

Editorial Foreword

Readers will find six research articles in this October issue of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* dealing in equal proportion with Myanmar/Burma, Indonesia and Thailand, focusing on the contemporary age as well as the late colonial and early postcolonial eras, and spanning disciplines from public policy and economic, political and social history to social and cultural anthropology. Although no single unifying theme or concern binds these articles together, a revisionist intent animates the three articles written by historians, one on Burma and two on Indonesia; while the interplay of economic, social and cultural dynamics at the local level with the state's central policies underlies the remaining three articles, one more on Burma and the other two on Thailand.

The opening article is Patrick Meehan's controversial but persuasively argued study on the role of the drugs trade in supporting state formation in Burma. Challenging the dominant approach to illicit economies, and drug production in particular, as being both a cause and a symptom of a state's weakness (of which Burma is often considered a paradigmatic example), the author argues that in fact the Burmese state's involvement in the drugs trade since the late 1980s, though initially aimed at gaining control over the border areas by co-opting ethnic insurgent groups in the wake of mass antigovernment demonstrations in 1988, has in fact supported the centralisation of the means of violence and extraction. Pointing to the implications his analysis carries for the devising of effective anti-drug policies, Meehan stresses the need for 'an understanding that it is not the presence of the drugs trade itself, but the political complexes which develop around it that determine whether it becomes a cause of stability or violence, state collapse or state-building'.

The article that follows, by Asuka Mizuno, taps into a previously neglected source to revise the common understanding by historians of Burma of the categories of 'agriculturalist' and 'non-agriculturalist', as used in colonial statistics and reports. Following the conceptual lead of Nicholas Dirks, who has proposed that India's castes were the creation of colonial administrators, Mizuno questions who an agriculturalist, and by converse a non-agriculturalist, was in a specific village tract of the Irrawaddy delta in the period from the 1890s to the 1920s. The distinction is particularly relevant in view of the crisis of the late 1920s (even though the crisis itself is outside the article's scope), which historians, following colonial administrators, have seen as causing the alienation of paddy land from small-plot-owning 'agriculturalists' to large landowners who did not themselves cultivate the land. Mizuno concludes that the intrinsic ambiguity of the category of 'agriculturalist' prevents historians from gauging the actual extent of land ownership in the rural areas in the four decades under investigation here; and that the apparent paradox of making use of a vague classificatory term in

land administration can be explained by Dirks' contention that 'knowledge was what colonialism was all about'.

The next two articles focus on the political and social history of Indonesia, and Java more precisely, in the final decades of colonial rule and the initial years of independence, and by doing so, engage prevalent historiographic interpretations of nationalism. Henk Schulte Nordholt, in a paper he qualifies as an 'hypothesis', challenges both Indonesia's nationalist historiography and the template of Asian nationalism put forth by Benedict Anderson's *Imagined communities* by divorcing modernity from nationalism in the Netherlands Indies and relating it, instead, to the social values and practices of the indigenous urban middle class, which for the author were conformant rather than antagonistic to the colonial regime's interests: 'the middle classes wanted to participate in a new modern lifestyle within the framework of the colonial state'. Modern education and consumerism, as promoted by school posters and printed advertisements (some of which are reproduced here), were the means whereby the indigenous urban middle classes, though denied access to the political process, were able, according to Schulte Nordholt, 'to become the new cultural citizens of the colony'. While this argument curbs the import of Indonesian nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s, the author also emphasises that 'the trajectory towards this new socio-cultural destination was not a smooth one. Members of the middle classes aspiring to participate in progress and modernity faced racial boundaries and uncertainty and confusion about the making of the new nuclear family'.

A revisionist intent also underlies the article by R. E. Elson and Chiara Formichi, who reconsider the origins of the Darul Islam rebellion led by S. M. Kartosuwiryo, which from West Java spread out as far as Sulawesi over some 15 years (1948–62). Questioning the dominant interpretation of the rebellion as an attempt to establish an Islamic state grounded in religious fanaticism, the authors of the article examine Kartosuwiryo's metamorphosis from fervent nationalist to rebel against the Indonesian Republic by focusing on the five years between 1945 and 1949, when he came to doubt the ability of the newly installed Republican government to act boldly to seize independence from the Dutch and, following their overthrow of the Republic in December 1948, launched his army into a 'holy war', which culminated in the proclamation of the Islamic State of Indonesia in August 1949. Yet because Kartosuwiryo's political intransigency was common to several other nationalists within the Indonesian Republic, who, however, did not rise in arms against it, Elson and Formichi conclude that his resort to violence 'was a function of the repeated interplay of contingency and locally motivated reaction' at an historical juncture, the 1940s, when 'Islamism escaped the constraining bonds of mainstream nationalism and nationalist discourse'.

The last two articles are ethnography-based studies of processes of social and cultural transformation taking place in Thailand's southern and northern regions, respectively. Alexander Hortsman looks at the Songkhla Lake basin area in the Deep South, where a bloody communal conflict has been rampaging for a decade now, to examine the ways in which Malay Muslims and Thai Buddhists manage peaceful coexistence at the margins of the conflict. Examining a range of social practices, from weddings and funerary rituals to ancestor cults and public performances, in which both Muslim and Buddhist spiritual leaders participate and elements of both

religions are involved, Hortsmann detects a competition that favours the integration of cultural and religious differences and at the same time provides opportunities for social mobility and prestige. This competition is also responsible for the local revitalisation of both faiths since state patronage of Buddhism is countered by the proselytism of transnational Islamic movements. Despite being fragile and fraught with tensions stemming from increasing cultural fragmentation, the balance between Muslims and Buddhists in the Songkhla Lake area shows that the various social groups 'maintain the boundaries of their religious identity more clearly and rigidly [than in the past], but still participate in the institutional activities based on customary law and local knowledge in order to prevent the destabilisation of their neighbourhood, community or village'.

Finally, Andrew Johnson's article considers the intertwined dynamics of urban conservation and supernatural regeneration in Chiang Mai as they seemingly converge on a recent *lieux de mémoire* — the Three Kings Monument. In spite of being an expression of Bangkok's economic and cultural hegemony, the monument has become 'the emblem for those local professionals invested in overturning this current political power differential' *vis-à-vis* the capital. Appropriately for a monument that commemorates thirteenth-century *Tai/Thai* rulers (ambivalence intended), the Three Kings Monument symbolises the mobilisation of Chiang Mai's past as the capital of the northern kingdom of Lanna in the attempt to restore the city's prosperity. Given the centrality of the past in the social imagination of the city's inhabitants, Johnson focuses his analysis on urban planners and spirit mediums, whom he both regards as seeking 'the intercession of "spirits" from the past in the present' — the former through heritage conservation and the latter through ritual invocation, both activities being directed at the city's centre where the monument stands. The author explains thus his pairing of a scientific and a magical undertaking: 'Much like mediums turned to an invisible supernatural power that provided the solution to all of the disparate threats which Chiang Mai faced, planners turned towards culture as a power which would similarly solve Chiang Mai's current state of crisis.'

As always, articles are followed by the book review section, which includes studies concerned with Asia and Southeast Asia as a whole as well as monographs on Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, The Philippines and Vietnam, in a total of twenty book reviews. We hope readers will find in the following pages insightful analyses, stimulating new ideas and starting points for reflection and debate.

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