

Continuing, Re-Emerging, and Emerging Trends in the Field of Southeast Asian History

Michael **Aung-Thwin**

Abstract

'Trends' in the field of Southeast Asian history have a way of being unresolved satisfactorily before 'new' ones emerge to take their place. Part of the reason is that older scholarship is not only considered passé, but each new generation of Southeast Asianists wants to 'make its mark' on the field in original ways. Yet, when one scrutinizes some of these 'new' issues carefully, they often turn out not to be entirely so; rather, they appear to be different ways of approaching and/or expressing older ones, using different (and more current) operating vocabulary. 'Angle of vision' and 'perspective', popular in the 1960s, have become 'privileging of' or 'giving agency to' in current usage, while their methodological intent is exactly the same, bearing the same (or nearly the same) desirable consequences. Older, seminal scholarship is often only given lip-service without much in-depth consideration, so that some of the 'new' scholarship begins 'in the middle of the game', scarcely acknowledging (or knowing) what had transpired earlier. This unawareness regarding the 'lineage' of Southeast Asia scholarship fosters some reinvention and repetition of issues and problems without realizing it, in turn protracting their resolution. So as not to lose sight of this 'scholarly lineage' that not only allows a better assessment of what are genuinely new trends and what are not, but also to resolve unresolved issues and move on to really new things, this essay will analyse and discuss where the field of Southeast Asian history has been, where it is currently, and where it might be headed. Although focused on the discipline of history, it remains ensconced within the context of the larger field of Southeast Asian studies.

KEYWORDS: Emerging Trends, Imagined Communities, Theatre State, Moral Economy, Rational Peasant, Age of Commerce, Galactic Polity, Indianization, localisation, autonomous history, angle of vision, periodization, state-formation, colonialism, nationalism, independence, nation-state, neo-colonialism

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS AN 'emerging trend' in Southeast Asian history often depends on who one asks, what his or her priorities are, and what he or she 'privileges'. That, in turn, often depends on one's cultural background, academic training and institutions attended, who one's mentors were, and the academic and political contexts of the time. Furthermore, some apparent 'trends' turn out to be reformulations of

older issues, so in effect, are ‘continuing’ (or ‘re-emerging’) rather than ‘emerging trends’ (if by ‘emerging’ we mean something new).

Yet, many of the so-called ‘new’ ‘trends’ in Southeast Asian historiography are variations of a theme and not entirely new. Some of them appear and disappear before they have a chance to crystallise, so that what may look like a ‘trend’ today turns out to be a ‘flash in the pan’ tomorrow, while others not as conspicuous end up with some long term affects. That, in turn, raises the question of how long a pattern must exist and how widespread it must be before it can be considered a ‘trend’. With these kinds of overall concerns in mind, I want to explore some of the issues and problems in the field of Southeast Asian history and its historiography to assess where we have been in order to determine where we are today, and where we might be headed tomorrow.

Other than my own research with primary sources, I have based this analysis mainly on my longevity in the field using three kinds of information: a) the prevailing English-language texts on Southeast Asian history, b) a few ‘state of the field’ articles, and c) occasional symposia. But this can be highly problematic.

First, the most popular texts written in English usually deal with or are focused on the *modern* period; that is, approximately the time when Europeans entered the scene in large numbers. That means most of these general histories of Southeast Asia ‘privilege’ the more recent past, trade and commerce, political events, reified ethnicity, and the West as major causal factors in the making of modern Southeast Asia. The same is true of history texts on pre-modern Southeast Asia (even if less abundant) for they still ‘privilege’ what their authors consider important. They invariably pay closer attention to the (unending debate) over the origins of the state, the issue of exogenous influences and indigenous ‘localisation’, concerns regarding the organisation of history (periodization), and, of course, the persistent issue of change and continuity which often serves as a circumscribing framework of analysis in which the other topics are usually placed.

The second category of information—‘state of the art’ articles—also has problems. Some scholars are simply more inclined towards writing these kinds of articles than are others, so that their works do not necessarily represent the field but their own personal preferences. Most are also written from the perspective of the author’s area of interest and extrapolate from its patterns and themes. Although not entirely unavoidable or undesirable, it nevertheless does not necessarily reflect the broader region.

And similarly, the third kind of information, symposia: some organizations simply have better funding than others while the philosophical inclination of the organising committee can be of a particular bent, so that a particular symposia topic may reflect more local than field-wide concerns. Then there are scholars who are not included in symposia because of schedules, distance to travel, funding, and (even) political and/or personal reasons.

Thus, what I may consider ‘continuing, re-emerging, and emerging trends’ in the field depends on the above kind of data used. Nonetheless, with over thirty active years in the field, the reader may still appreciate what I have to say.

PROBLEMS AND ISSUES IN THE FIELD OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN HISTORY

Imagine the following scenario. European and American studies is dominated by Asia and Asians. The bulk of the most prestigious journals in the West are published in Asia by Asian organizations and universities; most of the students studying the West are trained in Asia to be sent back to take positions at Harvard, Yale, Cambridge, and Oxford; most of its premier libraries and archives holding publications about the West are located in Asia; close to 93 per cent of its leading academics are Asian; most of the classes that teach obscure Western languages are found only in Asian Universities; the topics, methodologies, theoretical frameworks considered important and ‘cutting edge’ in the field are the product of, and selected by Asians or Westerners trained in Asia; and the experts the world press and governments go to for their opinions concerning the West are Asian. The entire structure of Western studies is, in this scenario, largely the product of Asian institutions and Asia-trained scholars. Can one imagine such an academic world? I cannot. Yet, that is precisely the case, *in reverse*, with regard to Asian Studies.

