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## <Book Review>

**Brandon Kirk Williams**

**Ang Cheng Guan. *Southeast Asia's Cold War: An Interpretive History*.  
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018.**

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*Faculty of Sociology, Bielefeld University****Southeast Asia's Cold War: An Interpretive History***

ANG CHENG GUAN

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018.

*Southeast Asia's Cold War* makes a significant contribution to understanding the Cold War's long history in Southeast Asia. Its author, Ang Cheng Guan, takes on a mammoth task: writing a capacious political and diplomatic history of Southeast Asia beginning in the turbulent period after 1919 until the Cold War's conclusion in 1991. He largely accomplishes this task in a snappy 198 pages by blending recent secondary literature, memoirs, and primary sources. Spatially, the book strikes a fair balance between maritime and mainland Southeast Asia while incorporating the perspectives of China, the United States, and the Soviet Union. Ang also aptly weaves in the ascendance of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to articulate how regional leaders anticipated a new, post-Vietnam War political landscape. Cogently writing this history is no mean feat, and there is much to celebrate in this ambitious book.

The volume harkens back to an older era of scholarship in diplomatic history. Ang declares in his introduction that he is moving away from the preoccupations that dominated the literature during the cultural turn of the past few decades. By foregrounding politics and diplomacy, he sets the terms for an argument that ties decolonization and nation-building with the Cold War in order to outline the creation of Southeast Asia as a political space during much of the twentieth century. He deserves praise for his reasoned stance that the literature needs an overview that traces the region's diverse local and international diplomatic inputs while simultaneously integrating regional voices that are often neglected.

One of the book's signal contributions is the selection of an interpretive lens that contends with Southeast Asia "from within rather than without" (p. 194). This perspective is sorely missing, and Ang is to be commended for placing readers in the region and not solely in the halls of great powers. He adeptly steers away from the historical literature that privileges the experience of the United States. Readers should not expect to see the names of historians of American foreign relations who predominantly discuss the Vietnam War. The author does not cite myriad works by Marilyn Young, Fredrik Logevall, Mark Lawrence, or Mark Philip Bradley. Utilizing the vast scholarly output of American foreign relations historians would be easy, and it is doubtful that this is an accidental strategy. As a result, readers benefit from Ang's choice to employ scholarship that grapples with the region on its own terms.

How does an author craft an almost century-long diplomatic history of the region? Historians

and scholars of Southeast Asia have thus far eschewed writing broad syntheses of the region's past during this time period due to somewhat obvious challenges of complexity. As Ang states in the introduction, he adopts a narrative style to chart the trends and continuities that defined the Cold War's diplomatic life in the region. Impressively, the book stays on track throughout its 198 pages and Ang seldom deviates from explaining diplomatic maneuvering. The narrative remains focused without detours into the Cold War's disparate theaters or capitals. The cast of characters is inclusive without spiraling into an unwieldy mass of names and acronyms. An audience of experts and non-experts will find this book valuable in comprehending the region's diplomatic history. The prose in *Southeast Asia's Cold War* is not freighted with scholarly jargon, and the book will serve as an invaluable reference tool for a variety of readers searching for an understanding of how regional leaders met the challenges created by decolonization and the Cold War.

The author restores a great deal of agency to communists and the left, those he indicates are often forgotten as the losers in the Cold War history literature. Communist cells in Southeast Asia long predated the hardening of the geopolitical order in the 1940s. Ang demonstrates to readers in Chapter One, "Antecedents," the genesis of communist parties in Southeast Asia as anticolonial movements with Moscow's backing. China's support of communist parties after 1950 eventually trumped the Soviet Union's, situating the struggle against communism via Beijing rather than Moscow. In a similar vein, the volume asks that readers take seriously the anticommunism of leaders such as Suharto, Ferdinand Marcos, Tunku Abdul Rahman, Ne Win, Lee Kuan Yew, and Thailand's ruling elite.

Uniquely, *Southeast Asia's Cold War* tackles the region's evolution and communism's decline in maritime Southeast Asia that birthed ASEAN. Ang views the first half of the 1960s as a turning point that parallels the Vietnam War in establishing the patterns that dominated the region after 1975. In Chapter Four—the book's longest and titled "Antagonisms"—the author demonstrates how leaders in Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia extinguished communism's threat to their rule. They accomplished this despite Mao's and North Vietnam's active sponsorship of violent national liberation struggles in neighboring Southeast Asian states. Assistance from the United States, Britain, and Australia facilitated this process, yet, as Ang shows, the impetus originated in maritime Southeast Asia. A sense of solidarity emerged among these states that inspired ASEAN's creation in 1967, without the West's heavy hand in forming the organization. ASEAN shifted from aspirational to operational only in the mid-1970s to counter the end of the Vietnam War and a decline of the United States' regional footprint. "The fall of Saigon jolted them to action," Ang writes, and ASEAN assumed a new role as a collective voice (p. 158).

