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Southeast Asian Perspectives on Power. New York: Routledge,  
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**Liana Chua, Joanna Cook, Nicholas Long, and Lee Wilson (Eds). *Southeast Asian Perspectives on Power*. New York: Routledge, 2012.**

Power has been a heavily discussed yet elusive concept that has marked Southeast Asian studies. In spite of the term's near ubiquitous use, Liana Chua et al., in chapter one, argue that the need remains for an understanding of "the ways that power is understood by the *people* of Southeast Asia" (p.1, emphasis added). Only with such an understanding can one not only analyze the essence, flow, and effects of power but also "explain people's orientation towards, and away from, particular models of power" (p.2). To undertake such analysis, "arguments anchored in diverse intellectual traditions ... [must be] accorded equivalent status as potential explanatory tropes" (p.4). Cultural models of power must also be deployed as research questions, not as mere "explanatory devices" but as "phenomena to be accounted for" (p.8).

Following the introductory chapter, Shelly Errington traces the developments of power as "clashing concatenations, not a master narrative smoothly unfolding in time" (p.16). Shifts in post-colonial relations between the colonized and colonizers ruptured the narratives of time, space, and knowledge production (i.e., the "idea of progress"), thus opening up questions about the "structure of history" (p.17) and the nature of power and leadership. Here, Benedict Anderson and Clifford Geertz are two towering figures in the re-definition of the nature of power. Errington observes that Anderson's point on the difference between hierarchy and social class remains helpful to understanding power relations. As she asserts, however, rather than seeing hierarchy as a "horizontal solidarity of the powerful versus the marginalized," it is better viewed as "chains of patrons and clients or as encompassing and encompassed personages/entourages" (p.23). This approach opens an understanding that, throughout history, "peers ... were rivals, and their followers and dependents fought under each as part of the noble's political body" (p.23). She critiques Geertz's essentialized sense that "all humans have a stable core self that lies beyond any linguistic cline of "I" that can be culturally deconstructed and reconstructed (p.28). Rather, she says, conceptions of power can be learned from analyzing "speech levels [that] imply a micropolitics of interpersonal power" (p. 28), demonstrating, for example, how a person of higher social status must evoke from his interlocutors the "[demeanor] and level of speech he desires them to use" (p.26). A reassessment of Anderson and Geertz thus suggests new insights for power studies, (i.e., that notions of the person, the shape of a life narrative, and space are all interconnected and imply each other—and cannot exist in absence of one another, in essentialized, defined silos such as "class/hierarchy" or "self," which remain sociological concepts that are posited by an ethnographer and then culturally reconstructed by his or her observations (p.29).

In chapter three, Joanna Cook analyzes the power of materiality/religious icons among Thai Buddhists. In observing their rituals, the spatio-religious materialization of sacredness and symbolic transfers of power to amulets worn by devotees are illustrated (p.41). Here, useful parallels may be drawn to late modernity's mass consumerism and commodification of products, where power, protection, and aspiration become wrapped up in the cloak of *nouveau riche* materials that often signal authority, power, and distance. Cook believes that Buddhist "mediators simultaneously understand their meditation as generative of power and seek the protection of others." This, however, seems inconsistent with many Buddhists' more commonly understood (and perhaps clearer) notions of giving merit to others as part of one's own merit-making and that to receive such merit from others further helps one's own journey towards nirvana. Thus, while Cook's analysis of materiality is sensitive to local practices, the paucity of actual interviews with Buddhists suggests the essay lacks sufficient emic analysis. For example, if rituals such as voluntary pain experienced through tattooing enable "a transcendence that echoes the generation of power through

renunciation,” what is the experiences of Buddhists when voluntary or enforced warfare occurs?<sup>1</sup> This minimal evidence is ironic given the volume’s attempt to ground studies of power within localized norms.

In chapter four, *sakti* (an Indonesian indigenous concept of power) is similarly explored structurally but through the medium of movie and TV. Here, connections between spirit beliefs and material transformations revolve around commodity relations such as land and power (p.54). As a critique of Benedict Anderson’s “essentialized notion of power” (p.56) and to offer a more grassroots perspective, Adrian Vickers’ spiritual and religious topographical survey enables us to better comprehend how Indonesian media and its use of horror imagery/movies that inhabit key power sites such as mountains, graveyards, and rural/urban spaces (implicating female sexuality and power) posit themes that resist male control (p.62). Here, spiritual possession “provides alternate versions of modern selfhood [i.e.,] possession by forms of the modern that have been perverted or possession by the opposite to the modern. The possessed body is the ultimate challenge to the notion of the modern, coherent self” (p.63). The media partly implicate power because it is within a “complex set of power relations ... between the highly material (commodities) and the immaterial” that “spiritual power is ambivalent” in films (p.63). Viewed likewise, media analyses that reduce topics to state and state power are overly simplistic. Vickers concludes that the increase of horror in Indonesian films reflects not only the “increasingly rational understanding of the world” but also a critique of (male) state power/control. However, one wonders why the opposite conclusion is not drawn – that this increase in horror in films reflects an increased enchantment or projection of power in the rationality of modern power relations.

