

will prove useful to historians of the Bay who are in search of creative responses to the call for new methodologies that challenge the politically and academically ‘entrenched’ (p. 7) boundaries that divide South and Southeast Asia.

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Asia

*Ruling before the law: The politics of legal regimes in China and Indonesia*

By WILLIAM HURST

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. 320. Bibliography, Index.

doi:10.1017/S0022463422000480

*Ruling before the law* employs the concept of ‘legal regimes’ to compare the dramatically different nations of China and Indonesia. Hurst, in defining legal regimes, is particularly interested in how Chinese and Indonesian politics shape a general legal order, and in turn, how this legal order affects state–society relations and political change. Exploring legal regimes in China and Indonesia highlights what he describes as the ‘outer limits of comparability between countries’. This ‘outer limit’ allows for a side-by-side comparison of common features to understand how legal regimes operate. Simultaneously, the immense difference affords a level of generalisability and insight into the different conditions that lead to the emergence of particular forms of legal orders. Specifically, in his book Hurst examines how the law functions and is ordered in the legal regimes of revolution, authoritarianism, and neotraditionalism.

After spending chapter 1 outlining the concept of legal regimes, Hurst, in chapter 2, provides a rich and comprehensive review of the historical conditions that undergird the legal regimes he discusses in subsequent chapters. Starting off with law and revolution in chapter 3, Hurst discusses the types of cases that emerged in Indonesia from 1955 to 1974 and China from 1949 to 1979. In Indonesia, first under Sukarno’s Guided Democracy and then under Suharto’s New Order, there was a paucity of criminal cases, and evidence of civil law being used by political individuals to entrench their wealth and power. In China, criminal law was deployed more frequently as an instrument of political and social mobilisation, especially as the socialist government aimed to root out supporters of the Kuomintang. Chapter 4 details the path to authoritarianism and legal efficiency in China from 1979 to the 1990s during a period characterised by the nation’s push for economic growth, and post-*Reformasi* Indonesia from 1998 onwards, in which democratisation led to the further development of the criminal justice and civil law systems. During this period, in both countries, the legal system becomes more sophisticated—in China with civil law becoming more transparent and predictable; and in Indonesia with criminal law becoming less of a tool of political control and more a tool of establishing order and predictability. Finally, in chapter 5, Hurst

explores the issue of external influences on the law through an examination of neotraditionalism in Indonesia from the post-independence period to the present day. He also discusses neotraditionalism in the ‘Strike Hard’ period in China from the 1980s onwards. In this chapter, the focus is on the role of elites, the stable and flexible nature of neotraditional regimes, and how such regimes can coexist in both revolutionary and authoritarian regimes.

The breadth of this book is impressive—the depth of knowledge, linguistic ability of the author, and coverage of cases demonstrates an unprecedented dedication to the two nations, emphasising how *Ruling before the law* is a culmination of over a decade of serious study and data collection. Chapters 1 and 2 are particularly useful for those looking for a quick introduction to the legal histories of China and Indonesia, as well as a well-organised and easy to follow summary of the various bodies of literature in law and the social sciences. Lastly, the comparative value of the book, and its attempts to move beyond the normative and teleological narratives associated with the rule of law discourse, resonates deeply with my own work, particularly *Criminal legalities in the Global South: Cultural dynamics, political tensions, and institutional practices* (2019), where my co-editor Pablo Ciocchini and I also attempt to draw comparisons from nations across the Global South in a similar way. In this regard, *Ruling before the law*’s theoretical contributions are surprisingly accessible. Given Hurst’s focused attention to these two nations, the similarities and differences in legal regimes highlight his theoretical concepts in a way that is useful and generalisable. Furthermore, the numerous civil and criminal law cases are vivid and illustrative, helping to draw the reader in and humanise the numerous theoretical observations and historical periods covered.

While the theoretical contributions and engagement with the literature is striking, certain questions emerged as I read the book. For instance, although the concept of legal regimes is useful, given the clear and succinct review of the field in chapter 2, I wonder how much this concept truly departs from existing frameworks in the law and society discipline—a field that is a lot more complex and arguably ill-defined than Hurst makes it out to be. Especially given the emergence of scholarship in the Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL) tradition, for example, in the works of Antony Anghie, Sundhya Pahuja, Luis Eslava, and other excellent studies on the Global South, such as those by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Jean and John Comaroff, Loïc J.D. Wacquant, and Kerry Carrington, to name a few, larger questions such as notions of what is ‘modern’, overarching economic and political pressures on Global South nations from the Global North, as well as the legacies of colonisation, all seem underexplored in Hurst’s legal regime framework. Additionally, while illustrative and engaging, the cases at times provided just enough details to be tantalising, yet not specific enough to examine the legal basis to claims and theories.

Despite these questions that emerged as I read the book, *Ruling before the law* is definitely a work of scholarship that I would recommend to students, friends, and colleagues who seek a rich introduction to how the law in China and Indonesia has developed over the last 70 years. While I may not be ready to employ the concept of legal regimes in my own writings, I think Hurst’s theorising across two incredibly different contexts is bold and exciting. *Ruling before the*

*law* is a tour de force that will undoubtedly influence and inspire generations of socio-legal scholars in their efforts to examine how the law continues to shape politics and vice versa across the Global South and other underexplored regions and nations.

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## Asia

### *Khao Sam Kaeo: An early port-city between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea*

Edited by BÉRÉNICE BELLINA

Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 2017. Pp. 675. Maps, Plates, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

doi:10.1017/S0022463422000510

This is simply a fabulous book. Bérénice Bellina and a multidisciplinary team of archaeologists and scientists from a range of allied disciplines undertook fieldwork at a rural site in southern Thailand for four years in order to be able to compile this volume. It is a labour of love. But perhaps one should emphasise the word 'labour' more than love, because anyone can sense how much grindingly-hard work must have gone into the production of this tome. The book weighs in at 675 pages, and you can feel every one of them when holding it in hand. This was not armchair work; this was labour in the heat and humidity and dust of the southeastern seaboard, astride the bakingly-hot Gulf of Thailand. Bellina's team spent their digging seasons trying to piece together the astonishing history of this place, which served as a conduit between the trade and civilisations of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. With almost nothing surviving in written form from the period when Khao Sam Kaeo thrived, this is a material history, one written in objects, and in detritus left in the land. The team have allowed us through their labours to think of how and why a small centre such as this one might have come into being, become important for a time, and eventually declined, all in the space of several centuries. There is almost nothing left in this place now, more than two millennia after the site started to become important. But its vestigial importance in whispering to us of patterns of human life in this part of the world is unmistakable.

Bellina and her researchers tell us that Khao Sam Kaeo was one of a number of small polities which experimented with increasingly complex forms of organisation during this time. Long-distance trade which criss-crossed Asia was beginning to thrive during this period: connections were being made in larger circuits than had ever previously been attempted, across both land and sea-scapes in this part of the world. Khao Sam Kaeo was strategically located in a place that took advantage of these developments. Situated on the Kra Isthmus, the narrowest point of the Malay Peninsula, it gradually became one of a number of sites that would function as portage centres for goods passing between South and East Asia, mostly via water. Sailing around the