

## Book Reviews

Asia

*Cultural politics and Asian values*

By MICHAEL D. BARR

London: Routledge, 2002. Pp. xii, 241. Notes, Biography, Index.

DOI: S0022463404210086

The preface of this book states that its intention is to contribute to ‘the cross-cultural discourse on human rights, democracy and civility in governance’. As it turns out, the book focuses more on the question of human rights in Asia. Indeed, its ultimate purpose is ‘to contribute towards building a cross-cultural consensus that might provide a broader conceptual foundation of human rights than that currently on offer’ (p. 11). In pursuit of this goal the author, Michael Barr, takes seriously the view that the question of human rights cannot be adequately addressed without taking into account the competing and conflicting cultural traditions within Asian and Western societies and between them.

The book is divided into three parts. Part III summarises the arguments of the text and concludes with prescriptions for the cross-cultural dialogue on human rights envisaged by the author. The first two parts, each taking up five chapters, reflect the two principal concerns that frame the arguments of the text.

First, Barr is well aware that the issue of culture has often been controlled and manipulated by Asian political elites to rationalise human rights abuses. This is clearly brought out in Part I, which documents the political history of the Asian values debate and culminates in a critical account of the cynical exploitation of that debate by the Chinese government, ‘a deadly Leninist regime’ (p. 62). Second, Barr is also troubled by developments in the tradition of liberal thought and practice in the West, and in this case he is sympathetic to the reservations Asian conservatives have towards the more excessive aspects of liberal individualism. Indeed, since the financial crisis of 1997 and the apparent loss of vigour among Asian political elites in asserting their cultural differences, Barr now fears that Asia is more vulnerable to this perverse strand of liberalism: ‘If social atomism continues its slow creep into the sinews of Asian societies, it will make the highly individualistic, almost asocial liberal vision of human rights and human relations seem so much more natural’ (p. 183).

Barr’s attempt to foster a cross-cultural dialogue on human rights is therefore situated between two poles. One pole is constituted by the excesses of liberalism resulting in the creation of atomic and asocial individuals, and the other by the suppression of freedom by non-democratic, authoritarian regimes and their exploitation of the discourse of local cultures and traditions. So in a way the book is animated by the ambition to save Asians from both the West and their own political elites.

The strategy Barr uses to facilitate the dialogue on human rights is not so much spelt out as indirectly demonstrated in Part II. This part of the book surveys the main

belief systems that are relevant to the dialogue within the context of East Asia: namely, liberalism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Confucianism. It is apparent from the survey of these belief systems, which are also characterised as religions, that Barr blurs the difference between a religion's doctrines and its historical practices. This strategy serves two purposes. First, it shows that all religious doctrines are historical and therefore subject to change. Second, since there is no difference between doctrine and practice, it is easy to survey the historical practices of the religions involved to show that all of them have perpetrated acts of injustice. So, for example, liberalism has been guilty of racism (p. 103) and Christians have participated in 'slavery, torture, and enforcement of religious conformity, exploitations of the poor, and discrimination against women and non-white ethnic groups, to name but a few offenses' (p. 119). Confucianism too has a bad record when it comes to 'protecting the vulnerable – women, children, sick and poor' (p. 172), and the Buddhists are among 'the biggest consumers of abortion among all the world's religions' (p. 152). While Barr does elaborate on the humanistic elements in each religion, his main point appears to be that no religion can claim moral superiority.

But would this strategy of fostering dialogue work? If no religion is superior, then it could be said that none is inferior either. What incentive do any of these religions have to engage in a cross-cultural dialogue? Besides, underlying the critique of religion is Barr's view of a humanistic morality. In short, what informs his critique is a religion of humanism. Why would any of the religions surveyed accept his religiously informed criticism of their faith? In other words, why should any religion accept Barr's criteria of what constitutes human or inhuman behaviour?

Barr's strategy of historicising religions/belief systems undermines his ability to answer these questions in a satisfactory way. I shall mention only two difficulties. First, the strategy leads him to open negotiation of the idea of what constitutes a human being. In one of his prescriptions for the conditions of a possible dialogue, he thus recommends taking a Buddhist approach, which is characterised by 'its reluctance – even inability – to conceptualise generic human rights, or even generic humans, as a meaningful concept because of the existentialism inherent in its mode of thought' (p. 189). That is to say, there is no clear determination of what a human being is, and hence what constitutes right human conduct. Second, Barr maintains that one of the indicators of the subsistence of a humanistic morality in religion should be 'openness to the application of reason' (p. 87). Yet in keeping with his strategy, Barr goes on to call into question the 'supposedly objective human reason' of Western thinkers like Descartes, Kant and Rawls (p. 108). Consequently, one is left in doubt about the rational basis of Barr's religiously informed critique of religion.

In view of these difficulties, it would seem that Barr is now obliged to articulate the conditions for the possibility of a consensus on what constitutes a human being as well as what constitutes human rationality before embarking on his actual goal of fostering a cross-cultural dialogue on human rights. If there is a contribution he has made, it would seem to consist in showing that the possibility of a cross-cultural consensus on human rights is a utopian fantasy.

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*Trans-status subjects: Gender in the globalization of South and Southeast Asia*

Edited by SONITA SARKER and ESHA NIYOGI DE

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002. Pp. xii, 344. Notes, Tables, Bibliography, Index. DOI: S0022463404220082

Any book bringing a sophisticated array of feminist, poststructuralist and post-colonial theoretical approaches to the intellectually conservative field of Southeast Asian Studies has to be seen as a welcome arrival. Sonita Sarker and Esha Niyogi De have done just this in a collection which employs the concept of 'trans-status subjectivity' to capture the diverse and contradictory experience of South and Southeast Asians in the face of globalisation.

Globalisation in South/Southeast Asia, the editors argue, is a force that effects continual shifts in the colonial and postcolonial spatial and temporal orders which situate the regions relative to the 'here' and 'now' of capitalist (post)modernity. They contend that in the course of producing new centres and peripheries and new temporal fault lines (for instance, between tradition and modernity), globalisation has a transformative impact on the way gender, race, ethnicity and class intersect to locate South and Southeast Asian subjects. The editors' specific interest in this volume is in how these shifts in status determine (newly) unequal male and female mobilities, the latter term being understood in both a spatial and a social sense. For while status transformation is something almost invariably experienced by those who cross political and economic borders, it can also be identified as acting on those who stay relatively still in space yet find themselves having to 'mark time' to the new tempos set by masculinist notions of socio-economic progress. Even when people don't cross borders, borders have a way of crossing them, as it were.

The editors and most of the contributors approach globalisation in terms of inter-relations of people and systems, analysing an array of global, national and regional power structures that work to situate and oppress subjects, while at the same time emphasising the possibility of contesting globalisation's imposed spatio-temporal divides by forging new citizenships and constructing individual and communal identities that resist oppression and victimhood. While some of the chapters do tend towards celebrating diasporic movement and subjectivity, such as Sarker's own chapter on Cornelia Sorabji and Ravinder Randhawa (South Asian women who experienced travel and migration almost a century apart under successive colonial and postcolonial cycles of globalisation), others balance this by stressing the discontents of mobility, particularly the sobering final chapter on the exploitation of undocumented South Asian domestic workers by their co-ethnic employers in North America.

*Trans-status subjects* is a multidisciplinary collection that includes contributions by historians, cultural anthropologists, geographers and scholars of literary and visual culture. Eight of its chapters address South Asia, while six address Southeast Asia. Below I will briefly discuss some of the latter chapters.

