

Review of *New Terrains in Southeast Asian History* by Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Liok Ee
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***New Terrains in Southeast Asian History*. By Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Liok Ee. Athens, Ohio: Center for International Studies Ohio University Press. 2003. ISBN: 0-89680-228-0**

After Orientalism¹ and the nation-state narrative, what is next for writing history in the Southeast Asian region? *New Terrains in Southeast Asian History* attempts to answer this question by analysing unexamined areas in history. *New Terrains* is an attempt to reflect on the position of the Southeast Asian intellectuals in the production of knowledge. Moreover, it seeks to reformulate the kind of history production and trajectory of historical writing in the post-colonial era.² The papers in the book are a selection of essays presented at the Conference of Southeast Asian Historiography Since 1945. In the survey of works, the majority of the participants acknowledged the dominant narrative of the nation-state as a specific reaction to the decolonization process.³ As I will describe below, the volume is organized into three sections, with an “Introduction,” and aims to address these theoretical and methodological issues. Furthermore, it offers examples of how alternative histories look like when these new perspectives are applied.

¹ The term here refers to a specific period wherein the orientalist discourse stemming from the West was questioned and provoked revisionist outcomes such as in writing history. See Gyan Prakesh, “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography.” *Society for Comparative Study of Society and History* 32, no. 2 (1990): 383 – 408.

² Arif Dirlik, “The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Capitalism.” *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 2 (1994): 328 – 356.

³ Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Liok Ee, “Introduction,” in *New Terrains in Southeast Asian History*, edited by Abu Talib Ahmad and Liok Ee Tan (Ohio: Center for International Studies Ohio University Press, 2003), xiii. This direction is also similar with Indian historiography, see Prakesh 1990.

As Southeast Asia has been thrust in global capitalism, there have been attempts in various disciplines by Southeast Asian intellectuals to formulate an alternative to the discourse of the Third World.⁴ These essays from Southeast Asian local historians provide an overview of the challenges facing a historiography of postcolonial societies. After the exuberance of colonial independence and the creation of nation-states, the demand to reflect and re-write new narratives, in light of global capital and other voices previously excluded, has become central. This requires looking into alternative historical and non-historical sources as well as reanalysing the various historical materials, especially local sources. This is where the local Southeast Asian scholars hold an inherent advantage. *New Terrains* provides an initial theoretical framework for an alternative history. The strength of the collection, however, lies in the application of these new methods and perspectives through two categories of alternative histories in the book. Although the collection does not represent all nations in the Southeast Asian region, these alternative histories remain as models for all students of history.

Introduction

In the introduction, Ahmad and Tan discuss common issues shared within a disparate region consisting of Mainland Southeast Asia (dominated by Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, along with Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia) and Island Southeast Asia (Indonesia and Philippines). The nation-state narrative project that has dominated history writing in the region has raised several theoretical and

⁴ See Arif Dirlik, "Spectres of the Third World: Global Modernity and the End of the Three Worlds." *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (2004): 131 – 148.

methodological issues common across Southeast Asian countries. The first is the position of the Southeast Asian scholars in relation to how they can control and represent history especially in the writing of textbooks. There is a debate among historians themselves about their political embeddedness as active or passive agents in the writing of history. In the active view, historians control but should not predetermine what becomes history. In the passive view, historians are product of histories and that “revisionist moments in historiography (are) therefore the products of history (rather) than historians.” A second issue is the identification of actors and events excluded from writing a nationalist account. The invisibility of marginalized groups such as minority indigenous and immigrant groups become problematic. A third issue is that the nationalist project has created what Ahmad and Tan call an “inward-looking perspective” that fails to capture issues that transcend national borders. This affects the ability of historians to engage in a comparative or regional work that can interrogate broader issues shared by Southeast Asian societies such as the Cold War. This requires eschewing a unilinear view of history by expanding concepts of time and space in analysis.

