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The Story of Southeast Asia

ERIC C. THOMPSON

Singapore: NUS Press, 2024.

The Story of Southeast Asia is certainly not the first or only book on Southeast Asia. Dozens of academic works from various perspectives have been published on the region. The question is, why did Eric C. Thompson decide to be part of those dozens of researchers? Thompson explains that he was introduced to Southeast Asian studies while a graduate student at the University of Washington in 1990. This sparked an interest in Southeast Asia and led to a career at the National University of Singapore along with the opportunity to explore his interest through scientific research. Thompson has had a stellar academic career in Southeast Asian studies, having published dozens of studies on the region in journals and books. In general, his research falls within the scope of sociology, gender, and anthropology.

At the outset, *The Story of Southeast Asia* contains a disclaimer that it is not a theoretical book but can be used to look at Southeast Asia from a social-theoretical and historical perspective. Nevertheless, the book is written from the perspective of history and anthropology, using Ernesto Laclau's theoretical approach that social structure can be understood as objective reality composed of sentiments laid down through the historical choices of subjective actors (p. xiii). From the perspective of historical studies, the long historical periodization of this book is seen as a form of writing *longue durée* history or history over a long duration. Although it is not specifically explained, this choice is seen as an attempt to correctly understand the historical process. Fernand Braudel, who introduced the concept of *longue durée*, believed that the longer the time perspective, the greater the chance of interpreting events correctly (Henley and Schulte Nordholt 2015). *Longue durée* has led historians to shift the direction of their research from social movements to social structures (Vovelle 1978), as Thompson does in this book.

The human activities that shaped the layers of social structure and cultural meaning in Southeast Asia are explained by Thompson in eight chapters. The discussion begins with Southeast Asia in prehistory, in the chapter titled "Populating Land and Seas." Starting with a focus on human activities in the Southeast Asian region from fifty thousand years ago, the narrative continues with

the development of humans in the Stone Age and the gradual formation of community culture. In the absence of written sources, the study of human tidal waves in this section is based on three important sources: archeology, genetics, and comparative linguistics (p. 22).

In Chapter 2, "Hub of the World," Thompson turns to Southeast Asia in the Iron Age, beginning with the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age. Once again, the author chronologically explains the characteristics of Southeast Asian life during this period. In short, during the Bronze and Iron Ages, Southeast Asian societies began to engage in a variety of social activities that were not limited to just one community. They started to engage in broader interactions between communities and between regions. They began to voyage and trade in various commodities, such as agricultural products and crafts. In addition, the region began to connect with a number of other regions that became world trade centers in their time. Centuries later, the Malacca Strait even became an important part of the trade boom that occurred around the fifth to third centuries BC (Sutherland 2007).

In Chapter 3, "God Kings of the Golden Lands," Thompson enters an era when people already lived in a complex, established system with a government, written language, religion, arts and architecture, economic systems, defense, and politics. Chapter 4, "Power, Piety and Reformation," discusses how the relationship between religion and power influenced the political order of Southeast Asian societies (p. 93). It also discusses Srivijaya and the process of formation of the Malay world, which later came to be associated with Islam.

In Chapter 5, "Family and Gender in Flux," Thompson discusses kinship and family values in terms of the patrilineal system, matrilineal system, and degrees of bilateral or cognatic kinship. The gender aspect is discussed in terms of gender pluralism, gender and politics and power, gender reordered, and religious reform and gendered economies. The process of identity formation in Southeast Asian societies is discussed in Chapter 6, "Emergent Identities." The discussion begins with a description of the factors that influence the formation of community identity, such as language and lineage, movement and migration, servitude and trade. The classification of Indigenous people in Southeast Asia is also a factor in the formation of community identity: racial classification became a tool for the colonial state to organize diverse populations under its control.

Chapter 7 goes on to discuss contesting sovereignty from the fifteenth century to the mid-twentieth. Contesting sovereignty generally involved foreign (European) parties seeking control of Southeast Asian territories from the local ruling elites. In the mid-twentieth century, Southeast Asian territories began to transition into independent and modern states: "European colonialism challenged Southeast Asians to think of themselves in new ways" (p. 180). Perhaps we can agree with this statement: European colonialism in Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia, sparked struggles for people to escape colonialism and establish sovereign states (Hall 1988; Ricklefs *et al.* 2010).