This reality, furthermore, is not only the way it was and is, but the trend in the foreseeable future as well. The reasons are plentiful: there is much more funding in the West for the study of Asia which in turn influences the *direction* of growth, the *way in which* the field is conceived and categorized, and the intellectual *subjects considered important* (including debates about the field itself). The largest and most esteemed professional organizations, the most prestigious journals, and the most numerous jobs for its clones (our students) are found mainly in America and the West; only seven per cent of the members of the Association for Asian Studies are from Asia. (I include Australia in the term ‘West’ for its cultural-intellectual hegemony is more at issue here than its geographic location.) One needs only to glance at the references in the standard histories of Asia published in English, the bulk of their citations – particularly those of a theoretical and methodological nature that shape the field – to see that they are by Westerners or Western trained Asians, most of them published by university presses located in the West and considered the most prominent.

In short, the West has a clear intellectual and economic monopoly over the theoretical, conceptual, and empirical knowledge regarding the field of Asian Studies. Westerners, the western intellectual world, western academic institutions, western museums and libraries, western think tanks, and western research funding dominate Asian Studies in ways whose reverse with regard to European and American studies cannot even be imagined. Asian Studies as a

field is indeed a *Western creation and enterprise* that serves mainly western professionals and their interests: academic for sure, but also political, military, and economic. And Southeast Asian history is a small planet within this larger, Western-dominated galaxy of Asian Studies.

There are, in addition to the circumscribing issue of Western dominance, other intrinsic ‘problems’ within the field of Southeast Asian history itself. One is that it is *relatively new*. Historical studies of and by Southeast Asians, of course, have been around for centuries, while individual ‘country’ histories have been published by historians relatively early as well. But in terms of a modern, Western discipline or field, with its own professional organizations, theoretical literature, journals, peer-review processes, self-assessment, and so on, the field of Southeast Asian history is new, having emerged only after World War Two. It is certainly newer than the fields of European and American, as well as South and East Asian history.

Southeast Asian history as a field also has a relatively *small constituency*. Historians of Southeast Asia make up about one-eighth the number of historians in other areas of Asian studies. Indeed, the larger field of Asian Studies (including all the disciplines and regions of Asia) probably has fewer scholars in it than historians specialising in the history of the United States alone. And yet, Southeast Asia covers one of the largest geographic and demographic areas in the world, with dozens of major languages and hundreds of dialects, eleven countries occupying an area as large as Europe and the Middle East put together, and a region where all the world religions are represented.

Then there are the historical problems created by recent events that have affected the region’s scholarship, particularly, colonialism and nationalism, World War Two, decolonization, Independence, and their aftermath. These major events produced real-life problems such as civil war, ethnic insurgencies, poverty, political instability, and infra-structural damage. Subsequently, neo-colonialism and its crusades with their contrasting political ideologies – fascism, communism, democracy and their economic counterparts – exacerbated the situation. Such overriding concerns have consumed much of the time, energy, and national budgets of these countries, with little left for scholarship, so that few (if any) academic ‘trends’ have emanated from the region.

As a result of this recent history, none of the universities in Southeast Asia is world class except for the National University of Singapore (NUS). (Singapore as a new nation, founded only in 1965, was fortunate enough to avoid the trauma of colonization and decolonization that plagued the other nations in Southeast Asia for decades.) In fact, NUS has a larger number of Southeast Asia historians in its history department than any single history department in the world. (Of course, if one counts all the universities in a single *country* such as the United States with Southeast Asia historians in them, and their relative stature in the field – which is admittedly subjective – then the equation is quite different.) Still, in the United States, only a handful of universities have Southeast Asia as an area studies

component in their programs, whose history departments include a very small number of Southeast Asia historians, with the University of Hawai'i having the most. Of these universities, approximately only eight are officially recognised by the United States Department of Education as having 'national' stature. And of all graduate students entering the whole field of Asian studies annually in the US, the fewest number enrol in Southeast Asian history.

WESTERNNESS, NEWNESS, AND SMALLNESS

However, not all is dismal. Apart from the historical problems, Westernness, newness, and smallness have their advantages. First, the human and material resources in the Western world and its superior institutions of higher learning – the well-trained faculty with some of the world's highest standards, the most modern physically, the size and scope of its libraries, the many fellowships available, the academic freedom, and general atmosphere of give and take – have greatly benefited the field of Southeast Asian history, not only in the United States but elsewhere. As most of the prominent historians of Southeast Asia are products of Western academia, and despite the academic problems noted above, the same or similar standards and attitudes, methods of teaching, and so on, continue to shape the field world-wide.

Second, being a relatively *new field* means it does not have to 'reinvent the wheel' every time an issue arises. There is no need to re-hash problems that have been addressed rather well in other, older areas such as European Studies, South, and East Asian studies. For example, the issue of whether Japan during the Nara period was a mirror image of T'ang China (an old topic) has its counterpart in Southeast Asian history in the issue of 'Indianization' – to what extent was Southeast Asia a mirror image of India? The expected response to exogenous influences with 'indigenization' (or 'localization' and 'autonomous history', the pertinent terms in Southeast Asian history) is also an issue found throughout the region and elsewhere, not just Southeast Asia. We have benefited from that debate that has occurred much earlier in East Asian studies, allowing us to skip certain, less productive stages of it while leap-frogging to more productive ones simply because our field is new (Coedes 1968; Legge 1992; Sears 1993; Wolters 1982, 1994).

