

6-1-2019

**Liana Chua, Joanna Cook, Nicholas Long and Lee Wilson (Eds.).
Southeast Asian Perspectives on Power. London: Routledge,
2017.**

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Recommended Citation

Suorsa, Olli Ph.D. (2019) "Liana Chua, Joanna Cook, Nicholas Long and Lee Wilson (Eds.). Southeast Asian Perspectives on Power. London: Routledge, 2017.," *Journal of International and Global Studies: Vol. 10: No. 2, Article 19.*

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1490

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol10/iss2/19>

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Power is an elusive and difficult concept to objectively qualify. Different academic disciplines give different meanings to *power* suitable to their own inquiry—whether emanating solely from another elusive and inherently imagined concept, the nation-state, or from the institutions above the state or the state’s numerous bureaucratic and power-laden institutions. *Southeast Asian Perspectives on Power* adds a modern anthropological approach to understanding the sources, origins, and peculiarities of power in Southeast Asia. It challenges the pre-laden assumptions of power residing solely on an abstract nation-state and attempts to relocate the literature to better decipher roles and meanings of cultural narratives, beliefs, symbolic but powerful artifacts or events, and deeply-rooted customs to local understandings of power. It can also help us better understand local resistance against central state and *modernity*, and work for inclusion rather than exclusion. Ultimately, it is the understanding of these local sensitivities and sources of power that will help nation-state reconcile the center-periphery dilemmas and build a more cohesive state of nations, rather than nation-state.

The work introduces a diverse set of thematic topics from a broad set of Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines. The work begins by providing a localization of the book in the existing literature, drawing from the two most prolific academics in the field who have made commendable efforts to conceptualize power in local circumstances, Benedict Anderson and Clifford Geertz. The chapters that follow adopt this approach, drawing and expanding on or offering modern adaptations of Anderson and Geertz’s works in inferring local particularities in the understanding or expressing of power in local circumstances. The book compiles an interesting and diverse group of thematic cases that range from the protective power of sacred amulets in Thailand and the appropriation of war-made objects in northern Cambodia and the power and agency of landscape in Indonesia to the role and power of prayer in the Philippines and to the power, planning, and emergence of baroque forms of life in urban Malaysia. Through the novel cases, the authors put forward a rich mixture of local perceptions of power in Southeast Asia, beyond that of the nation-state. The work has a vertical structure, building from the appearances of power at the monastic level and the spiritual forces (understood as a form of power) associated with all *things* and *places* that shape people’s behavior to an examination of the power of mid-level bureaucrats and sage-like individuals alike, introducing the notion of charismatic power and demonstrating how power affects local life through multiple forms, not just through the centralized and (imagined) nation-state imposed power.

The cases presented in the book demonstrate how definitions of power cannot be incorporated into a single overarching definition but are instead closely linked to different lives and are formed in a multitude of ways in Southeast Asia. The chapters vividly narrate the expressions of power in different localities and circumstances, their inter-subjective meanings to people and often conflictual relationships with the center. It, thus, gives a sense of, say, the (perceived) more immediate nature of spiritual power in comparison to some other forms or sources of power, such as the power emanating from the nation-state’s center.

The book’s chapters give an overview of the multitude of forms and appearances of power beyond the state apparatuses, better connecting people’s perceptions and perspectives on power horizontally. It also highlights how *actual* state power and the people’s imagination of it work side-by-side and moderate one another, as illustrated in the discussion of Vietnam. The work also shows the complexity of modern decision-making involving ethnic and class

mixtures, as illustrated in the examination of burial traditions in Singapore and government restrictions thereof, revealing some deeply felt structural injustices. The book underscores the lateral movement of marginal officials in Laos, not from uplands to lowlands but in reverse direction, as they go about seeking longer-term rent. Several cases also emphasize the role of a person's charismatic power, which, upon the person's death, gains a spiritual-like aura that continues to affect local and political life; this charismatic power is embodied by the likes of Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, General Aung San in Myanmar, and King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand. Through these examples, the book demonstrates the omnipresence of power in the lives and practices of peoples in Southeast Asia that transcends far beyond the nation-state.

Southeast Asian Perspectives on Power provides an important addition to the literature on understanding and localizing power in Southeast Asia. It offers nuance to the discussion with its rich narrative and diverse compilation of cases from almost all countries of the region. While offering glimpses of the various forms or appearances of power in the localities of those countries in question, the work falls short in linking those appearances of power vertically to, for example, town, provincial, or state structures of power—thus lacking a semblance of order or direction in its attempt to explain power. This observation, combined with the lack of a concluding chapter, leaves the various case studies and their narratives hanging separately, making the work's central aim—to demonstrate the forms and appearances of power *elsewhere*—just that. Through the cases, power becomes *atheoretical* rather than *theoretical*, as the work makes but a fleeting attempt to link the cases back to a theoretical framework. It often demonstrates power *in* (something) but fails to underscore that power's ability *to* (do something). This deficiency necessarily makes it more difficult to infer the role or agency of that power within the given phenomenon or circumstance. Criticism aside, however, *Southeast Asian Perspectives on Power* remains a valuable read to all who want to better grasp the local perceptions of power and its multiple appearances in different localities and circumstances in Southeast Asia, beyond the nation-state. This makes the work a great resource to add to university course syllabi in the social sciences, political science, and international relations alike, complementing the often pre-determined perspectives of power.

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