

The development of states and polities in Southeast Asia: Innovative connections and comparisons

Introduction to a thematic issue

Tuong Vu

The present special issue of *HumaNetten* includes four essays about the historical development of the state and polity in Burma, Vietnam, and the archipelagic area east of Java.¹ All four articles examine the historical development of Southeast Asian states in original ways. Specifically, we are interested not in studying these polities in the conventional approach, either in isolation or restricted to a particular period. Building on comparative and regional studies by scholars such as Anthony Reid and Victor Lieberman, our articles focus on historical developments in Southeast Asia while seeking to make fresh and innovative connections and comparisons across periods or across regions.

These connections and comparisons illuminate important aspects of Southeast Asian history that have been obscured in much existing scholarship. For example, Michael Charney ventures beyond the Southeast Asian region to compare the systems of transport in premodern and colonial Ghana to those in Burma of similar periods. In his paper, Hans Hägerdal contrasts the development of the small-sized kingdoms and principalities east of Java with that of larger states on mainland Southeast Asia. His focus is on the early modern period but he is able to draw implications for later periods. Tuong Vu's article borrows concepts from studies of central Asia and uses the contrast between China's northern and southern frontiers to explore the synergies between China and Vietnam over the length of their histories. He offers premodern, early modern, and modern examples of Vietnamese imperialism in the paper. Claire Sutherland calls on scholars of contemporary Southeast Asia to transcend the nation-state as an analytical framework. She proposes the concept of "postmodern mandala" as an alternative way to theorize about contemporary Southeast Asian politics, with Vietnam as a test case.

While our articles do not cover every polity or every period in Southeast Asia, we believe the papers together make two important contributions to broad scholarship across the region and beyond. First, the papers enhance our knowledge about the differentiated process of integration and consolidation in Southeast Asia. Hägerdal's article shows that the process was disrupted in the archipelagic area east of Java because of European penetration in the

¹ The four studies in the present special issue were originally presented as papers at the EuroSEAS Conference in Vienna, 12-14 August 2015. We are grateful to eight anonymous reviewers, two per paper, who provided valuable comments to our contributions.

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Unlike the ongoing consolidation into larger polities on mainland Southeast Asia at the same time, the small kingdoms in this area were able to preserve their autonomy well into the nineteenth century. Charney argues that Burma's precolonial road system has been neglected in the literature. His paper shows that in this case the expansion of the Konbaung Empire in the early modern period did not lead to significant development of the road system even while the state strived to control mobility throughout its territory. In comparison to a more developed road transport system in Ghana, a legacy of underdevelopment in the Konbaung and colonial periods can be found in the relative durability of the Burma military dictatorship today. In the Vietnamese case, Vu shows interesting parallels between patterns of imperial development throughout the history of this country. The process was shaped by threats from other frontier states, elite fighting, and ambitions of particular leaders.

Our second contribution involves historiography. Vu's article offers a sustained critique of the nationalist historiography that was developed in the colonial period and that remains influential today. According to him, this historiography misunderstands the sources of the negative synergies between "China" and "Vietnam" in the first millennium A.D. when the Red River was under northern rule. In contrast, Sino-Vietnamese relations in the subsequent period when Dai Viet was an independent kingdom were characterized mostly by positive synergies, unlike what nationalist historiography claims. Thanks in part to China, Vu argues, the Vietnamese in early modern and modern periods were able to expand their realm and become an empire that dominated the entire Indochinese peninsular. Sutherland also focuses on the historiography of Vietnam, but her target of criticism is broader, namely the conceptual framework of the Westphalian nation-state with fixed territorial borders separating the domestic from the international realm. As she argues, this state-centric framework obscures connections and networks that overlap and crosscut polities and communities. By investigating the historiography of Vietnam, Sutherland captures the recent shift in scholarly thinking from such a state-centric perspective and suggests a "postmodern mandala" as a metaphor for contemporary polities.

Authors and Abstracts

Michael W. Charney
 Professor, School of Oriental and African Studies
 The University of London, United Kingdom
mwcharney@googlemail.com

Title: *Before and after the wheel: Precolonial and colonial states and transportation in West Africa and mainland Southeast Asia*

Scholarship on Southeast Asia has generally ignored the role of precolonial transportation in religious, political, and even economic life (in contrast to rather more on the colonial period), while historical research on precolonial West Africa has directed great attention to road building, such as that by the Ashanti Kingdom. In both cases, however, the development of colonial transportation infrastructure that came later is depicted as an entirely European and

foreign political, economic, and even cultural intervention that helped to ensure colonial domination that was both a break with the past as well as the foundation for the kinds of states that emerged after independence. Precolonial transportation and everyday movement and administrative approaches to them are seen as irrelevant to the phenomenon and a standard assertion in the historiography of at least some Southeast Asian countries is that they had no roads at all before British rule. The present article argues instead that certain governmentalities regarding movement and transportation had an important influence on emerging colonial transportation networks and administrative approaches to everyday mobility. The article also suggests that the partial, long-term, and indirect impact of this influence has been the durability or failure thereof of authoritarian regimes in both areas. The article looks primarily at the case studies of Myanmar (British Burma) and Ghana (the colonial Gold Coast), although examples from others countries are used as well.

