

Joshua Barker, Erik Harms, and Johan Lindquist, eds. *Figures of Southeast Asian Modernity*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2013. 328 pp.

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*Figures of Southeast Asian Modernity* offers a surprisingly readable composite of life in contemporary Southeast Asia as experienced by nearly eighty individuals. The book is divided into nine chapters, each covering a different country (Timor Leste and Brunei are omitted). The chapters then subdivide into pithy essays that provide snapshots of a moment in the lives of specific individuals in each country. The innovation offered by Barker, Harms, and Lindquist is their request that authors, in less than a thousand words, “identify and describe a specific figure of modernity ... that offers a vivid and intimate portrait set against the background of contemporary Southeast Asia” (p. 2). Over eighty scholars contribute to the book, each offering one of a “cacophony of voices” (p. 17). Far from being discordant, however, the book is remarkably harmonious. In part, this is the happy consequence of the similar educational backgrounds of the book’s contributors, the majority of whom are early career anthropologists who have recently conducted fieldwork. Their ethnographic writing style is uniformly intimate and accessible, bringing their “figures” alive. Ben Anderson closes the volume with an epilogue.

The editors’ introduction offers a cogent explication of what they mean by “figures of modernity,” which they define as “persons within a given social formation whom others recognize as symbolizing modern life” (emphasis in original, p. 1). Each person figured is real, which not only brings “life and humanity to historical processes and transformations,” but it also opens a window onto larger, impersonal conditions that exist in contemporary Southeast Asia (p. 2). A focus on figures allows for a glimpse at the lived reality within particular cultural and historical contexts.

The introduction shrewdly addresses the possible critiques of the editors’ study of modernity—a global phenomenon—within a geographically delimited region. They acknowledge the criticisms of area studies and risks that can come with the focus on particular countries, but they argue their focus on examples from outside the West attest to the fact that “modernity must be understood as emerging in particular contexts” (p. 12). In detached fashion, the editors treat Southeast Asia as a container, a convenient “historical fiction,” that enables them to limit a study that is otherwise potentially global in its reach. However, Southeast Asia as a geographic region is not a blank slate, seamlessly interchangeable with other regions. Southeast Asian figures of modernity are “animated by the advent of industrial modernity in the context of authoritarian and interventionist states and the ensuing boom-and-bust cycles” of their economies (p. 8). Neoliberalism, economic inequalities, rural–urban divides, and transnational flows of people as laborers and goods are all notable similarities within the region. “By examining modernity through the lives of particular figures, we are able to explore how people across Southeast Asia position themselves in relation to global configurations of modernity and to create a panoramic snapshot of a region in motion” (p. 15). This productive tension between revealing something particular about a given culture or place and something general about what it means to be modern in the region characterizes the book as a whole.

The editors confess that organizing the volume around nation-states is problematic, but argue that the nation-state remains relevant because it is the dominant organizational form of everyday life for the majority of people in the region. An innovation that helps decenter the nation-state organization of the volume is the appendix, which reveals the various ways that the figures link to each other across the region based on other types of commonalities. The index enables readers to disrupt a linear or exclusively nation-state reading of the "figures" by referring to those examples in the index that have been placed in over fifty diverse thematic categories, including activism, development, imaginaries, media and technology, body, history and memory, neoliberalism, and sexualities. If this were an e-book, readers could hyperlink to all figures based on such connections. This also helps avoid a tendency in the book to treat identity as un-integrated or essentialized because only one aspect of a person's identity is highlighted in the essay titles. Striking, if unsurprising, similarities crop up in almost every chapter: the sex worker, migrant laborer, and cultural figure determined to save local traditions from change. They, more than others, symbolize the similar ways in which each country in the region has been integrated into the global economy and modernity.

Some of the figures for a given country cohere around an undeniable core, such as the essays in the Burma chapter, which reveal the imprimatur of a repressive state on each individual's experience. Burma's dictatorial state-led modernity is examined through nine figures, ranging from an animist priest to a government soldier, a sex worker in Thailand to a political exile in New Zealand. The essays on Cambodia's inhabitants also share in common their articulation of life in relation to the aftermath of war, genocide, and the rapid economic shifts occurring in post-communist states. NGOs are a more prominent feature in the Cambodian landscape than in other countries in the region, so it makes sense that the individuals include a Cham heritage protector and a blind musician whose life and music capture the social politics of Cambodia's struggle to combine the traditional with the modern. A village police chief with chameleon-like adaptability to changes in circumstances is productively juxtaposed to an ambitious young monk who links his life to a deceased national hero. In the Laos section, we read about five figures, including an expatriot, a reformed and reeducated Lao hippy, and the ubiquitous monk-with-cell-phone.

