

Aat Vervoorn, *Re Orient: Change in Asian Societies*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998. 328 pages.

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For historians of Asia teaching at the college and university level, chances are good that they will teach a course of impossibly broad geographic and chronological scope. Aat Vervoorn, in his 1998 book, *Re Orient: Change in Asian Societies*, attempts the impossible. Professor Vervoorn, a Senior Lecturer in Asian History at the Australian National University, has written *Re Orient* as a textbook for use in introductory courses on Asia. The book covers Asia, defined as a "geo-cultural region" that includes everything between Turkey and Irian Jaya. Vervoorn, who admits that these countries share too little in common to justify their incorporation under the rubric of "Asia," endeavors to link them through thematic concepts. By illustrating relevant contemporary themes through Asia-specific examples, *Re Orient* inventively approaches the study of Asia. Chapter themes include: 1.) Globalization and Insulation in Asia; 2.) State, Society, Individual; 3.) Human Rights; 4.) Ethnic Minorities; 5.) Economic and Social Development; 6.) Patterns of Population Change; 7.) Environmental Impact; 8.) Family Matters; 9.) The World of Work; 10.) Media, Communication, Censorship; and 11.) Using and Creating Knowledge. Each chapter is written in an accessible, straightforward style and replete with useful, comparative statistics, especially on ethnic minorities.

Rather than discuss each of the eleven chapters in detail, this review considers the book's merits and drawbacks as a textbook for an introductory course about Asia. It evaluates *Re Orient* in terms of Vervoorn's stated objectives and the degree to which he accomplishes them. In the introduction, Vervoorn explains his two explicit goals in *Re Orient*: to elucidate major issues facing contemporary Asian societies and to use Asian societies as a vehicle through which to think broadly and comparatively about societies in general. In addition, *Re Orient* has an important implicit objective, which is to raise awareness about epistemic assumptions embedded in concepts such as globalization, development, human rights, ethnicity, and the other themes around which the chapters are organized. In the main, *Re Orient* accomplishes these goals, but with considerable shortcomings.

Vervoorn summarizes his conceptual framework as follows: "Grand generalisations about the East and the West; whole societies characterised and evaluated by reference to a few core values; cultures and traditions conceived as fixed entities; lofty assertions about progress and the development of nations . . . The region we call Asia cannot be understood in such terms, and neither can the West. It is necessary to reorient ourselves . . ." (pp. 276-277). This might be a truism among postcolonial scholars, but it is still a salient and welcome intervention to make in an introductory textbook. Despite Vervoorn's earnest claim to break down the East-West binary, however, he ultimately fails to liberate the book from this imprisoning dualism. Indeed, it may be an inherently contradictory project to write a text on "Asia" that constantly juxtaposes Asia *not* to a historically specific Africa, South America, America, or Europe, but to the perennial, geographically unspecified, ahistorical "West." Chapter three on human rights, which is otherwise comprehensive and informative, exemplifies

how Vervoorn perpetuates the East-West binary. Rather than exposing the complexity of the human rights debate *within* Singaporean society, for example, Vervoorn's examination remains at global level of "East" versus "West." Intra-regional and subnational disputes and discourses about the meanings of human and rights are not addressed. In this way, the discussion of "Western Values" and "Asian Values" reifies rather than razes the East-West coupling by preserving it in the chapter's language and analysis. This is a general criticism of the text: it relies too heavily on quantifying United Nations principles rather than on analyzing subnational understandings of these principles. The fact that the majority of the book's statistics come from United Nations agencies is indicative: Asia is viewed at the macro-level, within a world systems framework.

Re Orient's focus on the global does, however, have beneficial side effects. By remaining at the international level, it agreeably avoids another drawback to textbooks on Asia: the overemphasis on the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis. For Vervoorn, however, this is less out of an ideological commitment to altering radically the parameters of traditional history than out of a commitment to a world systems approach. Within this approach, the nation-state is still a fundamental political administrative unit, but takes second stage to issues that manifest global interaction.

Despite these criticisms of Vervoorn's explicit objectives, he is successful in accomplishing his implicit goal of drawing readers' attention to the lenses through which they view the world. His theoretical critiques upset epistemic assumptions about salient contemporary issues. One particularly outstanding example is in chapter five on "Economic and Social Development." Vervoorn deconstructs the concept of development and its links to enlightenment notions of progress, lucidly revealing how this singular, evolutionary model of development is a restatement of social Darwinism. Unfortunately, this sophisticated discussion of development later sinks into an oversimplified moral debate over whether development is good or bad. The pattern recurs in several chapters. Other issues, such as that of globalization and the anxiety it raises about an increasingly culturally homogeneous world, are initially subtly analyzed then presented as polarized, straw man arguments.