Susan Morgan's 'Designing woman, designing North Borneo' uncovers the strange positionality of Ada Pryer, wife of William Pryer, the first Resident of the East Coast of Sabah under British rule. Pryer is a female empire-builder whose memoir, *A decade in Borneo* (recently edited by Morgan and republished by Leicester University Press [London] in 2001), 'feminises' the colonial space of nineteenth-century North Borneo by

erasing the history of violence behind its colonisation, and ‘bleaches’ it by euphemising the racial difference dividing white colonisers and the island’s indigenous peoples by constructing them all as ‘settlers’ in solidarity against the ‘bad’ (i.e., non-British) Europeans seeking hegemony in the region. Morgan concludes that the ‘brave new white, feminine world’ extolled in Pryer’s narrative does not ultimately challenge, but rather serves, the perpetuation of British imperialism and its racial imaginary.

Kathryn McMahon contributes an analysis of the films of senior Vietnamese director Dang Nhat Minh, that are interesting for the sophisticated way in which the characters depicted in them traverse, and are traversed by, Vietnam’s disjunctive histories (colonial/postcolonial, communist/market) and geographies (North/South, homeland/diaspora). McMahon’s reading of Minh tends, however, to portray him as a lone creative individual without addressing the all-important institutional and political contexts in which he works, or analysing the field of cultural production in which he operates.

Gisèle Yasmeen and Andrew McRae both address issues of rural–urban migration and urbanisation in contemporary Thailand. Yasmeen’s chapter looks at the gendering of Bangkok’s foodscape – 80 per cent of the city’s street food vendors are women – and the commodification of ‘nurturing’ this implies, while also highlighting issues related to women’s access to public space in the city. McRae performs a kind of literary ethnography of the gendered representation of the rural in Thai short stories. He demonstrates how in a context in which women domestic migrants to Bangkok outnumber men two to one, the mobile woman shows up in literature as a sign of social decay, but may also be read as a figure that can problematise existing binaries. McRae’s analysis of male writers could have been complemented by the inclusion of narratives of mobile women themselves, such as the celebrated *lookthoong* musical performer Pompuang Duangjan (most famous for ‘AM girl’), whose songs include gritty realist narratives about such things as being groped on a bus to Bangkok by a man who promises to make her – a naïve girl from the provinces – a star.

Esha Niyogi De writes on urban planning, nation-building and the cracks in the façade of Chinese patriarchal subjectivity in Singapore. While her framework is sound, it troubles me that her argument centres so completely around the Eric Khoo film *Twelve storeys*, which is made to carry an inordinate analytical weight. At times events in the film seem to be put forward as ethnographic reality and the writer oblivious to issues such as film genre, narrative convention and the transformations which occur in the textualisation of everyday life into film.

To return more critically to the book’s organising concept, defining globalisation in South/Southeast Asia simply by saying its effect is that ‘everyone’s status is shifting’ risks creating a rather vague and empty theoretical position. The historical, ethnographic and textual engagements of the chapters work to give the concept of trans-status subjectivity some context and content, but inevitably they also problematise it. While reading, I was struck more than once by the thought that a ‘plenitudinous’ understanding of the uneven and contradictory effects of globalisation can only be reached through an engagement with very specific locales and histories. Inevitably, there will be ‘static’ as we pursue the (very necessary) task of connecting up from these engagements to mid and high theoretical registers. This problem is evident in the collection under review, yet the editors, adopting a strident tone, fail to reflect on it in any depth, choosing rather to ‘talk up’ the explanatory power of the concept of trans-status subjectivity.

With these qualifications, I do find trans-status subjectivity a useful concept and especially like the way it creates a dynamic vision of subjects who are relatively immobile in physical space (unlike the cousin concept transnationalism, which tends to make them invisible). Other things I'd like to see in the development of the concept include more attention being paid to theorisation of the social fields in which trans-status subjects act, as well as to their strategies of accumulation and conversion of status between fields, and their pursuit of parallel strategies of social mobility in two or more fields at once.

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### Southeast Asia

*Chinese migrants abroad: Cultural, educational and social dimensions of the Chinese Diaspora*

Edited by MICHAEL W. CHARNEY, BRENDA S.A. YEOH and TONG CHEE KIONG.

Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003. DOI: S0022463404230089

Should the study of Chinese Diaspora be confined to its localities to identify its distinctive characteristics, or should it be put into a general transnational framework to map out common notions of 'Chineseness'? These two approaches continue to define research directions in this field. The editors of this volume state that they intend to focus on a 'local' approach whereby individual authors separately scrutinise overseas Chinese communities in different societies along broadly interrelated socio-cultural and educational dimensions. Based on an international conference on immigrant societies and modern education in 2001, the effort to bring together scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, from sociologists and ethnographers to historians and cultural theorists, is commendable. The extent of interest on Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia should also be noted, considering that seven out of twelve chapters in the volume are devoted to the region. This book should therefore be assessed based on its contributions to the critical appreciation of the legacy of the Chinese in the region.

*Chinese migrants abroad* is divided into three main parts covering the themes on identities, education and integration faced by Chinese diasporic communities. In his study of five prominent Chinese business personalities in Southeast Asia – Tan Kah Kee, Robert Kuok, Liem Sioe Liong, Dhanin Chearavanand and Lucio Tan – Jamie Mackie intends to show their very contrasting legacies and paths to success. Yao Souchou, on the other hand, centres the cultural politics of the nightlife around Chinese-based activities of sleaze, such as street hawkers and the consumption of pork-rib soup, considered hedonistic in Muslim-dominated Malaysia. In another aspect of conflicting identities, James Chin explores the 'multiple homelands' in both Southeast Asia and China of Indonesian ethnic Chinese who went to join the Communist 'New China' in the 1950s, only to become disillusioned and eventually settle in Hong Kong.

An outstanding feature of this publication lies in the contributions on the establishment of Chinese education in historical perspective, mainly in Malaysia and Singapore. Wee Tong Bao draws attention to the role played by different migrant dialect groups in establishing Chinese educational institutions rather than the conventional focus

on either British colonial policies or political development in China. Yen Ching Hwang focuses on the educational networks from Malaya to Southern China created by the immigrant Hokkien community, in particular the contributions of the Malaya-based philanthropist, Tan Kah Kee. The subsequent chapter by Danny Wong turns its attention to the emphasis on English instead of Chinese education in mission schools among the Hakka Christian migrants in British Sabah. Even as their proficiency in English provided them with a competitive edge, it was subsequently eroded by the promotion of the Malay language by the Malaysian government. Finally, Lee Guan Kin laments the state of Chinese education and culture in post-independence Singapore, where English was promoted as the dominant language tool for nation-building. She is, however, more optimistic that the 'dark days' of Chinese culture in the Republic are over in light of China's emergence as an economic power.

While it is certain that these individual case studies have intensified the research on overseas Chinese, particularly with the perspective on education, the book's agenda and narrative remain relatively conventional. The authors have collectively chosen to associate the Chinese Diaspora with the familiar notions of entrepreneurship, familism and diligence, as well as the (implied) Confucian emphasis on education. Whether it is about consuming popular Chinese pork ribs in contemporary Malaysia, establishing Chinese schools in colonial Malaya, or concerns about the state of Chinese culture in Singapore, the experiences of the Chinese are typecast into one of constant struggle for legitimacy in otherwise strange lands. Such generalised explanations of particular contexts are more ideologically coded, with a dangerous potential of reinforcing the myths of overseas Chinese as 'model minorities'. It is also unfortunate that the discourse here is also constructed to be an exclusionary 'Chinese' affair, instead of a regional (Southeast Asian) legacy. Most, if not all, of the authors have failed to explore in greater depth the interactions between the Chinese migrants of different generations with their host societies. The identities created have been of hybridity rather than difference, as seen in the experiences of the highly integrated Thai-Chinese and their Straits-born Peranakan counterparts in Malaysia and Singapore.