The 'Encounter with the West' is another topic that has been addressed elsewhere much more thoroughly and for a much longer period of time than it has been in Southeast Asian history. In fact, the 'trends' in Southeast Asian history of issues and problems raised in Post-Colonial and Subaltern studies initially comes from South, not Southeast Asian studies (Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993). The same can be said of Gender studies: it is a new import to the field of Southeast Asian history, even within institutions in the West. Here as well, scholars dealing with gender issues in the field of Southeast Asian history

have benefited from the latter's newness. The decades of building up a constituency, training scholars, formulating a corpus of theoretical literature, creating journals, making mistakes – all these, by and large, Southeast Asian historians working with gender did not have to undergo. It did not have to start from scratch. Thus, for example, when Barbara Andaya published *Other Pasts: Women, Gender, and History in Early Modern Southeast Asia* (2000), she was already an established historian of Southeast Asia, so that her experience in the discipline of history was brought to bear on the newer gender studies field.

Similarly, and third, *smallness*: there are in the larger field of Southeast Asian studies itself, fewer than a half dozen disciplines that actually shape its direction, with varying strengths and numbers. The most prominent are History, Political Science (or Government as it is called at Cornell), and Anthropology, along with other disciplines such as Archaeology, Religion, Linguistics, Literature, and Art History. Although only a handful of scholars from Southeast Asian Studies have transcended the field, they are nevertheless well known world-wide, especially for their theoretical contributions. That has brought disproportionate attention to the field relative to its newness and size.

The broad conceptual and theoretical works of Michael Adas (1989), Ben Anderson (2006), Clifford Geertz (1980), Victor Lieberman (2003), Melford Spiro (1982), Tony Reid (1988), James Scott (1976, 1985, 1990, 2009), Stanley Tambiah (1976, 1977), and Paul Wheatley (1983) to name a few, have managed to transcend Southeast Asia boundaries. And their impact has not been inconsequential. Regardless of discipline and area of the world, most of the social sciences are familiar with, and have used phrases such as 'Imagined Communities,' 'Theatre State' 'Moral Economy', 'Rational Peasant', 'Age of Commerce', 'Galactic Polity', and so on. All these are products of Southeast Asian studies.

To be sure, while these Southeast Asia scholars have contributed in important ways to the theoretical literature of various disciplines inside and outside the field, they haven't necessarily contributed (at least not to the same extent) within the field itself, particularly in terms of empirical, in-depth, country-and/or period-specific studies using indigenous primary sources. That 'vacuum' has been filled by other Southeast Asia scholars. The following are just a few of the Southeast Asia historians, either older than me, or more or less close to my generation of historians: Barbara Andaya (2006), Leonard Andaya (2008), Lawrence Briggs (1951), Nicholas Cushner (1976), Bruce Fenner (1985), Reynaldo Ileto (1979, 1998), Charnwit Kaestiri (1976), Alfred McCoy (2009), Ruby Paredes and Michael Cullinane (1998), Keith Taylor (1983), Michael Vickery (1998), James Warren (1981, 1987), John Whitmore (1985, 2006), and David Wyatt (1984); again to name only a few.

The smallness of the field has also given us the wherewithal to be more familiar with most of the important issues in it better than if the field were larger. As a

consequence, it has made the field *more interdisciplinary* in character than it might have been otherwise, which in turn has appreciably enhanced the quality of the research and publications of its scholars. Most modern historians of Southeast Asia are likely familiar with the issues raised by Southeast Asia political scientists, while most early historians of Southeast Asia, with anthropology, archaeology, literature, and art history. Conversely, most political scientists and anthropologists of Southeast Asia probably know their Southeast Asian history as well; at least we hope they do.

‘TRENDS’(?) IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN HISTORY

We finally arrive at the heart of this essay: ‘trends’ in the field of Southeast Asian history. If the criteria for determining ‘trends’ and ‘patterns’ in the field include: a) some of the best and latest published texts on the history of Southeast Asia *as a region*, b) some of the most prominent ‘state of the art’ articles in its major journals, and c) some of the important symposia on ‘trends’, then perhaps the following are ‘trends’: economic and social history, gender, ecology, colonialism and post-colonial issues, religion and the state, and ethnic and national identity (Bastin 1967; Bastin and Benda 1968; Hall 1955; Harrison 1965; Osborne 2004; Owen 2005; Steinberg 1985; Szanton 2004; Tarling 1966, 1992; Wolters 1982, 1999).

One will immediately notice that nearly none of these topics *per se* is entirely new; most are either ‘continuing’ or ‘re-emerging’ issues. Rather, their ‘newness’ lies in their *approach*. They have attempted to reconstruct history *outside the framework of the nation-state* which has been the dominating principle for organising history during the past half century and is still prevalent today. (Even that is not entirely new, for Robbins Burling had published his *Hill-Farms and Padi Fields* [1965] approximately forty years ago, which was consciously organized around communities with commonalities found throughout Southeast Asia rather than around nation-states.) Such studies invariably tend to cross modern political boundaries and penetrate chronological walls. Thus, the shift has been more towards a new consideration of *methodology*; that is, the trend is in *historiography* more than in subject matter, so that new and different *approaches* to the reconstruction of Southeast Asian history might be considered an ‘emerging trend’. In this shift, a variety of theoretical works from within the field of Southeast Asian Studies is clearly discernable, along with some from outside the field, particularly those by Edward Said (1979), Michel Foucault and David Hoy (1986).