Tuong Vu
Professor, Department of Political Science
University of Oregon, USA
thvu@uoregon.edu

Title: *State formation on China's southern frontier: Vietnam as a shadow empire and hegemon*

State formation in Vietnam followed an imperial pattern, namely, a process of conquests and annexations typical of an empire. At its peak in the early nineteenth century, the frontier of the Vietnamese empire encompassed much of today's Cambodia and Laos. This imperial pattern was the basis on which the French built their Indochinese colony and the Vietnamese communist state built its modern hegemony. By re-examining Vietnamese history as that of an empire and hegemon, this paper challenges the nationalist historiography's assumption about Vietnam's need for survival from China as the driving force of Vietnamese history. In contrast, I argue that the threat to Vietnamese survival has come less from China than from other states on China's southern frontier. Vietnam has in fact benefited from a positive synergy with China in much of its premodern and modern history. By situating Vietnamese state formation in the context of mainland Southeast Asia, I hope to correct the tendency in many studies that focus exclusively on Sino-Vietnamese dyadic interactions and that posit the two as opposites. Treating Vietnam as an empire or hegemon over a large area of mainland Southeast Asia also is essential to understand why Vietnamese sometimes did not automatically accept Chinese superiority despite the obvious "asymmetry" between them.

Hans Hägerdal
Associate Professor in History
School of Cultural Sciences
Linnaeus University, Sweden
hans.hagerdal@lnu.se

Title: *Trajectories of the early-modern kingdoms in eastern Indonesia; comparative perspectives*

As well known, a considerable development of statecraft in Southeast Asia took place in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, what Victor Lieberman has termed post-charter states (i.e., replacing older, culturally defining realms). Historical research has so far focused on the principal mainland kingdoms, and the newly Islamized maritime and insular polities. The present paper compares the larger Southeast Asian kingdoms (ca fifteenth-seventeenth centuries) with polities that arose in eastern Indonesia, east of Java. Four regions of political development are defined. These include the indianized kingdoms of Bali and Lombok, the Muslim kingdoms of Sumbawa, the Islamic spice sultanates of North Maluku, and the loosely structured polities of the Timor region. These areas are compared from a set of variables, and the paper asks what parallels may be discerned between local polity-forming processes and the dynamics of the mainland kingdoms and Java. Eastern Indonesian realms were all fairly decentralized though sometimes containing symbolisms and organizational features that were miniature versions of the larger realms. They had strong links to long-distance trade, thus connected to the Age of Commerce spoken of by Anthony Reid. State-building was however complicated by the very fragmented ethnic-linguistic picture. It is argued that maritime Southeast Asia's transition to a "vulnerable zone" after the arrival of the European powers (post-1511) had important repercussions for the maintenance of the smaller realms of eastern Indonesia and set the maritime world apart from the mainland. A trajectory of state integration in maritime Southeast Asia was underway, where new Muslim kingdoms were in the process of threatening or subjugating the smaller realms east of Java. This process was halted by European sea power that weakened the major archipelagic realms and provided chances for the smaller polities of survival under modest and sometimes subdued conditions. The minor principalities of eastern Indonesia were thus able to survive as archaic entities until the twentieth century.

Claire Sutherland
Senior Lecturer of Politics
Durham University, United Kingdom
claire.sutherland@durham.ac.uk

Title: *A postmodern mandala? Moving beyond methodological nationalism*

The colonial translation of the "nation-state logic" to Southeast Asia is commonly understood to have superseded what O.W. Wolters called the pre-colonial mandala model, in which power was exerted by a sort of central "sun king" whose gravitational pull weakened with

distance and was overlapped by other spheres of power in a complex system of tributary relationships. The historian David Biggs has argued that, in accepting the undeniable importance of national sovereignty in contemporary political analyses of Southeast Asia, there has been too definitive a break with pre-existing understandings of power relations, which may prove useful to explaining the particularities of politics today. In political science, the translation of nationalism and sovereignty to Southeast Asia is reflected in an entrenched “methodological nationalism,” whereby the nation-state is frequently taken for granted as the central unit of analysis. Paying attention to the “margins” of society still implicitly assumes a national centre, for example. Historians of Vietnam, including Keith Taylor and Li Tana, have made significant advances in loosening the “stranglehold” of nationalist historiography. Anthropologists and geographers of cosmopolitanism and migration have also long questioned the analytical usefulness of bordered nation-states. Building on these insights, the article calls for a paradigm shift in political enquiry and playfully proposes the “post-modern mandala” as an alternative to methodological nationalism applied to Southeast Asia.