

Book Reviews

Southeast Asia

Contesting Malayness: Malay identity across boundaries.

Edited by TIMOTHY P. BARNARD

Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004. Pp. xiii, 318. Maps, Notes, Index.

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The question of what exactly is referred to by the words ‘Melayu’, ‘Malay’ and ‘Maleis’, is a complicated and important one that this timely collection of essays addresses in a useful and constructive fashion. The articles in the book come out of a ‘series of discussions’ at Leiden University in April 1998. Its diversity of viewpoints, presented in 12 chapters and a short preface by a wide variety of qualified scholars, demonstrates clearly that no single approach or discipline can claim to be paramount in providing insight and understanding of such a topic. Indeed, the editor is to be commended for his broadness of view, and no doubt in the future we will look back on this volume as an example of a wise way to approach a difficult subject. Historical, literary, linguistic and anthropological treatments, both theoretical and empirical, are to be found here, along with the less conventional but no less interesting inclusion of a piece (translated into English) in poetic form by a contemporary indigenous Malay voice.

The opening chapters by Anthony Reid, Adrian Vickers and Leonard Andaya provide a concise introduction to the discussion concerning the disparate origins and understandings of ‘Malay’ and ‘Malayness’. They all discuss the different forms of knowledge through time past to the present that have defined ‘Malay’ and ‘Malayness’. By guiding us through time to uncover the web of changing meanings in the term(s) – from being a toponymic term, to one concerned with royal lineage and to a notion of modern ideology, nationality and race – all three authors have provided a vivid narrative of events and acute insights to show the forces of imagination that invent and construct Malay identity. Vickers raises the challenge that ‘it is preferable to use the notion of a [*pasisir* (coastal)] scale of forms rather than talking about Southeast Asian versions of “civilization” or “culture” to analyze what have been constitutive of “Malay” in terms of language, literature and space’ (p. 26). A more detailed discussion of what is meant by ‘the *pasisir* scale of forms’ would definitely have enhanced the understanding of readers and allowed them to participate more fully in this discussion.

Journeying beyond the Melaka Straits to show how the meaning of ‘Malay’ also fluctuated, the chapter on Malay traders in the port of Makassar in the eighteenth century by Heather Sutherland introduces yet another invaluable dimension to the debate on Malay identity. As she convincingly argues, ‘ethnicity was a very real force in Makassar, but it was adjustable. . . . Malayness resonated with the power of a glorious past, shared by cultural kin throughout the region. But it was also contingent, driven by personal strategies and constraining contexts’ (p. 104).

Timothy Barnard, in discussing how *hikayat* traditions were used and what specific traits were presented in them as model Malay characteristics during the eighteenth century, shows how commissioned texts directly supported a Malay identity based on Melaka and its rulers. Specifically, *Hikayat Siak* was read, and listened to, in a process that expressed Malay identity and encouraged behaviour that conformed to its ideals. Interestingly, as Jan van der Putten points out, Malay identity was manipulated for political ends in the 1850s by the Bugis writer of Malay treatises, Raja Ali Haji, 'by emphasizing the Islamic quality of kingship he reduced the "Malayness" associated with it' (p. 122). It would seem that this point of view, of relatively recent origin, has become widely and strongly held today.

Taking us to Malaysia where 'Malays' make up the major population group, Shamsul A.B. and Virginia Matheson Hooker examine several fundamental issues relating to identity formation in relation to modern Malaysian state and society. Issues such as the role of colonial and post-colonial knowledge, as well as the influence of Islam in the development of Malay politics and understandings of Malay identity, are discussed to highlight the controversies and debates that surround thinking about 'Malayness' in the colonial and contemporary eras.

James Collins, in proposing Borneo as the place of origin of the Malay language family, makes the useful point that too little scholarly attention is given to that island. His thought-provoking article, based on empirical investigation, elucidates a multiplicity of concepts and usage behind the term 'Malay' with respect to religion, languages and dialects, identity and relatedness among several villages in West Kalimantan.

Will Derks' article, though obscured by an odd title (combining terminology from literature and the biological sciences) demands consideration of the oral in Indonesian literature and offers a valuable and much-needed challenge to the Malay literary canon. Such a challenge should also be heard by scholars of the literatures of other parts of Southeast Asia as well. The value of this literature is underlined by Tenas Effendy's 'An Epic Poem of the Malay's Fate' (presented in an English translation of the original Malay), which operates on two levels simultaneously: as an example of a *syair* epic poem expressing aspects of Malay identity, and as a personal-analytical comment on that identity.