One of these circumscribing methodological ‘trends’ in the analysis of Southeast Asian history that has received considerable attention lately is the issue of ‘agency’. Although the notion and its use is not new – we actually find that kind of concern and approach as early as the writings of fifth-century BC

Greek historian Herodotus – the term itself within the field of Southeast Asian history is relatively new. The point it makes – of ‘privileging’, ‘emphasizing’, or giving ‘a voice to’ something – is also not new, but had been a *hidden bias*. Now it is out in the open and is probably analysed in a more sophisticated manner.

Today, we posit the question ‘what is privileged’ or what is ‘given agency’ for what we used to say ‘what is the angle of vision’ or ‘whose perspective is it’, especially regarding the writing of ‘autonomous history’ following the seminal work of the late John Smail (Smail 1961). Invoking the famous phrase by Van Leur, Smail asked how ‘autonomous’ was a history that looked at Indonesia from the ‘deck of a Dutch ship’? Essentially, the issue is the same as giving ‘agency’ to, or ‘privileging’ something. This kind of questioning subsequently led to the consideration of the following ‘angles of vision’.

What would Southeast Asian history look like from the perspective of the court of the Malay Sultan or the Burmese king and queen, the headman and headwoman of the village, the padi fields of the farmer, the spice shop of the merchant, the monastery of the Buddhist monk and nun, the mosque of the *ulama*, or the parish of the Catholic priest? Simply viewing Southeast Asian history from any one of these different angles automatically gives ‘agency’ to it, and the history that results from that perspective is quite different from one viewed from other angles. Thus, Smail was not only questioning the impact of exogenous perspectives on indigenous history. He was also asking what categories within the indigenous realm itself should be the focus. Should politics and the elite, rather than social and cultural factors and the common man and woman be given emphasis? And the choice one makes – whether it is exogenous or indigenous, class, gender, the state, the centre, the village, the elite, the commoners, politics, economics, religion, and even change or continuity – clearly ‘privileges’ the object of that choice.

Selecting who or what to ‘privilege’ changes the scenery significantly by determining what is to be foreground and what, background, well beyond the colonial and the indigenous divide. The subjectivity inherent in one’s selection of perspective is not a new issue either, but an increasingly scrutinised one in the field of Southeast Asian studies. The problem often arises with regard to the motives behind one’s selection. To be sure, these may merely be one’s personal preferences and/or desired foci of study, but they can also be calculated political (or academic) machination.

As a result of such discussion, history texts written during the past two decades or so have increasingly and consciously chosen to make Southeast Asia the foreground and the colonial powers, the background, so that Europeans are said to only ‘enter’ Southeast Asian history (J. Taylor 2003: 115). Such decisions on the whole are meant to balance the decades of Indic, Sinic, and Euro-centrism, but they are, nonetheless, conscious efforts to give ‘agency’ to Southeast Asia. At least we can say with some aplomb that the latter are more likely to be *academically* rather than *politically* motivated.

Not just people and classes, but certain *events* can also be given ‘agency’ that changes one’s historical perspective. Thus, because the *fall* of Melaka is emphasized as a most important event in all of our history texts the role of the Portuguese is given ‘agency.’ Yet, the event did not destroy the *relationship* the Sultan of Melaka had with all the other sultans which was the crux of his wealth and power and which the Portuguese were attempting to usurp. All the Portuguese got when they took Melaka in 1511 was the physical city, not those important personal relationships the Sultan took with him to Brunei. Thus, if ‘agency’ had been given to those relationships instead, the ‘fall of Melaka’ diminishes in importance. The same can be said of other events in the history of Southeast Asia considered critical: the Mongol invasions of Mainland Southeast Asia (Aung-Thwin 1998), the ‘fall of Sri Vijaya’ (Wolters 1970). The issue of ‘agency’ opens up new windows into which the Southeast Asia historian can now peep more intently.

In past decades, Indic influences were given ‘agency’ while Sinic influences were more or less relegated to Vietnam. On the whole, this is not entirely inaccurate, for the bulk of the evidence testifies to the presence of Indic influences in nearly every aspect of Southeast Asian life: religion, writing systems, literature, measurement of time, notions of leadership, authority and legitimacy, conceptions of the universe, and the arts – dance, music, painting, theatre. However, in more recent years archaeologists and art historians have shown the increasingly important role of Sinic (or more accurately northern) influences, especially in the very early phases of Southeast Asian history prior to the arrival of Indic influences, as well as in later periods *after* India had made its initial impact.

In other words, the influence of the culture of the northern regions of what is now Yunnan on the early agrarian societies of Southeast Asia has become more and more evident in the archaeological data, especially in terms of domesticated rice, art and crafts, architectural principles, perhaps weapons; while in later times, these Sinic influences tended to be both technological and intellectual: firearms as well as books (Laichen 2000; Moore 2003; Tarling 1998). And of course, in terms of economic exchange, both the western and the northern regions have always played a role, not only in the maritime world but also amongst the in-land agrarian states. The increase in northern influences may be an ‘emerging trend’ especially as China becomes richer and begins to put more money into academics and the scholarship of Southeast Asia-China relations which it is already doing.