Long interactions with foreigners made Southeast Asian societies adaptive and able to adopt

new ideas and practices, as discussed in Chapter 8, “Modern Southeast Asia.” Colonies in Southeast Asia began to emerge as modern states, with the exception of Thailand and Brunei Darussalam, which retained their dynastic systems. Independent states in the region began to connect with one another through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which was established in 1967. This chapter discusses state building in terms of education, printing and the public sphere, mass media, urbanization and social movements, and the mobilization of militaries.

Overall, Thompson successfully presents the process of formation of the Southeast Asian region from the prehistoric era to the modern era in the twentieth century. The book’s historical narrative shows the involvement of actors (subjects) who shaped social structures as objective reality. The history of the formation of social structures in Southeast Asian societies is presented chronologically and in depth. To answer the question in the first paragraph of this article: this book is fundamentally different from the dozens of other books on Southeast Asia because Thompson looks at Southeast Asia as a whole over the *longue durée*, studying the development of the social structure of Southeast Asian societies over a long time period.

Unfortunately, the discussion in this book is similar to M. C. Ricklefs’ work published 14 years earlier. The perspective of social structure and ethnicity was used by Ricklefs and his four co-authors in *A New History of Southeast Asia* (Ricklefs *et al.* 2010). Ricklefs’ book can be said to be a further development of D. G. E. Hall’s (1988) work, which was the first scientifically written book on Southeast Asian history. Nevertheless, what is interesting about *The Story of Southeast Asia* is Thompson’s choice to start his study from prehistory, so that readers can see Southeast Asia as a region that developed through a very long process. Therefore, this book can be an initial reference or introduction to understanding the historical-anthropological aspects of Southeast Asia before moving on to authoritative theoretical sources in the fields of history, anthropology, sociology, and politics.

Thompson would have done well to pay attention to the various conflicts still occurring in Southeast Asia. Conflicts between the majority population and the Moro Muslim minority in the Philippines, the Patani in Thailand, and the Rohingya in Myanmar have led to problems of human rights violations (Idi 2018). Conflicts need to be considered because they are closely connected to the long process of nation formation in Southeast Asia from an anthropological-historical perspective.

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Subjects and Sojourners: A History of Indochinese in France

CHARLES KEITH

Oakland: University of California Press, 2024.

In *Subjects and Sojourners: A History of Indochinese in France*, Charles Keith offers a sweeping, detailed history of Indochinese colonial subjects who sojourned in France from the 1850s to the 1950s. The book sheds light on how their travel experiences transformed them and, consequently, their own societies upon their return. As the title suggests, the book indeed discusses “Indochinese” (Vietnamese, Khmer, and Lao) sojourners, but it is mostly about Vietnamese men. This is because, as Keith acknowledges, most Indochinese sojourners in France came from (and returned to) the Vietnamese regions of Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin rather than the Khmer and Lao regions and were also overwhelmingly male.

The book’s central argument is that the presence of these colonial subjects in France meant that “colonial society” also existed in France: “The extension of the French imperial nation-state into Indochina, in turn, extended Indochina’s colonial society into France” (p. 6). In other words, the Indochinese who sojourned in France did not leave colonial society but were “one of colonial society’s core structural features: they are best conceived of and studied as a form of human circulation within colonial society, rather than outside of it” (p. 6). This book’s argument therefore departs from those of scholars who confine “colonial society” to Indochina’s borders.

Keith also positions *Subjects and Sojourners* as a corrective to what he thinks is the problematic tendency in global and transnational histories of colonial subjects in Europe to overemphasize, and sometimes fetishize, connections and commonalities between colonial subjects from Asia, Africa, and Latin America (p. 7). These studies may help explain political projects like Black Internationalism or various forms of anticolonialism. However, these historians, Keith argues, tend to inadequately contend with pluralisms and divisions among colonial subjects. They also tend to have weak area knowledge of their case studies and neglect archival collections outside of Europe as well as sources in “non-European” languages. In contrast, *Subjects and Sojourners* is