Part One: Seeking New Perspectives and Strategies

This section offers theoretical and methodological avenues through which historians can engage in alternative histories. The first step is to understand and critique the national project. For example, in his essay, “Country Histories and the Writing of Southeast Asian History,” Paul H. Kratoska analyses how the national project came about by examining the academic hiring structure, publishing preference, and to the structure of colonial records. While not discounting the progress achieved using the

nation-state framework, Kratoska points out the weaknesses of this perspective. He examines the five areas in which the perspective of nationalism can distort other issues. These five areas that are in need of review include the colonialist experience; pre-nation state polities and alliances; minority groups; other anti-colonial movements; and other regional issues. On the other hand, Thongchai Winichakul, in “Writing at the Interstices: Southeast Asian Historians and Postnational Histories in Southeast Asia,” points to other processes such as transnationalism that blur the borders of the nation-state. These processes include Indianization, Sinicization, European colonization, and even localization processes. He envisions how a post-national writing can happen with the focus on the margins, “locations and moments between being and not being a nation, becoming and not becoming a nation.”

In terms of methodology, Fernando, Yeoh, and Cheong provide three approaches in which to begin studying the margins of history. The first approach is to use utilize the quantitative material available. According to M.R. Fernando in, “Quantifying the Economic and Social History of Southeast Asia: A Quest for New Evidence and Methods,” this infrequently used source material, readily available to Southeast Asian scholars is a missed opportunity. He asserts that the hesitation to use quantitative measures to represent human behaviour misses out on the ability to compare and to see trends on long term change in society especially prior to World War II. Colonial records, such as shipping records of the Dutch and English East India companies and parish records, conceal economic and demographic information. As an example, Fernando presents a social history of the Chinese and Malay mercantile class based upon the shipping records of the Dutch East India Company. The second approach is to expand the theoretical borders and space of a nation-state. In “Changing

Conceptions of Space in History Writing: A Selective Mapping of Writings on Singapore,” Brenda S.A. Yeoh describes what a post-national space looks like in writing history for Singapore. This involves a rethinking of space as a “contact zone” in which conflict and negotiation can occur under several techniques of disciplinary power and resistances. Singapore, then, can be conceived as a “diasporic space” wherein everyday accounts can constitute other narratives of resistance. The third approach is to utilize frameworks from other disciplines to enhance historical analysis. One such tool is a literary theory analysis of various source materials such as poems, advertisements, and the like. The source of data, not just the contents, like those of colonial records, must be analysed as well. This has shifted the notion of truth and veracity of data to the issue of the historian to actually claim history. Literary theory raises the important question whether the past can really be knowable. Information is not as significant as the worldview of these chroniclers and the underlying goals of these texts. Despite its contentious content, in “Southeast Asian History, Literary Theory, and Chaos,” Yong Mun Cheong argues that literary theory can help advance new frontiers in history and outlines the steps necessary to engage in literary analysis. The examination of the arbitrary use of word signifiers, for example, the word ‘state,’ can reveal the problem of the representation of unity of a community. If literary analysis can put doubt on historical representation, the author also suggests introducing chaos theory to contrast the linearity of time-space. This allows for a non-mechanistic view of causation-effect of events wherein sudden transformations may dissipate while small events can cause unexpected large transformations.

Part Two: Constructing and Deconstructing the National Past

This second section demonstrates the productive results when the call for deconstructing the nation-state narrative is enacted. Two essays provide overviews of the Malaysian and Myanmar historiography to discover the trends in the field. In addition, three other essays demonstrate the ways in which the deconstruction of a national past is possible. The first step in the Malaysian context is to survey the state of Malaysian historiography. In “History Through the Eyes of the Malays: Changing Perspectives of Malaysia’s Past,” Abdul Rahman Haji Ismail and Badriyah Haji Salleh provide an overview of how writing history has developed since 1945. According to Ismail and Salleh, There are four important phases in Malaysian historiography. The first phase is what they call as traditional Malaysian historiography which consists of oral traditions referring to royalty (raja). This move from myths and legends to a more fact-based history began in the 1900s. Slowly, the shift towards modernist nation (bangsa) histories occurred giving rise to the second phase of the independence era in Malay historiography. During the period of 1945 – 1960, nationalist leaders became important writers of anti-colonial struggle and nation-building histories. This group of untrained historians raised consciousness for local heroes and the role of history for national patriotism. An important aspect during this period was the emphasis on the Malay language and other aspects of Malay culture. The rise of formally trained historians marked the third phase from the 1970s to the 1990s, alongside the institutionalization of Bahasa Malaysia in higher education units. This change brought about an emphasis on local history research and transmission of information in Malay. The establishment of history as a compulsory subject for the lower levels in 1987 also contributed to an increased interest in writing, teaching, and reading history to different audiences. Academic publications and translations of English sources in history increased. The fourth phase involved the