In addition, the editors and contributors have also missed the vital opportunity to raise the discourse on Chinese education and educational institutions more critically as an ideological tool in shaping Chinese identities outside China. These institutions and values have played a significant role in the student movements in postcolonial Southeast Asian countries, in particular Singapore and Malaysia, and have continued to be areas of heated contention. The celebratory accounts of the founding of these schools have already been well documented and explained. What remains largely muted has been a more comprehensive and balanced debate on their impact on the identities of the Chinese Diaspora in these host societies. How much have these institutions, in their orientation towards Chinese values and language, served to essentialise the ideas of 'Chineseness' and in turn impeded overseas Chinese from being integrated into the places where they reside? Are these schools traditionally fundamentalist enclaves of Chinese culture that have shaped its students to affiliate more with imagined China than the actual places where they live? And what is the worldview of a supposedly 'Chinese-educated' Chinese in Southeast Asia? Only James Chin has managed to explore such questions in a more critical light by showing the painful processes whereby Chinese Indonesians in Hong Kong have painfully tried to mediate between different Chinese sub-cultural identities in Communist China, Indonesia and, finally, in the British colony.



In sum, given its conservative conceptual framework, it is highly unlikely for this book to reach new empirical heights or effect paradigm shifts. Nonetheless, it should serve to remind researchers on ethnicity in Southeast Asia of the need to discover new networks of fluidity and hybridity rather than dwell on seemingly essentialised entities.

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*Fluid iron: State formation in Southeast Asia*

By TONY DAY

Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002. Pp. xii, 339. Plates, Bibliography, Index.  
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As a historian of pre-modern Southeast Asia, I firmly applaud Tony Day's removing the barrier of the dichotomy between 'early' and 'modern' in the study of the region as well as his firm acceptance of this territory as a region. Surveying a broad range of writings dealing either directly with the region or theoretically with the topic of the state and political formation, initially in tandem with Craig Reynolds, Day has developed a hypothesis (p. 34) – in his terms a definition – and proceeds to examine it. Naturally, his focus tends to be Java/Indonesia and its texts, mainly from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, supplemented with selected discussions of Vietnam and other portions of Southeast Asia and its past and present. He insists that, through time and space, there exist 'variants' of a broad regional pattern. For him, the contemporary (to us) reflects what he sees over the past thousand years of Southeast Asian history.

As Day searches out the 'deep history' behind the modern age, he begins (properly, to my mind) with kinship and gender, involving both the living and the dead, the underlying and constantly shifting pattern of indigenous society. He then examines the cosmological, ritual and administrative efforts made to develop a hierarchical and political form – the state – that will bring order, stability and protection to society. Yet the human volatility reflected in the first part cannot be completely controlled by the efforts of the second part. The result is state violence meant to bring the disparate and threatening elements back into line and to put the challenged cosmic model with its propriety back into place. In the process, the violence is aestheticised, made beautiful in terms of the restoration of order.

In this discussion, Day takes us out of historical narrative and our modern efforts to construct a controlling form through the centuries. Instead, he has us look at the timeless forces from which this form, the state, has continuously sought to provide protection/refuge and which it has tried to bring into some kind of order. Through external code, ritual and repetition, centralising efforts try to utilise these forces in order to achieve a greater and beautiful stability. Yet the very human complexities of the forces themselves on a daily basis undercut these efforts and occasionally explode in utter (but incomplete) destructiveness.

Starting with male prowess, 'sexual, oral and martial' (p. 258) (headhunting is a good representation), the political form builds on familism and its demand for status and reward so as to construct its hierarchy, all wrapped and recreated in an external,

increasingly masculine cosmology. Administrative efforts build on this, strengthened by familial service to the developing state and seeking to control the natural mobility of the people. The aestheticised violence is then necessary to complete the dominance of proper state form over the challenging ambiguities ever existent in the cultural and social patterns, that is, 'to regenerate power and hierarchy' (p. 278) against competing forces and their claimed invulnerability.

All this takes place, then and now, in a transcultural mode. Southeast Asia, as a region, interacts strongly with external cultural forces and localises them, resulting in ever-constant new hybridities. These creations become part of new universal knowledge systems and are employed to form new state systems. The latter then move to deal with family, gender and ambition and ultimately employ violence to contain the contesting complexities.

The author's emphasis is on the backdrop to historical events. Elements of this backdrop affect the events themselves, such that historical development is merely the constant attempt (in whatever form – Indic, Sinic or Western) to handle the backdrop. To do this better, his discussion would have required more time spent on the nature of the bilateral kinship system, its corollaries and its consequences. He might also have brought in blood/water oaths and their purposes. In addition, I wish that he would use 'administration' instead of 'bureaucracy' (the latter being a specialised form of the former). I agree that ritual and administration are tightly tied together.

Day draws on a Dayak spell (p. 155) and a Balinese painting of a sorcerer (p. 286) for his title and cover respectively. (He might well have employed Kali dancing on her mountain of skulls.) They express the nature of the political reality he sees in the Southeast Asian state over time: volatility, vulnerability and violence, requiring constant transformations. His purpose is to break down the existing historiographical discussion in a broadly comparative and non-chronological way. This he does in a highly stimulating and thought provoking manner, one that enriches the study of the region.

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*A land on fire: The environmental consequences of the Southeast Asian boom*

By JAMES DAVID FAHN.

Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003. Pp. xv, 365. Tables, Maps, Notes, Index.

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James Fahn served for most of the 1990s as the first environment editor of Bangkok's English-language daily *The Nation*. This valuable, accessible book draws on Fahn's journalistic experience and writings, his gift for narration and background in the sciences, and his thoughtful, unpretentious engagement both with contemporary Thailand and with, quite literally, the fate of the earth.

*A land on fire* includes chapters on the congestion and pollution of Bangkok during Thailand's boom years and on the ecological and social impact of tourism, dams, logging, deforestation, over-fishing and shrimp farming, off-shore gas fields, and the construction of the Yadana gas pipeline between Burma and Thailand. Fahn builds these chapters around his own investigative reporting for *The Nation* and his shorter stint working



on an environmentally oriented programme for Thai television. He uses accounts of his often very aggressive pursuit of stories and cites the articles in which that pursuit resulted to illuminate Thailand's environmental crises and their political and sociological complexities. This approach, along with Fahn's deft scientific and ecological explanations, distinguishes his book from other treatments of the environmental costs of rapid growth in Southeast Asia.

Many of the book's episodes take Fahn to Thailand's western littorals and borderlands. He documents land-grabbing and the depletion of fisheries along the coast of the Andaman Sea. He tracks illegal logging and corruption on both sides of the Thai–Burmese border. His visit to Karen villagers living deep in one of the conservation areas known collectively as Thailand's Western Forest Complex serves as his introduction to the *khon kap pa* ('man-and-forest') debate in Thai environmentalism. What Fahn calls his 'biggest scoop ever' (p. 217), his dogged effort to understand the extent of mercury poisoning in the gas fields of the Gulf of Thailand and along the country's eastern seaboard, will spook anyone who has ever eaten a seafood dinner in Bangkok. But he emphasises throughout this work that less affluent, above all rural, people bear the heaviest costs of ongoing environmental degradation.

