

Oliver W. Wolters

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Oliver W. Wolters, the Goldwin Smith Professor of Southeast Asian History, Emeritus, had been a member of the Cornell faculty since 1964. He played a substantial role in establishing his subject in this country, which, despite its deep engagement in the Philippines, had only limited academic investment in the modern history of the region and almost none in its ancient past.

Both the breadth and the interdisciplinarity of his scholarly interests gave his work a wide audience. He was, in effect, a generalist in what is a formidably difficult and specialized field and he remained a commanding figure in the development of Southeast Asian Studies through a vigorous regime of research and writing into his eighty-fifth year. He was devoted to the University's Southeast Asia Program, participating fully in its activities until a few weeks before his death.

All those who knew him are aware that Oliver disdained self-advertisement—that he was rather reserved and rarely spoke of his personal experience. Before coming to academic life, he spent twenty eventful years in Malaysia as a colonial official. He joined the Malayan Civil Service in 1937 immediately after completing his undergraduate work at Oxford with a First Class Honours degree in History.

Oliver arrived in Singapore in 1938 at a time of gathering international tension. He was immediately selected for intensive study of Cantonese, in which, after two and a half years of study in Singapore, Macau and Hong Kong, he could almost dream. He returned to Singapore in 1941 to assume duties in the Labor Department but was almost immediately caught up in the futile resistance to the Japanese attack in December 1941. He was a civilian internee in Singapore until liberated in August 1945.

During the post-war period, Oliver was swept up in a series of fast-paced and challenging events. First he served as a negotiator in a wave of industrial actions initiated by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). Subsequently, in 1948, when the MCP switched tactics and launched an armed resistance, his background in Chinese affairs fitted him to play a significant role in the massive resettlement of hundreds of thousands of rural Chinese squatters who were located in areas outside of the reach of governmental administration and on the fringe of the forested areas haunted by the guerrillas who relied upon them for recruits and material assistance. He also served as a District Officer in several postings in Perak.

These years were exciting and full of recognition. He was ambushed twice, escaping without injury, and undertook to travel repeatedly in areas of known insecurity. He was awarded the Order of the British Empire and was also decorated for his service by the Sultan of Perak. It was during this time, in 1955, that he married Euteen Khoo who was Inspector of Schools in Malacca and whose family, on both sides, were notable founding fathers of Kuala Lumpur.

With Malaya's independence clearly in sight, Oliver and Euteen left Malaya in 1957 for England where Oliver was to take up a lectureship in the School of Oriental and African studies, University of London, and where he remained until 1964, when Oliver joined the Cornell faculty as its first Professor of Southeast Asian history.

He had a singular voice, unmistakably his and fully formed in his early writing. It is audible in one of his earliest articles, "China Irredenta: the South", published in 1963 in *The World Today*. He gives a brisk, fluent, tour of China's current policy, as well as the Chinese state's perennial objectives in maritime Southeast Asia. The language he uses might easily be found either in strategic intelligence appreciations or in the subtle weighing of courses of action and assessments of probable outcomes typical of diplomatic correspondence. Yet he also makes a determined effort to make clear that the historical springs of action are still a shaping force in contemporary Chinese state initiatives. From early on, China's rulers always aimed to protect the state's maritime communications to the Indian Ocean and beyond by backing a single dominant Southeast Asian polity, a grand commercial center, which could guarantee the tranquillity of the major sea lanes in a region regarded by these rulers as characterized by unstable competing polities.

This principal power was Srivijaya (7-13th c.); its location, organization, capabilities, and the character of its hinterland was the focus of Oliver's Ph.D. thesis at the University of London. The thesis was published in 1963 as *Early Indonesian Commerce*, and after he joined the Cornell faculty in 1964, it continued to engage his imagination throughout his career. He published a second book on the topic, *The Fall of Srivijaya in Malay History* (1970) and followed this up with a series of papers in the 1980s.

All this effort, drawing on the most varied sources, including botanical evidence, archaeological survey, epigraphy, reminiscences of Chinese travelers and diplomats, and art styles and iconography, established that the present city of Palembang on the Musi River was the location of Srivijaya's capital. His contributions, when surveyed in their entirety, present a picture of the historical past, the physical topography of the landscape, and the metaphorical resonance abroad of a harbor-city whose fame and cosmopolitan glamour would rival that of Alexandria, Venice, or Trieste.

The horizon of Oliver's interests extended far beyond the search for Srivijaya. He crossed borders with impunity, writing important papers on Vietnam, Kampuchea, and Thailand. His work on Vietnam drew him to Sino-Vietnamese poetry and to the study of literary conventions. A new emphasis on "voice" and the close study of the structure of "texts" became evident. At the very end of his life, he was experimenting with presenting history through the flux and swift transition of speech in dialogue. He left unfinished an extensive manuscript on fourteenth and fifteenth-century Vietnamese history written in the fluidity and immediacy of address found in conversation. The stimulus here was Oliver's reading of the Russian literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin.

Throughout his years of teaching, and continuing throughout his retirement, Oliver gave encouragement to students, and also to colleagues, both through informal consultations in his office and by frequent lunch invitations. Although he would shrink from the grandiosity of such a formulation, he was pivotal in calling forth an intellectual community where one might otherwise have encountered only a loose aggregate of specialized producers of knowledge. He retained a large and exceptionally devoted circle of former students with whom he exchanged letters and visits long after they left Cornell. This web of exchange helped to keep Oliver in touch with publication, as well as research in progress, in many diverse fields and played a significant role in what may be the achievement for which he will be most widely remembered. This is, of course, his remarkable *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, originally published in 1982 and reprinted in a second edition in 1999 with the addition of a 138-page "postscript." While there have been many significant works on Southeast Asian history, no one before Oliver has so effectively charted the contours of that discipline in such a way that it can now embark on the process of self-reflection that is a requisite of maturity. No one before him had cast a net so widely across the region or made such a compelling case that the recovery of the wholeness of experience demands the integration of perspectives provided by both the humanities and the social sciences. And, there is no parallel to the richly textured weave of the many short narratives through which he demonstrates patterns of cultural commonalities, ruling tendencies, shared proclivities, which, despite many differences, persist in the region even today and give it an air of family resemblance.

Many of the key themes in the book were developed over many years in his articles: mandala politics; openness to the new; the creative adaptation of Hindu cognitive structures to local realities; feebleness of governmental structures; marriage politics and charismatic leadership. At the core of this was a vision of early Southeast Asian politics which he designated as mandalas, but that could be described as unstable compounds, an event in time, fluid in borders, lacking in fixed administrative structures, a momentary constellation of interdependent interests

focused on the radiant presence of a charismatic leader or “man of prowess.” Very few of Oliver’s friends and students will read those last words without feeling that he himself was just such a person.

The appearance of the revised edition of *History, Culture, and Region* was suitably greeted by a two-day seminar at the Australian National University. Oliver received many other honors, including the Distinguished Scholarship Award in 1990, the highest recognition bestowed by the Association of Asian Studies. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, was a Visiting Fellow of the Australian National University, and a Bellagio Fellow of the Rockefeller Foundation. He was a Trustee of the Breezewood Foundation, and at Cornell, he served as Chairman of the Department of Asian Studies (1970-72).

All of his colleagues and former students will long remember his generosity, his breadth of spirit, and the gentle and honorable quality of his character. He exemplified in his person the very best values of humane learning. We express our deep sympathy to his wife, Euteen; his son and daughter, Nigel and Pamela; and his sister, Gwyneth.

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