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**Michael Arthur, Aung-Thwin, & Kenneth R. Hall (Eds.). *New Perspectives on the History and Historiography of Southeast Asia: Continuing explorations*. London & New York: Routledge. 2011.**

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**Michael Arthur, Aung-Thwin, & Kenneth R. Hall (Eds.). *New Perspectives on the History and Historiography of Southeast Asia: Continuing explorations*. London & New York: Routledge. 2011.**

This volume was published as a *festschrift* to commemorate the retirement of John K. Whitmore, longtime professor of Southeast Asian history at the University of Michigan. Contributors are drawn from two generations of his students and collaborators. With its subtitle of “continuing explorations,” it may be seen as a sequel to a volume of essays published in 1976, *Explorations in Early Southeast Asian History: The Origins of Southeast Asian Statecraft*, which was co-edited by Whitmore and Kenneth R. Hall, a student of Whitmore’s and one of the co-editors of this volume. That volume was intended to present research that represented new perspectives on the study of Southeast Asia. The new volume, by including two generations of specialists, successfully illustrates emerging trends in historiographical methods while also updating and revising commonly held views.

The book features a wide range of interdisciplinary chapters covering several regions of mainland Southeast Asia and three major periods in its history: Classical/Post-Classical, Early Modern, and Modern. What links this set of essays on diverse topics is what the editors describe as a “shared approach” (p. 1) to the history and historiography of Southeast Asia, resulting from the common influence of the ideas of Whitmore, which are laid out in a brief chapter by Victor Lieberman containing a bibliography of Whitmore’s publications. What these shared perspectives entail, according to the editors in their introductory essay, is (1) the interdisciplinary approach characteristic of area studies, relying in particular on the disciplines of history and anthropology and (2) a common attempt to impart “agency” upon the practice of Southeast Asian historiography. The editors offer an extended, cogent discussion of the meaning and significance of the concept of agency as it has impacted the historiography of Southeast Asia over the past half century. They note that, on the whole, the articles in this volume give agency to “things indigenous” (p. 4) as opposed to “exogenous . . . , [meaning], in practice India, China, and the West” (p. 5). Indeed, most of the articles do rely upon indigenous written sources and recent archaeological finds, and they tend to focus on peripheral areas of Southeast Asia beyond imperial centers.

In their overview of Southeast Asian historiography, the editors summarize developments that are undoubtedly familiar to Southeast Asianists but may not be so to others. Briefly, early histories were composed by colonizers, whose emphasis was on external influences that created contemporary national cultures and polities through the processes of Indianization, Sinicization and Westernization. These histories were superseded during the postcolonial era by nationalist historians, who often minimized external influences and traced the origins of modern nation-states directly to classical predecessors, thus reifying particular national identities. The issue of agency was first raised in the 1960s under the rubric of “autonomous history,” meant to counter the colonial histories that had generally dominated earlier accounts. Later, the term “localization” was introduced to refer to autonomous history, which emphasized the adaptation, rather than wholesale acceptance, of external influences. Since then, the problem for historians of the region has been how to balance the indigenous and exogenous perspectives to most accurately represent the historical processes of adaptation.

While some of the chapters are written for, and would most appeal to, specialists, several chapters are more wide-ranging and should interest non-specialists who wish to update their

knowledge of the changing historiography of the region. These include Michael Aung-Thwin's "A new/old look at 'classical' and 'post-classical' Southeast Asia/Burma," Michael Vickery's "'1620,' a cautionary tale," and Maitrii Aung-Thwin's chapter on the historiography of colonial Burma. All three apply contemporary historiographical methods and raise questions that hold import for historians of any world region.

Michael Aung-Thwin questions the often unquestioned use of the term "classical" to refer to certain periods in the history of Southeast Asia, since it is not an indigenous concept but one borrowed from Western historiography. One major concern regarding the use of the term is that it plays into contemporary nationalist discourses that see the classical predecessors as direct precursors of and paradigms for the modern nation-states. In Aung-Thwin's estimation, the assertion of a "classical" state directly implies its modern counterpart. He sees contemporary nationalist discourse as projecting contemporary values backwards onto earlier civilizations in order to assert a questionable continuity. This becomes particularly problematic when it comes to, for instance, Indonesia, with its "classical" roots on the island of Java. In the end, though, the author acknowledges that it is difficult to come up with other terminology that clearly expresses the periods of florescence in the history of Southeast Asia.