The way in which Southeast Asian history is *organised* (periodized) gives ‘agency’ to any number of things. A period can be lengthened or shortened, giving (or not giving) ‘agency’ to its main actors and the consequences of their rule. A book on the history of Southeast Asia that has relatively few chapters on the pre-colonial phase (representing a thousand years) with most of it focused on the colonial and modern phases (representing a hundred years) gives ‘agency’ to *recentness*, privileging the importance of the present over the

past, as well as the colonisers over the colonised. Elsewhere, I have called this 'present-centrism' (Aung-Thwin 1995). I do not know if the critique of 'present-centrism' is an 'emerging trend', just a phase, or simply a fetish of a single historian. But because it is central to the way we organise Southeast Asian history and privilege certain periods we work in or favour, I personally hope it remains an issue.

'Agency' is also inherent in disciplinarity itself, which often encourages a binary framework of analysis between ('competing') disciplines, thus creating some false dichotomies (Lieberman 1999). Politics is given 'agency' over history by political scientists and vice versa by historians; anthropologists privilege culture over historical events; geographers, the physical environment over individuals and groups; the economist, money over religious beliefs; and the demographer, population patterns over trade and commerce. Merely being a historian automatically gives 'agency' to historical methodology.

The choice of subject within a discipline can also do much the same thing. A history of the elite is often seen in opposition to that of the commoner; the urban centre, to that of the periphery; the 'upstream' in-land agrarian societies, to that of the 'downstream' maritime, commercial world. Hill-society is regarded as inimical to those of the plains, the majority to that of the minority, the colonial and exogenous forces to those of the national and indigenous, and the dominant male to that of the underrepresented female. As most of these are false dichotomies, we may see a growing response to that binary framework of analysis evident in more *dualistic* approaches in addressing this issue of 'agency'. Again, one hopes that *dualism* rather than *dichotomy* will be a 'continuing trend'.

One binary perspective that is beginning to crumble (hopefully) is the *division of Southeast Asia* into a 'Mainland' and an 'Island' world. That separation of Mainland and Island Southeast Asia has not only shaped our approach to its study, but has determined the division of labour in history departments, so that 'Mainland' historians teach 'Mainland history' and 'Island' historians, 'Island history', perpetuating those conceptual divides in concrete ways. Even the hiring policies of history departments and the monies allotted to them are, and have been for a long time, by and large based on this artificially *administrative* division of 'Mainland' and 'Island.'

However, as more in-depth research in more diverse areas is beginning to show, such a scenario cannot be sustained. We are beginning to see Southeast Asia as having at least four components rather than two: 1) an inland, agrarian world (represented by civilizations such as Pagan and Angkor), 2) a maritime trading world (perhaps best represented by Sri Vijaya and Melaka), 3) a hybrid world that includes the latter two (such as Dai Viet, Mrauk-U in Arakan, and Ayuthaya), and 4) a world of the 'hills' which interacted with the other three. This quadripartite scenario is a far more accurate representation, and way of looking at Southeast Asia, and supported by the best evidence we have, than the old Mainland-Island dichotomy. It may truly be an 'emerging trend', not

just a ‘continuing’ one, with promises of a more nuanced reconstruction of the region in future (Aung-Thwin 2011a).

A possible ‘continuing trend’, although not very new is a more serious search for longer-term historical patterns and continuity, in the tradition of Marc Bloch, Fernand Braudel and Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie of the Annales School. For too long, progressive change has been the over-riding framework of analysis for historians, the ‘sacred cow’ so to speak, which assumed that the mere passage of time automatically produces change of some sort. We now seem to be moving towards seriously considering giving more ‘agency’ to *continuity*.

Taking the ‘classical’ era as example, we now know that it extends much further back than heretofore thought. This conclusion is derived mainly from new evidence recovered from archaeology. We also see the ‘classical’ era extending into subsequent centuries farther than heretofore imagined, into the ‘post-classical’ era. Here too, it is the result of better scrutiny and reading of the original sources contained in those eras. The same can be said of the ‘Early Modern’ period, whose roots now seem to extend well back into the ‘classical/post-classical’ periods, while its vestiges and legacy have lingered longer in the more recent past. Continuity going both ways (into the past and into the present) is being given more credence than it had been conventionally (Aung-Thwin 1991; Moore 2003). I personally hope this becomes a lasting trend.

Continuity (ironically, the results of essentially European scholarship obsessed with change) is most evident in the writing of *social history*. It has been a ‘continuing trend’ in Southeast Asian history since the 1970s, the most well known advocate of it being Anthony Reid. Others also write on social history but are more focused on specific areas or communities, such as James Warren (1987), Norman Owen (1987), and Leonard Andaya (2008). ‘Social history’ in Southeast Asia appears to have a special connotation, intentional or not. Implicit in it is the notion that the subject is concerned mainly with the ‘commoner’ classes, and rarely with those above them. Yet, the sources used to portray these ‘masses’ are often derived from those generated by the ruling classes. Despite this kind of potential problem, much has been accomplished (for example) using (elite) parish records in the Philippines for reconstructing the history of commoners, especially by those in historical demography (Concepcion and Smith 1977; Cushner 1976; Flieger and Smith 1975; Owen 1987).

The debate over State-Formation is also a ‘continuing’ rather than an ‘emerging trend’ (Aung-Thwin 2005, 2008; Day 2002; Hall 1985; Wheatley 1983). The newer studies appear to have better evidence as support, and are more precise theoretically and analytically, having benefitted from the advances made in anthropology, such as the distinctions made between *primary* and *secondary* state-formation that hitherto was not common knowledge to most historians (White 1995). More recent studies have also benefitted from newer scientific techniques, such as rehydroxylation (dating bricks by measuring their moisture content) which can better assess evidence.

