

# SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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## <Book Review>

**Erick White**

Holly High, ed. *Stone Masters: Power Encounters in Mainland Southeast Asia*.  
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damage in these regions under study is effected. Therein lies the hope that the book offers to us. The conclusion starts by referencing *Laudato Si'* (p. 187), which is globally touted as the green encyclical of the current Pope Francis. It shows the potential of long-standing anthropocentric faith traditions to not only renounce but also repent for their misguided teachings of human stewardship as having abusive dominion over nonhumans. In that vein, the book is disappointingly gender-blind. Zakaria's *The Camphor Tree and the Elephant* leaves us with a prophetic voice, in the spirit of old traditions: it is an invitation to "[rethink] what it means to be human, humanity's responsibilities, and ecological imagination" (p. 194).

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***Stone Masters: Power Encounters in Mainland Southeast Asia***

HOLLY HIGH, ed.

Singapore: NUS Press, 2022.

While *Stone Masters: Power Encounters in Mainland Southeast Asia* initially introduces itself rather humbly as an examination of "stone veneration in mainland Southeast Asia" (p. 5), it quickly expands into a much more ambitious comparative analysis of regional similarities and differences in materiality, cosmology, myth, ritual, and social organization across the region. As an exercise in comparative ethnology, the volume seeks to integrate fine-grained ethnography, local social history, regional historiography, and anthropological theory. Ranging broadly across mainland Southeast Asia, the volume contains three case studies from Laos, two from Myanmar, two from Thailand, and one each from Cambodia and Vietnam.

The two chapters by Holly High and John Holt in Section 1, "Stone Theory," analytically frame the volume's nine subsequent case studies in terms of key concepts and prior scholarship. Stones of various sorts (such as megaliths, statues, city pillars, termite mounds, mountains, stupas) are treated as physical manifestations of locality-centered occult presences and potency which require, even demand, negotiation for successful social life. "Masters" in the book's title refers to authoritative nonhuman presences mediated by these stones, agentive figures that are owners of territory, fertility, and bodies and display both the generative power to create life and the destructive power to take life. Simultaneously caring and capricious, these masters are appeased more than worshipped, pacified more than adored; and human collectivities are compelled to craft mutually beneficial relations with them. The localized cults emerging out of these relations give rise to multiple types and sources of power that nonetheless display thematic, discursive, ritual,

and social commonalities across the region. Nonetheless, the historical instantiation and development of these cults in concrete social encounters is open-ended, uncertain, and dependent upon changing cultural, political, and economic conditions. The volume's highlighting of the moral ambiguity of these stone masters is contrasted with how prior scholarship has treated guardian and tutelary spirits as solely benign, even as both High and Holt emphasize that the volume's approach builds upon Paul Mus's earlier study of the cult of the earth god in monsoon Asia and the need for human intermediaries in interaction with deities.

Section 2, "Living with Mounds, Stones and Soil," presents ethnographic-centered analyses of stone veneration. In Chapter 3, High compares how ethnic Kantu in contemporary Laos organized the cultic veneration of stone masters in their own village, both before and after the village's physical relocation, with how these villagers responded to calls made by government officials to participate in state-led public rituals centered on a provincial city pillar and a Buddhist stupa. In Chapter 4, Courtney Work examines how Cambodian villagers pursue fecundity, prosperity, and harmony by cultivating caring relationships with the chthonic energies of water and land via rituals framed less in the punitive terms of duty, sacrifice, and obligation than in the festive terms of eating, dancing, drinking, play, and conviviality. In Chapter 5, Paul-David Lutz explores the cosmology underlying a hierarchical pantheon of chthonic vitalities residing within an ascending jurisdiction of mountains surrounding a Khmu hamlet in upland Laos, and how the villagers' nurturing of reciprocal care with the custodian of the local mountain was disrupted and undermined by the political, economic, and technological interventions of socialist modernity initiated by the developmental Laotian state. Benjamin Baumann, in Chapter 6, argues that termite mounds in Thailand's Buriram Province house overlooked chthonic, vital forces that serve as a key nexus around which local rituals of care, well-being, and belonging are developed and through which the mutual imbrication of persons, communities, and territorial place is fashioned in everyday life.

Section 3, "Pillars and State," approaches stone cults from a more historical perspective. In Chapter 7, High documents five historical versions of the myth about the goddess Lady Luck, who is associated with the city pillar of Vientiane, and then compares their structures and thematic elements in the manner of Claude Lévi-Strauss, in the process teasing out the abiding core and changing features of this mythic complex as it has evolved over time. In Chapter 8, Sally Bamford documents and analyzes how the spatial layout of twelfth- and nineteenth-century Myanmar royal palaces, and the pillars, shrines, statues, and pavilions within them, cultivated relations of care and submission toward a diverse pantheon of spiritual entities which in turn protected and celebrated the earthly sovereignty of Myanmar kings and their kingdoms. Fukuura Kazuo describes the myth of the pillar of Indra in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in Chapter 9, explaining how its construction and worship were central to the founding of the city and kingdom in the ancient past, as well as how in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries its worship has been reinvented several times in relation to a contentious community of resurgent spirit mediums serving the tutelary spirit of the city

