

BOOK REVIEWS

Lieberman, Victor. *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830.*

***Volume 1, Integration on the Mainland.*
Cambridge University Press, 2003.**

***Volume 2, Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia and the Islands.* Cambridge University Press, 2009.**

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This two-volume *opus* intends to place Southeast Asian history in the Eurasian context by establishing parallels between Southeast Asian historical developments with those of France, Russia, Japan, South Asia and China. The first volume, *Integration on the Mainland*, focuses on the state consolidation and the homogenizing trend of economy and culture in three riverine civilizations—Burma, Thailand and Vietnam. It argues that these regions experienced parallel cycles of political integration marked by shortened intervals of disintegration beginning at around 800s AD, de-emphasizing the role of maritime trade and focusing on the agrarian innovations of these mainland polities. In this, it departs from Anthony Reid's classic *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce* (1988, 1993).

Strange Parallels Volume 2 is bolder and more ambitious than the earlier volume not only because of its length (it is twice as long as the first), but also because of the geographic scope and claims made by the book. The first four of its seven chapters lay out almost synchronic patterns in France, Russia and Japan comparable with the developments in mainland Southeast Asia. These regions (France, Russia, Japan and Mainland Southeast Asia), which Lieberman calls the 'protected zone' are later contrasted with South Asia, China and Island Southeast Asia which constitute the 'exposed zone.' The latter zone is characterized by a history of having been under a foreign rule (Inner Asians in China and India and the Europeans in Island Southeast Asia) which greatly affected the political, economic and social nature of the state.

Strange Parallels has a dual aim of countering historiographical notions of an 'Asian inertia' and European exceptionalism (see Vol. 1, Introduction). It

succeeds in this by showing the active role of Southeast Asian agency in transforming Indic and Sinic modalities of culture. It also succeeds in showing that Southeast Asia was not insulated from global processes, and that the region (at least the mainland) can be studied side by side other parts of Eurasia.

The 'global' dimension of *Strange Parallels* can probably be considered as the most significant achievement of the book. Other 'world historians' such as Michael Adas have [already] gone-beyond the 'nation-centered historiography of exceptionalism' by using an 'integrative and comparative approach' of world history (Bentley, 2001, p.95), and Lieberman was the first to treat Southeast Asia as a unit of comparison in a broad temporal and geographic stroke of world history. However, I think that *Strange Parallels* falls short of being 'integrative' for it fails to establish connectivities and interactions among the regions of Eurasia. While its comparative approach, which uses a common set of political, economic and cultural standards to compare regions, enables the author to jump from one region to another, this very approach presents a serious limitation which compromises the 'global' value of the book. Here, I want to emphasize the dilution of space and contiguity in the study of global history. China and India, regions with which Southeast Asia had long been connected, should have occupied more attention. *Strange Parallels* relegated them as mere 'others' in the 'exposed-' and 'protected zone' dichotomy (as compared for example to the attention given to far-flung France, Russia and Japan). Furthermore, this dilution of space in favor of a 'universal' parameter to compare societies also reinforces conventional notions of regional boundaries, uncritically. Though it may not have been part of Lieberman's agenda, *Strange Parallels* highlights disconnectedness in the histories of mainland and island Southeast Asia. Such disconnection becomes quite evident when Island Southeast Asia becomes part of the 'exposed zone' in the 1500s due to foreign rule. While the contents of the book implicitly feed the argument of a 'divided' Southeast Asia (or even the existence of two distinct regions!), it explicitly perpetuates the idea of a singular Southeast Asia. (The last chapter in Vol. 2 which deals with Island Southeast Asia serves as a powerful symbol to this idea of a regional singularity. Lieberman intended to cap his discussions, after 'going around the world', with 'Southeast Asia', his main point of departure.

The apparent disconnection between the Mainland and the Islands was not stated because it runs counter to Lieberman's agenda of making Southeast Asia comparable to other regions. However, the comparative regional approach and its dilution of contiguities/discontiguities paradoxically highlights the distinctness of the Islands and the Mainland.

The above discussion lies at the very heart of the problem of state-centered (and *status quo* political configuration) histories. In the spirit of James Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009), which challenges nation-state historiographies by shifting the lens towards the upland peoples of *zomia* (the 'marginal hinterland' of Inner Asia), we can ask: can we conceive of a supra-nation-state history of 'Southeast Asia' without adopting the conventional definition of Southeast Asia? Can we be comparative 'without seeing like a state' (*pace* J. Scott, 1998)? In other words, can we make use of other currencies of comparison aside from the state? It seems to me that other social formations (ethnicity, gender, class, etc.) may offer valuable narratives. As what Lieberman had done in *Strange Parallels*, these social formations equally deserve attention.

Strange Parallels is but one of many possibilities and perspectives in the writing of regional history. The comparative approach of *Strange Parallels* may yield intellectually challenging ideas, yet it should be kept in mind that, like other approaches, it has its limitations. To recapitulate, I have pointed out the dilution of space and contiguities, and further examination may yield other critiques. For example, the comparisons between the Inner Asians and the Europeans tended to subvert the fact that European colonialism was built on an entirely different *mentalité*, it has been pointed out by some scholars that racism may be the primary feature that distinguishes Western colonialism (Chatterjee, 1993, p.19; D. Scott, 1999, p.29).

Notwithstanding the issues raised, these two volumes will be seen by future generations as a representative *opus* of our times. Fifty or forty years ago, scholars studying Southeast Asia might not have imagined even the possibility of writing a book similar to *Strange Parallels*. Indeed *Strange Parallels* parallels the globalized nature of our present world.

References

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