

Book Reviews

Southeast Asian Lives: Personal Narratives and Historical Experience. Edited by Roxana Waterson. Singapore and Athens, Ohio: NUS Press and Ohio University Press, 2007, 336 pp.

“Anniversary ... Anniversary ... Do men so distrust their own memory?” So remarks Rolain, in Henri Fauconnier’s novel, *The Soul of Malaya*. The anniversary Rolain refers to is the armistice that ended the First World War, one of the most destructive conflicts in European history, that also drew into its ambit non-European peoples from the colonies. To someone like Rolain who has experienced first-hand the horror of slaughter at the trenches, the historical memory that the anniversary of the armistice sought to evoke seemed surreal and condescending. Rolain’s remark highlights the potential tension between constructions and experience of the past according to diverging, sometimes overlapping, logics and discursive frames.

This tension is one of the main issues that are explored in the volume, *Southeast Asian Lives*, edited by Roxana Waterson, with contributions from seven anthropologists who have conducted extensive fieldwork in Southeast Asia. Eschewing anniversaries, the authors collectively stand on the side of Rolain, not so much in trusting uncritically the memory of their collaborators on past events, but in recognizing the importance of paying attention to the collaborators’ narrations of their life story as a means to gain a richer understanding of historical transformations in the region. In the vein of works such as Bernard Cohn’s *An Anthropologist among the Historians* that seek to initiate cross-fertilization of methodological insights between anthropology and historiography, *Southeast Asian Lives* draws on the memory of individuals in various parts of the region to offer a wide-ranging theoretical reflection on the importance of life history as a viable method for historical and cultural interpretations.

The book opens with a masterful introduction by the editor, tackling head-on the various methodological problems associated with the life history method through a thorough literature review on the topic. While acknowledging that the life history method has often been utilized by anthropologists in their quest to document the diversity of human experience, Waterson argues that its possibilities for research have not been fully explored. The ambition of the introduction chapter consists of showing the fruitfulness of the life history approach not just for anthropology, but also for all other disciplines that are concerned with the interpretation of the past and its relevance to the present, such as history, sociology, and literary studies. On the question of why we should take interest in the stories of the “obscure” and non-famous, Waterson situates the volume squarely in the tradition of the work of E.P. Thomson and those of *Subaltern Studies*: “part of a democratizing urge to listen to the voices of the non-famous” (p. 5). Since all the contributors seem to reject the modernist historiographic assumptions of “objectivity” and “neutrality”, Waterson could have elaborated more on the politics of historical writing by explaining further why there is a need to “democratize” historical narration. Another thorny problem relates to the representativeness of the experiences of narrators. Here, invoking the literature on the ethnography of personhood, Waterson argues that since life stories “present us with the intersection between a self and the social context”, narratives of the self invariably reveal the broader social structures and transformations within which the self is embedded.

Seven subsequent chapters, divided into two parts, explore in greater depths the themes brought out in the Introduction. The first part, “Singular Lives”, comprises three chapters on Indonesia, each dealing with the life story of an individual who has lived an exceptional life. The “interesting times” that are the focus of this section span a large part of the twentieth century: Dutch colonialism, the two World Wars, the nationalist movement that created Indonesia, and Suharto’s New Order.

In Chapter Two, Carol Warren presents the life history of Made Lebah (1905–96), a highly accomplished performer and teacher of

Balinese music. Born into the descent group of the Batu Nginte, or Royal Guardian, Made Lebah had experienced life in the royal court of Peliatan, where his father was a servant. The Dutch subjugation of Bali brought forth the first in a series of drastic transformations that Made Lebah lived through: it was a time of “half Belanda [Dutch], half Bali”, a period of uneasy coexistence of two systems of political authority. Despite subsequently having lived through some of the violent episodes of Indonesian history, Made Lebah seemed rather coy about them. Warren attributes these silences on his localized world view; perhaps we can also infer a possibility of repressed memory, as can happen with the presence of strong conflicting sentiments.

Chapter Three, “Who Owns a Life History”, also presents an account of a remarkable man, a Dutch-appointed Raja of Rara by the name of Yoseph Malo, who had converted to Catholicism when he was a child. The author, Janet Hoskins, has not conducted an interview with the man, but was told about him by two people who had been entrusted by Yoseph Malo to tell his life story. Being a prominent and legendary local dignitary, it is not surprising that Yoseph Malo’s life was of interest not just to a Western anthropologist. When Hoskins had first characterized his story as an “incredible rags to riches story”, she received an angry response from Yoseph Malo’s son, who had also been compiling his father’s life story, and who had a different interpretation of the significance of Yoseph Malo’s life. Hoskins’ account of their initial testy exchanges to subsequent collaboration indicates that the days when outsider/Western representations alone provide authoritative texts on the “natives” are over.

The last chapter in the first part, “The Life of Fritz Basiang”, is a contribution by editor, Roxana Waterson, using the metaphor of “pilgrimage” to discuss the life of a Torajan. If pilgrimage entails a journey to seek out a “centre” which embodies one’s ultimate values, the life pilgrimage of Fritz Basiang first brought him to the Christian faith and medicine, from there to the metropolitan centre of Europe, before coming full-circle back to Indonesia, where he lived out his vocation as a medic in his homeland of Tana Toraja. All three chapters in the first part of the book thus show how the

social transformations in the twentieth century have presented both challenges and opportunities to the peoples living in the region.

