

REVIEWS

Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia, ed. by TONY DAY & MAYA H. T. LIEM. Studies on Southeast Asia 51 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2010). ISBN 978 087727 781 1 (hard), 978 087727 751 4 (soft)

This book claims to offer “the most detailed and probing examination to date of the cultural dimension of the Cold War in Southeast Asia.” It originated from a panel discussion at an international conference in Malaysia in 2007. There are eleven contributors, almost equally divided between insiders and outsiders to the region. The geographical spread of the essays is very wide: two on Indonesia, one each on Philippines, Vietnam, Laos, Burma, Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia, and one split across Indonesia and Philippines. The subjects include novels, theatre, painting, films, journalism, a conference, and a physical culture movement. In short, variety.

The key point in Tony Day’s introduction is that in Southeast Asia the ideological conflict of the Cold War coincided with independence and the emergence of new nations. The clash of socialism and liberalism at a global level was intertwined with issues of national identity, cultural pluralism, the quest for modernity, and the construction of new polities. Each of the essays demonstrates the subtle blendings of global conflict

and local aspirations that emerged in different national contexts.

Francisco Benitez examines how a Filipino film-maker, Lamberto Avellana, used skills and techniques learned from making USIS propaganda films to make feature films which strove to define “a coherent Filipino citizen subject” who could build a newly independent nation with a bright future.

Michael Bodden reconstructs the performances of leftist theatre companies, playing to local audiences in small towns of in northern Sumatra, mixing traditional dramatic forms with modern techniques, and avoiding the straitjacket of left-right ideological conflict in order to explore themes of democracy and freedom.

Boitran Huynh-Beattie explores painting and sculpture in Saigon before 1975, showing how artists tried to avoid the political conflict either by ignoring it, espousing the cause of “art for art’s sake,” or retreating towards traditional forms.

Simon Creak shows how the creation and celebration of the male physique became a fundamental part of the Lao communists’ attempt to create a “new socialist person.” After 1975, the party promoted sport, calisthenics, and physical education, with Kaysone Phomvihane as a model of the new physical Lao male, but failed to gain

much popular support as everyday work already consumed the average Lao's total energies.

Tony Day reviews four Indonesian and Vietnamese writers, showing that they were more interested in local concerns than global issues or global literature. Rather than looking to the literary centres of the west for models, or being transfixed by either socialist realism or liberal humanism, they were all in different ways concerned with addressing the problems of their immediate place and time.

Bo Bo analyzes articles in *Myawaddy*, a literary periodical published by the Burmese army in the 1950s and early 1960s. He traces the emergence of a strongly anti-communist yet socialist rhetoric, debates over the political resolution of Burma's ethnic complexity, and fervent anti-western feeling—three strands which later coalesced into the Burmese Way of Socialism.

Rachel Harrison examines films in Thailand during its "American era," focusing particularly on Mit Chaibancha and his series of *Insi Daeng* (red eagle) films. Given the persistent nostalgia over Mit and Phetchara, and the recent remake of *Insi Daeng*, it is good to be reminded that Mit was a pretty-boy actor happy to be used as a poster boy for right-wing nationalism. Harrison shows how his later films, especially *Insi Thong* (golden eagle) were not merely anti-communist but also anti-Chinese, anti-rich-capitalist, anti-Pridi, and anti-gay—conflating all the fears and prejudices of a new and desperately insecure middle class.

Jennifer Lindsay traces how Singapore's promotion of a South-East Asian Cultural Festival in 1963 appeared on the surface as an essay in region-building but was overshadowed by the fears of the Singaporean leadership as a merger with Malaya approached. Race became a guiding principle, and the festival projected an image of racial cooperation, blocking out the conflicts of the Cold War and the cultural concerns of other participating nations. As a public spectacle, the festival was something of a failure with the exception of appearances by Hong Kong film stars who had nothing to do with the official theming.

The final two essays look at the re-remembering of the Cold War era from the standpoint of the present. Gaik Cheng Khoo shows how Amir Muhammed's recent films about the Communist Party of Malaya, especially his documentary of Chin Peng, disrupt the demonisation of the left that has dominated since the defeat of the CPM and especially since the collapse of the Cold War. Barbara Hatley examines how films and stage performances have refocused attention on Indonesia's crisis of 1965, again challenging the conventional view of the crisis that has prevailed for four decades.

These individual essays are of exceptionally high standard. The subjects range from intriguing to quirky. The research is often extraordinarily detailed. The writing is generally lucid and highly readable. But what of the project as a whole? Does putting these ten essays between one pair of covers create more than the sum of its pages?

With the single exception of Huynh-Beattie's review of the Saigon art scene, the strategy of every article is to go deep rather than broad. As readers, what are we to make of conclusions drawn from one film auteur, a handful of films, a few local theatre groups, one festival, a single magazine, four writers, or the career of a single actor? Although some of the essayists (especially Bo Bo and Harrison) spend time putting their study into a broader context, others expect the case study to speak for itself.

In his introduction, Tony Day summarizes the articles rather than drawing out a number of themes running across the collection. Although he bounces some articles against one another and against some other published work, his generalization moves little beyond his initial point about the intertwining of global ideological conflict on the one hand with local concerns about independence, nation, and identity on the other. After reading the essays, I felt that the variety of *political* experience of different countries in the Cold War (American tutelage in Thailand, war in Vietnam, military-backed dictatorship in Indonesia, etc) overrode any similarity in the *cultural* experience of the era.

Chris Baker

The Sociology of Southeast Asia: Transformations in a Developing Region by VICTOR T. KING. NIAS Reference Library #3 (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008). ISBN 978 87 91114 59 5 (hard), 978 87 91114 60 1 (soft)

Reading through King's text, the *bon mot* about the one-handed planner from my UN-ESCAP days inevitably came to mind. As planners, we were expected to advise our patrons the course of action to take, even though experience had taught us that most of them were loath of counsel that ran, 'on the one hand..., yet, on the other...'. If, at the time, we were two-handed planners, Victor King strikes me as an eight-handed octopus. To illustrate this straight away, I quote from the conclusion of the eighth chapter on Asian Values and Social Action, "Nevertheless, provided one makes a distinction between doctrine and practice and recognizes that religious values are malleable, it is clear that values have motivational force, but their influence and effects are complex, they may work directly or indirectly, and at times they may have no consequence at all" (195).

In spite of such non-committal conclusions that pepper the narrative, the author is highly committed to introduce the reader to the sociological tools and theories available to make sense of transformations or macro-sociological dynamics in a strikingly complex region, and so, both tools and Southeast Asia stand in need of explanation. Since King's focus is on dynamics, he needs, like the fathers of modern social