

Review

DAVID G. MARR AND A. C. MILNER, EDS., *SOUTHEAST ASIA
IN THE 9TH TO THE 14TH CENTURIES*¹

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Southeast Asia nurtures such rank and exuberant variegation of language, custom, and subsistence mode that it is scarcely possible to focus the jumbled pieces into a coherent image. For the historian there is the special difficulty of discerning the shape of a time that once encompassed a plenitude of apparently incommensurate moments. Not only does the center fail to hold but, in a multicentric world, there never was one. Thus, despite the title, *Southeast Asia in the 9th to the 14th Centuries*, it is not surprising that the twenty essays in the book under review—seven on maritime, and thirteen on mainland, Southeast Asia—do not in their aggregate reveal any overarching quality of experience or unifying structure that might constitute a common object of study. Instead, and most valuably, we are presented with the historical imagination at work, engaged in strikingly parallel ways on the rich provender of creeds, languages, and peoples heaped and piled in Southeast Asia.

A book of essays written at top form by distinguished scholars, the product of a major international conference, represents in itself an episode in historical thinking. What sets this conspectus apart from earlier writing? What seems to me evident first of all in these essays is a new sense of the unfolding of time, everywhere present as a determining perspective but nowhere explicitly stated. At least one thousand years of previously almost vacant time, the period of late prehistory, is now, because of recent archaeological discoveries, vibrantly inhabited, rich in drama, and seen to be full of shaping power for subsequent historical events. It is apparent that the early centuries AD are no longer viewed as the seed time of the disciplines and skills requisite to civilization; instead, by that period, Southeast Asia is increasingly perceived to be already an ancient world of great material, social, and intellectual complexity.

Second, and related to this lengthening of the meaningful past, is the new conviction that Southeast Asian peoples formed their characteristic patterns of life, and extended and inflected them, primarily out of their own resources. Without denying that ideas travel as well as goods, this conviction has made less possible an unreflective acceptance of either "Indianization" or "Sinicization," and has drained life from diffusionist explanations for social and cultural development. It has also brought to the foreground in a number of these essays a search for the distinctive characteristics of early Southeast Asian polities as the linchpin of civilized order.

Third is the conviction that Southeast Asian realities are rooted in the particularities of place and that they can be recovered only by a plurality of methods and points of view. This pluralism is evident in the ease with which anthropologists, historians, archaeologists, linguists, and epigraphers cross disciplinary boundaries in these essays. One consequence of this focus on the depth and roundedness of

1. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985. xviii and 416 pp.

life as it was actually lived is a skepticism about "grand theory." In this spirit both Hermann Kulke and Jan Wisseman-Christie reject Marx's "Asiatic Mode of Production," and a number of the contributors, including Kulke, Christie, Janice Stargardt, Keith Taylor, and, possibly, Michael Vickery and Claude Jacques see irrigation as largely locally controlled and initiated and therefore providing no basis for the closely related "Hydraulic Society" model. Another and quite different construal of Southeast Asian realities, at least as exemplified by Balinese polities, and put forward as a model by Clifford Geertz in *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali*, is found by Christie to require significant qualification in order to become persuasive.

When we look now at individual essays we find six articles on Vietnam. Each emphasizes the way Vietnamese cultural and social practices are rooted in a non-Sinic world. John Whitmore, writing on the Lý period (AD 1010–1225), asks whether there was a social and cultural gulf between Vietnam and other Southeast Asian kingdoms of that time and concludes there was none and that Vietnam should be viewed "as an integral, not an exceptional, part of Southeast Asia. . . ." Keith Taylor inquires whether the "peculiar type of authority wielded by the Lý dynasty" was primarily indebted to a Chinese prototype, or whether it was closer to patterns more familiar to other early Southeast Asian communities. He argues, convincingly, that the Lý developed "some form of sacred kingship" out of a unique mix of Buddhist sects, Taoist priests, popular cults, and local spirits with which the Lý kings formed relations. In his view, the "Lý dynasty was essentially the growth and decay of a religious idea," and this idea was demonstrably different from that on which the authority and legitimacy of Chinese emperors rested.

In his article on "Vietnamese Ceramics and Cultural Identity," John Guy traces distinctive localized elements in high-fired wares produced before the second half of the fourteenth century. But, with the advent of cobalt blue decoration under glaze and the expansion of production to meet export demand, there was "a new direction in Vietnamese ceramics, away from localized statements towards a growing conformity to Chinese models and conventions." Similarly, articles by Esta Ungar and Tran Quoc Vuong explore the tension between imported Chinese models and what they view as the vigor of local traditions.

