

BOOK REVIEWS**First Islanders, Prehistory and Human Migration
in Island Southeast Asia**

Peter Bellwood

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*360 pages with colour and greyscale plates/images*Review by Victor J. Paz
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Peter Bellwood's latest large-picture-canvas of the archaeology of Island Southeast Asia (ISEA); it views human population movement and cultural transmissions as central factors explaining societal change across time. No student of ISEA and Pacific archaeology is unfamiliar with the scholarship of Bellwood. He is a synthesizer of the region's archaeology, who is known for his well-written academic books and engaging articles. His pioneering book, *The Polynesians* (1978), may be considered as the first popular academic synthesis of the subject matter. *Man's Conquest of the Pacific* (1978) quickly followed, expanding the scope of Bellwood's synthesis both regionally and topically. He has repeated this feat for ISEA and the Malay Peninsula with the publication of *The Prehistory of the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago* (1985); substantially revised in 1997, it is closely related in content to this current work. Bellwood is a scholar who is interested, as he mentions in the book, in both the macro- and micro-narratives, derived mainly from the data coming from multidisciplinary approaches (p. 351). He is an archaeologist who is comfortable in leading a variety of fieldwork-based researchers, as well as publishing broad-picture writings on the region's history drawn from archaeology, anthropology, linguistics, and genetics. One may disagree with him at certain levels and on particular details, but no one amongst the active researchers in the region can match Bellwood's depth and breadth of knowledge of the archaeological literature.

This book, as Bellwood explains, succeeds the *Prehistory of the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago*. It differs substantially from its predecessor because of its more focused argument for its central theme, and his integration to the volume of invited contributions from specialist colleagues. This book is also the latest addition in a series of Wiley Blackwell volumes that give a platform to Bellwood's macro ideas, which

present explanatory arguments for transformations and commonalities of cultural experiences through time. The first book in this series is aptly titled *First Farmers* (2005), which explain the origins of agricultural societies across the globe, followed by *First Migrants* (2013), which discusses ancient migrations in global perspective, and its significance to cultural change and transformation. This latest book highlights on Island Southeast Asia, the core research region which Bellwood has contributed to world archaeology.

The First Islanders is a text for academics interested in the deep history of the region. It is a more straightforward presentation of a treatise on the central interest of the author. He argued for the validity of human population dispersal/migration as an explanatory answer to the patterns observed in the history of the region. As the author underscores throughout the volume, his interest in human ancestries and population migration patterns in deep history is what excites him as a scholar (p. 2). Bellwood's argument is divided into ten chapters with the contribution of colleagues spread-out, starting from Chapter 3. Each chapter of this treatise ends with a reference list, which takes the place of the usual consolidated bibliography section at the end of a book. An effective Index section was also provided. The short first chapter explains the rationale of the work as well as defines terms and conventions used in the book, e.g., geographic coverage/definitions, and how he applies a modified three-age periodization – the Palaeolithic, Neolithic, Para-Neolithic, Early Metal Age, and Early Historical. It is a commendable step that surely avoided unnecessary misunderstandings. Another important element of this chapter is the rationale behind the publication of the book itself, provided in ten bullet points (pp. 4-6).

The next two chapters summarize the latest information and views on the formation of the landscape of ISEA, with Bellwood's clear opinion on it. This serves as the backdrop to a quick synthesis on what we know of the peopling of, or migration, to the region by Hominines and *Homo sapiens*. Inserted at the end of Chapter 3 is Colin Groves' invited perspective (pp. 46-53) that focuses on reviewing the dating and morphological study of *Homo erectus* from Java. He maintains that from this data set, it will be hard to argue for the evolution of *Homo sapiens* from this species. This insertion is followed by Argue's contribution (pp. 60-65) that synthesizes *Homo floresiensis* research and clearly presents the results of morphological studies on the remains of this species. She ends supporting the dominant position, namely, that it is indeed a different species. Argue

is also equally clear in stating that there is still room for discussion on the phylogeny of these finds.