To simplify, this debate pits individuals and groups who seek to preserve pristine wilderness against those who fight for the rights of forest-dwellers to stay put, living in putative harmony with nature. Fahn expresses his own doubts about the realism or sustainability of the latter vision. But he acknowledges that in the predominantly rural societies of most of the globe, it can represent the mainstream environmentalist position. He perceptively notes that what he terms the environmental democracy movement and other participatory campaigns are 'the closest thing there is to a true left-wing opposition' (p. 6) in Thailand. On the one hand, Fahn thus gently suggests both the utopianism of Thailand's NGO movement and the dysfunctional nature of its political parties. On the other, he makes clear that much of the environmental movement in developing Asia is, in its active engagement with the disenfranchised, a very different enterprise from its mainstream counterpart in the industrialised world.

Throughout *A land on fire*, Fahn effectively presents environmental problems confronting 'the global South' in terms comprehensible to readers in 'the global North'. His book proves less successful in illustrating the degree to which Thailand's Southeast Asian neighbours share the full range of its environmental problems. As he focused his investigative reporting for *The Nation* on developments within Thailand's borders, he lacks the rich anecdotal material in his references to Vietnam, Indonesia and other neighbouring states that so enlivens his treatment of Thai problems. At the same time, his accounts of trips to the Thai–Burmese border make an invaluable contribution to the book. Fahn cultivated a range of excellent contacts along that border, and readers of this book will learn much about the activities of Burma's State Peace and Development Council regime on its eastern periphery.

The penultimate chapter, the book's longest, addresses environmental issues in their global context: rich countries' linkage of trade and conservation, 'bio-prospecting' and biodiversity, and global warming. This chapter draws only minimally on Fahn's own reporting, and it is denser than the chapters that precede it. But Fahn uses the chapter to puzzle out for himself many of the North–South issues with which general readers will be most familiar. Whether or not they agree with his conclusions, those readers will

appreciate his effort and thought. The chapter offers a strong discussion of the World Trade Organization (WTO), of its Thai Director-General Suphachai Phanitchaphak's views on global environmental issues, and of the potential of legally binding WTO rulings to trump international environmental agreements.

The final chapter of *A land on fire* revisits the political violence on the streets of Bangkok during May 1992. Fahn sees this successful 'democracy uprising' (p. 319) as the true source of Thailand's 1997 'people's constitution', with its provision for better governance and more participatory management of natural resources. He thus makes an argument with regard to environmental concerns that parallels an emerging school of thought on human rights: what is needed is not stronger civil societies so much as more capable and responsive states. Just as international institutions must somehow take into account the environmental perspectives of 'the global South' treated in the preceding chapter, Fahn acknowledges that better government in Thailand must also accommodate the country's poor rural majority. Fahn makes clear in earlier chapters that these people suffer most from the environmental disasters that have accompanied Thailand's boom. He is somewhat less clear about the form that the political accommodation for which he calls might take.

*A land on fire* is a stimulating book, one of those rare titles on Southeast Asia that ought to reach readers whose thoughts do not ordinarily turn to the region. It will also serve teachers at many levels admirably in the classroom. One envies students whose first exposure to modern Thailand will come through the insights of James Fahn. As of this writing, however, Westview Press appears to have published only a hardcover edition of the book. Both for students and for other readers, a paperback edition is in order.

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*Early cultures of mainland Southeast Asia*

By CHARLES HIGHAM

Bangkok: River Books, 2002. Pp. xv, 375, Maps, Photographs, Bibliography, Index.

DOI: S0022463404260088

In the summation of his new book, representing a successor to a volume authored over a decade ago, the highly respected archaeologist Charles Higham expresses his delight that 'in virtually every period and major issue, earlier explanations have been set aside by the results of new excavations, and the incorporation of new and detailed scrutiny of older sources of information' (p. 351). This current work stands as an applauded heir to Higham's previous accomplishments, presenting a rich array of new archaeological finds that span from this region's earliest roots to the end of the Angkorean period in modern-day Cambodia.

A welcome inclusion provided in the introductory chapter is a brief history of the European inquiry into the archaeological past of mainland Southeast Asia, beginning with the late sixteenth-century Portuguese reports on the temples of Angkor, followed by a survey of the archaeological projects and scholarly efforts of the great pioneers of almost a century ago, when a majority of this region was known as colonial Indochina. It culminates with more recent collaborative archaeological missions involving newly

formed national entities established in the post-independence era. This review is rewarding, for it furthers an understanding of the attitudes that came to be associated with this subject, and introduces the scholarly foundation on which archaeologists of today interpret their newest discoveries and revise theories.

Higham's compilation is both ambitious and impressive, and this book is rich in its scope and detailing of information. He offers an excellent overview of the recent Hoabinhian finds in Northern Thailand (p. 53) and an admirable interpretation of the finds of Khok Phanom Di, a Thai site dated to the first half of the third millennium BCE (pp. 56–81). As he is one of the most senior and highly regarded professionals in his field, it is rewarding when he demonstrates his vast experience through an analysis of the material, such as in his discussion of the development of a pan-Southeast Asian agricultural phenomenon during the Neolithic Period (p. 111), and the connections among the Red, Mekong and Yangzi Rivers which associate South China's potentially pivotal role in the development of the Neolithic cultures of Southeast Asia (pp. 83–95).

In subsequent pages Higham incorporates Dougald O'Reilly's analysis of the Bronze Age site of Ban Kum Khao in Cambodia (pp. 144–6), the subject of the latter's doctoral dissertation ('A diachronic analysis of social organization in the Mun River Valley', University of Otago, 1999). He then traces the efflorescence of a rich and creative Iron Age tradition in mainland Southeast Asia which, as evidenced by the discovery of foreign imports among grave goods, was founded upon a high level of social and economic interaction among cultures. Higham concludes this section by underscoring the significance of the Iron Age as representative of a pinnacle to past developments while simultaneously serving as a foundation for subsequent traditions. One wishes that Higham might have the opportunity to offer more of his insightful analyses of archaeological finds and trends in future volumes.

As in the case of any survey volume, the author will be more at ease with the material in which he particularly excels. Higham's handling of archaeological material associated with the later epochs, specifically the era of city-states and the Angkorean period in Cambodia, reflects this phenomenon. Here the approach is sometimes disjunctive and disorganised, with a repetition of factual information and the stringing together of sentences in a somewhat illogical manner. The inclusion of several factual inaccuracies suggests that the author may have been led astray by his selection of sources for this information. At other times the historical data incorporated, obviously gleaned from other secondary sources, is irrelevant and bears little relationship to the archaeological material. Conversely, the lack of a strong chronological framework for his recounting of Angkorean royal history makes it difficult for readers to gain an appreciation of the evolution of the architectural forms and practices associated with its rulers.

While these weaknesses may suggest the author's discomfort with the material, they also bring to the forefront a significant issue: the differing approaches to the study of prehistoric and historical archaeology. In the former, the material itself may be the only means by which one can recreate the characteristics of a lost culture. In the latter, a wealth of disciplines may be brought into play in order to interpret the archaeological material. Most important among these are the direct historical and literary sources that provide descriptions of ritual practices, philosophical systems and historical events. These bring artefacts back to life and recreate their contexts. And when Higham brings his scientific and archaeological talents to the service of historical archaeology, such as in

his unravelling of the mythic significance of the irrigation systems and *baray* (reservoirs) to Khmer society, he achieves his greatest successes.

In all, this volume accomplishes its most important mission, for this presentation of new archaeological material by a leading scholar makes readers eager to delve deeper into the subject and read further on particular sites. This is also encouraged by the ample bibliography provided by the author at the end of this publication.

