

Editorial Foreword

The growing influence of inter-Asian Studies, transnational studies, and Comparative Asian Studies upon the study of the region is evident in this issue of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. While the commitment to bridging political, spatial, cultural, and methodological boundaries has always (for the most part) been a priority for Southeast Asianists, new research that emphasizes the ways in which our subjects are connected through networks, movement, flows, circuits and sites of interaction seem to be gaining traction in the academe and beyond. The articles featured in this issue were not asked to address these themes and they certainly can be appreciated for their focus on Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Malaysia. Enduring themes concerning local knowledge, rural agency, centre — periphery relations, ritual, and state — society dynamics continue to anchor these articles to a vision of Southeast Asian Studies as it has been classically defined. At the same time, many of these articles, by way of their focus on inter-regional connections, place-making, mobile communities, variation, and trans-local interactions, are also expanding the way we might define the spatial and epistemological contours of the region.

Our selection of research articles begins with Kathryn Hansen's exploration of Burma's encounter with Parsi theatre in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Her research traces the movement and career of Parsi theatre companies into Burma, providing a window into the history of South–Southeast Asian interaction that emerged under the British Empire. Viewed through the experiences of Dosabhai Hathiram, a noted Parsi actor-director who lived in Rangoon for most of his life, the article highlights the way global connections interacted with local dynamics and contexts to shape the lives of Southeast Asian communities. Scaling up, the study is situated via (1) the larger context of the Indian Ocean World, (2) the span of Asian theatre networks, (3) South Asian diaspora, and (4) global linkages amongst cities that emerged during the era of high colonialism. Scaling down, Hansen turns our gaze away from Rangoon's city limits towards the interior heartland to consider the role of preexisting (and indeed competing) forms of Burmese drama, theatrical innovations, and patronage networks to explain why, despite Rangoon's reputation as 'one of the best show towns in the East', Parsi theatre enjoyed only limited success in British Burma. Taken together, the article draws attention to how we might think about the spatial and intellectual boundaries that frame our study of the region in general and Burma (Myanmar) in particular.

Next, Katherine Bowie's article on the historical variations of the Vessantara Jataka over time and space in mainland Southeast Asia continues our transnational focus and reminds us that comparative analyses of cultural phenomena across borders and within sub-regional contexts have always been a methodological priority within

our field. While Hansen's work charts the inter-area movement of South Asian communities and their theatrical practices into Southeast Asia, Bowie's article draws attention to the way South Asian literatures and normative ideals were transformed and recirculated by Southeast Asian communities within the parameters of their own sub-regional networks. The article suggests that while conventional scholarship portrays the Vessantara Jataka as textually consistent across the region (in Pali), an examination of this most popular of Buddhist stories in its material, ritual, and social contexts reveals a significant amount of variation in how this story is depicted, performed, and understood. Not only are differences in content, themes, and meaning detected in different sub-regional settings, but the manner in which the Vessantara Jataka is referenced by local communities for a range of purposes also varies across mainland Southeast Asia. Synthesising the key secondary literature on the Vessantara Jataka across Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, the article provides an important conceptual framework for conducting a multi-sited, interdisciplinary, and comparative analysis of South and Southeast Asian cultural interaction.

Echoing Bowie's observations of cultural variation in northeast Thailand, Visisya Pinthongvijayakul's article on personhood and political subjectivity through ritual enactment explores the ways in which provincial communities in Thailand's Chaiyaphum province express belonging, authority, and agency through the veneration of Phaya Lae, a Lao chief who was incorporated into the national pantheon of Thai heroes. Focusing on Isan religious and ritual life, the study provides a thick description of how Chaiyaphum identity is produced, performed, and embodied via acts of devotion and affiliation to material representations of Phaya Lae that reveal how political and sacred relations connect this northeastern region of Thailand to Bangkok. Returning to classic notions of the 'theatre state' and 'galactic-polity', the article demonstrates that it is in this ritual domain where notions of power, legitimacy, and patronage associated with the Thai monarchy are translated, disseminated, and projected into the figure, beliefs, and spaces surrounding Isan's Phaya Lae. As such, social groups in Chaiyaphum are not only actively embedded in the broader processes of Thai national integration, territorial consolidation, and cultural homogenisation, but they are also engaged in the process of place-making through the reconfiguration of these images, meanings, and practices for their own consumption.

Peripheral spaces are also the setting for Katherine Ann Cagat's article on the Ifugao Rice Terraces inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which critically examines the way in which conservation management, heritage zoning practices and aesthetics come into conflict with local rice farming practices, spatial relationships, and notions of the environment in the Cordillera mountain region of Luzon, the Philippines. Her study analyses layered encounters involving members of local communities, NGOs, regional government, international agencies, and researchers who participated in the demarcation and delineation of the rice terraces that have famously come to characterise the Hungduan municipality and neighbouring districts. Arguing that the mapping of heritage zones has come to define and enable social-spatial relations for the Ifugao, Cagat identifies an important relationship between how Ifugao lands are represented and in turn how those spaces are transformed administratively and aesthetically. Through an analysis of how local concepts of *maphod* (functional/quality) and *napintas* (beauty) come into conflict with

conservationists' notions of 'beauty', the article identifies a familiar disconnect between external expectations surrounding variant cultural heritage management practices and the equally diverse lifeways of local societies. More crucially, this study finds that local stakeholders are all-too-familiar with the grammar and technologies of heritage zoning as observed in their attempts to incorporate their own maps that reflect their criteria for spatially representing their lived environment.

Where Cagat's article illustrates the tensions amongst local, provincial, and international stakeholders over how rice terraces are visualised and politicised through heritage policies in the Philippines, the final research article by Jamie S. Davidson, on the political economy of Malaysia's rice sector, appraises the apparent tensions between state and business interests over national rice management policies, food security, and the 'growing electoral competitiveness' in recent elections. Davidson's article explores the nature of state-business relations in Malaysia through an analysis of the country's biggest rice importer-distributor, Bernas, owned by one of the country's richest *bumiputera* tycoons. By situating the story of Bernas's origins, development, and expansion within the history and politics of the rice sector in colonial and postcolonial Malaysia, Davidson provides a detailed critique of how the state has expanded its authority, accumulated new sources of capital, and maintained the support of its main constituents via the blurred relationship with 'private' conglomerates such as Bernas, who in turn benefit directly from their affiliation to the state.

Our research articles are followed by Justin McDaniel's review article of Edward Van Roy's *Siamese melting pot: Ethnic minorities in the making of Bangkok*, as part of our initiative to encourage and promote more extensive appraisals of new monographs that are being produced on Southeast Asia. At the same time, we will continue to feature our normal book reviews and this issue features fifteen covering Asia and Southeast Asia. As always, the editorial team is grateful for the continuing support provided by our authors, referees, and book reviewers.

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