

## Introduction to the Launch Issue

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I AM DEEPLY HONOURED by the invitation of the founders of *TRaNS* to write a brief introduction to their inaugural issue. The launch of this important journal is both a significant moment for all students of Southeast Asia and an important contribution to Korean intellectual life. The scholars at Sogang University and elsewhere in the country have chosen to mark this occasion with a series of impressive and original international conferences that have, themselves, left a powerful imprint on scholarship about Southeast Asia. The care and quality that has been devoted to the founding of *TRaNS* gives one confidence that the journal will take its place among the premier journals devoted to the region. We are all in intellectual debt to this initiative by our Korean colleagues.

The theme for the first issue is '*Movement, Motion, and the (Im-) Permeability Boundaries*'. It gestures, obviously, to the vast literature questioning the continuing relevance of the nation state as the central unit of historical analysis. It is to this central 'problematique' that I would like address my brief comments here. It is entirely appropriate that such a question should be posed for Southeast Asianists, in particular, where the historical hegemony of the state is less obvious than, say, in India, China, or in Europe. Only in Africa, particularly sub-Saharan Africa is the case for the hegemony of the state form more historically tenuous.

The contemporary case against the state as the default unit of analysis is usually made out in terms of the factors eroding its importance: migration across state lines, the movement of capital, international patterns of consumption and taste, and the pressure by international organization (the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization) for nations to 'harmonize' their property laws, commercial regulations, and governmental structures. Indeed, one might argue that these tendencies amount to a utopian project to project most of the vernacular institutions of North Atlantic capitalism, already in place in Korea, Taiwan, and Japan, throughout the world. In this utopian fantasy, the Western businessman or woman would alight at any airport, built in 'international style' and would find a familiar world of transplanted institutions governing finance, property and legal rights. Only the

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native costumes, cuisine, music, dance, beaches, and nature reserves – all, themselves, commodified, would be distinctive.

William Case reminds us wisely that this peculiar dream is not yet achieved. He believes, in the spirit of Mark Twain, that the death of the nation state has been greatly exaggerated. For the foreseeable future the nation-state will remain the repository of most people's life chances: their desire for prosperity, freedom, security, and peace. The international system itself virtually guarantees the survival of nation states that have little intrinsic justification. Does anyone doubt that Laos and Brunei (Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Monaco, Andorra, Lichtenstein etc.) would persist were it not for the international system? Since World War Two, only the collapse of the Soviet Union and of Yugoslavia have spawned spasms of new state-making. Once a political unit is established, once it disposes of resources and governs its people's life-chances, it acquires, virtually by definition, elites whose status and power depend on the persistence of the unit. Thus, most of the post-war efforts to amalgamate smaller states into larger ones have foundered on this massive rock of elite interests.

If, then, we recognise the continuing relevance of the nation state, a more significant 'problematique' is posed. When and for what purposes is the nation state the appropriate unit of analysis? Here, all the processes diminishing the hegemony of the nation state come back into consideration. We should ask of the nation state the same questions Jonathan Rigg would have us ask of the village. To what degree do the implicit historical attributes of 'villageness' (e.g. cultivation, face-to-face community, relatively self-sufficient, limited mobility) still make sense. To the degree that they do not, the same logic can be applied to the implicit historical attributes of the nation state. It is not a question of the irrelevance of the nation state but of how and to what degree it is relevant for a particular purpose. Here, as Tim Bunnell, argues, the unit for many purposes, might be city networks rather than nations. We should, in other words, be agnostic about the unit of analysis and chose that unit which has greatest purchase for the inquiry at hand. For many purposes, Michael Aung-Thwin suggests that we distinguish between at least four political, ecological and geographical units: 1. agrarian kingdoms, 2. maritime kingdoms, 3. hybrid statelets like Dai Viet, Mrauk-U and Ayuthaya, and, finally, 4. upland hinterlands. If we adopt his suggestion, we now have units that are in some cases far smaller than nation states and in other cases span international borders.

The case against deploying the nation state as the default unit of analysis is in my view, powerful in at three respects which I will briefly elaborate in the remainder of this essay.