CECELIA LEVIN

*Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*

*Conflict and confrontation in South East Asia, 1961–1965: Britain, the United States, Indonesia and the creation of Malaysia*

By MATTHEW JONES

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Pp. xxi, 325. Bibliography, Index.

DOI: S0022463404270084

After 1945 the new nations in Asia, the Middle East and Africa were increasingly drawn into security agreements and alliance structures centred on the United States of America or countervailing alliance arrangements that linked them to the Soviet Union or, after 1949, to the People's Republic of China (PRC). In the case of the transition from the colony of British Malaya to the independent nation-state of Malaysia between 1945 and 1965, the Cold War provided the overall backdrop for a process of decolonisation that was shaped by the interaction between the Malay leadership, its local allies and opponents, the Colonial Office and the Foreign Office in London, the various branches of the US government in Washington and the government of the charismatic Indonesian nationalist Sukarno in Jakarta.

After 1961, in the context of the growing crisis of Sukarno's 'Guided Democracy' and the escalating US involvement in South Vietnam, the territorial conflict (known as *Konfrontasi*) pitted the Indonesian government against the Malayan and British governments over the inclusion of Sabah and Sarawak (and briefly Brunei) in the planned postcolonial polity of Malaysia (which was also expected to include Singapore). *Konfrontasi* came to an end in 1965–6 with the ouster of Sukarno by Suharto and the Indonesian military, at the same time as the war in Vietnam emerged as the undisputed focus of international politics in the region.

It is the complex international politics behind the creation of Malaysia (which eventually included Sarawak and Sabah, but not Singapore and Brunei) by 1965 that is the subject of Mathew Jones's detailed monograph. Jones, a Lecturer in International History at Royal Holloway College (University of London), has made impressive use of British and US archival material and other unpublished and published primary documents (combined with secondary sources) to produce a thorough history of the diplomatic complexities of the 'special relationship' between the US (a rising world power) and Britain (a declining world power) in a key period of the Cold War in Southeast Asia.

He makes clear at the outset that 'one of the chief sources of tension in Anglo-American relations during the 1960s was Washington's pressure on Britain to maintain a world-power role when British political leaders were finally coming to appreciate the

urgent need to shed an imperial past and release themselves from their formal commitments, particularly in the area east of Suez' (p. xiv). By 1963, as the conflict in Vietnam deepened, the skirmishes in Borneo between Indonesian soldiers, or guerrillas supported by Jakarta, and the British military combined with passionate nationalist speeches by Sukarno – one British Foreign Office official is reported to have said that Sukarno was to London what Fidel Castro was to Washington (p. 173) – ensured that Washington devoted increasing attention to the politics surrounding the emergence of Malaysia. By the final year of the Kennedy administration, Washington's commitment to the domino theory and its concern about Sukarno's relationship with both the *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (Communist Party of Indonesia - PKI) and the PRC led some US officials, such as Robert Komer (a senior staff member on the National Security Council), to warn that the struggle between Indonesia and Malaysia 'could easily become more critical to our interests than [the] Vietnam war' (quoted on pp. 205–6). Washington and London's Cold War calculus was also linked to a concern about the status of existing oil contracts and the longer-term interests of both American and British oil companies in Indonesia. All this fed the growing US perception that the establishment of Malaysia was contributing to instability rather than stability in the region (p. 209).

Throughout the Kennedy era the US continued to pressure London to try and reach a negotiated rather than a military solution with Sukarno. But, a turning point was reached in early 1964, by which time 'a new degree of harmony had spread over Anglo-American attitudes to confrontation'. The basis of this shift, Jones argues, is to be found in 'the interaction between the evolving Vietnam policies of the United States and the changes in personnel and attitudes that accompanied Lyndon Johnson's arrival in the White House' (p. 232). The Johnson administration became increasingly convinced of the need to increase the US commitment to South Vietnam and take 'direct action' against North Vietnam to both boost morale in, and interdict the supply lines to, the South (p. 235). Meanwhile, Washington's attitude towards Jakarta hardened at the same time as Sukarno's public utterances took on an increasingly critical tone towards the US (pp. 237–8). Jones observes that 'as the stakes of the Vietnam War were raised, Washington considered it all the more important' for Britain to continue to have a 'presence' in the region and for Indonesia to 'remain free of Communist control'. More specifically, the 'point at which American convictions that the British should remain to bolster Western power in the region intersected with London's increasing reluctance to stay, in view of the costs being incurred, was reached in the summer of 1965 when the whole basis of Malaysia was shaken by the abrupt departure of Singapore from the Federation'. Meanwhile, between the middle and the end of 1965 the number of US military personnel in South Vietnam rose from 54,000 to 175,000 (p. 269).

While the emergence of Singapore as a separate and independent nation-state and the dramatic increase in US ground troops in South Vietnam were coincidental, the escalation of the US military presence in the region, notes Jones, has been viewed by some observers as 'partly designed to bolster the anti-Communist forces' in the Indonesian military and government who were opposed to the direction of Sukarno's foreign policy. Jones finds no basis for such a connection, but he does argue that 'in a wider and overall sense, since early 1964 the war in Vietnam helped to impel the United States into a closer alignment with Britain and Malaysia in their conflict with Indonesia' (pp. 279–80). Furthermore, while the US shift was driven by a desire that Britain 'maintain a global

role' and more particularly 'despatch some recognizable military contribution to Vietnam', London replied that its 'resources were already full stretched' in Malaysia. By way of conclusion, Jones observes that although Britain's focus on the Indonesia–Malaysia struggle 'created immediate dilemmas and problems', the diplomatic and military exigencies that attended the creation of Malaysia 'may also have saved Britain from a far more costly exercise in containment in the jungles of South East Asia' (p. 304).

This study is an illuminating diplomatic history of the Cold War in Southeast Asia in the early 1960s, particularly the relationship between Washington and London in this period. My only criticism is related more to what I see as the shortcomings of traditional diplomatic history as a whole rather than this book in particular. It is, of course, easy to criticise what a book does not do and harder to engage critically with what it does. Nevertheless, I will conclude by noting that what it does is provide an empirically rich discussion that sheds new light on a crucial period in the Cold War in Southeast Asia. What it doesn't do is link the events of this period to wider conceptual or historiographical questions. Readers looking for the former will be rewarded, while readers looking for the latter will be disappointed.

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*Southeast Asia: A testament*

By GEORGE MCT. KAHIN

London: Routledge/Curzon, 2003. Pp. xxii, 350. Maps, Photographs, Notes, Index.

DOI: S0022463404280080

Perhaps because there are so many ways in which they can turn out badly – dull, self-aggrandising, treacly, vapid, vituperative – academic memoirs form neither a large nor a particularly popular genre, and they are frequently overlooked. This one, however, is a treasure well worth having on the shelf for a number of reasons. It deftly blends personal memory with scholarly examination of several important episodes and ideas in postwar Southeast Asian political history, and at the same time manages to remind us in an entirely unobtrusive way of the kind of high standards of social and political engagement that are seldom reached or even attempted these days.