The importance given to, therefore ‘privileging’ the state, or conversely, trivialising its importance and de-privileging it, is a bone of contention in Southeast Asian history. But this is not an entirely new issue either: it goes back to the (often false) dichotomy that has long been part of earlier debates over centre and periphery, urban and rural, town and village (Aung-Thwin 2011b; Scott 2009).

The search for ‘global patterns’, not only in colonialism but also neo-colonialism and democratization may be a relatively new subject in Southeast Asian history *per se*, as it is usually the domain of those more concerned with the present: political scientists, sociologists, economists, and (a few) anthropologists, but rarely historians (Acharya 2003; Emmerson 1995; Paredes and Cullinane 1998). Whether one can call these ‘trends’ is still too early to tell. Besides, the study of earlier *economic* global patterns, both maritime and agrarian that spread concurrently with other, but earlier, ‘ideologies’ such as Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity is not new.

The *political context* of the post-colonial period, especially the era of independence, has also affected the writing and conceptualisation of Southeast Asian history in important ways. The idea of a ‘classical’ state, a ‘golden age’ of a country, is directly related to the emergence of the nation; for without the nation, to what entity can that ‘classicalness’ be attributed? It has to be ‘classical’ of something. Admittedly, it can be a ‘classical’ age of a particular people or community rather than a state. By and large, though, in Southeast Asian history, these peoples and communities belong to a state or polity and most of the nation-states in Southeast Asia today are not empty shells but occupied by a particular people who were responsible for that ‘classical’ age, usually the majority.

Thus, ‘classicalness’ attributed to a nation-state, although not historically inaccurate, can be a problem. It is not so much whether Pagan and Angkor existed as historical phenomena independent of modern Myanmar and Cambodia respectively, but it is the *link attributed* to their respective modern entities that has been challenged for (what are really more recent) *political* reasons. One can no more deny Myanmar and Cambodia ‘their’ classical ages than deny Greece, Athens, or Italy, Rome. The ‘emerging issue,’ then, is neither the empirical existence of these ‘classical’ kingdoms nor the link to their modern counterparts, but the attempt to *make history commensurate with its desired consequences*.

As conventions become less sacrosanct with the passage of time, another (hopefully) emerging trend is their reassessment, particularly *distinguishing myth from history*. Paradigms that have been accepted as historical truth and entrenched in the field by a century of scholarship have been shown to be erroneous (Aung-Thwin 2005). But as their deconstruction has professional and political consequences of a serious nature, there is resistance to such revisionism. Nonetheless, it is a pattern that has borne fruit and promises to grow rather than fade. Here as well, the questions posed by post-colonial studies in terms of epistemology have been important, even if deconstruction of myth in an empirical sense *per se* is an old disciplinary concern.

One of the ‘emerging trends’, that promises to continue rather than abate (and briefly mentioned above) is the field of gender studies. Not only does it cross political boundaries of entities such as the nation state, social boundaries such as ethno-linguistic groups, economic boundaries such as class, cultural boundaries such as religion, and even physical boundaries such as continents, it also draws from a growing theoretical literature that is truly global.

To reiterate, an advantage it has is that some of the best scholars that belong to a variety of disciplines contribute to its study, so that the field did not have to begin anew with young, developing scholars. Already well-known and established scholars, familiar with the kinds of academic problems and issues that have plagued or enhanced their own disciplines have been on the vanguard of gender studies. That is part of the reason for its rapid growth as a legitimate field and the stature it now has. And as more established senior historians (along with younger ‘rising stars’) address gender issues in Southeast Asian history, the field can only move forward.

For a long time, colonial historiography made *reified ethnicity* a concrete, causal factor in Southeast Asian history. It was said to have created and destroyed civilizations, made and unmade dynasties, and caused civil wars. However, since at least the 1960s, that notion of reified ethnicity (and the resulting interpretation of Southeast Asian history as essentially caused by it) has been slowly whittled away and replaced by ethnicity as a *relational attribute*, an abstract notion of self and other, rather than a concrete phenomenon. Although identity, *per se*, is admittedly also a matter of perception, so long as that perception is demonstrated to have created historical events and patterns, it is a viable causal factor in history. This is different from saying that ethnicity *per se* is a causal factor in history.

As Leonard Andaya has shown (2008), ethnic identity (such as ‘Malayness’) is especially important when it is closely linked to the prevailing economic system in the region (such as trade and commerce), and even more so when also integrated to the major ideology of that region, such as Islam. And when such linkages persist over a long period of time, ethnic identity becomes even more potent as a causal factor. This kind of study can also be considered part of an ‘emerging trend’ in Southeast Asian history.

We often think that as Southeast Asia becomes more modern, traditional belief systems give way to new ones, changing the structure of society. It may be true that new conceptual systems have been imbibed (at least by the ruling elites) and that new structures have emerged to accommodate those new relationships. But that does not mean old beliefs and their links to society and government must have also disappeared, especially amongst the masses.

One of the most important of these relationships continues to be that between *religion and the state*, which is alive and well (Aung-Thwin 2009; Hefner and Horvatic 1997; Johns 1976, 1995; Spiro 1982; Swearer 1995; Tambiah 1970). Another is *patron-clientelism*, which is also alive and well despite attempts to install formal, ‘modern’ apparatuses to replace it. One of

the ‘continuing trends’ in assessing Southeast Asian history, therefore, is the attempt to make better distinctions between old and new, so that change is seen to occur within continuity rather than in place of it.