The final chapter, by Anthony Milner, functions as an afterword to the other articles, and shows that there remains significant disagreement as to the meaning of 'Malay' and 'Melayu'. This is not surprising, since they can and clearly do mean many things at once, depending on who is using them and in what context. In asking the question of 'what relationship exists between language usage and ethnicity', he points out that currently extant Malay texts date mostly from the nineteenth century and were often edited or otherwise influenced by agents of British colonialism; for example, the so-called 'Malay Annals' were given this title by Raffles, changing the earlier name, 'Geneology of the Rajas'. However, of relevance here is the recent discovery of the oldest known Malay text, dating from the fifteenth century and currently being studied by Uli Kozok at the University of Hawaii.

The challenge of the topic is perhaps underlined by occasionally inconsistent or unsubstantiated discussion, for example, the circular use of the word 'Malay' in attempts to define it, the incomplete distinction between the terms 'Malay' and 'Malaysian' and the frequent use of the passive voice, as in 'is considered to be one of the champions of

Malay customs' [by whom?] (p. 122) and 'were never considered to be part of the Malay lands' [by whom?] (p. 72). More maps would have been helpful, for example accompanying Collins' discussion; likewise, a List of Contributors, rather than burying information about them in the endnotes, would also have been a plus.

Nonetheless, the many strengths of the book far outshine any weaknesses, and include not only the questions about Malayness that it raises, but also other questions it implies, for example, what lies behind related words such as 'Java', 'Yawi', and 'Sumatra'. Most compelling of all, as Milner notes, is that the book represents 'a new departure in Southeast Asian studies', a project in the history of Malay ethnicity. Here one may ask whether, rather than referring to any one particular ethno-linguistic identity, Malayness is more a continuum of language(s) and custom(s) over time and space (in which case the term 'the Malay language' becomes a problematic one). Certainly a broad horizon for future research is opened up by this very worthwhile collection of essays.

MARTIN PLATT AND CYNTHIA CHOU

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Indonesia

Islam and state in Sumatra: A study of seventeenth-century Aceh.

By AMIRUL HADI

Leiden: Brill, 2004. Pp. xii, 273. Illustrations, Bibliography, Index.

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Aceh has long been a focus of interest in island Southeast Asia due to its status as a region in which Islam has played a dominant role in society. This work, written by a lecturer at the Institute of Islamic Studies in Banda Aceh and based on his doctoral dissertation at McGill University, focuses on how religion influenced the development of political and social institutions during the period of Aceh's greatest strength, the seventeenth century. The approach is interesting for Southeast Asianists since the author, Amirul Hadi, examines the material with a background of knowledge in Islamic history and civilization instead of Southeast Asian history.

The book contains seven chapters. The first chapter provides an outline to the origins of the seventeenth-century Acehnese sultanate. The next three chapters focus on the ruler's role in the state, the royal enclosure and religious ceremonies, and Islamic institutions (with a particular focus on '*ulama*, *adat* [customs] and *jihad*'). A final substantive chapter compares the above-mentioned topics in relation to their development in fifteenth-century Melaka and seventeenth-century Mataram. There are also short introductory and concluding chapters to the book.

While the subject matter under discussion is quite attractive, the book provides little new insight into Aceh and the role that Islam played in the state. Previous studies of the region have covered much of the same ground, and the author often ends up supporting the conclusions of authors such as Denys Lombard and Anthony Reid. In the end, the thesis (p. 247) that C. Snouck Hurgronje, as well as many other scholars, have underestimated the role of Islamic faith in not only Acehnese political life but that of larger Southeast Asia, does little to enhance our understanding of the issues involved. Such a

conclusion has been accepted for quite a while among most scholars of the region. While the author could have focused on how Islam transformed thought and life in Aceh, he does little to address the internal nature of belief, with his focus on the external and descriptive. The result is little or no analysis of Islamic ideas, in contrast to recent work by scholars such as Peter Riddell (*Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World: Transmission and responses* [London: Hurst, 2001]).