George McTurnan Kahin (1918–2000) was one of a small group of pioneers in Southeast Asian studies in the United States, one of the prime forces behind Cornell University's premier Southeast Asia Program, and founder and director (from 1954 to 1988) of its renowned Modern Indonesia Project. He is best known for his classic works on the Indonesian Revolution (*Nationalism and revolution in Indonesia* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1952]) and on America's involvement in Vietnam (*The United States in Vietnam*, co-authored with John Lewis [New York: Dial, 1967] and *Intervention: How America became involved in Vietnam* [New York: Knopf, 1986]), but every bit as important as his publications was his role as an academic activist, which was rare in its measured and realistic but deeply passionate nature. As Walter LaFeber notes in his thoughtful foreword, Kahin wanted to 'speak knowledge to power', and insisted on doing so in a level-headed, peaceful manner that respected an honest search for facts and,



however elusive and many-sided, the truth. (In the late 1960s and early 1970s he was courageously outspoken against poorly informed campus radicals' threats of violence.) He was particularly contemptuous of deception and duplicity; the obligation he felt to expose them courses through nearly all of his work and is if anything stronger in these final essays. (His withering treatments of Merle Cochran and the US role in Dutch–Indonesian negotiations, and Henry Cabot Lodge and the US role in suppressing the Struggle Movement in Hue are among the most striking examples.)

The 16 essays presented here cover events from the late 1940s to the early 1970s. All but one were written by Kahin over a four- or five-year period before his death; he did not have time to write the remaining essay, on 'The possibilities for peace, 1971', which he asked his wife Audrey to complete from notes they both took at the time. Half the essays concern Indonesia, and the remaining eight are split between Vietnam and Cambodia. Kahin's main purpose in writing, he says, is that he concluded that the generally accepted historical record was frequently at odds with what he himself had experienced, and '[a]ll too much of significance . . . has been consciously or unconsciously swept under the rug, or tailored to fit with perdurable and broadly accepted myths as to the past roles of the American government' (p. 1). He uses what must have been voluminous and meticulously recorded notes and diary entries to resurrect his personal encounters with a great many of the significant figures of the day, at crucial junctures in their – and their nations' – careers, and the conclusions he drew from these experiences. It is fascinating stuff, some of which – certain chapters on Vietnam and Cambodia, and sections on Kahin's struggles in the McCarthy era – makes especially arresting reading in light of current events and issues. Kahin's understanding of his own worth and the worth of his work was neither inflated nor undervalued, a balance reflected in his fine sense of the absurd (as when he finds himself considered 'the top CIA agent in Southeast Asia' [p. 108]) and a remarkable ability to smile at himself and his predicaments even, for example, when seriously ill or in genuine danger. Some portions of this memoir are brilliantly, laugh-out-loud funny, a quality which somehow in Kahin's hands enhances rather than lightens the impact of the whole.

It is surely no sacrilege to suggest that not everyone will agree with Kahin's 'take' on the controversial and incompletely known personalities, affairs, and issues he covers here. Some will see his appreciation for nationalism – and several nationalist leaders – as too uncritical, or find his interest in subversion and conspiracy too insistent and too exclusively focused on American misdeeds or stupidities. Others may feel that in some instances he privileges interviews or particular sources and their viewpoints too highly. There are points on which more complete and accurate information is available elsewhere, such as Sukarno's 'political testament'. And inevitably a few readers will wonder yet again whether it is a professor's job to criticise government policy in the classroom (p. 182). Kahin would not have shrunk before such commentary and was perfectly capable of defending his positions if necessary. He was also open to correction and nuancing when it was convincing and truthful. In short, he sought to both speak and listen to reason, and to behave accordingly, goals we could all do to remind ourselves of more than just occasionally.

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## Indonesia

*Kebudayaan dan pelestarian alam: Penelitian interdisipliner di pedalaman Kalimantan*

Edited by CRISTINA EGHENTER and BERNARD SELLATO

Jakarta: WWF Indonesia, 1999. Pp. 573. Maps, Plates, Tables, Notes, Bibliography.

DOI: S0022463404290087

Anthropologists have long argued that paying attention to the intimate connection between culture and natural resource conservation is necessary for the latter to succeed, and professional conservationists have come around to the idea, hence the proliferation of 'community-based' conservation projects throughout the world. *Kebudayaan dan pelestarian alam* is a detailed and forceful statement in this regard, and the editors are to be commended for their great efforts in producing such a volume in Indonesian, which makes the research findings accessible to the people most directly affected. A much-abridged (only 297 pages) English version also has just come out: *Social science research and conservation management in the interior of Borneo: Unraveling past and present interactions of people and forests*, ed. Christina Eghenter, Bernard Sellato and G. Simon Devung (Jakarta and Bogor: CIFOR, WWF Indonesia, UNESCO, and Ford Foundation, 2003).

An outgrowth of the Kayan Mentarang Conservation Project of the Worldwide Fund for Nature, focused on the Kayan Mentarang National Park in the interior of East Kalimantan, the Ford Foundation-funded Culture and Conservation Research Program ran from 1991 to 1997. For its three phases, it pulled together large multidisciplinary teams whose membership consisted of local indigenous, other Indonesian and numerous foreign researchers. They included anthropologists, lawyers, linguists, ethnomusicologists and agroforesters. From the outset, the project aimed to build a solid, holistic base of social, economic and cultural knowledge for more effective community-based management of the national park and its immediate vicinity. In addition to over 40 research reports and two films, the project has produced this edited volume.

The editors' introduction includes background on topics such as the project aims, methodologies, problems in the field and lessons learned. In addition, they provide a separate introduction to Kayan Mentarang itself, covering ecology, geography, population, cultural history and ethnic make-up (mainly centred on various subdivisions of the Kenyah). Following this are 25 chapters divided into four sections. Section I covers forest resource management and traditional ecological knowledge, with specific chapters on the usual set of topics – subsistence strategies, hunting techniques, knowledge of rice varieties, swidden farm practices, fallow management and non-timber product collection and use (with special focus on *rotan* and *gaharu*).

The second section concerns traditional institutions and changing resource tenure systems. The chapters focus on traditional land rights, forest resource regulatory systems, migration history and its importance for changes in land and forest resource rights, the impact of socio-economic change on farming and the status of widows and unmarried women. The latter chapter by Katja Meyer may be something of surprise, but its inclusion here does make sense given the importance of women's labour in most Bornean societies and the highly vulnerable economic position in which widows and spinsters find themselves.

Section III centres on area history and its implications for development, with historical perspectives on migration, social organisation and religion. Given the extreme paucity of pre-historical research in Kalimantan, perhaps the most interesting chapters are the two on archaeology and ethno-archaeology by Karina Arifin and Bernard Sellato. They deal with findings of megalithic burial monuments, stone tools, and local and foreign ceramics, as well as secondary burial practices. The final chapter on linguistic variation by Antonio Soriente seems the 'odd man out' in this section, as it does not explicitly address history. But with the earlier chapters on migration, its descriptions of Kenyah isolects do provide some fit.

The final section concerns mainly oral traditions and material culture and how these relate to the critically important subject of disseminating research findings to the source communities, with a potential outcome being the strengthening of self-esteem and traditional rights. Here, Yus Ngabut discusses oral traditions, their relevance for people today (e.g., in terms of promoting social cooperation and group identity) and their connection to nature (such as in relations between humans and animals). Other chapters provide descriptions of ethnomusicology and traditional but disappearing pottery techniques. Finally, museologist Christina Kreps relates her research into community-level discussions and planning for the development of a Kayan Mentarang Peoples' Museum.

Whether or not the Culture and Conservation project has any long-term effect on how the national park is managed remains to be seen, particularly given the instability of the Indonesian economic and political landscape. This collection, however, makes a strong case for making the effort to integrate a wide range of social science and humanities concerns with conservation efforts. It would indeed be futile not to even try. At the very least, the contributors have provided a valuable record on which to base future research as the conservation status of the park inevitably changes over time.

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## Laos

*Breaking new ground in Lao history. Essays on the seventh to twentieth centuries*

Edited by MAYOURY NGAOSRIVATHANA and KENNON BREAZEALE.

Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002. Pp. xv, 383. Maps, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

DOI: S0022463404300081

This is a collection of ten essays, chronologically ordered (except for the first chapter), which covers an impressive period of time (over 1,400 years) and, more significantly, examines epochs or events in Lao history that have been little studied, or at least explores them from a new angle. The variable definition of the object of study – 'Laos' – is a recurrent theme throughout the volume. In many of the different chapters, the authors attempt to determine the territoriality of 'Laos' with different approaches. The choice of the title unarguably owes as well to the richness of the research materials: Chinese records; Lao-language chronicles; pre-nineteenth-century European publications in English, Italian, Dutch, French, Latin and Portuguese; new Vietnamese archives; and unpublished records of European archival materials.

Chapters 1 and 3 propose two ways of identifying the thread of continuity in the writing of Lao history. Martin Stuart-Fox, in a thoughtful opening essay (a slightly edited version of his article, 'On the writing of Lao history: Continuities and discontinuities', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 24, 1 [1993]: 106–21), discusses two alternatives: focusing on the evolution of the Lao political structures or stressing ethnic continuity, i.e. the geographical areas inhabited by Lao-speaking lowland people. Stuart-Fox suggests an approach that in fact combines both perspectives. The concept of *muang*, he argues, while epitomising in the past the fragmentation of the Lao political structures, has nevertheless perpetuated a 'shared political culture' between the different ethnic groups (including the ethnic Lao) within a locally based and hierarchical organised socio-political entity (p. 21). Souneth Photisane, in Chapter 3, presents a brief overview of the sixteen versions of the chronicle of Luang Prabang and argues that all three of the periods described in the chronicle (from Lao prehistory to King Fa Ngum's birth in 1316 and onwards) should be considered as relevant to historical research. Hence for him, 'only one [polity] – the kingdom of Luang Prabang – had any pretensions to a continuous history extending back to the very origins of the Lao people' (p. 73).

Chapters 4 and 5 critically present early European publications of pre-colonial Lao-speaking territories. Beside the two most-quoted eye-witness descriptions of the Lao prior to the nineteenth century (one by an Italian priest, Giovanni Filippo de Marini [1663] and the other by a Dutch merchant, Geebaerd van Wusthof [1669]), Mayoury and Pheuiphanh Ngaosrivathana provide a comprehensive survey of the records of Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, Dutch and French exploration inside the interior lands of mainland Southeast Asia. Meg O'Donovan, in the following essay, gives an interesting introduction and discussion of the chapter on the Lao kingdoms published in the encyclopaedic *The modern part of an universal history* in England in 1759. A reprint of that chapter is reproduced as well (Chapter 6). Both essays by the Ngaosrivathanas and O'Donovan tend to demonstrate that extensive trade between the Lao kingdoms and their neighbours was already developed prior to the arrival of Western merchants and explorers. Nonetheless, these European accounts also show that the physical representation of 'Laos' remained a mystery up until the French colonisation of Indochina.

In the final chapter, Kennon Breazeale expressly details the complex legal process of defining the modern boundaries of Laos in relation to its five neighbouring countries during the early period of French colonial rule (1895–1907). His illuminating deconstruction of the delimitation of modern Laos is a clear departure from the pre-modern indigenous conception of territory (where fixed boundaries were an unknown notion and the extent of a kingdom's frontiers was depending first and foremost on the ruler's prowess). In short, it implies that the geography of contemporary Laos is a modern creation.

Chapters 2, 7, 8 and 9 look at more specific periods or events. In Chapter 2, Tatsuo Hoshino attempts to determine the political entities in the interior of mainland Southeast Asia from the seventh to the ninth centuries, based on a careful interpretation of Chinese records of the Tang period (CE 608–907) and in the light of recent archaeological findings, combined with linguistic analysis and first-hand field data from the countryside in the central Mekong basin. Chapters 7 and 8 look at the Lao–Vietnamese political and economic relations along the Cordillera, focusing particularly on the

late 1700s during the Tây Sơn movement in Vietnam (1771–1802). Tran Van Quy (Chapter 7), based on his interpretation of unique Vietnamese archives, stresses the Lao-Vietnamese collaboration during those troubled times, while Breazeale (Chapter 8), by contrast, convincingly shows that the latter was a circumstantial and opportunistic alliance against a then common enemy, Siam. Finally, Bernard Gay, in Chapter 9, gives a brief introduction to the movements of rebellion led by ethnic minority leaders in southern Laos against the French colonial rule from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. He then discusses the divergent interpretations in contemporary Lao publications of these events and the ideologies behind them.

This volume is arguably a pioneering work by its impressive amount of sources and original approach to the study of Lao history. Yet, it does not fully live up to its ambitions. Conceptual anachronisms are used in Chapters 3, 4 and 7, which apply modern concepts of nationhood and ethnicity onto historical periods when these notions were irrelevant. On the other hand, Breazeale's approach (Chapter 10) is to a certain extent inspired by Thongchai Winichakul's seminal argument on the modern and compelling relation between territoriality and nationhood. In that sense, albeit never explicitly, Breazeale objects to Stuart-Fox's and Souneth's *muang*-centred thesis in what should constitute the primary source of continuity in the writing of the Lao history. Breazeale does not go as far, though, and his focus on the strictly legal dimension of the delimitation of modern Laos fails to show how these constructed boundaries were enforced (or not) in the minds of Lao people. In addition, while some chapters may suggest avenues for further studies in Lao history (Chapters 2, 4, 7, 8 and 10), it is somehow more difficult to pinpoint the research novelty in others (Chapters 3 and 9). Finally, some essays (Chapters 2 and 4) appear to be overwhelmed by the volume of their materials, which significantly hinders the flow of their arguments and make the reading all the more arduous. Despite these weaknesses, one should nevertheless welcome the publication of *Breaking new ground in Lao history* as a contribution to the knowledge of such a still relatively underdeveloped area of study as pre-colonial and colonial Lao history.

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Thailand

*Bangkok: Place, practices and representation*

By MARC ASKEW.

London: Routledge, 2002. Pp. xvii, 358. Tables, Maps, Plates, Bibliography, Index.

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This book is an important milestone in the study of Bangkok. Any study dealing with an object as complex as a metropolis, and perhaps particularly with a global city such as Bangkok, has to be selective. Marc Askew focuses on the people that make up Bangkok as individuals, groups, neighbourhoods and households and their practices. The aim is to 'investigate people's practices in relation to urbanism (the way people live in and assign meaning to urban life) and the way it relates to the Thai socio-cultural

system' (p. 7). Practices and space are directly connected. Accordingly, understanding Bangkok from the practices of the people implies an ethnographic, locality focused approach in which, however, localities are taken not as isolated units, but as mediating broader structural forces. 'Place – communities', later referred to as '*yan*', are for Askew the sites and prism allowing an interpretation of the production of spaces and places that together constitute Bangkok.

The first part of the book deals with the history of Bangkok from its founding to the present, identifying major aspects of urban dynamics. Askew notes that Bangkok (or *Krung Thep*) consisted not only of the royal city, but also of the trading and crafts areas, the villages and the districts (*yan*) connected by the canals and the river. To reduce labour shortages, in-migration was sponsored and people resettled. They used to reside in their respective neighbourhoods and *yan*, often engaged in particular trades and crafts. From the perspective of the people, Bangkok was a collectivity of these *yan*, with which people identified themselves and were identified. The *yan* represent informality and community, contrasting with the monuments, hierarchies and formalities of the state and its bureaucracy. Although taking different forms, this pattern has remained up to the present, even though Bangkok has developed towards a 'global city' and a 'capital of everything'. The reason is that planning and implementation do not follow the same logic. 'In Bangkok the rhetoric of rational problem-solving dominated the discourse of town and regional planners . . . (b)ut on the ground, intervention in the urban process was haphazard and uncoordinated' (p. 85). Consequently, much of the development of Bangkok results from how wider dynamics are coped with and made use of in practices within 'place-communities'.