important role of history writing through the examination of the development of standardized or official history through Malay textbook publication. The authors conclude that social history has been neglected in the light of the dominance of political themes. The other areas they identify that need to be examined include those that do not necessarily use traditional written sources such as in the study of indigenous peoples. Ismail and Salleh lament the lack of utilization of other approaches from other disciplines to provide fresh and new methodologies.

Similarly, the historiography of Myanmar outlines the nationalist trajectory of history writing. In the essay, "Myanmar Historiography Since 1945," by Ni Ni Myint, the author primarily uses local sources previously unavailable and inaccessible to English speakers to plot the narrative. The direction proceeds from the dynastic chronicles to the present day post-independence formation of a national narrative. However, in the course of this development, the author also notes that ruptures prevent a lineal formation due to the diversity of political, social, and intellectual orientations and a strong individual character of these historians. These factors can be seen in accounts of personal experience or political experiences combined within historical accounts. Another is the use of archaeology and ancient history to expand traditional frame of history. Unconventional sources include estampages or rubbings of lithic materials in various languages, traditional manuscripts, and original archive materials from various bodies as well as foreign microfilm materials. Unpublished post graduate theses also provide valuable resources. Indigenous groups also figure in the re-making of Myanmar nationalist discourse.

In “Dialogue of Two Pasts: “Historical Facts” in Traditional Thai and Malay Historiography,” the author Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian reviews the traditional local pre-histories between Malaysia (hikayat/sejarah) and Thailand (phongsawadan) in order to examine Malay-Thai relations. The framework that Suwannathat-Pian uses is the form of a dialogue to discuss disputed and conflicting elements that are sources of tensions between the two communities. The dialogue involves two levels. The first is the dialogue between the Malay-Thai historical accounts that sought to narrate a common account with different perspectives. The second level is the dialogue between the historical materials and the author situated in the contemporary period. Primarily, Suwannathat-Pian examines key conflicting accounts that can be seen in three sub-sections of the essay: the early relations, diplomatic relations, and accounts of rivalry and conflict in these traditional accounts. The objective is not to refute or verify the veracity of the accounts in as much as understanding the socio-political context and agenda by which these accounts were recorded.

In deconstructing the singular narrative of Singapore history, C.J.W.-L. Wee examines the process of naturalization of the economic nation-state history as the sole history in “Our Island Story: Economic Development and the National Narrative in Singapore.” The first is an unusual position of colonialism as the basis of progress (pp. 146, 150). The second is the examination of the confrontation between the elites and the other factions such as the communist-left and the moderates of the People’s Action Party that sought to rule Singapore. The result of this is a particular interpretation of a ‘colonial paternalism’ that paved the way for the state to overcome contradictions of individualism and individual freedom for society.

The struggle for the identification of national heroes also destabilizes the Singapore national narrative. This revelation is discussed in Hong and Huang's analysis of the absence and problematic attempt to select national heroes. In "The Scripting of Singapore's National Heroes: Toying with Pandora's Box," Lysa Hong and Jianli Huang show how the first aspect of the problem involved a revelation of tensions with a shared Malaysian history which made P. Ramlee a difficult choice. The second involved the transformation of philanthropists Tan Kah Kee and Tan Lark Sye, once vilified as communist and chauvinist by the People's Action Party (PAP), to one of admiration and recognition for their model example of philanthropy. This transformation narrative was similar to the case of Pan Shou, a founder of the Nanyang University. Meanwhile, Elizabeth Choy's ascendancy as a female Singapore war heroine was possible because of the deliberate omission of her public life which involved collusion with the then British colonial ruler as well as dissenting view with the PAP.