Another criticism of *Islam and the state in Sumatra* is its use of Southeast Asian sources which are very dated or simplistic. For example, the author focuses on important traditional manuscripts such as *Adat Aceh* and *Taj us-salatin*, but does not treat them within the context in which they were written. The information in these texts is simply taken at face value. Also, most of the secondary sources consulted are from the 1970s or early 1980s, resulting in the book not taking into consideration much of the research done on Southeast Asia since that time. Finally, the chapter on Melaka and Mataram relies on standard histories of the nation-states of Malaysia and Indonesia. While these texts are fine as general histories, more focused studies of the early states are easily available in monographs that provide greater analysis of the issues involved. The result is that the final chapter feels as if it is pasted on to justify the monograph to a larger audience beyond those interested in Aceh.

In the end, this is an interesting book that describes various Islamic institutions in Aceh in the seventeenth century, but is intended for an audience that is not familiar with Aceh or Southeast Asian history. It provides a background for the material, and may work well for a comparison with Islamic states beyond Southeast Asia, but contains little new insight for those familiar with the region and its dominant religion.

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The Gamelan Digul and the prison camp musician who built it: An Australian link with the Indonesian Revolution.

By MARGARET J. KARTOMI

Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2002. Pp. 123. Maps, Plates, Appendixes, Bibliography, Index, CD Recording. doi:10.1017/S0022463405280268

This book tells two intertwined stories: the biography of a Javanese *gamelan* musician, Pontjopangrawit, and the *gamelan* that he made – out of food cans, kitchen pans, and such – when he was a prisoner in the Boven Digul prison camp. There are many reasons why this book is worth reading. Despite the wealth of scholarly literature on Javanese *gamelan*, very little has been written about the lives of musicians, and Pontjopangrawit's eventful life makes a great and thought-provoking story: a respected musician at the Surakarta court in the first decades of the twentieth century, involved with various musical experiments at the court (such as composing music for Thai instruments donated to the Surakarta court by the King of Thailand [pp. 45–6]), he was also involved in politics, which led to his arrest, and six years in a prison camp in New Guinea (1927–32), and, as Margaret Kartomi argues, probably his death in custody in 1965. The story of the *gamelan* instruments that Pontjopangrawit made in the prison camp is no

less evocative. The *gamelan digul* was made of tins and pans, and its story foregrounds something more modest and less exotic but ultimately no less powerful than the musical splendour of Javanese court *gamelans*: music as a basic need. The later part of the story of *gamelan digul*, when it was moved to Australia and first used by the Indonesian ex-prisoners and later museumified, is no less intriguing.

These stories are told in a simple way that ‘lets them speak for themselves’. The attached CD, on which one can hear recordings of individual instruments of the *gamelan digul*, as well as Pontjopangrawit playing the *rebab*, adds another dimension to the book. However, the reader should expect neither great detail nor in-depth reflection, except in the two thoughtful forewords, one by ethnomusicologist Judith Becker and the other by the musician and scholar Rahayu Supanggah.

Becker writes that ‘the volume is haunted by silences’ (p. xiv), and this is true in more than one sense. This is a short text, and the stories contain fragmentary information on Pontjopangrawit and *gamelan digul* against the background of thin sketches of the setting (Javanese court, prison camp), the latter based on secondary sources. Still, what little is known about Pontjopangrawit and *gamelan digul* is enough to make the book interesting and ‘haunting’. It is difficult to tell if more research could ‘flesh out’ the scattered bones that are the stories (to continue the haunting image), or if it is indeed impossible to learn more due to the lack of sources.

In her foreword, Becker evokes other kinds of silences:

Unlike other Indonesian political prisoners who were writers such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer or Mohammad Sjahrir [*sic*], Pontjopangrawit wrote nothing – either before, during or after his exile. Thus we can only imagine his inner life while at Boven Digul: Why did he decide to build a *gamelan* in the first place? Was it, in his mind, an act of resistance or of accommodation to his Dutch jailors who wanted the camp to present a humane face to the world? What was the nature of the solace it provided? Escape? Nostalgia? Or more mundanely, something to pass the time? How are we, removed in time, ethos, and space from the events recalled in the book, to understand a court musician from one of the most refined courts in Central Java living in exile, surrounded by the inhospitable jungles of New Guinea, conducting shadow-puppet performances for demoralized, often sick, fellow Javanese?

