarianism itself. This is to be expected given how this work is intended to meet a growing demand for policy-oriented research that can provide national governments and regional organisations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) with practical recommendations and guidelines for enhancing humanitarian assistance in crisis situations. Especially with regard to analyses originating from the Philippines and Indonesia, humanitarian debates are often operational in nature. As a result, while there has been a gradual shift in focus in East Asian literature from response to prevention and preparedness, the majority of Southeast Asian scholarship remains focused on optimising response strategies.

Humanitarian debates in Southeast Asia, moreover, often centre on humanitarian action in the context of disasters (both natural and man-made), indicating how the region's governments prefer the less 'politicised' nature of disaster relief assistance, as against the provision of assistance in times of war, religious conflict or social and political turmoil. While this is not to suggest that disaster relief assistance from states is necessarily divorced from political motives and interests (China, for one, has frequently been accused of employing 'disaster diplomacy' to garner support from other states), participation in (international) disaster relief operations by governments is generally less controversial than involvement in peace-building operations that could potentially amount to interference in the internal affairs of other states, though this does seem to be changing. Indonesia's contributions to UN peacekeeping have grown steadily, making it Southeast Asia's largest contributor, with peacekeeping forces stationed in Sudan, Haiti and the Philippines, among others. Vietnam has reportedly announced that its troops will begin participating in UN peacekeeping missions by early 2014 (AP, 2013). For ASEAN, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief has become a major area of interstate cooperation, featuring prominently in the policy agenda of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM). Significantly, the ADMM has issued concept papers on the 'Use of ASEAN Military Assets and Capacities in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief' and 'Defence Establishments and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) Cooperation on Non-Traditional Security'.

Promising research has also emerged from Southeast Asia on other humanitarian-related issues, including the development of philanthropy and philanthropic institutions and the role of religious organisations in relief provision; and the evolution of institutional and legal frameworks for state-led humanitarian action and civic engagement, the latter of which is marked by the involvement of local and international NGOs, as well as the private sector, in organising humanitarian assistance (Riyanto, 2012; Fernandez, 2009). This speaks to a consensus among observers on how civil society, businesses, religious institutions and faith organisations constitute exceedingly important actors in response coordination and relief distribution, especially in places which may be difficult for external groups unfamiliar with the local terrain to access (as was the case for parts of Myanmar struck by Cyclone Nargis).

This has consequently led many observers to argue in favour of these non-state actors, acknowledging their integral role working alongside government entities to provide public goods and, more specifically, improve humanitarian activism in the public sphere. This trend is evident in the establishment of ASEAN's Volunteer Programme following Cyclone Nargis, which aims to support Myanmar's recovery through the 'implementation of community-led livelihood and disaster risk reduction initiatives' (ASEAN Volunteers, n.d.). Crucially, the active involvement of grassroots Burmese health and youth groups, among others, in the aftermath of Nargis has since prompted the gradual opening up of Myanmar's embryonic public sphere, with organisations like the Metta Development Foundation, originally founded with the aim of

assisting communities affected by civil conflict in Myanmar, also extending their activities into the realm of humanitarian disaster relief and reconstruction (Interview, Yangon, 4 April 2013).

Increasing attention has also been directed to the role that businesses can play in supporting humanitarian operations and causes. While the private sector remains reluctant to give funds to operations involving sensitive local conflicts or complex humanitarian emergencies, it has been active in contributing to humanitarian efforts in disaster situations. Especially in recent years, with the advent of mega-disasters such as the Indian Ocean tsunami, the Sichuan and Haiti earthquakes and floods in Thailand in 2011, the private sector in Southeast Asian countries has become a prominent supporter of humanitarian activities. Donations in cash and in kind from Chinese businesses flooded into Sichuan in the aftermath of the earthquake, whilst in Thailand and the Philippines major corporations organised nationwide fundraising campaigns and contributed relief supplies in the wake of major disasters, including the Thailand floods and the recent Typhoon Haiyan. Equally noteworthy are attempts by organisations like ASEAN to bring a more 'localised' perspective to bear on humanitarian crises. Following Cyclone Nargis, for example, ASEAN published several reports to publicise its experience in responding to the ensuing humanitarian disaster, one of which documented the personal experiences of victims (ASEAN, 2010a; 2010b; 2010c; 2010d).