The second part of the book takes off with a detailed description and analysis of the history of Banglamphu, an inner city district of Bangkok. In fact, Banglamphu (*bang* indicating village) already existed prior to the establishment of Krung Thep as a multi-ethnic settlement of traders, soldiers, etc. Today the coexistence of different groups and institutions is becoming ever more precarious due to pressures on land and inner-city functional demands. Klong Toei is taken as an example of a large slum area within Bangkok. Askew looks at the slum as a multilayered economic, social and spatial formation, thereby avoiding common images of slums as cooperative collectives fighting for tenure rights or closely integrated communities of the poor. Klong Toei is a very large slum close to the harbour, and its different parts have quite distinct histories of local leadership, social integration as well as economic differentiation and struggle for tenure rights. One factor in this history is the local leaders who can either be a force of integration (*Mae Prateep*, a social activist) or fragmentation.

However, Askew overestimates the relevance of leaders. I agree with his argument that a slum is neither a closely knit community nor a well-organised collective, but in each locality an organisational core exists which can be an NGO, a slum committee, criminal or patron – client network, etc. that plays a crucial role in defining 'place – communities'. From this perspective, leadership depends on the ability to dominate this organised core. This organisation can disappear or be challenged by another organised core or the local public, which results in modifications of leadership. Accordingly, it is not the leader as such who is relevant, but rather the existing organisations. Looking at the different parts (*muban*) of Klong Toei, the rise and fall of 'organised cores' can well be described.



Leaving the inner-city *yan* and localities, Askew discusses the suburbs and middle-class housing estates – with Nonthaburi as a case study for the urban fringe – and finally the condominiums popular since the mid-1980s. Although the examples differ widely, Askew shows that a sense of place is widespread, as well as a mix of economic, social and cultural processes. From this mix emerge distinct understandings and meanings assigned to a space, which are often controversial and even contradictory. This becomes most clear when looking at urban construction and conservation (Chapter 10). The images and agendas of the planners contrast with the images of those living in the areas, what Askew describes succinctly as ‘Bangkok vs. Krung Thep’ or a popular urbanism versus seemingly rational planning and conservation. The planners tend to forget that ‘place – communities’ frequently conserve the history of the city as well, and that quite often conservation projects aim to realise an imagined history void of common people.

In the introduction, Askew briefly refer to Geertz’s ‘thick description’. In fact, his book can be taken as a ‘thick description’ of Bangkok, but he goes beyond this by taking into account those structures and processes that affect the histories of localities. In this regard, except in the first part, wider processes and structures of Bangkok are only looked at from local perspectives. But is Bangkok really basically a mosaic of *yan*? One chapter is missing which could have provided an idea of what keeps the place – communities as well as Bangkok – together, namely, a chapter on public space and public life in the capital. Following Askew’s own data on conflicts and local histories, the public sphere in Bangkok, as well as within the respective places plays a crucial role for the creation of ‘place – communality’ as well as for mediating conflicts within the city.

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## Vietnam

*Diem’s final failure: Prelude to America’s war in Vietnam*

By PHILIP CATTON

Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002. Pp. x, 298. Map, Notes, Bibliography, Index. DOI: S0022463404320084

In this book Philip Catton examines American–South Vietnamese relations in the context of land reform policies instituted during the reign of Ngô Đình Diệm. From 1954 until 1963, the United States and Ngô Đình Diệm worked to create a non-communist nation in South Vietnam. Differing views on how best to achieve this goal and South Vietnam’s failure to stem the communist insurgency created tension in the US–Diệm relationship and eventually led to Diệm’s assassination. The coup against Diệm in November 1963, in turn, signalled the failure of a ‘specifically Vietnamese program of nation-building’ and ‘paved the way for the Americanization of the conflict’ in Vietnam (p. 4).

One of the great strengths of Catton’s study is that it provides insight into the leadership of Ngô Đình Diệm. Critics have traditionally faulted Diệm for his profound conservatism and traditionalism, dismissing him as a backward mandarin or the ‘last

Confucian'. Catton convincingly argues, however, that these simplistic portrayals obscure the complexity of Diệm's vision for South Vietnam. While Diệm had many conservative tendencies, he was also 'forward-looking, concerned with change, and determined to strengthen the country' (p. 36). Catton characterises Diệm and his brother Ngô Đình Nhu as 'conservative modernizers' who used 'Western ideas in order to revitalize certain aspects of Asian culture' (p. 40).

Diệm was strongly influenced by the philosophy of Personalism, a doctrine promoted by French Catholics in the 1930s. Personalism, which advocated a balance between the rights of the individual and responsibility to the community, provided a 'third way' between the excesses of liberal capitalism and communism. In the 1950s and 1960s, Diệm initiated a number of rural programmes that reflected these Personalist ideas. Encouraging groups of peasants to work together to create new communities would serve both individual peasants and the common good; peasants would develop civic virtue while the nation developed economically, politically and militarily. Diệm and Nhu expected these programmes to attack the related enemies of communism, underdevelopment, and disunity and, eventually, reunify the country.

Catton traces the origin and progress of several South Vietnamese rural reforms. From 1955 to 1959, Diệm initiated three different projects: land reform, the Land Development programme and the Agrovillage programme. Although Catton shows some differences in these programmes, they followed a similar pattern. Diệm hoped that redistributing land and resettling peasants would undermine support for the communist insurgency while increasing agricultural output in South Vietnam. Poor planning, corruption, unwillingness to push for more radical reforms, peasant backlash against conscripted labour, and unrealistic goals conspired to mitigate any positive results from these programmes.

The failure of these early efforts led Diệm to establish the Strategic Hamlet programme in 1961. In many ways, Strategic Hamlets resembled Diệm's earlier rural reforms. They were an attempt to solve a variety of political, social, military and economic problems in South Vietnam. And as in the earlier attempts, corruption, poor planning, communist resistance and peasant backlash doomed the programme to failure.

The failure of the Strategic Hamlet programme, Catton argues, 'constituted one of the most dramatic and decisive turning points in the Vietnam conflict' (p. 186). From 1961 to 1963, Catton explains, 'Saigon and Washington held conflicting conceptions of the program even as they collaborated on its implementation' (p. 141). As long as the programme showed signs of success, the United States and South Vietnam could work past their philosophical differences. In 1963, however, communist gains in the countryside shed doubt on the efficacy of the Hamlet programme while the Buddhist crisis shattered American confidence in the Ngôs. The subsequent coup against Diệm and Nhu in November 'brought to an end a nine-year effort to promote a noncommunist, and specifically Vietnamese, solution to the problem of nation building'. At the same time, the coup 'presaged the failure of the U.S. policy of trying to save South Vietnam by providing advice and support to an indigenous client, rather than by the force of American arms' (p. 212).

*Diem's final failure* represents an important step forward for historians of Vietnamese–American relations. The overwhelming majority of Western scholarship on this topic fails to address effectively the ideologies of Vietnamese officials, their policy

goals or their decision-making process. Through access to Vietnamese sources, especially materials recently made available at the National Archives #2 in Ho Chi Minh City, Catton has addressed this deficiency in the study of land reform programmes during the Ngô Đình Diệm regime. Other historians should follow his lead.

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