Aung-Thwin applies these same questions to the history of Burma in the process discrediting previously held theories. For example, he argues that Theravada Buddhism in the thirteenth century was instrumental in the development of Pagan and the neighboring Thai states and that the earlier idea that Buddhism caused the decline of these states is "twentieth-century wishful thinking" (p. 36). Furthermore, he minimizes the effect of the Mongol invasions, previously considered instrumental in the decline of Pagan and other Southeast Asian states, making the case that their declines were instead related to internal structural contradictions.

Michael Vickery's article seems at first more narrowly focused on relations in the early seventeenth century among the states of Cambodia, Ayutthaya, Champa, and Vietnam. Yet, his "cautionary tale" about the limitations of autonomous history based upon indigenous chronicles has broader implications for historians everywhere. Through a close reading of both Cambodian and Vietnamese chronicles, he illustrates that popularly accepted explanations of Cambodian-Vietnamese relations based upon just one or the other of such chronicles are erroneous. By comparing them, he finds that the Vietnamese and Cambodian chronicles are not only mutually contradictory but that, depending on the era, they are also internally contradictory. Vickery notes that too much of the history of the Southeast Asian mainland has been unthinkingly copied from earlier secondary sources that relied upon later chronicles and that both, at times anachronistically, injected later regional tensions into explanations for earlier events.

Maitrii Aung-Thwin studies the historiography of the 1930s Saya San Rebellion against British colonial power in Burma. He shows how previous historical explanations essentialized and reified the peasant experience and denied their agency, suggesting that a truly autonomous history is one that acknowledges the ways in which history itself objectifies historical events through its unthinking application of "historical categories and epistemological processes" (p. 222).

Other contributing authors provide useful insights into history based upon new research that in some cases updates and revises previously held theories. Comparing Chinese records with local epigraphic and archaeological evidence, Kenneth Hall brings new insights as he examines Vietnamese maritime connections with other areas in the region during the era of the Song and Yuan dynasties, periods that saw growing maritime trade diasporas and the rise of port-centered regional states. Comparing Chinese and Vietnamese historical records with archaeological

evidence, Sun Laichen presents a detailed analysis of Chinese-style weapons (those that used gunpowder) produced in Vietnam and concludes that such weapons were in widespread use in Vietnam by the fifteenth century. Kenneth Swope closely analyzes the Miao uprising in southwest China to highlight the growing friction between the expanding Ming state and local tribal groups and to illustrate the broader effects of Ming policies. Charles Wheeler examines three periods in the history of Vietnam during which forces at the margins, in this case pirates and smugglers, contributed to the creation of strong, centralized states in central Vietnam.

Li Tana draws upon Vietnamese, Chinese, and Japanese records and accounts to undermine the traditional argument that Confucianism took root in Vietnam due to the nature of its agrarian society. She argues persuasively that the adoption of Neo-Confucian learning, which formed the “ideological foundation of Vietnamese statecraft and culture by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” (p. 167), was due to a new trade in inexpensive books being printed in China and shipped to Vietnam. Her evidence indicates that such commodities were impacting not only the elites, but all levels of society, making pre-modern Vietnam “perhaps one of the most literate countries in Asia” (p. 170). Concluding, she argues that contrary to popular opinion, there is little evidence of widespread acceptance of Confucianism in most of Vietnam prior to the seventeenth century. In a related article, Keith Taylor examines a seventeenth century dual-script dictionary to assert that there was at that time an attempt to simplify Vietnamese adaptations of Chinese characters as a means of promoting greater literacy in the latter. His is a highly detailed literary analysis that would likely appeal only to specialists in Vietnamese literature and linguistics, yet he does give insights into Vietnamese politics of the time and how they intersected with the literary milieu. Finally, Edwin Moise offers a detailed study of the Tet offensive during the Vietnam War, in which he effectively demonstrates that much of what has been written about the war is highly inaccurate, primarily in that it has repeatedly denied agency to the Vietnamese, portraying those on both sides as hapless pawns of American policies. This book lives up to its title in that the reader will find revised explanations for facets of Southeast Asian history that continue to be misrepresented as well as new approaches to the historiography of the region that rely increasingly on indigenous sources. While of great interest to Southeast Asia specialists, it also holds thoughtful new insights for those who deal with Southeast Asia only in world or global history courses.

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