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SPECIAL EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

New Turning Points in Southeast Asian History: Re-writing Southeast Asian Chronologies from Within

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As historians, we live under the tyranny of periodisation. Our profession compartmentalises into variations of the conventional quartet of ancient, medieval, early modern and modern history. Within those subdivisions are even smaller pigeonholes, such as nineteenth-century history, pre-war history, interwar history, post-war history, and pre- or post-colonial history. The titles of major professional journals enshrine this conventional periodisation, it determines the assignment of university chairs, and it structures the tables of contents of leading textbooks and anthologies. Moreover, each era's specialists tend to focus on diverse analytical concepts and use different methodological tools (Henley and Schulte Nordholt 2015: 2).

Of course, it is only natural for historians to construct their narratives of the past through periodisation and attempt to identify turning points in which fundamental changes occur. The problem is that, as historians, we have focused for too long on a small number of seemingly fixed periodisations, with equally ossified conventional benchmarks determining the transition from one period to the next. This traditional periodisation obstructs alternative ways of interpreting and structuring the past, for instance, in the form of alternative turning points, and other periodisations.

This problem affects all historians. But, as we argue in this special issue, it is all the more damaging for those of us thinking about non-Western histories. The canonical periodisation reifies a Euro- or Western-centric chronology: classic caesurae that organise our profession include such years as 1492, 1789 and 1815, 1914–1918, 1939–1945, and 1989. For non-Western regions, and especially for formerly colonised nations, a consequence is that we end up trying to squeeze our topic into these frames, thus exaggerating the actions of Western actors (and states) as causes of historical change whilst dismissing or neglecting the agency of non-Western actors. Ironically, as Anthony Reid has rightly noted, in Southeast Asia nationalist histories conceived after independence have all too frequently reinforced this conventional periodisation:

> Along with the dominance of nationalist perspectives in the twentieth century came the modern notion that history ought to be periodized in relation to the dominant features of each age. […] Despite their desire to stand colonial historiography on its head, the early nationalist historians tended to replicate its categories, with the arrival of the Europeans soon after 1500, the beginning of systematic colonialism around 1800, and its end in 1945 being their major turning points. (Henley and Schulte Nordholt 2015: 2–4, 13; Reid 1993: 9)

Some challenges to the imposition of a Western-centric chronology on the Southeast Asian region have arisen regarding the so-called Early Modern era. Reid himself has been a moving force in such attempts to understand the area as "having its own logic apart from the advent of the Europeans" (Reid 1990; Reid 1993; 9–11). In a similar vein, Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Andaya have structured their early modern history of the region on "the varied nature of Southeast Asian experiences" (Watson Andaya and Andaya 2015: 10–11). In striking contrast to these studies, the historiography dealing with the past 250 years is often still fixated on the more conventional benchmarks of colonial chronology.

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In this special issue of *TRaNS,* we aim to challenge the hegemony of Western-centric periodisations to 'decolonise' Southeast Asian history. We interpret a turning point as an event or series of events in a society or state's history that has influenced the future trajectory of its development.[1] A turning point, under this definition, is not necessarily a shocking event in itself, such as a cataclysmic war or a major natural disaster. Rather, it is a moment – large or small – which, when seen in hindsight, set new waymarks for subsequent events (Vann 2002: 326). One may find a similar approach in the recent publication of the *Asia inside Out* project, which seeks to redefine "the adequacy of conventional dates and spatial conceptions." Rather than focusing on familiar benchmark dates coinciding with conflicts, discoveries, and crises, the authors explore "less obvious but equally significant inflection points when certain major cultural processes changed direction" (Tagliacozzo 2015: 6–7).