residing within it. In Chapter 10, Klemens Karlsson unpacks the territory cults of village and town spirits among the Tai Khuen people of Chiang Tung, Myanmar, analyzing the ritual sequences and offerings underpinning these cults in order to show how the ceremonies not only bring fertility, wealth, and prosperity but also provide symbolic and mythic legitimacy for the domination of displaced indigenous residents by the Tai migrants who claimed legal rights over land as civilized propagators of agriculture. In Chapter 11, Ngo Thi Diem Hang examines the mutual entanglement of a local cult, mythological figures, and the modern Vietnamese nation-state at the temple on Hung Mountain, documenting the ancient veneration of kings at the temple, the appropriation of this worship by the state during different periods of Vietnamese nation-building, and how contemporary Vietnamese devotees treat Hung kings as auspicious, powerful ancestors in their personal lives. The section and book conclude with an afterword by Penny Van Esterik, which critically reflects on the materiality of stones, the male scholars and grand narratives that haunt the Southeast Asian scholarship about stone masters, the promise and possibilities of a new regionalist comparative ethnology, the challenge of incorporating stones from prehistoric Southeast Asia into the analysis, and the necessity of wrestling with the ideological and social complications introduced by the arrival of hegemonic world religions into the worlds of stone masters.

Much more than these brief chapter summaries suggest, the substantive descriptions, anthropological arguments, and theoretical reflections of the case studies in *Stone Masters* resonate with each other across multiple dimensions—myth and ritual, ethnographic detail and cultural history, cosmologies and social organization, popular efflorescence and elite appropriation, social dynamics and political conflicts. The close attention paid by the authors to local terminologies, conditions, processes, and structures in the unfolding of specific cases of stone masters precludes any quick or easy generalizing about consistent and shared regional patterns and characteristics, except in broad strokes. Nonetheless, the reader cannot help but walk away with the clear sense that the contributors have opened up an illuminatingly fruitful domain of regional analysis worthy of further study, if only in order to more clearly elucidate the sociocultural contours and characteristics that define this family of shared phenomena. As an exercise in comparative regional ethnology, therefore, the volume is a thought-provoking success.

As much as the volume is about stone masters as prominent nonhuman figures of potency and efficacy within Southeast Asian society and culture, the book is also equally about the diverse, unruly pantheons and cosmologies within which these caring and capricious figures of potency reside. In fact, some of the chapters and arguments touch only lightly in a concrete or focused manner on either stones, masters, or stone masters per se. Instead, they delve more robustly into the encompassing cults and cosmologies of chthonic potency and sovereignty that would seem to be derived from ontologies that preceded both world historical religions and the naturalist vision of scientific rationality. Threaded in a hidden fashion across the various arguments within *Stone Masters*, therefore, is a larger comparative question about how ideas of personhood, agency,

efficacy, fecundity, productivity, well-being, prosperity, and humanity are conceptualized rather differently within the ontologies of “animism,” world historical religions, and secular scientific naturalism. In this sense, the book is also an exploration of how these contrasting understandings reinforce, negate, supplement, or undermine each other in the daily lives of contemporary mainland Southeast Asians. Hopefully future scholarship about stone masters will more directly investigate these questions as well.

Erick White  
*Independent Scholar*

***Disturbed Forests, Fragmented Memories: Jarai and Other Lives in the Cambodian Highlands***

JONATHAN PADWE

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020.

*Disturbed Forests, Fragmented Memories* delves into the relationship the Jarai of Tang Kadon village have forged with their land as it has been tested through times of historical upheavals and intrusions by the “other.” From the French protectorate through the Khmer Rouge regime to the recent waves of monocrop cultivation, the history of the village and its inhabitants is intimately intertwined with the villagers’ interactions with the landscape.

The book is rich with information on land use in this part of Cambodia’s northeast, where hill rice farmers have—often by means of deference and caution—interacted with the forest. To describe the physical and spiritual landscapes that have shaped the lives of the Jarai of Tang Kadon for centuries, the author uses different narrating styles to illustrate different aspects of the local agricultural system. In the first few chapters, Jonathan Padwe immerses the reader in old Jarai tales with the eloquence of a traditional village storyteller. The following chapters are written under a magnifying glass that demands scientific precision. This is particularly the case with the detailed study of rice. From the loss of Cambodian rice varieties at the end of the 1970s to the reintroduction and spontaneous reappearance of several endemic types in Tang Kadon and beyond, the examination of rice cultivation is clinically thorough. The book ends with the author reflecting on Tang Kadon and its immediate region today. To best illustrate how large companies’ investments have given a finishing touch to this interactive canvas, the author switches voice to write his concluding remarks in the fashion of a development report, which summarizes the devastating impact of large and powerful companies’ presence.

Padwe writes that “landscapes of memory are often portrayed as passive: they appear in these accounts as inanimate canvases, assigned meaning only through human action” (p. 15). In