4.1 Religion, the state and humanitarianism in Southeast Asia

Like East Asia, communitarianism serves as a fundamental trait of Southeast Asian understandings of humanitarian obligation. However, this responsibility tends not to be conceived in a vertical or 'top-down' fashion, as seen in East Asian societies, where the primary duty to act rests with the ruling elites and the state. Rather, the imperative to help others in need within the Southeast Asian context tends to be couched more in horizontal terms, based on personal relationships and religious beliefs. For instance, with Buddhism as the national religion, Thai society is founded upon a strong belief in karma (or *dhamma*), compassion (*metta*) and benevolence (*garuna*) (Kumar,

2001). Even the Thai translation of 'humanitarianism' – *manudsaya-dhamma* – is culturally and religiously loaded, as it refers to the ethics that underlie human relations and stems from an understanding of the *Brahmavihara*, comprising the four Buddhist virtues of benevolence, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity. Likewise, in Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar Buddhism has had a profound influence on people's humanitarian outlook. According to a Thai government official at the time, Thailand's relatively 'open' attitude toward Indochinese refugees in the 1970s was purportedly because 'We're a Buddhist county and must abide by Buddhist precepts. We have a long tradition of helping refugeess' (Comptroller General, 1979: 4). Thus, whereas Confucianism is based on a 'negative' understanding of reciprocity (i.e. 'do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you'), Buddhism is grounded in a more 'positive' understanding, epitomised in the popular Thai adage of 'doing good as bringing forth goodness and doing evil as bringing forth evil' (*tumdee daidee*, *tumchua daichua*).

Similarly, for the predominantly Islamic societies of Indonesia and Malaysia, 'religious constructions of philanthropy' are reflected in societal 'patterns of giving' (Fernandez, 2009: 26). In Indonesia, where Islamic philanthropy was introduced as early as the fifteenth century and Catholic philanthropy in the early nineteenth century, various forms of giving take place on a personal level as well as through religious charities and faith organisations. In such societies, where faith has an almost omnipresent role, charitable giving – as expressed through *zakat* (obligatory giving as required by Islamic *sharia* law), *sedekah* ('spontaneous' charitable gifts that can come in the form of money or volunteering) and *wakaf* (voluntary gifts of land or property to be used for mosques, *pondoks*[1] and the like) – amounts to the realisation of one's religious obligations. As is likewise the case for humanitarian action in China and Japan, the line separating humanitarian charity and duty in Southeast Asia is far from clear-cut.

With regard to the coordination of humanitarian activities, the state undoubtedly remains an extremely important actor in Southeast Asia, especially in countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia, whose distinctive geographical features and susceptibility to natural disasters render centralised response mechanisms necessary.

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1 A *pondok* is a traditional private Islamic educational institution.

But just as the state is of paramount importance to the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance, so it can also work to frustrate such efforts, owing to political interests and the lack of transparency characteristic of Southeast Asian governments. During the Cambodian refugee crisis in the late 1970s, for instance, the Thai government was accused of placing political interest over humanitarian imperatives by providing assistance to Khmer Rouge 'refugees' in the wake of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978, and the toppling of the Khmer Rouge (see Terry, 2002). Concerns that the collapse of the Khmer Rouge would mean communist control of Cambodia prompted the Thai government to announce an 'open door' policy, supported by pledges from Western countries – notably the United States – to provide further humanitarian assistance. Effectively allowing the Khmer Rouge to recuperate and regain strength in holding centres in Thailand led many to criticise the Thai government for tacitly assisting a regime responsible for severe human abuses, instead of focusing humanitarian efforts on those suffering inside Cambodia itself.