Jane M. Ferguson's thoughtful introduction to the Thailand section attends to the ethnicity of Thai modernity. Many of this chapter's "figures" conflate what it means to be modern with Thainess regardless of the diverse ethnic and linguistic background of its sixty-seven million citizens. Highlighted among them are an airline attendant, spirit medium, NGO worker, transnational laborer, slum community leader, and a single woman.

The essays on Malaysia reveal how individuals must negotiate ethnic politics, Islam, and the economic impacts of modernity. We read about Mahathir, a Muslim reactionary, an idealist scholar-musician, a folk hero, a faux political candidate advocating for women's political rights, a satirist, a remarkably savvy Kuala Lumpur squatter, a domestic migrant who struggles upon his return to the village in the highlands, and a timber entrepreneur. Singapore's figures reveal contradictions in Singaporean society and resistance to state attempts at regulation. We witness this through a snapshot of a Malay gangster who navigates ethnic hierarchies in the

underworld, a Bangladeshi worker, a woman activist who advocates for the marginalized, a filmmaker who exposes cinematically the problems ushered in by Singaporean modernity, a schoolteacher who pushes his students to think for themselves, and a social entrepreneur who promotes Middle Eastern cultural events.

Some countries' essays offer more differentiated experiences of modernity, such as those about Indonesia and Vietnam, whose figures are not linked by an easily identifiable common thread. Vietnam's encounter with modernity is shown through the examination of eleven figures ranging from enterprising communist state officials to a Cham girl from the Central Highlands, and a folk performer who embodies state-sanctioned quintessential Vietnamese culture to a young girl who aspires to study abroad and has a weakness for Hello Kitty paraphernalia. In Indonesia, too, readers are bombarded with a dizzying array of personalities and experiences, all of which are mesmerizing. Indonesia's figures hail from across the archipelago—from Aceh to Lombok and Makassar. Those who are affiliated with new technologies stand out. The essay about a telecommunications and media expert offers an acute analysis of truth claims and authenticity in the proliferating, diversified forms of public media available in the archipelago. A snapshot of a Muslim television preacher who has gained celebrity status exposes the evolving relationship of Islam to technology and the market. Other figures paradoxically grab our interest for their invisibility: people with AIDS, street kids, and overseas female laborers. We learn about how the 1998 downfall of the New Order regime changed perceptions of student activists, freedom fighters, and NGO workers. Also competing for attention is the career woman searching for a moral compass, the virtuous Hajji, a spiritual coach selling religious discipline as a remedy for Indonesia's problems, and the cocooned life of a rich person in Bandung.

Most of the ten figures highlighted for the Philippines are connected to the country's position in the global labor market: call-center workers, managers of overseas labor who embody the state's love affair with neoliberalism, agriculturalists who invest foreign remittances in farming ventures, transvestite overseas workers, and merchant sailors. But domestic figures also claim their space, including a Chinese mestizo, a community health worker, a beauty contestant, a lawless type in the southern Philippines who texts with one hand and holds a rifle with the other, and a Filipino domestic worker negotiating the class and family hierarchies of household servitude.

The volume offers a rich portrait of lived experience in Southeast Asia, but it is unfortunate that the editors linked the number of essays to the size of the population for each country. Diversity does not correlate to the number of inhabitants. As a consequence, some countries appear monochromatic compared to others. It also begged the question: why does Singapore (population 5.4 million, only 3.3 of whom are citizens) rate seven figures, while Laos (6.7 million) and Cambodia (15 million) are represented by only five and six inhabitants, respectively? In addition, the volume's originality of design is also its greatest weakness. Like twitter and speed dating, the brevity of the snapshots can only provide a surface glance rather than in-depth analysis. Still, although I was initially dismissive of the book's structure because it seemed to pander to those with short attention spans, it also grew on me. Taken as a whole, it indeed offers a composite view of the figures living in the region today.