

## In This Issue

BARBARA METCALF's presidential address draws attention to the "politics of knowledge" in present-day India, particularly as it applies to the growing interest in and use of historical narratives to shape and define contemporary identity and citizenship. She traces such accounts back to the colonial narrative that grew out of specific administrative practices as well as the nationalist narrative that arose to counter it. Both versions were based on the notion of the "essentialism of an India composed of two eternal groups"—Hindus and Muslims. A new body of scholarship is emerging, however, that offers alternative stories by refusing to make "too much" of stereotypical categories and by considering much more carefully the historical contingencies and complexities that generated differences but also similarities in the experiences of people living in the Indian subcontinent.

RICHARD A. O'CONNOR connects the decline and rise of successive states in Southeast Asian history to the differing agricultural strategies of ethnic groups. Specifically, he argues that the transition from the early Pyu, Mon, Khmer, and Cham states of lowland mainland Southeast Asia to the states of the Burmese, Tai, and Vietnamese in the second millennium A.D. can be correlated with the change in agricultural technology from "gardening and farming complexes native to the lowlands" to "irrigated wet rice specialization from upland valleys." The historical triumph of the successor states is thus tied to their agricultural practices and the social systems based on cooperative villages, which emerged to support their common style of agricultural production. In locating the dynamics of historical change in Southeast Asia in the region's "agro-cultural complexes," the author advances not only a bold hypothesis about the interlocking nature of agricultural practices, social systems, and historical change, but also a model with wide implications for understanding political change and ethnic expansion in other parts of Asia. O'Connor makes a case for a return to regional anthropology, an anthropology that treats culture and society as interconnected rather than discrete entities and an anthropology that blends ethnography with history.

MARK RAVINA offers a reconsideration of the nature of the state in Tokugawa Japan. He takes issue with studies of early modern Japanese politics that have focused on questions of state building because they invariably end up with the finding that centralization failed in the mid-seventeenth century. To see the Tokugawa system largely in terms of a failed effort to achieve a strong centralized, absolute system, he argues, is to view Tokugawa politics from the center rather than the periphery, and to draw an implicit comparison with state-building in Europe. He proposes an alternate approach, decentered in its focus, and based on Mizubayashi Takeshi's concept of a "compound state" characterized by the sustained autonomy of the large daimyo and considerable lack of clarity about political authority over many matters. "The task of writing Tokugawa political history," Ravina observes, "is thus to understand domain politics not only as a precursor to the Meiji state, but as part of a world which the new regime systematically destroyed."

In contrast to much of the literature on the topic of Chinese secret societies, DAVID OWNBY is interested in highlighting their religious character. Following a

review of the historiography of Chinese secret societies, the author turns his attention to the Heaven and Earth Society (Tiandihui) of early nineteenth-century western Fujian and eastern Jiangxi, which he shows functioned not as a protonationalist organization or as a rebellious group, but as an organization grounded in popular religion and local culture. Its rituals, deities, and vocabulary overlapped with those of lay Buddhism and local religious practices. Tiandihui members, moreover, he finds, were drawn by the promise of power that the Society offered through its religious elements. His consideration of the interplay of religion and power leads him to challenge Durkheimian approaches that emphasize the solidarity functions of religion.

JOHN BOWEN reviews key issues and developments in his state-of-the-field article on Southeast Asian anthropology. Although much of the work in the field shares an interest in culture, the emphases have shifted recently, away from an earlier preoccupation with studying culture through its "public forms" and their "intrinsic" meanings to a concern with interpreting the meanings they acquire and possess for different sets of actors. Through his extensive survey of the literature, Bowen shows that anthropologists have turned their attention away from face-to-face communities to scrutinize how people understand and interpret their roles and experiences in a changing world, where their lives are increasingly shaped by a variety of institutions ranging from state to school to mosque. "Rather than analyzing culture into intrinsically meaningful symbols and meanings," Bowen believes, "Southeast Asianists have come to see culture as a history of people interpreting public forms."

Not so much a conventional survey of the literature as an assessment of approaches and paradigms, Bowen's essays dovetails nicely with historian Craig Reynolds' "New Look at Old Southeast Asia" (54, 2, May 1995). Both articles raise issues of interest that extend well beyond their disciplinary and regional frameworks. Furthermore, the essays by O'Connor and Bowen in this issue, Reynolds in an earlier issue, and Tongqi, Rosemont, and Ames and Morris-Suzuki in the previous issue (54, no. 3, August 1995) provide additional perspectives on "the many forms culture takes."

This issue has relatively few book reviews in the China and Japan sections because of the changeover in book review editors. We expect to feature the usual number in forthcoming issues.