

Editorial Foreword

More thematically diverse than most recent issues of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, the six research articles in the present issue deal with such topics as the mythology and historiography of the Lao nation, postwar Thai etiquette manuals, Cambodian grassroots perceptions of the dispute with Thailand over the Preah Vihear temple, the emergence in Vietnam of the cult of Ho Chi Minh as the Jade Buddha, the intellectual and professional life of a nineteenth-century Vietnamese mandarin, and the history of a Portuguese-ruled enclave in western Timor. Complementing the articles is our rich book review section.

The historiographical reconstruction of the mythic genealogy of the Lao nation is the subject of the opening article, where Ryan Wolfson-Ford considers the part assigned by Lao historians from the 1920s through to the mid-1970s of the indigenous historical narrative, *nithan khun bulom*. This story relates the divine lineage of Lao rulers as descending from the heavenly Khun Bulom, whose oldest son was believed to have been the first king of Lan Xang. The scripting under French colonial rule of a nationalist history that appropriated the *nithan khun bulom* selectively served the double objective of countering imperialist misrepresentations as well as the Pathet Lao's Marxist internationalism. The figure of Khun Bulom was accordingly reimagined as the ruler of Nanzhao, purported as a Lao kingdom, and the Chinese were cast as the main antagonists to the Lao race in a Darwinian struggle for the survival of the fittest. The ethnocentrism of Lao nationalists was thus the result of a premodern worldview articulated by indigenous cultural texts as much as the localisation of Western (and even Thai) racialist thought and ethnic nationalism.

Even as Lao nationalist ideologues borrowed from their Thai contemporaries, the latter localised Euro-American notions of good manners and gender roles. Juthamas Tangsantikul's article shows how in the postwar period America replaced Britain as a model of civility by examining an etiquette manual, *Kritsana's instructions to Little Sister* (1961), adapted by a male Thai writer from a 1949 text by a female American author. Books of etiquette had been published before in Thailand, as detailed by Patrick Jory elsewhere; but in the context of the Sarit dictatorship and the royalist revival at the turn of the 1960s, *Kritsana's instructions to Little Sister* assumes special significance for its commoner author responded to the court socialites' reactionary attempt to rescue Thai elitist manners from the degradation caused by the rise of a democratic ethos by localising postwar American ideas of middle-class domesticity. By a close analysis of the textual strategies by which the original manual was adapted for the benefit of Thai readers, Tangsantikul shows that the manual attempted to negotiate tensions and contradictions in Thailand's pursuit of 'development' and concurrent promotion of alleged Thai values (e.g. 'Thai-style democracy') during what the late Ben Anderson labelled 'the American Era'.

Much has been recently said and written on the history and the politics of the long-standing dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over the mountainous border area surrounding the Khmer temple of Preah Vihear in the wake of intermittent military clashes from 2008 through 2011. Kimly Ngoun's article manages to break new ground by examining the view of the Cambodian province's residents vis-à-vis the official rhetoric emanating from Phnom Penh. Through the ethnographic method, the author documents the extent to which the borderland's residents have adapted, and in doing so demystified, the state's nationalist discourse of protecting territorial sovereignty and heritage sites. Far from this official rhetoric, ordinary Cambodians in Preah Vihear province see the construction of roads and other infrastructure pragmatically as enhancing mobility and trade, hence livelihood opportunities — as testified by the booming of new settlements and markets along newly asphalted roads. Instead of the anti-Thai animosity fomented by state rhetoric, grassroots perceptions entail a diverse range of meanings that denote a more layered and nuanced definition of the Cambodian 'nation'.

Another phenomenon that has been much discussed recently in the academic literature is the emergence of new popular cults and religious beliefs in post-Doi Moi Vietnam. Chung Van Hoang's article examines the worship of Ho Chi Minh as the Jade Buddha by a religious movement known as the Peace Society, which though mirroring the posthumous personality cult promoted by the state on the model of ancestor worship, is rather more akin to the worship of indigenous spirits. The article examines how the Peace Society has been promoting through its mediums and publications the agenda of a religious nationalism that champions the unity of 'spiritual revolution' and 'heavenly laws', and rejects foreign (notably Chinese) influences. The recent deification of Uncle Ho as a benevolent spirit redoubles his memorial status as Vietnam's founding father and points to the continuity of both popular religion and millenarian beliefs in the current context of regional and global integration.

In the following article the focus shifts from the present to the past of Vietnam, as Keith W. Taylor illuminates political dynamics in the reign of Minh Mang (1820–40) through the life of official and poet, Nguyen Cong Tru (1778–1858), whose times saw for the first time a dynasty governing both the north and the south of Vietnam. As an official, Tru was involved in quelling local rebellions and addressed peasants' impoverishment by submitting a petition to the throne that led to his appointment as Commissioner of Fields for the Landless. Back in Hue in 1830 Tru clashed, however, with another official, Hoang Quynh, one generation younger than him. As their relations soured, Quynh's accusation caused Tru's momentary demotion to district magistrate, but this did not harm his career, which culminated in the prestigious post of governor of Hue province. Accordingly, Taylor concludes that promotions and demotions were routine aspects of the bureaucratic machinery, which in order to work properly required the presence at the top of a knowledgeable and authoritative king able to prevent its degeneration into an arena of factionalism and intrigue. Minh Mang was such a king, not so his two successors, the last Vietnamese monarchs before French conquest.

The last article takes us to Island Southeast Asia, more precisely to the Oecusse-Ambeno enclave in Timor, over which the Portuguese maintained a hold from the eighteenth through to the twentieth centuries owing to the confluence of

economic, political and religious factors. Based on Portuguese sources from the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, Laura S. Meitzner Yoder reconstructs how the Portuguese established the Oecusse-Ambeno enclave in the context of competing Dutch expansionism in western Timor, boundaries being eventually established in 1916. Over the following century, Oecusse has remained a political enclave as a result of the local leaders' ritualistic identification with Catholicism and allegiance to Portuguese authority in Timor until the end of 1975, when the Indonesian military took Oecusse one week before invading East Timor; local leaders were however able to retain Oecusse's enclave status. Following the end of the Indonesian occupation and the proclamation of Timor's political independence in 2002, the enclave was granted special administrative status and proclaimed, as recently as 2015, Timor's first Special Economic Zone, thus reviving its colonial history as a trading hub.

As always, we trust readers will find in these pages — whether paper or electronic— new stimuli for debate.

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