Finally, I see another emerging trend that has been largely ignored because it is not dramatic or sensational: the study of ‘public history’. It involves the origins and development of the whole process of reconstructing national archives, museums, historical societies, archaeological departments, theme parks, and the like. What does the national museum in Myanmar tell us about the concept of history of its builders and the social and political context at the time of its building? Was it being influenced by the prevailing ideologies of the time in the country and world, or by more local and practical concerns? Was the arrangement of the artefacts in a display merely a matter of using space efficiently in an aesthetically pleasing manner, or does it have a message as well? Thus, for example, why is the (1930s) Saya San exhibit in the Defense Services Museum (formerly in Yangon) placed in a hall that deals largely with World War Two? Was it deliberate in that the curators saw the two exhibits as anti-colonial or was there no more space for Saya San on another floor? This kind of probing also promises to be an ‘emerging’ trend.

CONCLUSIONS

In short, with the exception of some of the issues raised by gender studies, none of the major concerns raised in the discipline of Southeast Asian history in recent years is entirely new. However, the *approaches* to addressing old concerns as well as the *questions asked* of the old evidence are fresh, creative, and innovative, particularly in fields such as post-colonial studies. But even there, because it essentially asks the question ‘*how do we know what we know*’, the issue is at heart epistemological, a sub-field of perhaps the oldest of all disciplines: philosophy.

Late 19th and early 20th century historians such as Leopold von Ranke and Friedrich Meinecke on the one hand, and J. B. Bury on the other (who more or less broke with the latter two), along with those such as Carl Marx and Charles Beard, felt that one cannot leave philosophical issues out of historiography. In that sense also, the issues raised by post-colonial studies are not new, for the former older generation of historians and scholars had long raised similar (in some cases, identical) questions of epistemology, particularly in terms of methodology, perspective, and evidence. On the other hand, scholars of post-colonial studies feel they have gone further, and have returned to a more inclusive approach in engaging other disciplines. They may be right: in certain ways their field appears more sophisticated, exciting, and pertinent to Southeast Asian history. At the same time, what we used to call “classical education” was also very inclusive and interdisciplinary, well before the latter word became fashionable.

While the new generation of Southeast Asia historians enthralled with post-colonial studies need to know the earlier historiography of the field better, the

older generation also needs to keep up with genuinely new issues and problems broiling in it. Although most of them are no longer with us, at least their works survive to inform us. The whole process is, or should be, an accommodation of both the old with the new.

References

- Acharya, Amitav. 2003. Democratisation and the prospects for participatory regionalism in Southeast Asia. *Third World Quarterly* (24)2, 375–390.
- Adas, Michael. 1989. *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance*. Cornell Studies in Comparative History. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Andaya, Barbara Waston. 2000. *Other Pasts: Women, Gender and History in Early Modern Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hawai'i at Manoa.
- Andaya, Barbara Waston. 2006. *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Andaya, Leonard Y. 2008. *Leaves of the Same Tree: Trade and Ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Anderson, Benedict R. O'G. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Revised edition). London, New York: Verso.
- Aung-Thwin, Michael. 1991. Spirals in Burmese and early Southeast Asian history. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 21(4), 575–602.
- Aung-Thwin, Michael. 1995. The 'Classical' in Southeast Asia: the present in the past. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 26(1), 75–91.
- Aung-Thwin, Michael. 1998. *Myth and History in the Historiography of Early Burma*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Aung-Thwin, Michael. 2005. *The Mists of Ramanna: The Legend That Was Lower Burma*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Aung-Thwin, Michael. 2008. Mranma Pran: when context encounters notion. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 39(2), 193–217.
- Aung-Thwin, Michael. 2009. Of monarchs, monks, and men: religion and the state in Myanmar. *Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series* 127, 2–31.
- Aung-Thwin, Michael. 2011a. A new/old look at 'classical' and 'post-Classical' Southeast Asia/Burma. In Michael Aung-Thwin and Kenneth R. Hall (eds.), *New Perspectives on the History and Historiography of Southeast Asia: Continuing Explorations*, pp. 25–55. London: Routledge.
- Aung-Thwin, Michael. 2011b. Ava and Pegu: a tale of two kingdoms. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 42(1), 1–16.
- Aung-Thwin, Michael. 2011c. Debate. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 167 (1), 86–99.
- Bastin, John Sturgis and Benda, Harry Jindrich. 1968. *A History of Modern Southeast Asia: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Decolonization*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Bastin, John Sturgis. 1967. *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: 1511–1957*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Breckenridge, Carol Appadurai and van der Veer, Peter. 1993. *Orientalism and the Post-colonial Predicament*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

