

## Editorial Foreword

# Connections and comparisons: Region and the world in framing early modern Southeast Asian history

Christopher Bayly, in *The birth of the modern world*, emphasised how ‘all local, national, or regional histories must, in important ways, therefore be global histories.’<sup>1</sup> This is all the more so for Southeast Asia, given its intermediary and pivotal position in maritime Asia and global commerce, connecting the Indian Ocean, the East Asian seas, and the Pacific, and providing important commodities on the Maritime Silk Roads.

Yet, Southeast Asia has occupied a somewhat marginal position in the field of global or world history. The major debates and fields in world history, be they the formation of world-systems, modernisation, ‘The rise of the West’, or ‘The great divergence’, have focused largely on China, Western Europe, and North America.<sup>2</sup> Studies of maritime Asia have also focused on or started with the Indian Ocean and East Asian seas, with Southeast Asia regarded as extensions of these geographic categories.

At the same time, prior to the 1980s, few Southeast Asian historians sought to engage with these broader debates in world history, and to locate Southeast Asia within global parameters. The Southeast Asia project, driven by the emerging Southeast Asian Studies programmes in the United States, Western Europe,

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1 Christopher A. Bayly, *The birth of the modern world, 1780–1914: Global connections and comparisons* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), p. 2.

2 Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *The modern world-system: Studies in social discontinuity* (New York: Academic Press, 1974); Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and capitalism, 15th–18th century*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1981); Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe: Economy and civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An economic history from the rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global economy in the Asian age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The great divergence: China, Europe, and the making of the modern world economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European hegemony: The world system A.D. 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Wong Roy Bin, *China transformed: Historical change and the limits of European experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

Australia, and New Zealand, were largely concerned with the creation of nation-states in the post-1945 world, and delineating the structures and coherence of the region.<sup>3</sup>

In the last three decades, however, there have been several notable efforts to write Southeast Asian histories from a global perspective or global histories from a Southeast Asian perspective, from Denys Lombard's *Le carrefour Javanais* and Anthony Reid's *Age of commerce*, to Victor Lieberman's *Strange parallels*, Craig Lockard's *Southeast Asia in world history*, and Barbara and Leonard Andaya's *An early modern history of Southeast Asia*.<sup>4</sup>

This special issue is a continuation of this project to globalise Southeast Asian history and to write Southeast Asia into world history. It focuses on the early modern period in Southeast Asia's engagement with a world being transformed by Western European commercial and imperial expansion to Asia and the Americas. This was a critical period in world-historical time, in which a new world-system was being created vis-à-vis the older Eurasian systems of trade and cross-cultural exchange.

The early modern period was also an important epoch in Southeast Asian engagements with the world, and vice versa, as well as world history. First developed in the early twentieth century to denote the transition between the medieval/Renaissance and modern periods in Europe, the concept came to be applied to the study of Southeast Asian history through the works of Anthony Reid, notably in the two-volume *Age of commerce*, in which he examined the social, political, economic, and cultural impacts of Southeast Asia's expanding commercial engagements with a new maritime world-system being created between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries through Western European commercial and imperial expansion, replacing older Eurasian trading systems.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike Western Europe, where these changes in the early modern period led to the growth of a new bourgeoisie and other sociocultural, economic, and political transformations of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, if not earlier, the processes of commercial expansion in Southeast Asia did not result in the growth of a similar class. The concentration of royal power arising from the expanding commerce between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did not lead to sustained processes of centralisation and state consolidation, as seen in the rise of absolutism in early modern Europe.

Expanding contact with Western Europe was to lead to the gradual retreat of Asian merchants from Southeast Asian trade vis-à-vis the Dutch East India Company, in particular. This, and the failure to produce more powerful centralised

3 As Reid noted in 1990, 'The debates about the capitalist transition in Europe and Japan, and about the relative failure of this transition in China and India, have scarcely touched Southeast Asia.' Anthony Reid, 'An "age of commerce" in Southeast Asian history', *Modern Asian Studies* 24, 1 (1990): 1.

4 Denys Lombard, *Le carrefour Javanais: Essai d'histoire Globale*, Civilisations et Sociétés, 3 vols. (Paris: École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1990); Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the age of commerce, 1450–1680*, vol. 1: *The land below the winds* and vol. 2: *Expansion and crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); Craig A. Lockard, *Southeast Asia in world history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Victor Lieberman, *Strange parallels: Southeast Asia in global context, c.800–1830* vol. 1. *Integration on the mainland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A history of early modern Southeast Asia, 1400–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

5 See Andaya and Andaya, *A history of early modern Southeast Asia*; Reid, *Southeast Asia in the age of commerce*.

states, was to lead to a gradual divergence in fortunes and development, explaining the 'poverty' of Southeast Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Victor Lieberman questioned the applicability of this trajectory to mainland Southeast Asia, arguing for key regional differences. Adopting a longer periodisation, from c.800 CE to 1830 CE, he proposed a comparative approach that locates developments in mainland Southeast Asian states with those in other parts of the world, namely Japan, Russia and France, as well as polities in island Southeast Asia and South Asia. Going beyond commerce as the predominant variable, he examined other broader dynamics such as cycles and patterns of state-building and consolidation, and the creation of cultural identities that were to constitute the foundations for nation-states in the modern era.<sup>6</sup>

More recently, Barbara and Leonard Andaya have sought to further refine the meaning and significance of the 'early modern' as a concept in Southeast Asian historiography. Defining the early modern as the period between the early fifteenth century and the early nineteenth century, they outlined the features of this era in Southeast Asian and global history. It was a period that saw important transformations in the adaptation of the physical environment and resources, as well as the creation of new cash and food crop regimes, an expansion in population, greater human mobility, important processes of religious change, especially with respect to Islam and Christianity, the transfer of technologies and ideas related to warfare and commerce, as well as 'territorial consolidation and administrative centralization'. Playing an important role in these processes was the Western European presence and interventions in the region and their interventions in the regional political economy, as well as their creation of a new global system.

The contributors to this volume, while building on these foundations, propose new parallels and linkages in attempting to locate Southeast Asia within the broader parameters of world history. From cosmologies surrounding the seas and oceans in different parts of maritime Southeast Asia and Asia, the movement of animal products and people in these maritime spaces, the creation of knowledge formations in cross-cultural diasporic encounters with Southeast Asian port-polities and environments and the building of a Trans-Asian and global trading concern, and the engagement between Islam and matriliney in different parts of the Indian Ocean littoral, they emphasise the transregional and global connections and comparisons fundamental to understanding Southeast Asian history.

Together, the contributions to this volume underline the connectedness of Southeast Asia to broader transregional and global environments, whether geographical, cultural, political, or economic, as well as the important parallels and comparisons between different parts of the region and the early modern world. Far from undermining Southeast Asia as a field of study, they emphasise the limits of the nation and national ideological discourses that have hitherto shaped the historiography and study of the region, and suggest the importance of the regional and global in Southeast Asian history.

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<sup>6</sup> Lieberman, *Strange parallels*; Victor B. Lieberman, *Beyond binary histories: Re-imagining Eurasia to c.1830* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).