Hence, we have challenged the authors in this issue to reconsider the periodisation of Southeast Asian histories from within. Our revisionist approach aims to identify events, developments, or processes that we may interpret – as much as the conventional turning points – as crucial turning points in local or regional histories, but that historical narratives have overlooked due to Western-centric chronologies. We suggest that by identifying critical pivots or periods of transition that are more indigenous to the area, we encourage society to reexamine also the causes of global developments. For example, as we argue in our article in this issue, the increased autonomy of many colonies in the 1910s and 1920s has frequently been interpreted in light of World War I and the resulting 'Wilsonian moment's' influence. However, should we not pay more attention to changes in mentality that had already appeared in the years beforehand? Likewise, as Cesar Suva argues here in different ways, the emphasis on military confrontations and transfers of sovereignty between indigenous polities and Western powers has too often obscured from view earlier indigenous power shifts that decisively impacted those colonial confrontations. Finally, the emergence of an assertive Vietnamese elite is frequently linked to colonial education efforts. Yet, as Sara Legrandjacques illustrates, international developments such as the Russo-Japanese War and the contacts between various anti-colonial nationalist movements provide other explanations.

It goes without saying that any attempt to identify a 'turning point' in history suffers from a degree of arbitrariness. Strictly speaking, one could construct *any* previous event as a decisive moment that led to subsequent events. Therefore, in this special issue, we do not see 'turning points' as objective, intransigent historical truths. Instead, we treat the concept of a historical turning point as a heuristic device. In the words of Richard T. Vann, the identification of a turning point "must be judged on its aptness, and not as a potentially verifiable truth claim" (Vann 2002: 326). In our cases, conceiving of indigenous Southeast Asian turning points helps us think about alternative ways of organising Southeast Asian chronologies and histories. What happens to our understanding of Philippine history if we take 1881 as a decisive turning point in Sulu's history, instead of 1898? Or, what happens if we focus on 1913 instead of 1901 or 1918 in Indonesian history? Although the reader may ultimately conclude that 1881 or 1913 as new 'turning points' are artificial constructions, we assert, at the very least, that conventional turning points are equally contrived. More importantly, we contend that our effort to identify different years or events as decisive 'turning points' in Southeast Asian history shows other actors at work than those that previous historians have given centre stage.

Our efforts demonstrate that the predominance of Western-centric periodisations has obscured causes and historical processes that are more indigenous to Southeast Asia. Although all the authors in this issue may have interpreted 'turning point' slightly differently, the very exercise of re-imagining what more indigenous chronologies may look like – and who knows, how future university chairs may be categorised? – leads to exciting new avenues of research. In this issue, the reader will find three such explorations of Southeast Asian chronologies from within.

Cesar Suva zooms in on the succession crisis in the southern Philippine archipelago of Sulu that developed after the death of the Sultan in 1881. He argues that one cannot adequately explain many events in the first years of American rule, which historians have understood in the context of the American arrival and Spanish departure in 1898, without considering the pre-existing power contests. Sara Legrandjacques studies 1905 as a watershed in the history of education in Vietnam. Legrandjacques focuses on international student mobility between non-metropolitan centres and the development of alternative notions of

[1]This (rather general and pragmatic) definition has been adapted from Wang and Iggers 2002: 1.

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modernity to argue that indigenous schooling efforts set up in 1905 had a greater influence on the later trajectory of Vietnamese education than colonial-focused historiographies have acknowledged. Finally, our article nuances the established view that the years of the First World War marked a turning point in the history of Indonesian anti-colonial sentiment, emphasising instead the changes of mentality that emerged in the years before. By identifying the year 1913 as a turning point in Indonesian history, we discern a whole range of small but significant symptoms of larger developments to come that, together, signalled a wide-ranging mindset shift with considerable consequences.

A common thread runs through these three papers, highlighting that Western actors and Western-directed events cannot be erased from Southeast Asian history but that they often reacted as much as they acted to indigenous developments. A second common thread asserts that sometimes seemingly small events – an Indonesian refusing to crouch for his superior, a Vietnamese man travelling to Japan, sixty Sama men moving domicile and allegiance – can presage or even cause critical social, political, or attitudinal changes. If indeed, we were to remain "reluctant to believe that great events have small causes", as A. J. P. Taylor warned in 1972, we would continue to overlook such seemingly small events (Taylor 1972: 210).[2] Consequently, we would continue to ignore Southeast Asian indigenous chronologies.

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[2]Taylor made this remark to support his provocative discussion of the causes of World War One, in which he dismissed explanations based on 'profound forces', blaming the inflexibility of train timetables for the outbreak of the war instead.

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