- Briggs, Lawrence Palmer. 1951. *The Ancient Khmer Empire*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society.
- Coedes, George. 1968. *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: East-West Center Press.
- Concepción, Mercedes B. and Smith, Peter Colin. 1976. *The Demographic Situation in the Philippines: An Assessment in 1977*. Honolulu: East-West Center.
- Cushner, Nicholas P. 1976. *Landed Estates in the Colonial Philippines*. Monograph series no. 20. New Haven: Yale University Center for Southeast Asian Studies.
- Day, Tony. 2002. *Fluid Iron State Formation in Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Emmerson, Donald K. 1980. Issues in Southeast Asian history: room for interpretation. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 40, 43–69.
- Emmerson, Donald K. 1995. Region and recalcitrance: rethinking democracy through Southeast Asia. *The Pacific Review* 8(2), 223–48.
- Fenner, Bruce Leonard. 1985. *Cebu under the Spanish Flag, 1521–1896: An Economic-Social History*. Cebu City, Philippines: San Carlos Publications, University of San Carlos.
- Flieger, Wilhelm and Smith, Peter Colin. 1975. *A Demographic Path to Modernity: Patterns of Early-Transition in the Philippines*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.
- Foucault, Michel and Hoy, David Couzens. 1986. *Foucault: A Critical Reader*. Oxford, New York: B. Blackwell.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1980. *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hall, Daniel George Edward. 1955. *A History of South-East Asia*. London, New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Hall, Kenneth. 1985. *Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Harrison, Brian. 1966. *South-East Asia: A Short History*. London: Macmillan.
- Hefner, Robert W. and Horvatic, Patricia. 1997. *Islam in an Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Ileto, Reynaldo Clemeña. 1998. *Filipinos and Their Revolution: Event, Discourse, and Historiography, Centennial of the Revolution*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- Ileto, Reynaldo Clemeña. 1979. *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840–1910*. Quezon City, Metro Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- Johns, Anthony Hearle. 1976. Islam in Southeast Asia: problems of perspective, In Daniel Hall, Charles Cowan and Oliver W. Wolters (eds.), *Southeast Asian History and historiography*, 304–320. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Johns, Anthony Hearle. 1995. Sufism in Southeast Asia: Reflections and Reconsiderations. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 26(1), 169–183.
- Kasetsiri, Charnwit. 1976. *The Rise of Ayudhya: A History of Siam in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- Laichen, Sun. 2000. *Ming-Southeast Asian overland interactions, 1368–1644* (Unpublished Ph.D Thesis). University of Michigan.
- Legge, John D. 1992. The writing of Southeast Asian history. In Nicholas Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia: From Early Times to c.1800, Vol. 1*, pp.1–50. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Lieberman, Victor B. 2003. *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c.800–1830*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lieberman, Victor B. 1999. *Beyond Binary Histories Re-Imagining Eurasia to c.1830*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- McCoy, Alfred W. 2009. *An Anarchy of Families: State and Family in the Philippines, New Perspectives in Southeast Asian Studies*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Moore, Elizabeth. 2003. Bronze and Iron Age sites in Myanmar: Chindwin, Samon, and Pyu. *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 1(1), 24–39.
- Osborne, Milton. 2010. *Southeast Asia: An Introductory History* (10th edition). Crowns Nest: Allen and Unwin.
- Owen, Norman. 1987. *Death and Disease in Southeast Asia: Explorations in Social, Medical, and Demographic History*. Singapore, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Owen, Norman. 2005. *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Paredes, Ruby and Cullinane, Michael. 1988. *Philippine Colonial Democracy*. Yale Southeast Asia Studies Monograph Series. New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies.
- Popkin, Samuel. 1979. *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Reid, Anthony. 1988. *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450–1680* (Vols. 1–2). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Reynolds, Craig James. 1995. A new look at old Southeast Asia. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54(2), 419–446.
- Said, Edward. 1979. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Scott, James C. 1976. *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Scott, James C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Scott, James C. 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Scott, James C. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sears, Laurie J. (ed.). 1993. *Autonomous Histories, Particular Truths: Essays in Honor of John R.W. Smail*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Center for Southeast Asian Studies.
- Spiro, Melford. 1982. *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Steinberg, David. 1985. *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Swearer, Donald. 1995. *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Szanton, David. 2004. *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja. 1977. The galactic polity: the structure of traditional kingdoms in Southeast Asia. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 293, 69–97.
- Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja. 1970. *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*. Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja. 1976. *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tarling, Nicholas. 1966. *A Concise History of Southeast Asia*. New York: Praeger.
- Tarling, Nicholas. 1998. *Nations and States in Southeast Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tarling, Nicholas. 1999. *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, Jean. 2003. *Indonesia: Peoples and Histories*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Taylor, Keith. 1983. *The Birth of Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Vickery, Michael. 1998. *Society, Economics, and Politics in Pre-Angkor Cambodia: The 7th–8th Centuries*. Tokyo: Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies for UNESCO, Toyo Bunko.
- Warren, James Francis. 1987. *At the Edge of Southeast Asian History*. Quezon City: New Day Publishers.
- Warren, James Francis. 1981. *The Sulu Zone, 1768–1898: The Dynamics of External Trade, Slavery, and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State*. Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- Wheatley, Paul. 1983. *Nagara and Commandery Origins of the Southeast Asian Urban Traditions*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Whitmore, John. 1985. *Vietnam, Ho Quy Ly, and the Ming*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Whitmore, John. 2006. The rise of the coast: trade, state and culture in early Đại Việt. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37(1), 103–22.
- Wolters, Oliver W. 1970. *The Fall of Śrīvijaya in Malay History*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Wolters, Oliver W. 1982. *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Wolters, Oliver W. 1994. Southeast Asia as a Southeast Asian Field of Study. *Indonesia* 58, 1–17.
- Wolters, Oliver W. 1999. *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Revised edition). Studies on Southeast Asia 26. Ithaca, Singapore: Southeast Asia Program, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Wyatt, David. 1984. *Thailand: A Short History*. New Haven: Yale University Press.