The second part of the book, “Voices and Fragments”, focuses primarily on multiple stories and diverse voices. If the narrative structures of the protagonists’ life story in the first part contain a certain degree of coherence, Robert Dentan’s innovative chapter, “Arifin in the Iron Cap”, serves both to reveal life’s inherent “messiness” and to disrupt the self-assurance of the ethnographer undertaking their task of cultural representation. Arifin was a convicted child-murderer; he was also a Semai who had become an acculturated Malay. Dentan’s style of presentation consists of multiple narrators telling fragments of Arifin’s case: the police, news reporters, lawyers, a worker with the Centre for Orang Asli Concerns, the author, and Arifin himself. Underpinning this way of representing his subject is Dentan’s moral concern to avoid essentialism — in this instance, Arifin’s public identity as a “murderer” and a “monster”. In the end, Arifin’s complex life story becomes inextricably entwined with the larger story of marginalization of the Orang Asli in Malaysian society.

Annette Hamilton’s “Marking Time: Narratives of the Life-world in Thailand”, also deals with the multiplicity of voices — not on the life of one person but on the history of one place. The town of Hua Hin, on the western shore of the Gulf of Thailand, has historically had close links with the Thai Royal Family, who often visited the place in the past. Reminiscences of four long-term residents at Hua Hin cover the period from the days of King Rama VII, to the Japanese occupation during the Second World War, up to the recent decades of rapid economic and tourism development. Partly due to the prestige enjoyed by Hua Hin through royal patronage, all of Hamilton’s respondents showed reverence to the Royal Family, with affectionate accounts, for example, of the visits paid by King Rama. While all also indicated a general positive evaluation of “modernity”, each has different interpretations of the significance of events related to their respective social position within Hua Hin society.

The next chapter, “Traversing Invisible Borders: Narratives of Women Between the Hills and the City” by Yoko Hayami, further

elaborates the presence of multiple narratives and voices in the social life in one community; in this particular case, the gendered interpretations of migration and Karen society by migrant Karen women from the hills in northern Thailand. Hayami links the life stories of these women to their construction and enacting of projects as a means to exercise agency within, and despite of, the constraining structures placed on women in Karen society. According to Hayami, most of her respondents narrate their experience of migration in a similar fashion: after finishing their education in the urban centres, most expressed the desire to move back to the hills to find a job and get married to Karen men. However, the author chooses to focus the bulk of her chapter on the cases of a few women who do not conform to the general pattern, and who have had problems integrating into Karen society. Despite these differences among her female respondents, the interviews revealed the shared concern of these women on topics regarding relationships with men, love, and marriage, thus revealing strong cultural definitions of gender roles which persist to serve as dominant frames through which the women understand their place in Karen society.

The last chapter also presents material from Thailand, on a Thai-Malay fishing community in Pattani in the south. Saroja Dorairajoo's "Stories from a Muslim Fishing Village in Southern Thailand" offers a fascinating reflection on the problem that many ethnographers face when they first arrive in their fieldwork site: the unwillingness of local respondents to answer questions due to their suspicion of the researcher's intention. Dorairajoo's fieldwork site was situated in an area that had witnessed frequent violent skirmishes between the Thai military and the Malay-Muslim separatists, and where the local people were intensely wary of strangers and outsiders, especially those who asked loads of questions. In this context, then, how does a researcher go about collecting life stories? The life stories Dorairajoo has collected have not resulted from her solicitation and questioning. When she stopped asking questions and started to listen, she heard the presence of a meta-narrative, that of one concerning the fishing crisis that the community faced. This meta-narrative shaped the

local response to questions from outsiders — such as staff from non-governmental organizations, anthropologists — as it has brought tangible rewards in terms of aid and monetary handouts from external agencies. Therefore, researchers often arrive at a fieldwork site to find themselves in an already existing (dominant) discursive field. The key to going beyond the dominant narrative of crisis to peer into the “hidden” aspects of local life is thus long-term participant observation and the skill of listening. It is perhaps fitting that a volume consisting of essays all written by anthropologists should end with the reiteration of the importance of “old fashion” ethnographic fieldwork.

Nationalist narratives — suffused with the ideology of citizenship and the need to construct a sense of continuity — abhor, and seek to mask incoherence and messiness in projects of nation building. National celebrations of anniversaries are an important component in efforts to instill a high level of coherence in national historical narration. At the same time, nationalist narratives can often form the justificatory basis for concrete acts of symbolic and physical violence against individuals or groups which cannot be fully absorbed into the nationalistic imagining of One People, One Culture, and One History. In contrast, as the various chapters in this volume show with admirable detail and theoretical sophistication, the life history method implicitly recognizes that life is inherently disorderly, and that historical experiences can be refracted through prisms such as social location, class, culture, and gender, generating a multitude of unwieldy historical interpretations. While not necessarily always in conflict, nationalist and personal narratives of the past often exist in tension with one another. While life history certainly adds to “our understanding of the range of possible human experience”, in terms of the politics of memory it can also be potentially subversive.

Francis KHEK Gee Lim