More recently, humanitarian relief operations in Southeast Asia have been conducted with an increased degree of autonomy from the state. Here, the roles played by external donors, national media, civil society organisations, religious charities and institutions, as well as the private sector, are proving critical – in certain cases, more so than governments themselves – in providing assistance and mobilising volunteer services. In the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan in March 2011, for instance, the Thai government was strongly criticised in the country's media on the grounds that its contribution to the response – five million baht (equivalent to approximately $170,000) in assistance, plus relief supplies – was too small. A nationwide campaign spearheaded by the country's major media outlets, private businesses and banks, as well as charitable organisations such as the Thai Red Cross, raised funds from Thai society to assist in Japanese relief efforts, with donations totalling over 400m baht (Watcharasakwet, Hookway and Yuniar, 2011). Similar fundraising activities took place following the 2010 Haiti earthquake and in the wake of floods in Thailand in 2011. In Vietnam, the Vietnamese Red Cross Society also played a key role in raising funds to send to Japan. A similar pattern is emerging in Indonesia, which has experienced a surge in humanitarian activism at the local level, as humanitarian assistance is increasingly provided

through non-state channels (pers. comm., 10 August 2011). Overall, the contribution of national Red Cross Societies, together with organisations such as Mercy Malaysia, Dompet Dhuafa and Yayasan Wisnu in Indonesia, has been to encourage the proliferation of a wider range of volunteer and philanthropic activities in the regional public sphere, as well as enhancing community resilience and disaster preparedness within the region by raising public awareness and initiating grassroots development projects (Virola, 2010; Luna, 2001).

Another important characteristic underlying Southeast Asian perspectives on humanitarianism has been the strong adherence of governments within the region to the norms of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference – a fact reflected in ASEAN's Charter and founding document. Attributable to the region's colonial experience and the adverse impact of Cold War rivalries on the social and political landscape of individual Southeast Asian states, adherence to these principles arguably reflects a pervasive mistrust of foreign influence, as well as a deep-seated fear of losing autonomy at the hands of external interests, an abiding legacy of the region's long experience of colonial rule.

Accordingly, while the concept of humanitarianism itself is not extensively contested in the region, with humanitarian values pertaining to the alleviation of human suffering having been largely accepted by Southeast Asian governments, if the fulfilment of certain humanitarian imperatives were to impinge on a country's right to non-interference in its internal affairs, the latter norm is more likely to prevail over the former. Indeed, the principle of prior consent in the provision of multilateral and bilateral humanitarian assistance has generally been steadfastly observed by ASEAN member-states. As the dialogue between ASEAN and the Burmese military junta following Cyclone Nargis suggests, despite it being morally reprehensible for the regime to impede the provision of international humanitarian aid to its people, to decline assistance was nonetheless within its rights as a sovereign state. Even with mounting consensus within the region that states have a responsibility to protect the rights and welfare of their people, coupled with the growing role of non-state actors in scrutinising state power, attempts to translate such concepts as 'responsible sovereignty' (Miliband, 2008) and the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P) continue to be tempered by a lack of political will on the part of the

region's governments. Like China, they remain fearful that these concepts could serve as an elaborate guise for the interests of external powers.

The development of humanitarian action in Southeast Asia has clearly been influenced by a gamut of social, cultural and (geo)political factors. At the policy level this has brought about a degree of accord within the region regarding the desirability of humanitarian action – such that the provision of humanitarian assistance is now increasingly framed as a moral obligation on the part of the state – albeit with the tacit understanding that any humanitarian activity will have to take place within the established framework of sovereignty and non-interference norms. Changes in the social and political environment of individual countries and in the region more broadly have further allowed for the inclusion of an assorted cast of humanitarian agents, ranging from local civil society groups and international NGOs to religious institutions, government agencies and regional and international mechanisms such as the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response and the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ASEAN, 2011). This feeds into trends at the international level, where non-state actors are working to reconfigure governance processes within a nascent global public sphere (Devetak and Higgott, 1999).

