

Cynthia Chou. *The Orang Suku Laut of Riau, Indonesia: The Inalienable Gift of Territory*. London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2010. 176 pp.

Timo Kaartinen

The seascapes and maritime societies of Southeast Asia offer a novel and sometimes privileged vantage point from which to consider such classical issues as state formation, knowledge production, colonial history, and long-distance trade. Cynthia Chou's new book exemplifies the growing ethnographic and historical interest in people who live at the margins and frontiers of land-based polities. It focuses on the Orang Suku Laut, boat-dwelling people whose livelihoods depend on fishing and the trade of sea products across the Riau Archipelago. The setting of Chou's ethnography is just hours away from one of the world's busiest shipping routes, one that also serves Singapore and the Straits of Malacca. Owing to its position in the center of historical trading empires and colonial events, Riau is one of the many unbounded maritime regions of Southeast Asia¹ that have supported hybrid, multi-ethnic, and mobile polities² and remained, for a long time, outside the effective territorial control of modern states. The maritime mobility of the people described by Chou used to be the key to state formation in the Malacca Straits. At present, that mobile lifestyle is being undermined by the joint efforts of Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia to turn Riau into an integrated economic zone, even as its fish stocks, minerals, and fresh water are increasingly contested by the three countries. Chou's book draws a contrast between these schemes of development and territorial control and the entirely different perception of territory among Orang Suku Laut, the "sea people" of the Riau Islands.

In Chou's narrative, the Orang Suku Laut appear alternately as a tribal people and as a society informed by its relationship to the Malay trading states that succeeded Sriwijaya in the fifteenth century. Malacca and Johor were not territorial entities, and their ability to benefit from trade relied on navies composed of sea people fiercely loyal to the Sultan. Colonial and local power struggles related to dominance based on control of the land began to undermine the recognition of the sea people, and in the nineteenth century they were treated as pirates by newcomers, the British authorities. Chou argues, however, that earlier models of the state persist in the sea people's oral histories. The sovereignty they recognize is not localized in a single site but commands a network of interconnected people and places. Their territorial and resource rights do not depend on fixed residence and settlement; instead, those rights derive from the local and personal affiliations that are reproduced when people visit each other and make productive use of the sites where they anchor and land their boats.

The contrast between custodial, socially grounded modes of tenure and the territorial control exercised by modern states has received plenty of emphasis in recent literature. The theoretical interpretation of this contrast is complicated by the language of "ownership" and "rights," two terms that also appear in Chou's account of Orang Suku Laut discourse (p. 63). Acknowledging that the concept of ownership exists

¹ Eric Tagliacozzo, "Smuggling in Southeast Asia: History and its Contemporary Vectors in an Unbounded Region," *Critical Asian Studies* 34,2 (2002): 193–220.

² Timothy Barnard, *Multiple Centres of Authority: Society and Environment in Siak and Eastern Sumatra, 1674–1827* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2003).

among an ethnic minority raises the question of whether its self-definition is based on some kind of legal system and thus a form of cultural or political sovereignty that supports such a system. By Chou's account, this does not seem to be the case for the Orang Suku Laut, who regard sovereignty as entirely relative. This view transpires from their comments, cited at the end of chapter 4, on the numerous political borders and monetary units that represent the shifting source of external state power. What, then, supports the sea people's territorial claims? The subtitle of Chou's book is key to how she handles this problem. She talks about territory as an "inalienable gift," one that extends social relationships to the past and future. It is not as if people can possess land simply by being there first: instead, land constitutes the identity, dispositions, and spiritual essence of its owners. Ultimately, it seems, ownership is the performative result of the acts of mutuality, cooperation, and sharing.

The chapter on social organization contains valuable comparative material. It reveals that the tribal organization and internal hierarchies of the Orang Suku Laut derive from their long, historical connection to Malay states. When this connection has unraveled, their society has turned into a flexible system organized around bilateral kinship. This structure allows households and individuals to move easily between several localized groups. Chou suggests that this is an ecological adaptation typical of island communities that respond to population pressure and the scarcity of land with flexible social relationships and mobility (p. 29). There is room for broader ethnographic comparison, which is not attempted in Chou's book. Communities that expand with the establishment of new households (p. 35) are common in the land-based societies of Borneo and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, and many such societies have also been transformed by their dynamic, historical relationship with Malay communities and states.

The Orang Suku Laut do not live in a bounded territory, but in a maritime world constituted by human activity and movement. This cosmological perspective is addressed in the chapter on fishing that also brings home the social implications of seaborne existence and the variety of maritime resources recognized and used by the sea people. Marine species are not simply caught for eating: some yield commercial products, which are valuable for having certain properties (including "magic"), and, in the fascinating case of the *dugong*, or sea cow, they are caught and kept as cattle. The sea people's world extends across national boundaries, and the obstacles they face on trading trips to Singapore make evident the contradiction between state simplifications and the sea people's mode of life. At the end of the book, Chou takes up two effects of state presence. The passing attempt by the Indonesian government and Islamic missionaries to convert the sea people into a settled welfare population may have had less durable effects than the conversion of the Riau Islands into an integrated economic zone by the governments of Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Economic integration presupposes firm political boundaries that divide up the formerly boundless world of the Suku Orang Laut. On those grounds, Chou is skeptical of the state narrative that promises such integration will simply do away with borders in favor of free-flowing economic activity (p. 119).

Globalization and integrated economic zones bring up complex issues, and Chou's consideration of these is so condensed that it is not entirely clear how the sea people are affected by the sovereignties, constraints, and values involved in such political

developments. She argues that Indonesian and Singaporean state power is instrumental in creating the new regimes of control that allow the integration to take place, leaving the sea people little room to defend their resource rights and way of life. The state certainly remains a big part of the power equation. One wonders, however, if the emerging regional context affects sea people's understanding of their own situation in any way. Is indigeneity, for instance, a meaningful category for the sea people? While it is not particularly recognized by the Indonesian state, it does figure in the international human-rights discourse, and it surfaced in various parts of Indonesia during the country's regime change one decade ago. The trips of sea-cucumber traders to the port in Singapore would be one model for embedding the sea people's economic activities in the emerging border regime—something that has happened elsewhere on a local scale. This would be one way of accepting the multiple realities of Riau and including Orang Suku Laut in the global community, as the book sensibly recommends in the end.

A glance at the book's title suggests that it probably focuses on ethnography. The author herself cautions against this reading by describing her book as a collection of independent essays. The environmental adaptations and territorial claims described in the book are certainly outcomes from survival strategies and development pressures, as Chou states. At the same time, the book's historical narrative suggests that the Orang Suku Laut society has the potential to transform in response to political and ecological shifts and crises. This long historical perspective gives justification to Chou's holistic treatment of the sea people's cosmology and practice, suggesting more continuity between the book's subjects than the author seems to claim. Aside from its interest in political ecology, the book also responds to more general ethnographic concerns. It gives a systematic account of social organization, political history, land-and-sea tenure, economic and productive practices, and responses to state intervention. Chou's handling of these topics conveys her sensitivity to the lived world of the Orang Suku Laut. In addition to providing a fresh perspective on Southeast Asian development and political history, Chou's outstanding ethnography is a useful source for exploring various comparative issues.