

## Book Reviews

### Southeast Asia

*The flaming womb: Repositioning women in early modern Southeast Asia*

By BARBARA WATSON ANDAYA

Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006. Pp. 335. Maps, Notes, Bibliography, Index.  
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Barbara Watson Andaya, well-versed in Asian history ('Oceans unbounded: Transversing Asia across "area studies"', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 65, 4 [2006]: 663–90), takes on an expedition examining the nature of Southeast Asia as a region, the sources available for the study of its history, and the place of the female across space, time, and life within and without the region. Winnowing the varied data available to us, she presents a mosaic that is a social history of early modern Southeast Asia. She shows us variety by locality, by century and by social standing and looks to portray what life was like for a woman, young or old, high class or low, inland or coastal, and how the early modern era affected these many types of life as commerce grew and as world religions consequently had a greater impact throughout the region.

Her basic target is: Does the cliché of higher female status hold up for the region at this time? Following questions are: Does Southeast Asia hold up as a coherent region? What sources can we use profitably to study its history? Was the early modern a significantly different era? As one whose career has spanned the years of the intellectual pursuit of this 'early modern', Watson Andaya joins Anthony Reid and Victor Lieberman in broad regional studies of the period. All three provide breadth and depth that supplement each other. She, like Reid, is an island specialist whose natural inclination is to approach by sea, and she, with her husband Leonard, has done superb work across the maritime space of the region. Coming out of Cornell and her work with O.W. Wolters (as did I), she joins Tony Day in expanding out of the island world and bringing the mainland into her discussions. Yet, unlike Reid, Lieberman, and Day her interest is less in power and wealth than in the lives that were lived, specifically their gender aspects.

Watson Andaya begins with a unique approach to defining the region, one that is outside in. By this I mean that she comes at her demarcation by starting in areas beyond Southeast Asia (East Asia, South Asia and, most uniquely, Oceania) and moves in toward the region to see if different patterns emerge. Her introduction of Oceania here is a logical and major contribution. Her approach is very good, especially in its comparative terms. Yet I am partial to an internal analysis, one focused on kinship and social organisation (as Day has done). Though Watson Andaya does allude to kinship, she does not focus on it. This needs much more work (as Thomas Trautmann has done for South India).

This said, Watson Andaya has nicely expanded our use of source materials in studying the early modern era. Going beyond the textual study that first defined this

era, she judiciously applies recent anthropological and archaeological work to the situations laid out by the texts of that era (indigenous and foreign) and joins performance and artistic evidence to it. This is a very good discussion of what information exists and how we can use the varied types of data to interpret the events of the time. She does this very well, both for the history of the region and for her specific focus on gender and the female.

These first two chapters form a good background for any study of Southeast Asia. The following five bring us into social history and life for women in the region. She begins with religion and the sacred, moves on to economic life, proceeds to the place of ordinary women in the political systems and elite women in the courts, and finishes with the life cycle for women. Framed against the basic question (the fabled higher status for women), Watson Andaya marshals her winnowed detail into the mosaic of women's lives and significance. She shows their importance in indigenous ritual, the marketplace, the household, and the court. She then, for each subject, treats the impacts and the changes of the early modern era on women: the adoption of the world religions (Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Confucianism), the growth of international commerce, greater social differentiation and stronger administrative centrality. Not just assuming that these changes automatically favoured males, Watson Andaya looks closely at the data to see the results for gender balance. Women profited in some situations; in others they did not, as the political and social systems did tend to privilege the male. The admirable and carefully derived detail she brings to bear on these situations brings to life female existence, their successes, their struggles and their relations with men. In so doing she ably demonstrates the necessity not to be bound by male perspectives, but always to keep in mind the female (or other non-male) experiences involved in any situation.

In these life experiences, one aspect I find missing is woman as political operator: What would women do with power when they had access to it? What were their motives, their interests in those situations? The book's title, drawn from a well-known incident in early Javanese history, implies power and agency. 'Women of prowess' demand our attention, and we need to know more about how they actively gained and used power within the existing and changing systems. Situated at key junctures of power, individual females worked to benefit whom and what? Interacting with the males of the power structure, they gained or lost through these relationships. This power, whether political, economic, social, or religious could serve women as well as men, and the female could apply its benefits to both their male and their female allies and kin.

How then does Watson Andaya answer her basic question? With specific qualifications, she believes that the region of Southeast Asia is indeed marked off culturally and in gender terms from the surrounding regions. She provides a 'guarded defense' of higher female status there and 'a very general explanation' for it (pp. 227–28). The scattered and varied sources offer, in her mind, good possibilities for further research – what is needed are more studies grounded in place and time that carry out gendered analyses. And, despite the increasing male position in the early modern age, she pointedly notes the room for continued female agency within the changing religious, economic, and political structures. Barbara Watson Andaya has given us a most solid foundation stone for future work on gender in Southeast Asia and

comparative work with other regions (and see her postscript, 'State of the field: Studying women and gender in Southeast Asia', *International Journal of Asian Studies*, 4, 1 [2007]: 113–36). It serves in addition as a very good introduction to the social history of the region.

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*Nationalism in Southeast Asia*

By NICHOLAS TARLING

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There has been, in the last few decades, a proliferation of academic works that seek to examine the history of 'nationalism': its origins, evolution, propagators, opponents, inheritors and victims in the Southeast Asian context. From the magistral works of William Roff and Reynaldo C. Ileto to the more recent and highly acclaimed monograph by Thongchai Winichakul, the history of nationalism in Southeast Asia will, for certain, persist as a topic of scholarly interest and debate in the many years to come.

With that said, preceding historical studies on nationalism in Southeast Asia have suffered from two key inadequacies. There have been very few notable attempts at transcending the political boundaries of the nation-states towards the narration and analysis of nationalist movements and counter-movements within a wider conceptual category known today as 'Southeast Asia'. Admittedly, such scholarly inertia is expected given the diverse ethnic landscape of the region which necessitates the mastery of several languages – an enterprise that will require several lifetimes. The second inadequacy is the lack of a sustained endeavour to engage with the theories of nationalism. Indeed, scholars of Southeast Asia have, in general, been dependent upon ideas that were manufactured and continually re-formulated by theorists whose data were derived largely from the studies of European, African, American and South Asian histories.

These are the crucial gaps which the author of *Nationalism in Southeast Asia* hopes to address. In doing so, Nicholas Tarling duly admits that the book is '[a]bsurdly ambitious' (p. 3). To be sure, he has gone further to situate nationalist developments in Southeast Asia within an international context so as to open up possibilities for comparisons with similar movements that were pursued in other parts of the globe. Scholars of the histories of what are currently known as Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Laos, Cambodia, Brunei, Singapore, Burma and Vietnam may find Tarling's text rather amateurish due to the author's over-reliance upon secondary works. Be that as it may, I would argue that the vital contribution of the book is to be found not in the unearthing of obscured facts but in the manifestly skilful ability to provide an integrated synthesis of established arguments. The spread and sustenance of