5 Conclusion

In light of the preceding analysis, this paper posits five main observations that speak to enduring characteristics of humanitarianism and humanitarian action as seen from East and Southeast Asia. First, the idea of humanitarianism is not static but constantly evolving. It constitutes a contextually contingent concept, influenced by a variety of social, cultural, religious, political and historical factors. For this reason, while communities tend to assume the 'timeless quality' of their humanitarian values and commitments, it is more often the case that such values and commitments are the outcomes of complex processes involved in the construction of humanitarian ideals (see Barnett, 2011). One example of this is the nineteenth century notion of the *mission civilisatrice* which, although discredited now, served then as a clarion call for European states to 'modernise' and 'humanise' the developing world through Christianity.

Second, in view of the cultural and political heterogeneity of East and Southeast Asia, it is more appropriate to speak of humanitarianisms as opposed to a single, monolithic conception of humanitarianism. Here, multiple interpretations of humanitarianism are frequently advanced by various humanitarian agents acting at multiple levels of society, ranging from governments, civil society (including religious groups and private donors), national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies to NGOs such as Mercy Malaysia, the Metta Development Foundation and World Vision, as well as regional organisations. This diversity presents both opportunities and challenges for the coordination and delivery of effective humanitarian action in East and Southeast Asia, as different actors will seek to take forward differing and, at times, contending objectives, priorities and values.

Third, contrary to conventional explanations that depict the development of humanitarian action in East and Southeast Asia as the result of foreign (i.e. Western) influence, notions of humanitarianism have deep roots in the societies of East and Southeast Asia, and are embedded in local cultures, religions and political traditions. At the crux of indigenous perspectives on the humanitarian imperative is a shared outlook which places human beings at the centre. Here, cultural and religious ideas and customs serve as major sources of influence that have contributed to shaping local understandings and practices of humanitarianism. This is, however, not to say that foreign ideas have had no bearing on how humanitarianism came to be understood in the region. Encounters with Europeans played a crucial role in exposing Asian societies to alternative viewpoints. As such, it is necessary that we place the history of humanitarian action in these two regions within a broader context, where geopolitical dynamics have also contributed to shaping its course.

Fourth, the nature of the relationship between humanitarian action and politics is vital in determining how official responses are framed and implemented. This is evident from the varied approaches that states adopt when dealing with humanitarian situations in the wake of natural disasters, and when responding to complex emergencies stemming from social, ethnic or religious conflict or, in certain cases, state-sanctioned violence. There are also differences between humanitarian responses led by governments and those orchestrated by local and international civil society organisations and NGOs. Whereas humanitarian actors such as the Red Cross or the Japanese Association for Aid and Relief are expected to be impartial in their aid provision, assistance offered by governments is typically deemed to be less so. One recent example is the controversy surrounding China's initial offer of monetary aid of $100,000 to the Philippines following the devastation wreaked by Typhoon Haiyan in November 2013. Commentators attributed Beijing's 'small' offer to tensions between the two countries in the disputed South China Sea. In response to widespread criticism, China announced that additional relief supplies worth $1.6m would be provided to the Philippines (Sun, 2013).

Finally, and related to the above point, conceptions of humanitarianism in East and Southeast Asia are inextricably tied to the political realm, with official humanitarian responses often laden with politicised motives and interests (though, again, this is not unique to Asia). As was evident from Chinese official humanitarian assistance to Haiti

in the aftermath of the destructive earthquake in 2010, Chinese aid was viewed by some as a move on Beijing's part to 'curry favour' with a country that continues to formally recognise Taiwan, in an attempt to persuade the Haitian government into establishing a diplomatic relationship with the People's Republic instead (Erikson, 2010). In this regard, ascertaining the tacit interests of political actors in providing assistance is an invariably precarious undertaking. Despite the offer of aid being presented by the Chinese government as a display of human solidarity, others saw it as a diplomatic tool to counterbalance Taiwan's influence within the region. Especially in Southeast Asia and China, where the legacy of colonialism has left a deep imprint on the region's collective historical memory, concerns for sovereignty and territorial integrity limit the scope for humanitarian action, particularly for external non-state actors. It will be some time before such principles as the responsibility to protect gain substantial policy traction in the region.