Refreshingly, the author's discussion of the massacre of Indonesian communists in 1965 and 1966 places this event in the stream of communist activities in maritime Southeast Asia. His tone is measured and the analysis is, mostly, correct. He accurately retells the decline of civil order under Sukarno's failed Guided Democracy that precipitated a rising tenor of political competition

that erupted in searing levels of violence. Economically, Indonesia teetered on the brink of collapse and Sukarno's health failed. These events perhaps inspired a small cadre of the Indonesian Communist Party's (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) leadership to collude with military officers to seize power. Mao encouraged PKI leader D.N. Aidit to prepare for a violent struggle with the army, whenever it arose. A putsch on the night of September 29, 1965, failed and portended devastating consequences. The author emphasizes the importance of a list of approximately 5,000 communists provided by the United States Embassy in Jakarta to the Indonesian military. Historian Jess Melvin's 2018 *The Army and the Indonesian Genocide: Mechanics of Mass Murder* sheds new light on this topic, and Melvin's book is a necessary addition to any understanding of the massacres. As she ably illustrates, the army perpetrated the slaughter with startling efficiency thanks to advance preparation that was independent of American aid. One cannot criticize Ang for omitting a book that was published after his own, yet any future writings on this event must take *The Army and the Indonesian Genocide* into account.

The PKI's failure did not mirror North Vietnam's eventual triumph over South Vietnam and the United States. Ang allocates a suitable amount of the book's pages to document the ways by which the struggle for Vietnamese unification and the United States' combat operations pulled Southeast Asia into the conflict. Thailand, in particular, became a critical node for American military efforts, and various Thai ruling cliques implored the United States to preserve dedicated streams of material assistance to resist the war's overflow. North Vietnamese military planning and diplomacy, often conducted by Le Duc Tho and Le Duan, prioritized expanding the struggle beyond Vietnam's borders. However, the author does not offer a justification as to why both men "persuaded and encouraged" Malaysia's Chin Peng to embark on a guerilla war to undermine Tunku Abdul Rahman's leadership (p. 102). Were their actions the product of revolutionary zeal? Readers are never provided an answer.

Ang rightly attends to the arc of Vietnam's history prior to and after the war. North Vietnam's emissaries cultivated support from China and Russia. Their efforts only yielded Soviet support in the long run. When South Vietnam's fall arrived in 1975, "nobody, not even the Vietnamese communists themselves, expected that they would be able to reunify the country so quickly" (p. 155). Shifting geopolitical tides left Vietnam stranded with only the Soviet Union as an ally. Vietnam and the Soviet Union signed a Treaty of Friendship in 1976, with the consequence that, for China, "the treaty was synonymous to having a Cuba next to China" (p. 177). The author excels in charting how Vietnam realigned its regional politics after 1975. Embarking on a failed invasion of Cambodia prompted China to attack Vietnam and created an opening for China to reconcile with ASEAN nations.

For Southeast Asia, the most difficult struggle throughout much of the Cold War was the looming presence and ultimate integration of China into regional affairs. Ang deftly traces China's changing relationship with much of the region that progressed from enemy to wary partner to a

constituent in Southeast Asia's economy and diplomacy. The normalization of bilateral relations of Southeast Asian states with China was achieved slowly—if not glacially in the case of Indonesia. This process contributed to the Cold War's erosion before the Berlin Wall's climactic fall. To this reviewer's eyes, he could have made a stronger argument that events in Southeast Asia signaled the end of the Cold War. A drastic change in the economic model in East Asia and Southeast Asia heralded a novel, globalized dawn that presaged much of the post-1989 world. Fleshing out this transformation could have brought readers more into the present to realize the contemporary purchase of Cold War-era diplomacy within Southeast Asia.

*Southeast Asia's Cold War's* narrow focus prevents readers from grasping the dense layers of local, regional, and international politics that intersected to shape diplomacy. Interstate relations are never conducted in a vacuum. Indeed, decolonization and the postcolonial project was an intoxicating milieu of culture, modernization, economics, diplomacy, Afro-Asian solidarity, war, and vast human destruction. Ang mostly avoids tallying the human toll, and at times readers are left with a sense that the titanic amount of death did not register as an influential dimension in the region's events. Notably absent was a fluid discussion of modernization and economics in Southeast Asia. The last few pages on economics in the final chapter, "Ending the Cold War Chasm," appear more as an afterthought rather than an element knitted into the book's analytical framework.

In spite of these critiques, the author has provided historians and area specialists with a laudable entry that scholars can expand upon and update. *Southeast Asia's Cold War* stands alone in the literature and will be a necessary guide for those who seek to view the region's politics from within. As geopolitics once more pivot toward influence over Southeast Asia, books such as this can help future scholars and policymakers see the contours of regional politics and the stakes for those who determine its future.

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### ***Cultural Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Asia***

TIANTIAN ZHENG, ed.

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016.

*Cultural Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Asia* is a provocative and timely publication which invites us to re-vision our understanding of sexuality, gender roles, and gender relations as performed, experienced, and perceived in Asia. The book brings together cultural, social, and economic contexts of Asia to show how gender and sexuality are not a "given" and cannot be understood or analyzed without understanding the contexts they are found in. Toward this end,