

# SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/>

## <Book Review>

Majid Daneshgar

Charles Higham. *Early Southeast Asia: From First Humans to First Civilizations*.  
Singapore: Ridge Books, 2025.

*Southeast Asian Studies*, 1-5 (in press).

## How to Cite:

Daneshgar, Majid. Review of *Early Southeast Asia: From First Humans to First Civilizations* by Charles Higham. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 2026, 1-5 (in press).

DOI: 10.20495/seas.br26018.

## View the table of contents for this issue:

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2026/03/earlyview-br-majid-daneshgar/>

**Subscriptions:** <https://englishkyoto-seas.org/mailling-list/>

## For permissions, please send an e-mail to:

english-editorial[at]cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp



Charles Higham. *Early Southeast Asia: From First Humans to First Civilizations*. Singapore: Ridge Books, 2025.

Reviewed by Majid Daneshgar\*

My habitual interest in the history of Southeast Asia stems from reading the works of several scholars, including Charles Higham. A prolific archaeologist and emeritus professor at the University of Otago, he enlightens his readers. After several key publications on various aspects of human life and social developments in ancient Southeast Asia, particularly the civilization of Angkor (Higham 2001), Higham has now updated and expanded on his 2014 study on early Southeast Asia. *Early Southeast Asia: From First Humans to First Civilizations* revises former literature about the early days of human beings in Southeast Asia. Higham applies a mixture of new scientific methods, including radiocarbon dating, genetic studies and DNA results, and LiDAR to put forward new and significant hypotheses that “cut through old controversies” (p. 10). For instance:

... for years, there was a debate over indigenous innovation against external influence. On the basis of DNA extracted from the bones of prehistoric farmers, we know that they came ultimately from the Yangtze River valley, where over millennia, rice was domesticated. (p. 11)

In Higham’s opinion, there has always been a direct connection between the maintenance of Southeast Asian states and societies and local technologies, whose mechanism and efficiency over the centuries are described in the present volume.

The book under review is divided into nine chapters, covering a wide range of archaeological, evolutionary, geographic, and social-historical topics. Chapter 1 indicates how the book has been developed, and the author gives readers a chance to measure and challenge prior proposals regarding the existence of the first humans and their lives in Southeast Asia. Mainland Southeast Asia in relation to China and India represents the author’s geographic focus in this study—although some critical points are made about Sundaland (mainly Java) and the formation of early human life. Chapter 2 is about the first-known human in Southeast Asia, properly contextualized by means of Higham’s brief accounts of a tough climate change and its impact on the for-

---

\* Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

mation and transition of the current Southeast Asian lands and islands over the past 2.5 million years. The origin of the first human in Southeast Asia is compared with that of the first human, *Homo erectus*, in North Africa. Remnants of similar human skulls and femurs belonging to *Homo erectus* have been discovered in eight locations in Java: Sangiran, Trinil, Ngandong, Perining, Sambungmacan, Ngawi, Pucangan, and Kabuh. Evidently, early humans traveled thousands of miles to reach a suitable place with better climatic conditions in about 1.8ma–1.43ma. Former discoveries have demonstrated the other species of animals that lived during the time of *Homo erectus* in Java: tiger, cuon, water buffalo, among others. This raises an important question: how did *Homo erectus* manage to survive in Java for such a long period of time? Whether they were professional tool makers and self-defenders has been the subject of many debates, though there is no conclusive evidence. I assume that finding the answer to this question will lead to an intellectual revolution among historians as it may overturn some former proposals viewing Southeast Asian progress and development as mere imitation of earlier and/or other societies. In this context, Higham’s insight should be taken into account:

. . . experiments with a wide range of possible cutting media, such as stone, shell and bamboo, have shown that shell was the most likely to have been used . . . illustrates beyond reasonable doubt, that *Homo erectus* was an innovative and adroit user of the available raw materials for conversion into useful tools. (p. 22)

The author highlights other discoveries such as *Homo erectus* skulls and limbs in China, Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos and shares the good news that some sites continue to deepen our knowledge because they contain samples that are yet to be recognized; they are “neither clearly *Homo erectus*, nor the fully developed modern human” (p. 24). Further arguments related to the existence of other species such as *Homo floresiensis*, *Homo Luzonensis*, and *Denisovans* until the arrival of Anatomically Modern Humans (AMH) are outlined in this chapter.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to the AMHs who left Africa around 50ka. It arouses readers’ curiosity over how hunter-gatherers (e.g., Hòabìnhiàn) arrived and lived in Southeast Asia. The author highlights the significance of Thailand and highland caves with respect to the existence of AMHs in Southeast Asia. The excavations of the notable archaeologist Chester Gorman (d. 1981; see Solheim II 1982) in Thailand and his examination of rock shelters and caves, including Spirit, Steep Cliff, and Banyan Valley, are discussed. The cultivation and domestication of plants and animals for the sake of long-term life is the subject of Chapter 4. Higham’s study of the Neolithic settlement of Southeast Asia begins with an account of the transition from hunting and gathering to “settled farming” (pp. 66–67) in Central China. Based on his re-examination of previous studies (e.g., Fiorella Rispoli 2008), the author concludes that the more knowledge there is of Neolithic settlements in Central China, the greater the likelihood of

