

## Editorial Foreword

Collective action, in the form of street protests in Bangkok and Rangoon, and collective beliefs, in the form of historical memory in the Philippines and the Karen imaginary, are the overarching themes of four of the seven research articles in this issue of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. The remaining three are concerned with politics and race in British Malaya and Singapore in the late colonial era and on the eve of decolonisation.

The opening article, by Erik Cohen, analyses one particular and particularly disturbing episode — the splattering of human blood on pavements — during the red shirt demonstrations in Bangkok in early 2010. While openly symbolic, the spilling of blood was nevertheless difficult for many to understand ‘in terms of the conventional vocabularies of religious and political action in Thailand’. As a performative act, it was construed both as non-violent resistance and even exorcism (ineffective, as it turned out) to avert the possibility of real bloodshed as well as, on the contrary, ‘uncivilised’ political theatrics. As a cultural act, its initial ascription to Khmer/Brahmanical ritualism was rejected and a Thai historical precedent invented for it. Finally, as magic, the ‘act was intrinsically related to popular supernatural beliefs’, which were detectable also in the subsequent cleansing despite its rational validation by medical discourse. ‘The blood spilling episode,’ concludes Cohen, ‘thus seems to introduce an important innovation in the conduct of political protest in Thailand, with a wider implication for the study of social change in the kingdom’.

The second article, by Hongwei Fan, examines the anti-Chinese riots that broke out in Rangoon in June 1967 as a result of the resident Chinese students’ defiance of the Burmese government’s ban on the wearing of Mao badges in school. The riots drastically ended more than a decade of ‘fraternal’ relations between the two countries and led to an exodus of Burma’s Chinese community. Even though analyses of the riots were produced as early as the 1970s, Fan’s account of the events and their political aftermath is unprecedented in terms of factual detail and analytical insight, being based on a wide array of Chinese sources, interviews with eyewitnesses and even a declassified Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) report. While explaining the riots as a response to the radicalisation of China’s foreign policy instigated by the Cultural Revolution, Fan argues that domestic conditions (the 1967 rice shortages caused by Ne Win’s economic nationalisation and the consequent rise of xenophobia) and Cold-War anticommunism also contributed to stirring Burmese hostility against the Chinese. ‘Ne Win’s determination to confront China,’ claims the author, was ‘no mean feat as Burma had always been wary of Red China for fear of being invaded and subverted from within’.

The context of decolonisation and the Cold War evoked by Fan rises to prominence in the following two articles. Andrea Benvenuti reassesses the attitudes of the

Australian government of R.G. Menzies towards Singapore's political and constitutional development by focusing on the 13 months from April 1955, when elections in the island empowered left-wing parties, to May 1956, when David Marshall's short-lived government came to an end. Relying on recently declassified diplomatic records, Benvenuti counters recent scholarship's criticism of Menzies and judiciously argues that his government's response to Britain's transfer of power to Singaporean politicians 'was sensible and far from negative' as it 'sought to ensure, quite pragmatically, that this process would not produce outcomes contrary to Australian politico-strategic interests in the region'.

The spotlight stays on Malaya's power transition at the turn of the 1950s in the next article, which examines British attempts to contain, in the context of the communist 'Emergency', the rise of communal politics through the creation in 1949 of the Communities Liaison Committee (CLC). Joseph M. Fernando argues on the basis of previously untapped colonial records that the CLC played a greater role in shaping postcolonial Malaysia's political developments than hitherto assumed. Though an informal body, the CLC, writes Fernando, 'achieved considerable success in reaching compromises on complex intercommunal issues' and also 'paved the way for political and constitutional reforms and helped to speed up the decolonisation process'.

A persistent preoccupation in colonial Malaya, intercommunal relations are examined in Marc Rerceretnam's theoretically informed article from the perspective of interracial marriage within the Catholic and Methodist communities at the turn of the twentieth century. Interracial unions were not uncommon in the Malay archipelago before British rule, but massive male immigration from India and China late in the nineteenth century and the parallel growth in missionary orphanages and homes for the destitute concurred in promoting interracial marriages among Chinese and Indian Christian converts. Noting that 'there has been little to no work on intermarriage between colonially subservient Asian communities', Rerceretnam contends that 'Asian-based Christian communities are a perfect case study' for appreciating the prevalence of interethnic relations in Malaya and Singapore in spite of colonial society's overt racial divisions.

The last two articles examine collective beliefs through the lenses of the disciplines of history and anthropology, respectively. Lydia N. Yu Jose, in an article whose methodology is as intriguing as its subject matter, probes the veracity of the enduring rumour that 'the Koreans committed more atrocities than the Japanese in Second World War Philippines'. Noting that 'hearing or narrating a rumour is different from believing it', the author adopted a two-pronged strategy — scrutinising war-trial documents in Manila and Washington archives and administering questionnaires to her students — in order to assess the rumour's origins and persistence. Jose's finding that there were 'just over 600' Koreans in wartime Philippines, and that the rumour is therefore historically unfounded, raises important questions about 'the relevance of specific policies and actions of particular historical agents' in shaping historical memory in postcolonial contexts. Alas, these questions will require separate consideration.

Finally, Mikael Gravers brings four decades of fieldwork to bear upon an analysis of the cosmologically conceived 'Karen royal imaginary' which, he asserts, must be

regarded 'not in the sense of an illusion, but as part of the aspirations of a Karen cultural community and polity' and as a means to retain their cultural origins. Central to the Karen royal imaginary is the millenarian figure of a leader who will guide the scattered Karen nation in their search for knowledge and wisdom, whose perceived loss is 'the reason why the Karen were reduced to swidden agriculture and hunting, and why their insights into the global forces of cities and states were diminished'. Combing through Karen cosmology, legends and history, Gravers concludes that 'The Karen have a fear of states and governments and look for enchanted leaders whom they can trust' even as they are painfully aware that 'he who poses as the saviour may easily turn into a destroyer'.

As always, articles are followed by an extensive book review section, where 18 recent publications are discussed. Readers will notice among the reviewers a number of senior scholars together with younger but already established academics in the field and some younger still, who recently graduated to it. The cross-generational compass of the reviewers complements the increasingly marked national diversification of the authors of articles — evidence of the internationalisation of Southeast Asian studies over the past decade — and confirms the pre-eminence of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* as an international forum for academic debate involving three generations of scholars across four continents.

Maurizio Peleggi