Part Three: Shifting Boundaries, Moving Interstices

The third section examines the result when historians use unconventional sources such as family histories, local histories, ecclesiastical records, migrants and other minority groups previously glossed over in favour of more traditional sources. According to Abu Talib Ahmad in his essay, "Writing Malaysia's Social History from the Ecclesiastical Records," a rich social history of Malaysia can be gleaned when existing work, including those traditionally neglected like oral histories and work by students, are used. One important source material he focused on was the ecclesiastical records of the Islamic bureaucracy. It is these local sources that provide a fresh

reading of state history, including new information and insights on the dynamics during the Japanese occupation and prostitution in the early twentieth century. Moreover, Ahmad attests that these materials provide greater in-depth knowledge of the processes of change in recent history such as modernization and Westernization during the 1930s until the mid-1960s.

Similarly, in “Continuity and Connectedness: The Ngee Heng Kongsi of Johore, 1844 – 1916,” P. Lim used such a historical resource to examine the Chinese-Malays inter-group relations was the use of Chinese association and secret societies records. In a study of one such secret society called the Ngee Heng Kongsi, Lim looks beyond the criminal element described in the colonial records to examine the accommodation and negotiation between the early Malays and Chinese in Jahore.

In “Locating Chinese Women in Malaysian History,” Liok Ee Tan reveals how another marginal group that is fairly absent in Malaysian historiography are the women, in particular the Chinese women, who are ‘invisible’ in Chinese immigrant accounts in Malaysia. This is because the author found the problem of the classification of ‘Chinese’ which rendered these women invisible. Local-born and those born of mixed parentage were generally excluded from the immigrant accounts which focused on direct female migrants from China. She argues that this distinction between categories is artificial and affects the analysis of demographic information.⁵ Women were hidden in accounts due to their different statuses in society. In the re-analysis of the materials, women appear in marriage accounts with successful men or as secondary wives. Women also appear in records of prostitution living in conditions

⁵ Ibid., 358.

of slavery. Slave or bondage conditions also affect women engaged in unpaid household labour. It is only through the focus on women that they become more visible in historical accounts. Increasingly, documentation of work has acknowledged the role of women in the agricultural, mining, and factory work in the twentieth century.

The use of life histories as a particular method enlarges the national narrative to capture migration and transnational movements in a time of conflict such as in Vietnam. By focusing on the marginal voices of people affected by world events and the conflict in his essay, “Migrants in Contemporary Vietnamese History: Marginal or Mainstream?” Andrew Hardy allows a new history to emerge from the eyes of these individuals with world events receding into the background rather than as focus. The use of the perspective of within-country and transnational migration decisions of these people situate the transnational reality of history. Hardy argues that focusing on migration allow us to take an active view of these people who moved or stayed behind at the time of conflict as choices and as evaluation of risk as they confront the political and economic situation of Vietnam.

However, an attempt at writing a revisionist history may not always be possible. This is what Pombejra calls as a limited autonomous history in a secondary location such as Phuket in his essay, “Toward an Autonomous History of Seventeenth-Century Phuket.” After examining the records, Pombejra argues that this is largely because Phuket has a limited position outside of the central kingdom of Ayutthaya and its principal tin trade linkage to the world. But at the same time, his aim was to re-read and focus on the references given to local traders and governors in order to discern the

dynamics in Phuket which have only been represented as a secondary polity. By focusing on the local and foreign traders and resources of the area, the importance of Phuket may still be discerned beyond its secondary status in dominant history.

This collection is a comprehensive discussion of the challenges faced by Southeast Asian historians. More importantly, it suggests and provides new source materials, methods, and examples to produce what they call as alternative history from the margins.

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