Chapters 4 and 5 cover the late Pleistocene and early Holocene, or the period before what is considered the "Neolithic" in ISEA. The discussion starts with the biological history of *Homo sapiens* in ISEA. Bellwood is particularly invested in his arguments with the presentation of current data and analysis of the peopling of the region. He very capably synthesizes the latest information on the archaeology of ISEA for this time period, presenting a picture of a region that was unlike the surrounding areas, especially New Guinea. Within these two chapters are three contributions that buttress the argument for movements not only of human populations, but also of other ecological elements in a biogeographical framework. The invited perspective of Matsumura, Oxenham, Simanjuntak and Yamagata (pp. 98–106) discusses the human biological history of Mainland and ISEA, based chiefly on human remains from late Pleistocene and Holocene cemetery sites. It provides a very important and useful summary table of relevant sites and relevant finds; more importantly for Bellwood, they provided cranial data supporting the population movement of peoples in Southeast Asia, thus supporting the main argument of the book. A further summary of the population genetics data is provided by Cox (pp. 107–116) who gives his take on the genetic history of human populations in the same time period and does not contradict Bellwood or Matsumura and colleagues. The following chapter discusses the archaeological data from the late Palaeolithic in the region, with a contribution from Piper on changing hunting patterns across ISEA from 45 to 4.5 kya, or before the Neolithic (pp. 166–170). From zooarchaeological data and investigation of modified faunal bone, he argues that there is still very weak evidence for the translocation of animals across the region at this time, which supports the hypothesis of the book that such human behavior only begins in earnest during the region's Neolithic, or at the time Austronesian populations and cultures spread.

Chapter 6 summarizes what we know, through historical linguistics, about the early history of the Austronesian language family. This is core to Bellwood's central argument for the Neolithic transformation of the region. It is further reinforced by Blust, the foremost historical linguist on this subject matter and a longtime collaborator of Bellwood's. In Blust's contribution (pp. 190–192; 193–197), he reiterates his historical linguistic arguments on why the constructed Austronesian language family

originated on the island of Taiwan. Another invited perspective to this chapter is that of Tanudirjo (pp. 207–211), who explains the influence of the Austronesian dispersal discourse on the study of Indonesian archaeology, and the contribution of this discourse to the further formation of Indonesian national identity. The chapter that follows contains crucial data and discussion on the origins and spread of rice, rice agriculturalists, and the Austronesian language in ISEA. It includes a survey of what is known from the archaeology of southern China, and the body of information coming from research done in Taiwan. This is very useful for anyone overwhelmed by the amount of research and information coming from this region in both the Chinese and English languages. Bellwood succinctly presents the Out of Taiwan Hypothesis within his larger view of farming/language dispersal hypothesis to explain Austronesian dispersal into ISEA. In the process, he clarifies a few points that are significantly misunderstood by those who are critical of the Out-of-Taiwan hypothesis (pp. 231–232). The archaeological information and data for the Neolithic of southern China, Taiwan and the Philippines are also summarized. It is worth pointing out that for the most part, the information Bellwood presents comes from his own basic research projects, especially the data he presents for the Neolithic coming from northern Luzon. Hung contributes a section (pp. 232–240) that provides more details regarding current archaeological data from northern Luzon that directly supports Bellwood's hypotheses. Following immediately after, Carson's piece (pp. 240–244) discusses the coastal palaeo-landscapes of the Neolithic, arguing for the relevance of this analytic approach, and cautions those who try to understand Neolithic lifeways through current landscape configurations. Carson provides very useful maps generated from his own landscape modeling of Taiwan and northern Luzon, focused on the Cagayan valley (Figs. 7.4, 7.5).

Chapter 8 deals with the Neolithic of east Malaysia and Indonesia, divided into the eastern and western Neolithic streams. The details of artefact assemblages from major sites are presented. A further discussion of the nature of the ISEA Neolithic is also included. In Bellwood's presentation of this section, it becomes clear how complex and confusing the picture is at the moment. This is reflected by the point raised by the second contribution by Piper (pp. 297–301), in which he reviews current evidence for domesticated animal remains from Neolithic sites. He argues that the received view of seeing these iconic domesticates (*i.e.*, pig, dog, and chicken) as a package moving through the landscape cannot be supported by what we know from the skeletal and genetic data. Chapter 9

focuses on the Early Metal Age and the intercultural connections throughout ISEA that sustained it. Bellwood reiterates the concepts and presents the problems of trying to be rigid in defining the "Age" across Southeast Asia; at the minimum, he treats the use of the period-term the same way he treated the other periods, as a chronological short-hand. He places much emphasis on the Đông Sơn drum assemblages and the jar burial traditions for this period, as well as presents his views on the regional megalithic traditions. This chapter also emphasizes the significance of later-day migrations into ISEA, such as the Malay, Cham, and Indian influx, to further push the arguments of the book. Included in this chapter is an enriching contribution by Hung on nephrite artefacts and early Metal Age exchange networks across the South China Sea. The final short chapter is an excellent recap of the entire book with comparative salient observations from Mainland Southeast Asia, China, New Guinea/Melanesia, and Australia. Bellwood underscores that the substantial differentiation of ISEA as a region took place only after the coming of the Austronesian speaking cultures during the Neolithic, understood within the concept of the farming/language dispersal hypothesis. In this final chapter Bellwood strikes a positive note on the future of basic research in the region.

