

consideration of the rise and fall of Hatien and other early junk ports and their replacement by ports with good anchorage facilities for deep-keeled Western square-riggers. It would have provided a fine counterpart to the similar economically and politically significant ecological evolution of the Chaophraya and Irrawaddi deltas during the same time frame.

Despite the abovementioned caveats, this book of collected essays on the Lower Mekong Water Frontier is a valuable, state-of-the-art contribution to the new wave of “borderless” Southeast Asian history. It is heartily recommended to all those with an abiding interest in the region’s economic, political, and ethnic history.

Edward Van Roy

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*L’Asia du Sud-Est 2011 : Les événements majeurs de l’année* [Southeast Asia 2011: Important events of the year] by A. LEVEAU & B. DE TRÉGLODÉ. Institut de recherche sur l’Asie du Sud-Est contemporaine (Bangkok: IRASEC, 2011)

One must firstly congratulate IRASEC on its crystal-ball gazing; this review is being written at the beginning of 2011, and already we are told what the important events of the year will be. This bizarre dating, defended by IRASEC (effectively and perhaps correctly maintaining the events of 2010 will be played out in 2011), conceals the fact that the book is a useful summary of events in the year just concluded, 2010, in the South-East Asian region.

The contents comprise a list of contributors, a foreword by the two editors, four essays (on the Jemaah Islamiyah, the evolution of the role of the yuan, South Korean ambitions in the region, and Chinese–South-East Asian relations), and eleven summaries of events in the past year of the countries comprising the region, in fact ASEAN plus Timor Leste (the latter a long-time pet of IRASEC). These résumés constitute the meat in the sandwich, and are topped off with eight annexes providing details of Francophone institutions in the region.

In any overarching publication of this nature, it is difficult to maintain a balance. Events in Thailand in 2010 were certainly dominant and twenty pages are allocated to the Red-Shirt uprising, without mentioning their foot-shooting

public relations error that forced the closure of Chulalongkorn Hospital. But Indonesia, far larger in population, area and perhaps even potential than Thailand, was only accorded 16½ pages, where the dominant issue, as in nearly all the summaries, was that of corruption. Achieving a balance with tiny Brunei (11 pages, in which the indigenous people seem most concerned with having different cars and official housing) and Timor (14 pages, now living off oil revenues and hoping for a tourist invasion) is not easy, but the editors come out from the attempt well.

It is extraordinary how the issue of corruption pops up in every account, even in squeaky-clean Singapore. So many societies in the region are used to playing with their cards close to their chests, handing out dribbles of information when and of what it suits them, that the world of Wikileaks and instant Internet, sometimes much-abused ‘freedom of speech’ permits all – or seems to. But then the comeuppance: the Indo pop star Peter Porn alias Ariel has got three and a half years for pornography. Something for the 2012 edition no doubt.

Sometimes the figures are puzzling. Singapore (whose figure is unofficial) and Brunei, notoriously labour-short, both have an unemployment rate of 3.4%; Indonesia, a surplus-labour country, declares an unemployment rate of 7.4 %, and the honest Philippines 8% (with underemployment at 18%). But Thailand manages to have an official rate of 1.4%, the lowest in the region. Apparently the rate is calculated by

different countries in different ways, but that which gives Thailand the lowest rate in the region really needs explaining. This reviewer would not be surprised if a calculable part of that 1.4% is found in the village in which he lives. A similar case might be the inflation rate, given here for Thailand as minus 0.9% for 2010 (Indonesia 6%, Laos 8.14%, Vietnam 6.5%, Malaysia 5.4%, Burma 9%); one wonders if the compilers have been to the market in the past year or again if official calculating quirks are to be blamed.

This is not a volume to be read from cover to cover, but dipped into as and when needed. It tries hard to achieve a fair balance, which means it will certainly offend some. Being in French means that its outreach will be limited to a comparatively small elite.

The volume comes with rather cluttered maps that are sometimes uninformative (and even inaccurate: Nong Bua Lamphu has changed places with Nongkhai). But in short the volume is a useful compendium of information about the region, and certainly up to date. What is striking is that the issue that unites the region, corruption (the Philippines not excepted, though so often an outsider to South-East Asia, with its historic links with Mexico, and its Catholic background), is admitted by all, to differing degrees, and tackled effectively by so few.

Michael Smithies

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