“identifying a Neolithic cultural ‘package’ compatible with a southward expansion of communities” (p. 71). The people of Southeast Asia followed similar strategies for effective settlement, such as cultivating rice and creating decorated pottery vessels. Thus, the Neolithic culture was a significant factor in the distribution of communities in mainland Southeast Asia. The book contains important analytical notes about several Neolithic sites in different corners of Vietnam and Thailand. From this point forward, the author emerges as a serious contributor to multidisciplinary projects by providing information on historical demography and the history of language and art, culture, and geography. Higham points out that Southeast Asian Neolithic groups used clay, metals, and an alloy of tin and copper (i.e., bronze) to create artifacts from the second millennium BC, a period widely known as the(ir) Bronze Age. In Chapter 5, the author first discusses former studies on the classification of the historical “ages” and then describes Asians’ knowledge of metallurgy and the formation of modern Chinese life with references to several sites with copper-based artifacts. Subsequently, a number of copper sources in Southeast Asia are introduced, which helps readers get an idea of how Southeast Asians progressed from the Neolithic period settlement to the Bronze Age. There is a detailed study of burials in Ban Lum Khao, Ban Chiang, Non Nok Tha, and Ban Non Wat, among others. In addition, Higham draws attention to people of the Bronze Age who “lived in relatively small settlements within a monsoon environment . . . also maintained domestic cattle and pigs, and introduced domestic chickens and dogs” (p. 159). Health issues, social changes and inequalities, and mortuary feasts of the people of this age are discussed from empirical, ethnographical, as well as historical perspectives.

Chapter 6 is about the Iron Age of Southeast Asia, around “400–500 BC [*sic*]” (p. 173). Knowledge of working with iron is said to have been achieved in three ways: internal innovation with minor contributions from outside, and northern and southern technologies (from China and South Asia, respectively) with more obvious impact. Various discoveries are discussed, such as crossbow bolts from Cồ Loa and, more important, the 72 kg Ngọc Lũ drum. The stories of other bronze drums spreading throughout Southern China and Southeast Asia—with remarkable decorations showing local life and culture—demonstrate how Southeast Asian communities applied local and foreign technologies to settle, survive, and expand their territories. One becomes more impressed upon learning about boat burials with various forms of weapons and utensils from the Red River Delta’s archaeological sites of Việt Khê and Châu Can. The author pays particular attention to the significance of Southern Thailand and Myanmar in global trading routes, introducing archaeological sites and items—such as Chinese mirrors and fine Indian products—that were “traded along the maritime Silk Road” (pp. 193–195) during the Iron Age. Human skeletal remains from the Iron Age and further archaeological evidence from Noen U-Loke, Northwest Cambodia, and Khorat Plateau are also discussed in this chapter.

Leaving behind all historical periods, mainland Southeast Asia was ready to experience a

new reality: the establishment of states by Southeast Asian residents. Bắc Bộ, which was initially attached to the Chinese Empire, and Pyu, Dvāravatī, Champa, and Angkorian Cambodia were “the five existing states” (p. 235) until the ninth century CE. The establishment of states had a direct relationship with the use of natural sources (water supply), opening up of new trading routes, prosperity, sustainability, and stability. Higham acts like a historical theorist when giving readers a panoramic view of past Southeast Asia:

Development of Southeast Asian states reflects several vital interacting factors. Individual prowess of potential leaders may well be one, but we cannot divorce our deliberations from other variables, such as strategic location, soils, capacity for intensified production, and the availability of iron . . . Consequently I propose later in this account, to emphasise interactions between different socio-economic variables in order to establish a model incorporating several aspects of behaviour. (p. 237)

The author also highlights the status of the coastal regions of Southeast Asia with respect to the trading and commercial ties between India, Rome, and China. By referring to some historical accounts and archaeological discoveries such as mirrors, jewellery, and scripts, the author explains the ways in which these empires influenced Southeast Asian states, goods, religious beliefs, and cultural practices. Chapter 8 deals with the “State of Angkor” in 802–1431 CE. To provide concrete insights into the structure and mechanism of this state, archaeological results are integrated with former studies on inscriptions and art history. Higham believes that it is the field of archaeology that may better decode mysterious aspects of life in Southeast Asia, including the “control of water, the infrastructure of roads, bridges, hospitals and quarries, and industrial production” (p. 298). Finally, Chapter 9 contains the author’s concluding remarks, mostly a synopsis of the previous chapters.

Higham offers a masterly study using 386 captioned photos, maps, and plans. However, none of these are numbered, and the author has not provided a clear table for the hundreds of images and captions throughout the book. All in all, *Early Southeast Asia* is a fresh voice with many original accounts, which makes it a great addition to other studies by K.R. Hall (1985) and N. Tarling (1992), who approached Southeast Asian communities from different historical perspectives. Higham reminds paleoanthropologists, evolutionists, and biologists, who often fall into the old-fashioned evolutionary traps dedicated only to the African origin of humans, to take Southeast Asian context and geography into account. His book provides clues for answers to decades-long questions about the origins of Southeast Asian religions, traditions, and ultimately cultural diversity, for which it is worthy also of being used as a reference by historians of religion.

## References

- Hall, Kenneth R. 1985. *Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Higham, Charles. 2014. *Early Mainland Southeast Asia: From First Humans to Angkor*. Bangkok: River Books.
- Higham, Charles. 2001. *The Civilization of Angkor*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Rispoli, Fiorella. 2008. The Incised and Impressed Pottery Style of Mainland Southeast Asia: Following the Paths of Neolithization. *East and West* 57(1/4): 235–304.
- Solheim II, Wilhelm G. 1982. Chester F. Gorman, 1938–1981. *American Antiquity* 47(4): 795–797.
- Tarling, Nicholas. 1992. *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia: From Early Times to c. 1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.