This is a must-read book for anyone interested in ISEA archaeology and human early history; a well-crafted volume with multidisciplinary data woven into the narrative. It is made possible due to Bellwood's mastery of a large amount of literature, and his background as a field-grounded scholar. What I like about the way he presents his views is his effort not to preach a dogma (or make one). This comes across clearly with statements, such as "reflecting my current understanding" (p. 218) in describing his synthesis. He is level and fair in answering criticism from colleagues who have engaged with his ideas, especially in the discourse on the Austronesian dispersal. He respectfully recognizes the views of critical colleagues, and appropriately integrates their contributions in his work, e.g., Solheim, Denham, Barton, and Donohue's works are productively cited in the presentation of his synthesis. It is clear that Bellwood listens and engages with critiques, and when he agrees, makes adjustments or refinements in light of new data, but he does demand a higher standard before he agrees.

As a student of this region's archaeology and deep history, I can accept Bellwood's hypothesis for culture change. I agree that there is a connection between the spread of cereal farming and population

movements in ISEA. The core of the Austronesian spread hypothesis clearly answers the questions: where did the Austronesian language likely originate? At what time did this culture or language initially spread to ISEA, and in what general direction? In my view, the answers to these questions are well supported by Bellwood's treaties. I would like, however, to further share some of my reservations and views.

On one level, I believe that the decision to continue using the nomenclature from the classic Three Age System created some confusion. This periodization has already been shown to be highly problematic when applied to Southeast Asia, and there is indeed no consensus on how best to define the system (see Paz 2003, 2004). Bellwood rightly calls his periods "technological phases" at one point, but then explains that they should just be treated as a chronological short-hand to situate observable patterns especially for the understanding of the Neolithic and the Early Metal Period" (p. 7). He then makes the effort to clearly define what he means by these various phases, but later shifts to explain that a system must address "...the problem of classifying the hundreds of undated sites in Island Southeast Asia that lack diagnostic artifacts or economic evidence", and ends by declaring that we should just keep the status quo (fn 1, pp. 9–10).

At another level, I have some reservation with the specific definition of the "Neolithic". Bellwood defined the Neolithic for Southeast Asia as the "presence of domesticated animals and crops, polished stone uni-beveled adzes...body ornaments, and pottery...slipped, stamped, incised..." (p. 8). He further explains that these components of the Neolithic were brought to ISEA by people speaking Austronesian languages, and these new populations encountered in ISEA mostly small bands of gatherers and hunters who did not have much regional homogeneity beyond their basic subsistence strategy. The clarity of the definition is unquestionable and is a consistent premise throughout the book. It may, however, be worth considering the possibility that there is another type of "Neolithic" that may have existed in ISEA before the spread of the Austronesian cultures, and this may be called as such if we consider that there are diagnostic artefacts and proxy economic evidence that may differentiate the older assemblages in the region from the later Austronesian Neolithic. This other kind of possible "Neolithic" may be defined by having root crops, tree crops, ground-edge stone or shell artefacts, and a developed maritime technology skill set. It does lack pottery, and beasts-of-burden, which clearly differentiates it from the Austronesian pottery or adze, and cereal-

based agriculture Neolithic. Bellwood is not convinced that this type of "Neolithic" existed in ISEA due to what he thinks is still insufficient data. He does, however, acknowledge the data on the existence of non-cereal plant management in Papua New Guinea, accepting therefore, that there could be other forms of plant management, which may be equivalent to cereal agriculture. Bellwood, however, does not see them substantially interacting with ISEA.