The evolution of humanitarian action in East and Southeast has been shaped by a number of internal and external upheavals, including large-scale wars and disasters, which have in turn given rise to a cast of humanitarian actors operating beyond the aegis of the state. For this reason, while the mounting prominence of non-state actors in the public sphere may appear to be a contemporary social development, these actors do not constitute entirely 'new' entities; some of the region's first national Red Cross societies, for instance, were established in the late nineteenth century. Part of the legacy of the French attempt to subjugate Siam was the Thai Red Cross Society (TRCS), which was established in April 1893 to help those affected by the Franco-Siamese War of that year. It is through the activities of these non-state – and, in particular, civil society – actors that humanitarian action as practised within the region has gradually been transformed. Innovations in communications technology and the expanding reach of the mass media have further provided humanitarian NGOs and, in certain instances, affected communities with a platform that enables them to appeal to wider audiences and endows them with greater visibility in the policymaking realm. As detailed in the 2013 *World Disasters Report*, these new 'humanitarian technologies' have facilitated the push towards more community-centred humanitarian action, where local communities along with the general public are contributing to the mobilisation of funds and volunteer services, as well as to the

provision of vital, on-the-ground information (see IFRC, 2013).

That said, the role of the state as a humanitarian actor is still far from obsolete. In countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and China, the state continues to assume a primary role in the administration and execution of humanitarian action. Particularly for countries with autocratic modes of government, as in North Korea, Myanmar and Cambodia, the state remains extremely important to effective humanitarian response. Conversely, the state can likewise prove to be a major impediment to humanitarian action or, in extreme cases, an aggressor responsible for generating human rights abuses and humanitarian crises itself – of which the atrocities committed by the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, for instance, serve as stark reminders.

The humanitarian ideals held to be novel products of modern-day society are by no means completely 'new' either. By adopting a historical perspective, this paper has illustrated how the cause of humanitarianism – that is, to help alleviate the suffering of others – has deep roots in East and Southeast Asian cultures and societies. Although the term 'humanitarianism' itself was not used in either region until the late nineteenth century, when countries such as Japan and Thailand came into closer contact with Western ideas, articulations of humanitarian sentiment could still be found. Expressed through concepts like benevolence, compassion and humanity, East and Southeast Asian understandings of humanitarianism were clearly informed by an ethical sense of duty as well as charity.

It is crucial that we do not lose sight of the fundamental similarities in humanitarian thought between the diverse countries of East and Southeast Asia in contemporary debates on humanitarian policy and practice. Despite the merits of adopting a culturally relativist perspective when it comes to undertaking the delicate enterprise of coordinating humanitarian assistance, too much emphasis on difference can also hinder the development of a comprehensive body of humanitarian laws and regulations at both the international and regional levels. While this paper has argued that multiple humanitarianisms exist, with the creation of a universal humanitarian language remaining elusive, there are nevertheless underlying elements that cut across East and Southeast Asian understandings of humanitarianism – embedded sentiments of empathy and solidarity which serve as the drivers of humanitarian action, marking

the moment when people identify the plight of others as their own. Certainly, it is noteworthy how some expressions of humanitarianism contain a strong sense of normative 'reciprocity'. Indonesian and Thai responses to the Tohoku Earthquake made reference to Japan's assistance to both countries in times of disaster (particularly after the Indian Ocean tsunami). Similarly, Chinese 'netizens' brought up images of Japanese relief and rescue workers on the ground after the Sichuan Earthquake as a further compelling reason why China needed to reciprocate in kind when disaster struck Japan.

As explained by Buddhist monk the Venerable Pomnyun Sunim, empathy is – and should be – the main motivation behind acts of humanitarianism (Sunim, 2013). This sentiment transcends national borders, social and political boundaries and temporal divides. Disagreements over the exact connotations of humanitarianism and how humanitarian assistance is best delivered to those in need notwithstanding, it remains the case that humanitarian acts – whether undertaken by the state, society or individuals – ultimately rest on the desire to respond to the suffering of others, and are intended first and foremost as a display of goodwill. Fundamentally, it is this notion of a moral obligation to help others which underlies the humanitarian traditions of East and Southeast Asia, effectively uniting them through the common sentiment of human solidarity.

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