These questions or silences articulated in Becker’s preface touch on what makes the stories interesting. Yet, it seems to me that the most fundamental of those questions – ‘Why did he decide to build a *gamelan* in the first place?’ – cannot be reduced to a label-like answer – resistance, accommodation, escape, nostalgia, passing time – even if we knew more than we do, such as whether the musician wrote about his experiences. The mere act of building the *gamelan* in the prison camp speaks volumes, and it is this simple irreducible action that for me makes *gamelan digul* genuinely haunting. The *gamelan* was built using, among other things, materials and tools that were provided to the prisoners so that they could build dwellings for themselves (p. 3). Clearly, for Pontjopangrawit, building the *gamelan* was no less important than building a shelter – it was almost a matter of survival. Comparable perhaps to the passionate revival of traditional arts in war-torn Cambodia, it is a statement about the need for things like *gamelan*, for their importance in some people’s lives – a statement that makes the spirit of *gamelan digul* hauntingly near, hauntingly understandable, hauntingly real.

There is another ‘silence’ that haunts the book: music. It is through music – building musical instruments and playing them – that Pontjopangrawit ‘spoke’. But this ‘silence’ is only the absence of words and explanations that would take power from the reality of the instruments, the power of music that defies explanation, the person living and asserting his humanity through music rather than words. Making musical instruments and playing music, in the case of a musician like Pontjopangrawit, says more than his words could. In a sense, we do not lack his writing; his statement is powerful and, strangely, utterly understandable.

I think Supanggah feels the same way:

Such work is born, not by the order of another person, but from artist’s strong desire to create from within. Cut off from resources of his former life, Pak Pontjo’s inner drive as a musician expressed itself first of all in Upper Digul in the creation of a gamelan ensemble – an amazing feat of ingenuity and craftsmanship considering the deprivations of his environment. (p. xvii)

The final part of the story of the *gamelan digul* – its conservation in a museum – makes a curious ending. Instead of concluding, the historical narrative changes into a museological description of the instruments and their conservation. Kartomi, also the ‘Gamelan digul project coordinator’ (p. 104), explains why it is best that the *gamelan* be in a museum, not repaired and not played. I do not dispute the wisdom of this decision, in which Kartomi was involved, but she could have looked at the museumification of *gamelan digul* as a final part of the story. There is thus an additional silence that is not heard in the book: the poignant contradiction of ‘conserving’ musical instruments in such a way that they cannot be played – ‘stabilised and properly managed as an historical item, but not restored to playing order’ (p. 96). With the musical instruments of *gamelan digul* finally silent forever, the last sentence of the book reads like a happy end: ‘The gamelan is now in a fit state to embark on a travelling exhibition’ (p. 97).

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The politics of economic liberalisation in Indonesia: State, market and power.

By ANDREW ROSSER

Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2002. Pp. xv, 232. Notes, Appendices, Bibliography, Index. doi:10.1017/S0022463405290264

Andrew Rosser has produced a detailed and insightful account of the politics of economic policymaking in Suharto’s Indonesia. Focusing on the period since the end of the 1970s oil boom until the East Asian financial crisis, he carefully reviews liberalisation episodes in the financial markets, in trade and investment policy and rules governing the protection of intellectual property rights. Rosser’s main point is that economic liberalisation was not, as some observers would have it, a victory of rationality – as personified by politically insulated ‘technocrats’ – over the particularistic demands of special interest groups. Instead, the author interprets liberalisation episodes as the

outcome of a political struggle in which factions likely to benefit from deregulation defeated their protectionist rivals (p. 10). For Rosser, the period after the oil boom saw the rise of mobile capitalists as a political force and the relative decline of the 'politico-bureaucrats' and domestic conglomerates that had profited from the *dirigiste* policies of the 1970s.

This dimension of Rosser's argument draws heavily on, and updates, Jeffrey Winters' *Power in motion: Capital mobility and the Indonesian state* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996). Where Rosser differs from Winters, although mainly in emphasis rather than substance, is in his contention that neither international capitalists nor politico-bureaucrats and conglomerates achieved a complete victory at any one point in time. Rosser arrives at this conclusion through a comparison of the pace and form of liberalisation over time and across different economic sectors. He argues that some liberal policies favoured by mobile capitalists were adopted, but only those that were not unduly prejudicial to economic interests of the conglomerates. For example, the technocrats succeeded in liberalising interest rates and opening the banking sector to private and foreign investment, but failed to put in place adequate safeguards and supervisory institutions and mechanisms. The result was a free-for-all in which conglomerates continued to benefit from easy credit from state banks as well as banks established within their own business groups.

