

Book Reviews

DOI: 10.1355/sj36-1g

Southeast Asia after the Cold War: A Contemporary History. By Ang Cheng Guan. Singapore: NUS Press, 2019. 282 pp.

Contemporary history is, in many ways, one of the more difficult tasks for the historian. As the author notes in his introduction, being in such close periodic proximity presents a host of issues, especially those related to source materials. With so many potential sources available, how does one ascertain what is truly essential? In contrast, many government publications will be unavailable. It is quite the tightrope to navigate and Ang Cheng Guan does so deftly in *Southeast Asia after the Cold War*. While there are other recent works that cover a similar time period, Ang's approach is what differentiates this monograph from the rest. Ang's is an impressive career of scholarship where he has written extensively on the region. His latest, inspired by E.H. Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939* (1939), is a sequel to his 2018 monograph, *Southeast Asia's Cold War: An Interpretive History*.

There are two major themes in this monograph. The first is the “pursuit of regionalism” where “in the first 20-plus years after the end of the Cold War, the preoccupation was economic and security integration” (p. 14). The second is on establishing order—a new kind of order in a post-Cold War world where Southeast Asian leaders conceived of the region as a centre of focus. The monograph is organized chronologically and topically, with financial security, economic recovery from the late-1990s financial crisis and responses to terrorism post 9/11 among the different themes explored in the narrative. The clash with China over the South China Sea is, in some ways, an ever-present issue for Southeast Asian nations. Throughout, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and its individual

member nations have attempted to navigate between China and the United States.

This book begins with the signing of the Framework for a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict in the fall of 1991. “The ‘official’ end of the Cambodia conflict ... was the first concrete indication that the Cold War was finally over in Southeast Asia” (p. 20). At the outset there was optimism for the future based on economics and multilateral institutions. While the success of the United States in the Gulf War led President George Bush to declare a “new world order” where not only Southeast Asia but also the world would be reshaped in the image of the United States, some correctly foresaw the growing presence of China (and India) in the region (pp. 22–24). Thus the era when the United States was a sole superpower in the region was short-lived, as the ‘China Threat’ to the region quickly grew.

The ‘China Threat’ is certainly not new to the region. While certain Southeast Asian nations can trace this threat back centuries, it certainly became regional during the Cold War. These historical tensions inform the post–Cold War era and exemplify the ever-present external threats integral to the narrative of this work. Another theme is the struggle that ASEAN member states encounter in working collectively towards common goals. When it comes to economics, for instance, Ang states that “ASEAN had made all the right moves since the shock of the financial crisis” (p. 129). Internal political crisis, however, such as the military coup in Thailand, is always a looming threat to regional cohesion. Thus, the dual threats of external pressures alongside internal political instability make ASEAN’s path towards the future all the more difficult.

How does one gauge the success of ASEAN during this thirty-year period? Ang measures this in relation to its goals. He surmises that ASEAN has been slow to achieve its first objective of a cohesive region. Like multinational organizations, ASEAN can at times move like a lumbering giant, slowly reacting to a fast-changing world. It is at its best when “confronted with an existential threat—of disintegrating or being sidelined” (p. 239). He argues that a proactive, dynamic ASEAN is when it is at its most effective and he is hopeful for a

shift towards this stance in the future. ASEAN's second goal, a new regional order, is still a work in progress as it is overly dependent on outside forces for its future success. In summation, the author argues that, despite vast political, cultural and religious differences among member nations, ASEAN has been a success on the whole, and he is cautiously optimistic about its future.

That future, however, will be shaped by an increasing Sino-US rivalry. Perhaps the author is looking towards this future (or a pre-2017 world) when he claims that "the United States is unwilling to concede its predominant status" (p. 241). This is arguably in doubt at present, as Donald Trump killed the pillar of his predecessor Barack Obama's shift towards Asia, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and instead focused on the Korean peninsula and trade with China, which the author does note (pp. 229–30). Ang has done well to capture the preceding thirty years of Southeast Asia's regional history. With its concise, readable prose, it makes a worthy follow-up to his work on the Cold War and is a sound contribution on global contemporary history.

Matthew Jagel

Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 520 College View Court, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115, USA; email: jagel@sxu.edu.

REFERENCES

- Ang, Cheng Guan. 2018. *Southeast Asia's Cold War: An Interpretive History*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Carr, Edward. H. (1939) 2001. *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939*. New York: Perennial.

DOI: 10.1355/sj36-1h

The Politics of Vietnamese Craft: American Diplomacy and Domestication. By Jennifer Way. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020. xiv+226 pp.

Jennifer Way's *The Politics of Vietnamese Craft* is an exceptional book and body of research inspired by an issue of *Interior* magazine from