Two articles, one by Ian Mabbett, "Buddhism in Champa," and Pamela Gutman's "Symbolism of Kingship in Arakan," explore the sea change that imported cultural forms underwent in their journey from India to Southeast Asia. Mabbett makes the point that Buddhism in its peripatetic life "did not merely take on the colouration of local cultures; it also performed different roles in different times and places." From a technique of salvation it could become, among other things, a philosophy, a vehicle of "talismanic-magic," a hybrid mixed with folk cults, a royal cult, and state orthodoxy. He traces the "bundle of religious activities," greatly varied in form and function, that Buddhism served in Champa, where it took its place as one of the elements among others in a court culture that it was "the business of educated men to study."

Pamela Gutman traces the role of imported elements of Indian symbolism as they were recast in the political culture of Arakan. In doing so she demonstrates the persistence, "with appropriate innovations," in Arakan over a period roughly from the sixth to the sixteenth centuries of "an old Indian imperialist tradition." Both these articles give rise to the thought that what Southeast Asians found attractive, even necessary, in classical Indian culture was a vocabulary of prefabricated allusions, stock metaphors, and epithets that could do two things: state highest truths and do this with commonplaces, *topoi*, so well worn and polished by use, arising from the common intents of an elite, that they could be understood without conscious effort. The swarming messiness, the hum and buzz of local reality, was

not normally expressed by this vocabulary but, just like classical echoes in the West, it could serve a range of social ends.

Three of the remaining mainland papers are focused at least in significant part on economic issues. Srisakra Vallibhotama reconstructs "Dvaravati" history on the basis of archaeology and the study of ancient settlement distribution in the Chao Phraya Valley. He postulates the emergence of two culturally divergent port cities as the major centers of early civilization in central Thailand. They are U Thong in the Tha Chin River basin in the west and Sri Mahasod in the Bank Pakong basin in the east. These urban complexes both seem to share aspects of material culture and foreign contact with such second to sixth century sites as Oc Eo in Vietnam and Beikantho in Burma. But between the two river basins there were religious and other cultural differences and, in his view, these tendencies persisted throughout the history of the "Dvaravati" period (sixth to eleventh centuries AD).

Janice Stargardt situates the rise and decline over a period of 800 years of the hydraulic and agricultural complex on the Satingpra peninsula in southern Thailand within a wider context of Pyu, Khmer, and Mon sites elsewhere. In the course of her article a number of cherished assumptions are challenged: the supposed dichotomy between trading and agricultural communities; the absence of commodity production in early Southeast Asia; the belief that the great river valleys are the home of the earliest civilizations.

Economic activity in ancient Cambodia is the subject of Claude Jacques' article. He suggests that the innumerable references to slaves in Khmer epigraphy do not necessarily implicate a secular order in which a few men own many others, but might more likely refer merely to pious villagers who devote themselves to the welfare of a god. Once this view of "slavery" is entertained, it is, as Jacques points out, no longer necessary to see most of the land in the hands of a few great landowners. Rice fields were bought and sold and there may have been a "fairly large class of small land holders."

The last of the mainland articles, "Some Remarks on Early State Formation in Cambodia" by Michael Vickery, also draws on pre-Angkorian epigraphy and provides evidence of potentially great importance of the emergence of a local elite group from which royalty may derive. The author identifies a title "poñ" the "bearers of which appear in nearly all parts of pre-Angkor Cambodia . . . , as founders and donors of the gods and temples commemorated by the inscriptions." This title seems to refer not only to members of the highest elite families but is held by low-level officials as well. Vickery hypothesizes that the poñ were originally local chiefs and that, since "the first royalty must have developed out of existing elites, it is safe to infer, even if proof is impossible, that some poñ eventually became the earliest 'kings.'" By the late eighth century the title had completely disappeared to be replaced by another, *mratañ*, which may suggest a new ruling group imposed over the poñ. Here we seemingly have a link between structures of great antiquity and the rise of the earliest Khmer polities.

Several of the papers on Java test the adequacy of the "mandala" concept against what can be inferred from inscriptions about the political environment and the processes by which power was exercised. The capacious term *mandala* usually indicates, I think, something like a political system of obscure extension, ramifying from various centers, porous at its periphery, diffusely administered throughout, but precariously unified by charismatic leadership and ritual display. In her article, "Negara, Mandala and Despotic State: Images of Early Java," Jan Wisseman-Christie finds that both archaeological evidence, especially illuminating on the degree of economic integration, and epigraphy argue for the existence of a more cohesive state structure and thus point to the need to qualify the *mandala* concept. Related to her article, and an important contribution to any future study of early Javanese polities will be J. G.

de Casparis' study of the titles of officials, religious leaders, and village spokesmen who constituted the formal and informal channels by which the power of the central government reached the base of the population to raise revenue, exact service, and organize security.