Rosser's critique of the mainstream is effective and well documented. Yet his portrayal of Indonesian politics is at times static and one-dimensional. Categories such as 'mobile capitalists' and 'politico-bureaucrats' fail to capture the diversity of interests within these groups and how these interests changed over time. A primary example of this process is the experience of financial liberalisation, which transformed some domestic conglomerates into transnational enterprises that control assets across the globe and depend heavily on Japanese, European and North American banks for capital. That they also profited from industrial protection and lax banking supervision at home does not necessarily mean that they continued to rely on these sorts of domestic accumulation strategies.

Similarly, Rosser is curiously indulgent of Suharto's technocrats, who often appear in his book, as in most orthodox accounts, as sensible economic managers frustrated at every turn by meddling nationalists and rapacious crony capitalists. Yet as Rosser himself notes, the technocrats were themselves caught up in enough banking and security market scandals to at least blur the line between themselves and the politico-bureaucrats. Moreover, their determination to press ahead with financial liberalisation in the presence of an open capital account, even when it was clear by the early 1990s that they had as a result lost control over monetary policy, suggests they were not as technically astute as they would like to claim.

A related issue is the absence of ideology as a motivating factor in this account. After all, the era recounted by Rosser coincides with the height of the neo-liberal resurgence in development thinking, not only within the international financial institutions but also among the many academic advisors to the Suharto regime. Even readers sympathetic to Rosser's structural approach would agree that ideas do matter, and the dominant idea of the times was that markets work better than states. This is painfully evident, for example, in the absurdly naïve market fundamentalism expressed in Radius Prawiro's insider

account of the period (*Indonesia's struggle for economic development: Pragmatism in action* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998]). To understand the liberalisation drive under Suharto we must gain a better appreciation of how these ideas were assimilated and their interaction with the material interests that Rosser describes.

Andrew Rosser has produced a readable yet detailed account of a fascinating period of Indonesian political and economic history. He has succeeded in debunking the notion that liberalisation is the triumph of reason over politics, and shows that struggles among competing interests affected the pace and form of policy change. But he does not attempt to answer the more fundamental question of whether liberalisation was the correct policy for the times. Nevertheless, the book contains a wealth of information and analysis, and students of Indonesian politics and economics will want to keep it readily at hand.

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Malaysia

Raja Bilah and the Mandailings in Perak (1875–1911).

By ABDUR-RAZZAQ LUBIS and KHOO SALMA NASUTION

Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Monograph no. 35, 2003. Pp. 278. Illustrations, Appendices, Bibliography, Index. doi:10.1017/S0022463405300269

This book is an important watershed in the local and national historiography of Malaysia, in terms of the themes it addresses, the array of materials it has utilized and its presentation. Its title suggests that it is primarily a biography of Raja Bilah, a Mandailing leader in Perak during the formative period of British colonial expansion in the states of Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang in the Malay Peninsula. However, this biographical narrative is situated within and structured according to three broader historical themes in the history of Perak and the Melaka Straits, namely the history of Mandailing migration and movement between Sumatra and the Peninsula, the creation of the British colonial state, and the social, morphological and economic development of the state of Perak during this crucial period of colonial expansion. In encompassing the history of colonialism, diasporas and local or regional history, this book provides important new insights into ethnicity, politics and identity in Malaysian historiography.

It is one of the first comprehensive histories of the Mandailing communities in Malaysia in the English language. Most of the existing literature on the Mandailing deals with communities and regions in Sumatra, rather than the Mandailing diaspora and its broader geographical locus of movement and settlement. *Merantau* (migrating or sojourning) is a keyword in the identity-formation and social memory of many communities now resident in the Malay Peninsula, a region whose very history and politics were created by movement and mobile groups. The movement of the Mandailing has not received as much attention as that of other groups like the Bugis, Minangkabau and Javanese.

Raja Bilah and the Mandailings in Perak is unparalleled in the biographical details it presents. The focus is not solely on Raja Bilah, but also on his father and contemporaries. More importantly, it examines this history not only from the perspective of the

Mandailings but also in terms of how members of various communities negotiated with Mandailing and non-Mandailing groups in their adaptations to a new political and economic environment brought about by British colonial expansion in Perak. It also charts their connections to the broader Islamic ecumene.