Another dilemma presented by *Re Orient's* steadfast attempt to reorient the world view of readers is its tendency to become bogged down in the quicksand of terminology, where the definition of one term requires the definition of another, requiring the definition of another, and so on. This is unnecessary in a college-level textbook. For instance, chapter two on "State, Society, Individual," never arrives at a discussion of the individual because it dedicates most of the chapter to providing basic definitions of complex terms such as nation, culture, society, rules, law, morality, religion, constitutionalism, and civil society. Consequently, too much space is devoted to generalized definitions and abstractions of the book's major themes rather than on satisfying the need for a profound exemplification of these issues *in the context of communities in Asia*. That is not to say Vervoorn gives no examples: he does. However, the examples from Asia tend to be cursory, ahistorical, and thus not satisfactory in fulfilling the need for in-depth, localized analysis.

The omission of local and personalized accounts in *Re Orient* may have its basis in more than simply the book's ambitious geographic scope. The bibliography is as broad as the themes and territory the book covers, especially in terms of the impressive array

of monographs and secondary sources utilized. Yet, there is not a single non-English language source cited. Vervoorn, a China specialist, surprisingly does not include any Chinese language sources, let alone other Asian language sources. To be fair, no one has mastered this range of languages, and thus it cannot be expected of any single author. However, the fact that Vervoorn utilized *no* sources other than those in English may help explain why the book lacks examples that are deeply embedded in local knowledge systems. Unfortunately this makes *Re Orient* difficult to utilize in a course that aims to convey substantial information about specific, historically contextualized events in Asia, particularly Southeast Asia.

Historical contextualization is not a high priority in *Re Orient*, which is avowedly about contemporary Asia. *Re Orient* presents readers with a *mélange* of times and places, from premodern to contemporary Asia, heavily emphasizing the post-1960s period. Refreshingly, it refuses to conform to a chronological narrative. This is not out of an overt attempt to confound history's beloved timeline, but rather a necessary consequence of the book's extensive thematic structure. A result of this structure, however, is that the book does not give readers a sense of how people in particular communities might handle each issue because those communities are not covered consistently. It also means that important historical information that shapes contemporary issues falls by the wayside.

For example, in chapter four on "Ethnic Minorities," Vervoorn's theoretical discussion of ethnicity as a mutable category is crystalline, but his treatment of ethnicity in Malaysia neglects to mention the substantial Tamil population that has resided there since the colonial period. To understand the government of Malaysia's policies toward its ethnically diverse population today, one must consider British colonial policies. These policies encouraged Chinese *and* Tamil laborers to immigrate to Malaya to work in the tin mines and on rubber plantations, while they confined ethnic Malays within a traditional agricultural framework. The alignment of ethnic group with specific types of employment was just one example of an historic process of ethnic categorization.

Again, to be fair, the ahistoricity of *Re Orient* may be an unavoidable pitfall in a textbook of such grand geographic scope. The demands of a textbook on "Asia" are overwhelming, and no author can be expected to incorporate every significant detail. In fact, *Re Orient*, unlike other textbooks on Asia, includes novel information such as that in chapter ten, "Media, Communication, Censorship." It discusses the relationship between state power and technology, focusing on the ways in which private individuals circumvent state power through fax machines and access to non-state controlled media. Yet, crucially, the chapter fails to mention the Internet. This is one of several omissions of important, well-documented information. The chapters on "The World of Work" and "Economic and Social Development" neglect a discussion of sex work and touristic economies, both of which are deeply related to employment patterns structured by development schemes.¹ Another oversight occurs in chapter

¹ The literature on gender and development is large. Included here are several studies written about Southeast Asia that were available prior to 1998, when *Re Orient* was published. Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, & Bases* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Elizabeth Uy Eviota, *The Political Economy of Gender: Women and the Sexual Division of Labour in the Philippines* (London: Zed Books, Ltd., 1992); Thanh-dam Truong, *Sex, Money, and Morality: Prostitution and Tourism in South-East Asia* (London:

eight on "Family Matters." This otherwise comprehensive essay, which problematizes the notion that economic development leads to the nuclearization of the family, excludes the well-documented existence of non-heteronormative genders and sexualities in Asia.²

Despite these omissions, *Re Orient* is a stimulating introductory textbook on Asia that challenges fundamental assumptions and pushes the analysis of contemporary issues beyond simplistic formulations. Where it might fail in terms of historical specificity, it succeeds in innovation.

Zed Books, Ltd., 1990); Diane Lauren Wolf, *Factory Daughters: Gender, Household Dynamics and Rural Industrialization in Java* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

² For example, some studies of gender and sexual subcultures in Southeast Asia alone that were available before 1998 include: J. Neil C. Garcia, *Philippine Gay Culture: The Last Thirty Years* (Diliman, Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1996); Peter Jackson, "Kathoey <Gay> <Man>: The Historical Emergence of Gay Male Identity in Thailand," in *Sites of Desire, Economies of Pleasure*, ed. Lenore Manderson and Margaret Jolly (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 166-190; Mark Johnson, *Beauty and Power: Transgendering and Cultural Transformation in the Southern Philippines* (Oxford: Berg, 1997); Rosalind Morris, "Three Sexes and Four Sexualities," *Positions* 2:1 (1994): 15-43; and Rosalind Morris, "Educating Desire: Thailand, Transnationalism, and Transgression," *Social Text* 52/53, 15:3 and 4 (Fall/Winter 1997): 53-79.