Five other essays in the book – the symbolic appropriation of war-made objects in Cambodia (in Krisna Uk’s chapter six), tensions over cemetery plots in Singapore (in Ruth Toulson’s chapter seven), ambiguity in power of planning in urban Malaysia (in Richard Baxstrom’s chapter 10), the deployment of sapiocracy—the popularization of a sage-like leader—in Vietnam (in Markus Schleckler’s chapter 11), and “prayer power” in the Philippines (in Deirdre de la Cruz’ chapter 12) – discuss how power relations between the state and people may be understood by investigating common, everyday items, rituals, or concepts. Objects such as warplanes, cemeteries, government plans, hagiographies, and prayer in and of itself are seen as endowed with inherent power. When they are domesticated and carved, worshipped, or nurtured by locals, what may have been distant/foreign, state-owned/zoned, abstract/uncertain or nationalistic/idolized, become, in and of themselves, objects of empowerment or re-animation that conquer, sidestep, or resist the powerful when appropriated by the ordinary people against external/state forces. For example, war planes that once threatened death are now part of Cambodian funeral rites, “warding off evil spirits” (p.85). Unlike the Melanesian cargo cult phenomenon, for Uk’s Cambodian villagers (who had not seen such technological objects), such modern replicas (e.g., warplanes) are not linked to any millenarian movement. Rather, the mimicry and appropriation of objects such as war materials (chapter six) or government plans (chapter 10) may be seen as forms of powerful protection from evil or an uncertain future, to channel any disruptive forces so as to serve tutelary (p.87) or prosaic purposes (pp.135-149).

In other instances, the Singaporean Hokkien,<sup>2</sup> with their cemeteries forcibly relocated by the state (chapter 7), “provides an occasion for heckling the state from the penumbra of the sacred” (p.103). Indeed, the “creativity and resourcefulness of a communal life that refuses to surrender its integrity to the hegemonic ‘other’ motivated by the desire to dominate

<sup>1</sup> Jerryson, M., & Juergensmeyer, M. (2010). *Buddhist warfare*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> A distinct ethnic Chinese group that originally hailed from southern Fujian, China

and control” (p. 92) aptly describes many of these essays. Conversely, grassroots ritual such as prayer may also be appropriated by the state to construct new idioms of power that tap into but also cannibalize “people power” – e.g., when “‘Prayer Power’ betokens the persistence of the dominant social and political class, as a slogan, it unwittingly parodies it” (pp.177-178).

Space delimits two other aspects of power – the “big man”/“man of prowess” in Indonesian *wibawa* (chapter 8) and the upland/lowland divide in area studies (chapter 9). Briefly, for Loren Rytter, “The origin of this *wibawa* [influence] in the deeds that office itself allows [local officials] to perform [is a] prowess that depends on their official position and on disavowing precisely such dependence” (p.117). For Sarinda Singh, bureaucratic officials placed in geographically marginal (i.e., upland) postings are not necessarily disempowered, but their placement in such locations may become grounds for economic opportunists to reframe these postings and become big fishes in small ponds (pp.130-131).

By gathering such diverse essays of rich ethnographic description and analysis, we are given new lens through which to examine emic orientations, feelings, and deployment of power. Though many such forms of localized power may be underground or go unnoticed or unrecognized by the state, the on-going appropriation of power by the ordinary people of Southeast Asia means we ought not ignore its salience for studies on power.

Curiously, although the book is helmed by four editors, several essays are marked by suspect editing, such as run-on sentences that span six to nine lines (p.39), missing references in the bibliography (such as the one for Mary Steedly, p.156), and undefined terms (such as “occult traditionalism,” p.178). Minor quibbles aside, this ground-breaking volume upturns long-held and essentialized conceptions of power in Southeast Asia while modeling new ways of analyzing and understanding it. This text should be required reading in anthropology, political science, and cultural and area studies on power.

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