Another important contribution is that this book brings a different perspective to the history of colonial expansion and the 'making' of British Malaya between the 1870s and 1914, which has hitherto focused on the British administrators, the 'Malay' Sultan and his court, and the role of Chinese capital and labour in the opening up and modernization of these states. These early histories of what later came under the integrated structure of the Federated Malay States have tended to lump all non-European and non-Chinese Muslim groups under the rubric of Malay-ness, or at best 'Sumatran' or 'Foreign' Malays.

This book begins with the biographies of Raja Asal and Raja Bilah before the British Intervention of 1874, especially with regard to their tin-mining and pioneering activities in Perak, Selangor and Pahang, as well as their roles in the wars between the Malay court factions which also implicated Chinese *kongsis*. The authors then chart the subsequent recruitment of Mandailings as allies in the British pacification of Malay resistance after the murder of J.W. Birch. In return for this assistance, Mandailing were granted important positions in the rudimentary administration erected by the British in the Kinta region, as well as patronage and loans for their mining and agricultural ventures. They came to be instrumental in the founding of several important mining settlements in Kinta, such as Papan, Gopeng and Kampar, the sites of the Kinta tin rush in the 1880s.

In addition to their administrative roles under this new system, Mandailing also undertook and financed tin mining, smelting and trading operations in Perak and Selangor. The book contains rich ethnographic descriptions of the mining methods used, and their roles in the agricultural development of the Kinta valley. More importantly, the authors go to great lengths to describe and explore the relationships, often on a personal or inter-family level, between Mandailing leaders and their Chinese and British counterparts, as well as their ties with Malay royalty in the state.

Lastly, this book is also important in terms of the vast array of sources it has brought together. It is based primarily on a set of private papers known as the 'Pengkulu Papers', which were 'family documents belonging to Raja Asal, Raja Bilah and Raja Ya'qub, that had been kept in the Rumah Besar in Papan, Perak. They are now housed in the National Archives of Malaysia, Perak Branch' (p. 10). The skill with which these sources have been juxtaposed alongside official colonial documents, family chronicles and printed memoirs, and photographs from private and institutional sources is very refreshing, and promises to appeal to both the academic world and the general reading public.

In summary, the traditional narrative approach of this book, as Khoo Kay Khim has pointed out in the preface (pp. 6–7), contains several important questions and statements about perspective, methodology and method in Malaysian historiography. It has undoubtedly set a high standard for scholarship on the writing of Malaysian local histories that is deserving of emulation.

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Vietnam

Southern Vietnam under the reign of Minh Mạng (1820–1841): Central policies and local response.

By CHOI BYUNG WOOK

Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2004. Pp. 226. Plates, Appendices, Bibliography, Index. doi:10.1017/S0022463405310265

When Franco-Spanish forces invaded Saigon in 1859 they faced unusually severe resistance in the surrounding countryside from an array of Nguyễn dynasty and regionally organised militias. In fact, the ensuing campaigns to defeat and subdue the wider region, which became French Cochinchina, took most of the following decade, until 1868, to complete. Until now scholarship has generally taken for granted that a deeply ingrained, inherent sense of ‘national’ loyalty to the kingdom and the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945) nourished Vietnamese resistance in the south, ensuring its vigour over this protracted period. But as Choi Byung Wook of Seoul National University illustrates in this carefully researched study, southern allegiance to Huế was a relatively recent phenomenon which traced its roots to the 1830s and the policies of the second Nguyễn king, Minh Mạng (r. 1820–41).

Choi presents an illuminating picture of the complex social and political interests in the south, known as ‘Gia Định’, in the early decades of the nineteenth century. He shows that a generation after the inauguration of the Nguyễn dynasty, local powerbrokers’ parochial interests still dominated the political milieu to the extent that in 1833 Gia Định’s elite threatened to trump central power in Huế by nearly seceding during the Lê Văn Khôi rebellion (1833–35). Choi takes a straightforward approach by asking what subsequently changed southern attitudes between this rebellion and the French invasion to instill and harden southern loyalties to the capital. Focusing on Minh Mạng’s bureaucratic reforms and cultural policies, Choi provides a fresh interpretation of changing attitudes to show how the court transformed this socially heterogeneous, parochial frontier region into a more faithful pupil of the capital.

