

Paul H. Kratoska, Remco Raben, and Henk Schulte Nordholt, eds. *Locating Southeast Asia: Geographies of Knowledge and Politics of Space*. Ohio University Research in International Studies Southeast Asia Series, No. 111. Singapore: Ohio University Press/Singapore University Press, 2005. 326 pages.

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This well-edited and stimulating collection of essays on the question that students of Southeast Asia both love and fear to ask, "What and where is Southeast Asia?" comes to us thanks to a workshop held in Amsterdam in 2001 to celebrate the work of Heather Sutherland, professor of history at the Free University. The volume bears clear witness to the emergence of a new paradigm for studying Southeast Asia, one that is based, as Ruth McVey observes in her cogent "Afterword," not on the concept of the "nation-state" or the "region" as defined by American university "area studies" departments, but on "networks," "processes," "transitions," polyvalence, and fluidity. How this new way of looking at Southeast Asia will affect nation- and state-building, still underway and beset with practical challenges of all sorts, is unclear. But the new approaches to studying Southeast Asian history represented by the essays in this book encourage us to recognize patterns and features long in existence, but seldom examined. In so doing, these essays provide us with the basis for new, and more realistic, ways of discussing the challenges facing the nation-states of Southeast Asia as they seek to participate in the new world order now coming into being.

Heather Sutherland's essay "Contingent Devices" opens the collection. With her usual insightfulness and tact, Sutherland dissects the various debates on the identity of "Southeast Asia" in the (largely Western) historiography of the early modern period. She finds consensus on the important role of "connections" within the region, but none on overarching "unities." Interregional connections arose because of trade, cultural interaction, state formation, and cities, but Sutherland deftly shows that each of these categories needs to be released from overly deterministic Western-historical meanings and understood more as "contingent" conceptual "devices" for describing what took place in early modern Southeast Asia.

Sutherland offers the history of Makassar as a case in point. As of the 1660s, Makassar's political and economic decline and fall appear to have been terminal, until one starts to count the number of ships that sailed in and out of Makassar in the early eighteenth century. Presto! — another history of ongoing commercial life springs into view, one that is no more peripheral or "incidental" to the history of Southeast Asia than shifting family networks are to the substantive account of state formation in the region, a fact that Sutherland was the first to articulate in her pioneering studies of Java's colonial regent families.

Sutherland leaves us feeling the need to define more clearly how "cities" have functioned historically in Southeast Asia. The essays by Wang Gungwu ("Two Perspectives of Southeast Asian Studies: Singapore and China"), Howard Dick ("Southeast Asia as an Open System: Geo-politics and Economic Geography"), and Willem Wolters ("Southeast Asia in the Asian Setting: Shifting Geographies of Currencies and Networks") work in tandem to suggest the important role of Southeast

Asian cities, and the Chinese middle classes that live in them, in giving a determinate shape to the region. All three authors argue the crucial importance of China and Chinese commercial networks for creating a "region" out of Southeast Asia.

For the Chinese, it was only with the advent of aggressive European traders that "Nanyang" began to acquire specific cultural and political traits, as a place of trade but also as a region from which the threat of invasion should be feared. By the end of the nineteenth century, according to Gungwu, China had already formed a concept of "Southeast Asia," something that did not take place in Japan until World War I (as shown in an informative essay in this volume by Shimizu Hajime) or in Europe and America until World War II. This "Nanyang consciousness" filtered into the worldview of Chinese living in Southeast Asian cities in the early twentieth century. It still informs the "Anglo-Chinese" perspective on Southeast Asia found in Singapore today, where a sense of Southeast Asian regional identity, in Gungwu's view, is being threatened by the widely held feeling that Singapore is too "exceptional" to belong to the region in which it lies. Sutherland might counter this assertion with the thought that exceptional contingency is the rule as far as historical concepts and experience in Southeast Asia are concerned. Indeed, Howard Dick argues that, seen in terms of urban networks and economic flows, Singapore continues to sit at the "center" of a Southeast Asian world of urban middle-class commercial exchanges that link the region to South China, which must be thought of as being integral rather than peripheral to what we understand "Southeast Asia" to be. Whether or not the South China Sea has or will ever function as a kind of region-unifying "Mediterranean Sea" in the Braudellian sense is a question that Stein Tonnesson raises in his provocative contribution to the volume.

Almost nowhere in this collection does the "nation-state" operate as a meaningful framework for thinking about "Southeast Asia," except where it serves to obstruct or muddy regional consciousness as such. As Thongchai Winichakul demonstrates in his discussion of Southeast Asian studies in Thailand (in "Trying to Locate Southeast Asia from its Navel: Where is Southeast Asian Studies in Thailand?"), Thais still conceive of Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam in terms of "imperial" categories, some of them inherited from the days of Ayutthaya, others being more recent borrowings from the United States, that have become firmly fixed within a Thailand-centric view of the world. According to Ma. Serena I. Diokno, Filipino attitudes to the region are strongly affected by a similar kind of post-imperial and nationalistic exceptionalism that make it difficult to perceive commonalities of culture and historical experience.

For the sea nomads described by Cynthia Chou ("Southeast Asia through an Inverted Telescope: Maritime Perspectives on a Borderless Region") and the inhabitants of "Zomia," a vast highland on the mainland inhabited by speakers of Chin-Mizo-Kuki languages (Willem van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia"), the "borders" drawn by "states," not to mention the "Southeast Asia" conceived by urban traders or intellectuals, are meaningless. Such "peripheral" peoples and regions are, in the view of both authors, central to any attempt to redefine the "region" as something perpetually shifting and transformative, unbounded by any nation or state.

All this talk of fluidities, nomads, and hill tribes may encourage us to forget about other historical realities in the region, like the transformative role of imperialism and

colonialism, and the formation of bounded nation–states. Wolters reminds us how the creation of the gold standard, in conjunction with the formation of the nation–state interfered with more “natural” modes of economic exchange in Southeast Asia. And Eric Tagliacozzo (“Tropical Spaces, Frozen Frontiers: The Evolution of Border-Enforcement in Nineteenth-Century Insular Southeast Asia”) meticulously documents the closing down of borders and frontiers in Southeast Asia during the nineteenth century. The borders that were inexorably tightened and plugged were not just geographical: ethnic and racial categories were, by means of the same processes, made hard and fast.

In conclusion, this is a book brimming with important topics and new approaches for students of Southeast Asia to examine and debate. All of the essays will be useful in university courses at the undergraduate or graduate levels. The collection offers fresh reasons for ignoring the dry-as-dust border guards of academic specialization and for carrying on with writing about a “Southeast Asia” that confounds conventional definitions of what an academic region or subject ought to be. But it may also leave the reader even more troubled than before about the future, in the real world, of a region where so many of its inhabitants have been so unsure, for so many centuries, of a basis for unity or the grounds for common action.