I also find it slightly confusing that, while he downplays the significance of a shell industry cohesion in the region and presents the role of the Austronesian spread as both creating the conditions for later regional cohesion, he then explains that the Austronesian cultures produced diversity. To me, this seems no different from what he stated on its presence before the arrival of these newcomers. While presenting the Austronesian Neolithic as a harbinger of homogeneity in ISEA, he is also fascinated by the fact that we have not excavated any characteristically Neolithic nucleated and mounded villages like those in Vietnam and Thailand in the region. He further tries to explain the absence of these patterns by stating that it may just reflect that such sites are harder to discover because they are deeply buried, or that they are truly absent due to the relatively smaller scale of geographic features, such as, river basins, deltas, and coastal plains, when compared to the Mainland Southeast Asia. These are the landscapes that held the permanent-field and stable wet-rice agriculture settlements in the Mainland (p. 350). Bellwood further reflects upon and continues to hold the view that, perhaps, what was happening in the Neolithic of ISEA was the predominance of shifting dry/upland-rice agriculture and that "true wet rice cultivation in embanked fields in ISEA was not widespread until the Early Metal Age, or even later," (p. 268)—which in a way tells a story of a drawn-out pattern of transformation. It is, therefore, not hard to conclude that the Austronesian Neolithic may have not immediately managed to dominantly transform the places where populations settled. This is further not surprising for Bellwood because he also argues that the arrival into ISEA of Austronesian speakers did not happen in hoards. If this is the case, then the argument for the relative demographic advantage of cereal agriculturalists, which were initially coming into ISEA, may not be too relevant (p. 348); if the size of the migrant population may not at all be substantial, and may likely not be fecund. This, I think, does not also contradict the historical linguistic conclusion that "Philippine languages experience a major leveling event at some point in the past" (p. 191)—

some point in the past does not have to be 4000 years ago, and could be just 2000 years ago or later.

I also think there is an oversight in the way Bellwood views northern ISEA—an extension of Taiwan and the Mainland when it comes to the spread of rice agriculture southwards. Moreover, because the spread of rice agriculture is still a central variable of the demic diffusion hypothesis for the region, this may have affected the way he understood relevant patterns in the data set. The view that the reason why rice agriculture was eventually lost by Austronesian speaking cultures as they got closer to the equator is valid: the plant needs exact amounts of sunlight to successfully produce. I think the problem is that this analysis was not taken into consideration by Bellwood for the Philippine archipelago and the rest of northern ISEA. He may have assumed that the rice plant was already adapted to these latitudes.

The productive sensitivity of rice associated with precise amounts of sunlight must not be underestimated especially for the period when it is just being introduced to new latitudes. Rice initially coming from Taiwan and brought to the lower latitudes of the Philippine islands and the rest of ISEA will, therefore, immediately encounter difficulties. The plant's sensitivity was not considered relevant by Bellwood until the Austronesians reached the much lower latitudes towards the equator. This information was included in Bellwood's explanation for the loss in the Austronesian cultural assemblage of both pottery technology and rice agriculture within the Austronesian material culture assemblage. In this case, therefore, it would have taken some trial and error before rice farming cultures would have succeeded in producing a viable harvest for a community, and thus expand its population. These initial failures would have resulted in failed colonization and slow demographic growth and may not have conveyed a clear subsistence advantage for the newcomers over the cultures that greeted them in the islands (see p. 349). The scarcity of evidence of rice remains in the region's Neolithic archaeological record may be explained equally in this manner.

I differ in the view taken for ISEA just before the Austronesian dispersal period; Bellwood sees the region solely populated by small bands of hunters and gatherers with a diversity of cultures. He is inclined to put much weight on the demographic and cultural transformations brought about by the initial Austronesian dispersal. He sees the history of human culture prior to this period as more static and less cohesive regionally (pp. 347–348). I like to think that from the moment humans colonized ISEA,

there was already a significant interaction—a better premise than starting with the view of no interaction. Not at all contradicting the treatise of this book, I think the Austronesian cultural dominance/hegemony may truly have happened only during or after what is described by others as the "Early Metal Age." It is perhaps just a difference of appreciation of timescales; where one sees 1,500 years as one continuum or sees it as a long enough period of time for much complex interaction and transformation; I go for the latter. The time scale—spanning over a thousand years from 4,000 to 2,500 BP—is more than enough to allow for numerous cultural changes.

When Bellwood proposes that the anthropological landscape of ISEA comes from the Austronesian Neolithic and Early Metal cultures of the region, and that this is indeed the true foundation of Island Southeast Asian cultures (p. 269), I agree. However, I would like to imagine that within this long span of time, within the last 2000 years, many interactions and migrations of populations occurred and many of these interactions are from cultures whose languages were Austronesian rooted. If there was a "great shift" in the basic human population geography of ISEA (p. 269), it was not likely at the pioneering stages of the spread of rice agriculture and the Austronesian language family. It may likely be that it was centuries afterwards; first made possible perhaps, as soon as the rice plant was already well-adapted to sun exposure rates in the new latitudes.

In conclusion, the overall positive elements of the book outweigh my critical points. The last sentence of the last chapter ends with the words, "I wish all my colleagues well in their searches for the truth about the past, or at least a convincing version of it" (p. 351). We can only take this as a positive challenge and thank Peter Bellwood for updating his synthesis of the region's archaeology, as well as providing colleagues and students with exciting talking points at both the small and large scales of human history.