The first and most obvious reason is that from at least the colonial period forward, virtually all historiographic and political analysis has taken and nation as its straightjacket; even those works critical of nationalism. Much as the court chronicles placed the dynasty at the centre of their universe, so have modern

histories been national histories. In fact, the ‘nation’ has typically been, without any possible justification, pushed back historically so that pre-colonial kingdoms are seen as proto-nations. Whether, for example, Dong Son drums and other archaeological remains belong to Thai, Vietnamese, or Chinese national history is a totally meaningless question inasmuch as these units and the identities putatively associated with them did not exist at the time. ‘Flores Man’ does not belong to Indonesian national history but to the history of early mankind. As the first line of a poem observes: “No cow knows it is in Switzerland”. Explicitly nationalist historiographies, designed to mythologize, celebrate, and elaborate a deep and glorious past are for the most part the dead hand of history that represses serious inquiry. At its worst, such histories are a confected just-so story designed to justify the rule of current power-holders and they stand in the way of an honest historical discourse, worthy of the name: one of debate and critique and careful evidence and argument.

The baleful influence of national histories is evident once we wave a magic wand and see the historical inquiries that they obscure. Environmental history, the history of historical migrations, the history of infectious disease, the history of landscape ecology, of floods, of cultural exchange, of language shifts and development, of forests, of human demography, of cultural zones, of cultural identity, of cultivation, of wildlife and marine life, of the sea or ‘sea-people’, simply cannot be successfully accommodated within a purely national framework. History, to flourish as a discipline must transcend the nation state. If you want to write a serious historical account of, say, the Mekong watershed, of teak forests, of river dolphins, of Theravada Buddhism, of the historical peopling of Southeast Asia, national history is largely an impediment. Most of the great histories that remain to be done are not national histories. To take one example, the premise of Anthony Reid’s great two volume work is that the Sunda Shelf is, like the Mediterranean of Fernand Braudel, a zone of migration and of cultural and economic exchange that deserves to be studied as a unit. We have hardly begun to take up the invitation offered by Reid to lift our gaze to this larger and more historically potent unit, though Eric Tagliacozzo has made a splendid start.

The case against the nation state as the default unit of analysis, then, is not simply a matter of contemporary globalizing trends. The nation state framework has stifled research by restricting the range of research, by not problematizing the unit of analysis, and by simply blinding us to all those vital questions that cannot be successfully addressed within its narrow confines.

We are, I would argue, unjustly mesmerized by the nation state for another reason. Our histories, and not simply of Southeast Asia, are lamentably shallow. Here I want to urge far more attention to what has come to be called ‘deep history’. In Southeast Asia, this would mean going back to the histories of the myriad of fragmentary statelets before the dynasties that so preoccupy pre-modern Southeast Asian histories come into view – and which persist during periods of dynastic decline. The fact is that we so privilege the ‘state-form’ that

we ignore the history of non-state peoples and the small states and confederations of towns that were numerous and widespread. Edmond Leach observed that there was scarcely a small town in Burma that did not claim to have been the centre of a small kingdom sometime in the past. I do not underestimate the difficulties of evidence for such a project but the success of European historians of the Neolithic period in piecing together the archaeological evidence suggests that such inquiries are not out of reach. What I am suggesting is an effort to document the history of non-state units that precede the early agrarian states like Pagan and which persist, especially when they disintegrate.

And what about truly deep history? After all, the proto-states which insist on a starring role only came into view roughly a millennium ago. *Homo sapiens* have been in Southeast Asia for roughly 40-50 thousand years (and *Homo erectus* before that!) of which only the very last millennium witnessed the rise of state-like polities. The nation state is, of course, completely irrelevant to this great stretch of human experience. Looked at from this angle, the normal temporal practice of history is radically foreshortened. It is hard for us, *Homo sapiens*, to think much beyond the default unit of our own life span. It's no surprise that almost all history is the history of our contemporaries and of those only a generation or two back. Beyond that most of us appear to lose interest.

This deep history is not only important in its own right, but it seems to me to be essential to the illumination of contemporary history. Imagine, for example, the project of writing a history of the Ayerwaddy watershed: its history, its peopling, its ecology, its riverine life, its floods, its role in irrigation, its alluvial soils, the history of human cultivation along its banks. To start such a history with the colonial period would make little sense. Such a history requires a lens both wide and deep. If the nation as a unit is increasingly marginal to the history of the peoples of *contemporary* Southeast Asia, then it is totally irrelevant to the *prehistory* of the nation. The heyday of the nation in Southeast Asia, arguably, has lasted from, say, the late eighteenth century until, say, the 1990s. The remainder of the history of Southeast Asian peoples, that is to say almost all of it, remains to be written.