Taking up the issue of southern regionalism from where Li Tana left off in her groundbreaking political and economic history of Nguyễn Cochinchina (*Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* [Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 1998]), Choi examines the ascendance of the ‘Gia Định regime’ under the leadership of Nguyễn Ánh from the 1770s. This region provided Nguyễn Ánh – who became the first Nguyễn king, Gia Long – with a powerful base to launch his victorious expeditions against the Tây Sơn rebels and the Lê capital of Thăng Long (modern Hanoi), to establish the Nguyễn dynasty in 1802. In the process, the coterie of generals and advisors around him grew into an influential political network from which he drew his most senior court advisors and governors-general to rule the newly unified kingdom. However, as a consequence of this pattern, in the 1820s his son Minh Mạng faced considerable resistance from southern interests to Huế’s primacy as the new dynastic and bureaucratic capital. The southern viceroy, Lê Văn Duyệt (1763–1832), was in particular a tough adversary whose close relations with local Chinese settlers, Catholics and the populous community of resettled northern convicts throughout the 1820s stymied Minh Mạng’s efforts to transfer bureaucratic authority

from regionally appointed notables, to centrally chosen men with academic qualifications. Minh Mạng's chance to dismantle the Gia Định regime came with Duyệt's death in 1832. But no sooner had he succeeded in appointing his own hierarchy of officials than Duyệt's adopted son, Lê Văn Khôi, rallied the viceroy's disaffected supporters in rebellion.

After Hué crushed the rebels and Duyệt's powerbase in 1835 the court faced far less resistance to its centralising policies. Chief among these were the court's efforts to promote Confucian learning and orthodox cultural values through the policy of '*giáo hóa*', or 'cultivation'. This policy saw the unprecedented spread of educational institutions in the south; these establishments were aimed at encouraging more young men to gain a civil education, compete in the re-instituted examination system and seek entry into the Hué bureaucracy. Other efforts, such as the issue of edicts on village-level ritual practices and the integration of indigenous Khmer and other ethnic minority communities, made the policy represent little more than a process of 'Vietnamisation', whereby the court sought to force all sections of southern society to conform to centrally prescribed social and cultural mores.

The strength of Choi's scholarship derives from his use of the Nguyễn court chronicles in the original classical Chinese: the Nguyễn Veritable Records (*Đại Nam thực lục*) and the Vermilion Records (*Châu bản*). These two sources have been available to researchers for decades but rarely have they been exploited in such a thorough way as Choi has done. Yet, because this work is so densely detailed with fresh information on southern perspectives and experiences of Nguyễn central rule, it is a little disappointing that it did not receive a little more editorial development to help place some of its most interesting and intriguing claims in broader Vietnamese historical or interregional perspectives. Nevertheless, Choi has broken new ground by historicising southern identity in the late dynastic period and in doing so has enriched a field of study which has long remained stagnant under the heavy gaze of official Vietnamese nationalist historiography.

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Vietnamese voices: Gender and cultural identity in the Vietnamese Francophone novel.

By NATHALIE HUYNH CHAU NGUYEN

DeKalb: Southeast Asia Publications/Center for Southeast Asian Studies/Northern Illinois University, 2003. Pp. xi, 238. Notes, References, Index.

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Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen's *Vietnamese voices* offers a much needed analysis of a largely neglected body of literature – Francophone novels by Vietnamese authors. In contrast to the well-developed field of scholarship on Francophone North African novels, Vietnamese authors have received far less attention. Until the publication of *Vietnamese voices*, Jack A. Yeager's *The Vietnamese novel in French: A literary response to colonialism* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1987) was the only English-language foray

into Francophone Vietnamese literature. It was not until the late 1990s that French scholars began to compile the first anthologies of Francophone literature from the Asia-Pacific and Southeast Asia regions. Rich in borrowings from Vietnamese and Western literary traditions and steeped in reflections on the crises and tensions that mark twentieth-century Vietnamese history, this body of literature and Nguyen's study are of great value to students and scholars interested in Vietnamese literature, history and society.

As the title denotes, gender is a central category of analysis for *Vietnamese voices*. Chapter 1 looks at how four Vietnamese novels, from the 1930s to the 1990s, draw from the Vietnamese classic poem *The tale of Kieu* to explore the tensions between tradition and modernity experienced by Vietnamese women. As with the heroine Kieu, the choice of whether to embrace or reject traditional Vietnamese mores typically results in pain, hardship and suffering. However, for Vietnamese women in modern fictional works, no form of redemption seems possible. Despite living in an age of improved conditions and widening opportunities, the weight of tradition acts as an inescapable force that crushes the lives of both rebellious and obedient female protagonists. It is this darker version of *The tale of Kieu* during a period of marked social change that served as an attack on traditional values and customs that continued to constrain, restrict, and limit the life choices and possibilities of Vietnamese women well into the twentieth century.

