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Foreign military transfers in mainland Southeast Asian wars: adaptations, rejections and change (Introduction)

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As in Europe, the transfer, adaptation and utilisation of foreign military knowledge and techniques have contributed greatly to the development of Southeast Asian states. However, it has not always been easy to write about such military transfers when it comes to Southeast Asia. After decades of colonial domination by the West, not to mention wars of national liberation in Indochina and Indonesia, nationalist architects of the past have preferred to emphasise the 'indigenous' and the 'authentic' over the foreign and external. For those who examine the impact of Western colonial 'modernity' on the development of local states and societies, the field still hides a number of nationalist mines, while the study of 'overseas' Chinese 'modern' contributions to the development of Southeast Asian states remains risky business.[1] In short, incorporating 'Western' and 'overseas Chinese' contributions into the picture can pose problems for nationalist historians keen on emphasising their peoples' roles in building the nation and its past. It would not be hard to find similar examples in Europe and elsewhere.

Like the nationalists, the advocates of the recently created regional grouping called ASEAN[2] tend to focus on that which is indigenous and unique to the building of a Southeast Asian regional identity. Just as the defenders of the European Union have revisited the Roman Empire or Charlemagne in search of historical precursors and sources for legitimating a 'new' European identity in the present, a similar process has been occurring in Southeast Asia. Supporters of the Southeast Asian idea tend to emphasise 'autonomy' and the shared historical, social and cultural traits of the members of the region. Like the modern nation-state, the soul of Southeast Asia flows out of its internal uniqueness, undefiled by external Chinese and Western influences or their 'foreign' names for the region such as '*Nanyang*' and 'Indochina'. Indeed, many 'regional nationalists' would still consider it heresy to suggest that upper Southeast Asia and the three southern provinces of present-day China have a lot more in common culturally, socially and geographically on the ground than that which divides them politically from on high.[3]

1 For an early and intelligent plea for factoring the Chinese into the Southeast Asian historical picture, see Claudine Salmon, 'The contribution of the Chinese to the development of Southeast Asia: A new appraisal', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 12, 1 (1981): 260–75.

2 The acronym for the Association of South East Asian Nations created in 1967, which – like the European Union – is still in the making.

3 Denys Lombard long argued for getting beyond the nation and the region in favour of that which connects down below; see Denys Lombard, 'Networks and synchronisms in Southeast Asian history', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 26, 1 (1995): 10–16 and 'Une autre "Méditerranée" dans le Sud-Est Asiatique', *Hérodote*, 88 (1998): 184–93.

Yet such connections exist elsewhere; Fernand Braudel long showed how Europe was linked to northern Africa and beyond.

Of course, what is often lost in nationalist and regionalist histories are the historical connections and exchanges, which cannot be confined to such neat political borders, whether national or regional. These geopolitical demarcations of the field limit our understanding of important transnational phenomena of great historical importance. While these three articles are sensitive to 'regional' and 'nationalist' concerns, they are nevertheless based upon the shared conviction that no nation or region is an island – nor are their pasts. The interconnected nature of Southeast Asia, its place at the intersection of major overland and maritime routes and its remarkable sociocultural diversity and vibrancy undermine notions of national and regional autonomy.[4] This is particularly true when it comes to tracking and understanding the movement of foreign military knowledge and techniques into mainland Southeast Asia.

On this same note, Eurocentrism also remains a serious problem for our understanding of military science in Southeast Asia. If Geoffrey Parker, John Keegan and many others have provided excellent histories of military science, transfers and their impact on the development of Western history, the state of the field for Southeast Asia, if not all of Asia, lags behind.[5] Until more research is done on the Asian side, we will continue to have an unbalanced view of such military transfers, invariably tilted towards the West. Moreover, compared to studies on conflicts in Europe, our knowledge of the social impact of war on Southeast Asian societies and civilians remains scant at best. And the anthropology of war, surely an important subject, is largely uncharted territory for Southeast Asia.[6]

While these three articles are only the tip of the iceberg,[7] they nevertheless attempt to redress the balance by getting beyond Eurocentric, nationalist and regional partitionings of the past in order to explore the interactions and connectedness underlying military transfers into Southeast Asia, their adaptations and their impact on the local states and societies. It is only by placing this question within a larger temporal and spatial

4 R. Bin Wong, 'Entre monde et nation: les régions braudéliennes en Asie' and Maurice Aymard, 'De la Méditerranée à l'Asie: une comparaison nécessaire (commentaire)', both in *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 56, 1 (2001): 3–50.

5 Geoffrey Parker, *The military revolution: Military innovation and the rise of the West, 1500–1800*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and John Keegan, *A history of warfare* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993). Pioneering studies on Southeast Asia include Victor Lieberman, 'Europeans, trade, and the unification of Burma, c. 1540–1620', *Oriens Extremus*, 27, 2 (1980): 203–26; Anthony Reid, *Europe and Southeast Asia: The military balance* (Townsville, Queensland: James Cook University Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, James Cook University, 1982); and Geoffrey Barlow, 'Early weapons systems and ethnic identity in the Sino-Vietnamese frontier', http://www.vietnamjournal.org/article.php?sid=29 among others.

6 I'm thinking of *Civilians in the path of war*, ed. Mark Grimsley and Clifford J. Rogers (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002); George L. Mosse's discussion of the 'brutalisation' of modern war in *Fallen soldiers: Reshaping the memory of the world wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Annette Becker, *Oubliés de la grande guerre* (Paris: Éditions Noêsis, 1998), among many others. New studies are emerging on Asia, however; see *Scars of war: The impact of warfare on modern China*, ed. Dian Lary and Stephen MacKinnon (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2001) and Shaun Malarney, *Culture, ritual and revolution in Vietnam* (London: Routledge/Curzon, 2002).

7 They were first presented in a panel of the same name at the Association of Asian Studies conference in Washington, DC in 2002. My thanks to the AAS; to Brantly Womack, Qiang Zhai and Stein Tonesson for their participation as discussants; to the anonymous readers for *JSEAS*; and a special thanks to Bruce Lockhart, Editor of *JSEAS*, for his helpful comments on and careful editing of the articles.

context that we will be able to track and fully grasp the importance of military science and transfers into and throughout Southeast Asian history.

These articles attempt to do that. Looking at Southeast Asia from the north and via overland routes, Sun Laichen examines the spread of military technology from Ming China into northern mainland Southeast Asia and its impact on the emergence of states there between 1390 and 1527. Coming from the south, Frédéric Mantienne focuses on French military transfers to Vietnam in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. My article follows up on these two by examining how military knowledge and techniques continued to flow into Vietnam via Asian routes, in spite of or even because of the French creation of a colonial state called 'Indochina'. All three articles show the importance of military transfers in our understanding of Southeast Asian history in general and that of Vietnam in particular. After all, Sun's discussion of the important military exchanges already taking place between Ming China and northern mainland Southeast Asia before the West arrived reminds us that the Portuguese were not the first foreigners to introduce revolutionary military techniques into Southeast Asia. Nor were they the last.