Standing in creative tension with the two preceding articles is Hermann Kulke's "The Early and the Imperial Kingdom in Southeast Asia." While accepting the general utility of the mandala model with its "precarious balance of power" for the early Southeast Asian state, he suggests that at Angkor, Burma, and East Java in the first centuries after the second millennium there were structural changes of sufficient magnitude and kind as to give rise to a new kind of unified polity which he calls "Imperial Kingdoms." He sets forth in plausible outline the changes by which the social forces shifted in prevailing direction from centripetal to centrifugal.

Two papers move the focus of discussion beyond the framework of Javanese history. C. C. MacKnight reviews the prehistory of the eastern parts of the archipelago and shows it to be both earlier and different from the course of development in the western archipelago including Java and Sumatra. Although the history of the eastern regions remains shadowed, largely because they participated less directly in the cultural exchanges with India and China, MacKnight suggests that, once the region is considered as a vitally important subject of inquiry on its own terms rather than as a fringe area, it has much to offer for a balanced view of historical development.

As if to give force to MacKnight's argument, Pierre-Yves Manguin has canvassed the many instances in which societies in the archipelago choose boat symbolism to represent the ordered political community. What he discloses is something like a root metaphor with a remarkable continuity across great distances and one that, through the equivocality and polyvalence of symbols, encompasses great social and ecological diversity as well. The intrinsic value of his study is immediately apparent: something deeply intertwined in the imaginative world of scattered Austronesian-speaking communities is brought to light. His approach could be usefully applied to such other richly evocative symbols as the house, metallurgy, and weaving, to mention only an obvious few.

In his helpful introduction to this volume, Wang Gungwu notes that one session at the conference was organized around the theme of "approaches." He mentions papers by O. W. Wolters and Peter Worsley as examples of methodological innovation. But I have deferred reference to papers by James Fox and Helmut Loofs-Wissowa as well because they, too, seem to fit readily with the approach undertaken by both Wolters and Worsley.

Wolters offers a reading of a Vietnamese text, a piece of historical writing. Through a series of displacements, he shifts attention from the sense of the text as a window on to a meaningful and interpretable world to those conventions of narrative order and genre clues that make it possible to read the text at all. He gives us then an artisan's view of how a text is fabricated as an artifact of words and also the set of rules or conventions that a skilled reader must possess to employ the text to some human end. There is nothing exclusive or limiting in Wolters' approach. He does not suggest that texts are a closed system or that they have no recoverable relationship to the world they purport to disclose, nor does he invite interpretive license. He does, however, enlarge the possibilities of understanding by pointing out how the various elements of a text are governed by an order, and how the themes of the text are announced by their recurrent sounding within that order. All this comes together in his rich and insightful interpretation of the text.

By a happy convergence, the papers of Fox, Worsley, and Loofs-Wissowa are also marked by a concern for the placement of elements in formal systems. Fox

investigates, with the aid of P. J. Zoetmulder's Old Javanese dictionary, the possibility of reconstructing the ancient Javanese relational kinship categories and system and compares and contrasts it to that of the present day. His important conclusions are that "the Old Javanese kinship system is entirely Austronesian and, in its basic categorical structure, shows little if any Sanskrit influence; indeed certain of its features are contrary to the Indian model. The second is that the semantic structure of modern Javanese is much like that of Old Javanese and shows a development from it."

In his paper, Worsley looks at three narrative relief cycles carved on Surawana, a temple northeast of Kediri in eastern Java which was probably erected in the fourteenth century. By analyzing the logic controlling the position of the reliefs and the appositions of relief cycles to each other in reference to the circumambulation path of the viewer, Worsley recovers, through spatial logic and narrative order, intimations of a moral order.

Loofs-Wissewa asks why the Khmers never felt compelled to adopt the true, rather than the corbelled, arch in their massive building program, and, conversely, why the Pyu and the Burmans did. But instead of simply looking at the question as one of the arrested or fulfilled conquest of a technical system, Loofs-Wissewa suggests, if I follow him correctly, that the arch may profitably be studied as an element of cultural meaning and that the Khmer did not use it because it had little relevance to what they were trying to say.

Taken altogether these papers constitute an excursive view of Southeast Asia. Like all thoughtful and enriching travel, we deepen our understanding by experiencing things from many perspectives, looking at them in different light and weather. It is a fact much to be admired that twenty scholars working independently have produced a volume that is both companionable and pathbreaking. The editors, David Marr and A. C. Milner, deserve our thanks.

