

Editorial Foreword

This issue features a contribution to our ‘SEA Beat’ platform; a publication space we reserve for shorter articles that examine contemporary developments, issues and topics in the region. The essay by Francis E. Hutchinson, Shaun Lin and Tim Bunnell draws attention to the forthcoming 100th anniversary of the Causeway—the one-thousand-metre-long raised track and roadway across the Johor Strait connecting Malaysia and Singapore that has supported the daily flow of people, goods, water, and railway services since 1924. The article presents a compelling case for examining ‘unspectacular but vital’ examples of Southeast Asian infrastructure to uncover local dynamics behind their construction, their meaning and representation, and the histories of the communities that use them. We invite scholars who are interested in examining other cases of everyday Southeast Asian infrastructure to submit their essays for future SEA Beat publication.

The seven research articles that follow our SEA Beat essay examine various dimensions of bridging, linking and separation across different cultural systems, communities, and borders. The lead article by Tan Zi Hao examines the depiction and literary function of the fall of Singapura in the *Sejarah Melayu* through the symbolic and rhetorical significance of violence. Tan argues that violence—as a rhetorical trope—inscribes Melaka into Malay history by providing the literary ruptures that enable genealogical continuities to be claimed across time and space. Building on previous work (notably by O.W. Wolters, Abdul Rahman Haji Ismail and Syed Hussein Alatas), Tan focuses on three episodes preceding the collapse of Singapura, to demonstrate how the combination of ‘unjust violence’ is ‘emplotted ... and storied’ to bridge narrative inconsistencies that enable royal genealogies to be maintained.

The next article, by Davisakd Puaksom, considers the role of newspapers and key intellectuals in the merging of Western science with Buddhism in Thailand. Focusing on *Nangsue Chotmai het The Bangkok Recorder* and *Chotmai het Sayam Samai*, Puaksom recounts how lively debates between Protestant missionaries, monks, and Buddhist intellectuals entered the public forum over issues of religiosity and progress between the 1860s and 1880s. Western critiques of Buddhism’s limitations prompted a robust response by a range of Thai writers and intellectuals. Vernacular print media provided the bridge for local intellectual stakeholders to develop and communicate notions of scientific Buddhism that emerged out of this ‘conjuncture of two epistemologies that clashed over the project of revelation and progress’.

The development of scientific Buddhism in Thailand resonates with Nicholas Chan’s study of Malaysia’s modernist Islamisation project. Challenging conventional views that attribute the embracing of state-led Islamisation by elites as simply a reflection of anti-Western sentiment, Chan argues that secular-leaning Malaysian Muslim elites produced an approach to Islam that provided a space that could accommodate

developmentalist concerns while at the same time positioning Malayness within a more cosmopolitan field of status and prestige. Just as scientific Buddhism emerged from a struggle by Thai elites to situate Buddhism in the wake of Western market, bureaucratic, and intellectual pressures, so too does Chan suggest that Islamisation in the 1980s was a response by elites who sought a version of Islam that spanned both a postcolonial international order and a broader Islamic worldview.

Reassessing the motivations and factors behind elite-endorsed Islamisation in Malaysia resonates closely with Jung Hoon Park's study of the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS) in Java. The article focuses on the process of 'mainstreaming' Islam and the strategies deployed by the PKS that have enabled it to expand its influence to non-Muslim voters. Focusing on Indonesia's complex socio-cultural variations and the dynamics arising out of local-national priorities, Park considers how grassroots activism, factionalism, personalities, and clientelism enables the PKS to traverse different electoral spaces in the forging of political alliances.

Panitda Saiyarod's article also concerns community-based activism, this time in the Thai border town of Chiang Khong as they compete with other actors to influence the implementation of China's large-scale Green Belt Road and Mekong River projects. Focusing on the Rak Chiang Khong Conservation group, Saiyarod applies Caterina Scaramelli's 'moral ecology of infrastructure' to explain both the tensions between China-backed infrastructure and various local stakeholders and the latter's responses to environmental transformations. The article provides an account of a community-based environmental movement in northern Thailand to illustrate how contestation over dam and waterway projects associated with the Belt & Road Initiative have created new conditions of insecurity, uncertainty, and political ambiguity.

Our final two articles take us to the tumultuous years surrounding the Vietnam Wars and the genocide in Cambodia. Through the lens of law, both articles examine the way war captives and minority detainees were prosecuted and persecuted as communists or by actors calling themselves communists. Marcel Berni's essay studies how captured armed combatants and civilian detainees designated as communist were treated by South Vietnamese and American officials. Berni argues that categories used to distinguish different types of captives were politicised and blurred, enabling jailers more leeway to ignore distinctions between captured prisoners and hence their treatment. In broad terms, the study demonstrates how legal principles and procedures concerning captivity were practised and repurposed on the ground during the Vietnam War by American and South Vietnam officials. The insecurity of the Khmer Rouge years in Cambodia and the plight of its Cham Muslim population is the subject of Francis Williams' study, which reveals how gender-based violence was used as a tool of genocide. Based on transcripts of the Extraordinary Chambers of the Courts of Cambodia trials, Williams makes the case that gender-based violence was used both against individual and collective Cham identity.

Our research section is followed by a selection of book reviews; a special thanks to the many reviewers who continue to highlight the exciting new research that is emerging in our field.

Maitrii Aung-Thwin