Chapter 2 focuses on the work of Ly Thu Ho, the only Vietnamese female novelist living in France and writing in French from the 1960s to the 1980s. Her novels, explains Nguyen, are not innovative in terms of literary style or technique. Much like the extraordinary European women writers of the late nineteenth century, Ly Thu Ho chose to write about the ordinary lives of women who shared her middle-class background. Of particular interest, however, are the insights into the constraints and burdens imposed on these women by Vietnamese tradition. The female protagonists who adhere to these traditions and respect the established patriarchy enjoy no reward or recognition. Instead, they experience only suffering, despair and ruined lives. The most radical and non-conformist women in her novels are the bar-girls, prostitutes and servants who live on the margins of society.

Chapter 3 examines the depiction of women in novels by Pham Van Ky. Like Ly Thu Ho, he depicts various categories of women, each constrained by the values, customs, and patriarchal order that define the traditional Vietnamese way of life. Yet the critique of these constraints offered by this male author is much harsher and more brutal than that of the female novelist. Vietnamese society becomes far more rigid and the fate of those who transgress the established order is even more tragic. Pham Van Ky's work, especially his later novels, is also more complex, functioning through symbolic abstractions and temporal incongruities absent in the writings of Ly Thu Ho. Yet both authors share a common critique of a calcified society that victimizes both men and women alike.

Chapter 4 takes up the subject of interracial relationships in two novels – *Bà Dâm* (by Albert de Teneuille and Truong-Dinh-Tri) and *Nam et Sylvie* (by 'Nam Kim', the pseudonym of Pham Duy Khiem). Both novels feature relationships between French women and Vietnamese men – a taboo pairing rarely found in French literature. In each case the relationship proves unworkable, ending in separation, divorce and even death – an allusion, according to Nguyen, to the larger failed relationship between France and Indochina. In the case of *Bà Dâm* it is the enormity of the cultural divide and the hostility and rejection experienced in Vietnam that dooms the marriage between Janine and Sao.

For Nam and Sylvie, in the novel of the same name, the impossibility of the relationship seems to be a foregone conclusion as the two lovers part ways without ever contemplating marriage. In a novel written in 1957, three years after France's withdrawal from Indochina, Sylvie represents both the illusion and frustration of a desired and unattainable France.

Chapter 5 departs from the theme of gender to explore questions of identity and critiques of colonialism found in two novels written shortly after the end of French rule in Indochina. Borrowing from confessional and autobiographical genres in Western and Vietnamese literature, both novels are written as journals or collected papers published after the death of fictional writers – Vietnamese men who volunteer to serve in wars against or for the French and ultimately meet their demise in combat. The novels convey the difficulty of reconciling Eastern and Western sources of cultural identity, the search for stable reference points during the chaos of decolonization and the desire to be master of one's own destiny, even if it means serving in the French army. Modes of justification and self-defence, these novels express a 'plea for understanding' and the pain caused by a fragmented sense of identity.

The literary treatment of the difficulty of returning to Vietnam after the experience of exile is the subject of the sixth and final chapter. In the two novels in question it is never really possible to return home. Life abroad creates an unbridgeable divide between the protagonists and the static, traditional world they left behind. In particular, exposure to French culture only results in alienation from one's own culture. All efforts to reconcile these two worlds are doomed to failure and inevitably meet with disaster. There is a possible foreshadowing of a future history of Vietnamese displacement, escape and renewed exile, the ultimate consequences of this clash of civilizations.

Vietnamese voices is an enlightening and varied treatment of a rich corpus of still little known Francophone Vietnamese novels. With special attention given to gender, The book offers a wealth of insights into the divergent approaches, sensibilities and depictions of Vietnamese society, social relations and identity questions offered by male and female Vietnamese Francophone authors. Engaging and clearly written, this is an invaluable resource for scholars, students and general readers interested in Vietnamese literature and the larger traumas and tensions caused by the experience of French imperialism and decolonization.

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