

BOOK REVIEW

**Paul H. Kratoska, Remco Raben,
and Henk Schulte Nordholt (eds.).
2005. *Locating Southeast Asia:
Geographies of Knowledge and
Politics of Space*. Singapore:
Singapore University Press.**

The substantiality of Southeast Asia as a concept has for many years been a subject of debate among specialists on the region. The concept of Southeast Asia evolved from the need of Japan, Europe, and America to deal collectively with a set of territories and peoples, yet the area has never formed a unified political vision, nor has it developed cultural unity. Scholars have searched diligently for common elements within Southeast Asian societies only to find variety and fluidity of cultures, wide-ranging forms of economic activity, and openness to external influences as the defining features of the region. If Southeast Asia is nothing more than a geographical contiguity, how then is this regional concept relevant to an understanding of the place and its peoples?

Locating Southeast Asia provides an important contribution to the on-going debate over the nature of Southeast Asian Studies. This collection of 13 articles by contributors from Southeast Asia, Europe, Australia, and the United States takes a critical look at existing epistemologies by questioning the use of Western concepts and by examining where the region is located and imagined from different national and non-national perspectives. In doing so, the authors not only raise concerns about the way the region has come to be known and understood and the relevancy of the regional concept in explaining the past but also anticipate

further challenges to the concept as a study tool. How, in particular, do changes in world historical forces such as globalization and the shift in categories of analysis, e.g. from nationalism and colonialism to more open and transient spaces and identities, affect the meanings of Southeast Asia?

Articles in this book bring together observations about Southeast Asia from a number of regional and disciplinary perspectives. The first five articles provide historiographical analyses of the birth of the Southeast Asian regional concept and the existing state of knowledge. Two works challenge the notion that Southeast Asia was a European conceptual invention: Wang Gungwu describes the early Chinese perception of Southeast Asia as an entity, while Shimizu Hajime points out that Southeast Asia was first identified as a region by Japanese imperialism during the Second World War. Thongchai Winichakul and Ma Serena I. Diokno examine the way in which exigencies of the nation stood in the way of Southeast Asian studies in Thailand and the Philippines. But it is Heather Sutherland who provides a contextual framework for future research by pointing out that although the "Southeast Asia" concept may not apply to existing regional socio-cultural phenomena, it can still be used productively as a "temporary-contingent device" to advance the research task at hand.

The remaining articles address a variety of subjects and approaches. The image of Southeast Asia that reflects from these works is both plural and transient, despite the efforts of past colonial authorities and present governments to construct and unify a "nation." Cynthia Chou's study of sea people and Willem Van Schendel's

article on mountain folk describe peoples from different places, but they share the characteristic of both radically departing from the shape and assumption of the nation-states. Eric Tagliacozzo illustrates that the boundary-making centralization associated with the nation-state had already begun under colonial and semi-colonial rule, cutting through indigenous patterns of trade, loyalty, and religion. Yet the spread of capitalist relations brought new boundary-crossing connections that challenged state efforts at control. Willem Wolters' essay on currencies recounts this process in its early days, and Howard Dick and Stein Tonnesson show how powerful this web of relationships has now become, to the point where the political geography of Southeast Asia in fact bears very little relationship to its economic bounds.

Locating Southeast Asia is certainly a thought-provoking book that invites readers to shift their mindset away from the paradigm of modernizing nation-states. However, in going through the volume, readers may share with Ruth McVey the feeling expressed in her concluding article: "instead of locating Southeast Asia they have discovered many Southeast Asias—or none." Although that would not seem to bode well for future study, McVey has, fortunately, provided us with the answer. She points out that it is not in the realm of coherent entities that we will find the place but in that of networks and transitions. Southeast Asia has always been a zone of trade and transit, of cultural and social contact and transformation, and it is precisely in the context of a new emphasis on globalized networking and processes that Southeast Asia can best be understood. She suggests that we should, therefore, look not for one Southeast Asia but for many, viewed according to their times and the groups that participate in

them; however, we must also keep in mind the process that will bind peoples and places, not modernizing nation-states but globalizing influence. This reviewer could not agree with her more. With new approaches and intellectual mindsets, Southeast Asian Studies should still be as relevant and exciting today and in the future as it was at its genesis.

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