

Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th Centuries

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Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th Centuries

edited by
David G. Marr and A.C. Milner
(with an introduction by Wang Gungwu)

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A ship from the carvings on the 8th century Buddhist temple at Borobudur, central Java. This is thought to represent a trading and passenger vessel utilizing the monsoon winds of the Java Sea in the period of the Javanese and Sumatran Kingdoms of 500–1000 A.D.

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Contents

<i>Contributors</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Introduction: Wang Cŭngwu</i>	xi
1. Hermann Kulke <i>The Early and the Imperial Kingdom in Southeast Asian History</i>	1
2. Janice Stargardt <i>Hydraulic Works and South East Asian Polities</i>	23
3. J.C. de Casparis <i>Some Notes on Relations between Central and Local Government in Ancient Java</i>	49
4. Jan Wisseman Christie <i>Negara, Mandala, and Despotic State: Images of Early Java</i>	65
5. Michael Vickery <i>Some Remarks on Early State Formation in Cambodia</i>	95
6. John K. Whitmore <i>"Elephants Can Actually Swim": Contemporary Chinese Views of Late Ly Dai Viet</i>	117
7. Keith Taylor <i>Authority and Legitimacy in 11th Century Vietnam</i>	139
8. E.S. Ungar <i>From Myth to History: Imagined Polities in 14th Century Vietnam</i>	177
9. Pierre-Yves Manguin <i>Shipshape Societies: Boat Symbolism and Political Systems in Insular Southeast Asia</i>	187
10. C.C. Macknight <i>Changing Perspectives in Island Southeast Asia</i>	215

11.	Srisakra Vallibhotama <i>Political and Cultural Continuities at Dvaravati Sites</i>	229
12.	Helmut Loofs-Wissowa <i>The True and the Corbel Arch in Mainland Southeast Asian Monumental Architecture</i>	239
13.	John S. Guy <i>Vietnamese Ceramics and Cultural Identity: Evidence from the Ly and Tran Dynasties</i>	255
14.	Tran Quoc Vuong <i>Traditions, Acculturation, Renovation: The Evolutional Pattern of Vietnamese Culture</i>	271
15.	Pamela Gulman <i>Symbolism of Kingship in Arakan</i>	279
16.	Ian Mabbett <i>Buddhism in Champa</i>	289
17.	James J. Fox <i>The Ordering of Generations: Change and Continuity in Old Javanese Kinship</i>	315
18.	Claude Jacques <i>Sources on Economic Activities in Khmer and Cham Lands</i>	327
19.	Peter Worsley <i>Narrative Bas-Reliefs at Candi Surawana</i>	335
20.	O.W. Wolters <i>Possibilities for a Reading of the 1293–1357 Period in the Vietnamese Annals</i>	369
	<i>Index</i>	411

Contributors

PROFESSOR J.G. de CASPARIS

Kem Institute, University of Leiden, The Netherlands.

DR JAMES J. FOX

Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University.

DR PAMELA GUTMAN

Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Canberra.

DR JOHN S. GUY

Assistant Keeper, Indian Department, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

PROFESSOR CLAUDE JACQUES

Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Sciences Historiques et Philologiques, Sorbonne, Paris.

PROFESSOR DR HERMANN KULKE

Südasiens-Institut der Universität Heidelberg, Heidelberg, West Germany.

DR H.H.E. LOOFS-WISSOWA

Asian History Centre, Australian National University.

DR IAN MABBETT

Department of History, Monash University, Clayton, Victoria, Australia.

DR C.C. MACKNICHI II

Department of History, Australian National University.

DR PIERRE-YVES MANGUIN

Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient, Paris.

DR JANICE STARGARDT

Cambridge Project on Ancient Civilization in South East Asia, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom.

DR K.W. TAYLOR

Department of History, National University of Singapore.

PROFESSOR TRAN QUOC VUONG

Department of History, Hanoi University, Vietnam.

DR E.S. UNGAR

Department of Far Eastern History, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University.

DR SRISAKRA VALLIBHOTAMA

Department of Anthropology, Silpakorn University, Bangkok.

DR MICHAEL VICKERY

Centre for Asian Studies, University of Adelaide, Adelaide.

PROFESSOR WANG QUNGWU

Department of Far Eastern History, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University.

DR JOHN K. WHITMORE

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA.

DR JAN WISSEMAN-CHRISTIE

Centre for South-East Asian Studies, University of Hull, Hull, United Kingdom.

EMERITUS PROFESSOR O.W. WOLTERS

Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, USA.

PROFESSOR PETER WORSLEY

Department of Indonesian and Malayan Studies, University of Sydney, Sydney.

Preface

In May 1984, about forty historians, epigraphers, archaeologists, linguists and anthropologists convened at the Australian National University for four days to talk about early Southeast Asia. It was a refreshingly cosmopolitan encounter, at least four languages being spoken across the conference table, another six cropping up in the conference papers.

The outcome might have been a Southeast Asian tower of babel, with each specialist talking past the others. Fortunately, most participants came to Canberra eager not only to present the fruits of their most recent research, but also to evaluate the state of the field in general, and to engage in interdisciplinary and cross-regional discourse. To encourage such exchanges, conference organizers insisted that authors remain silent while their papers were introduced and reviewed by participants who were not specialists in the particular subject matter. Thus, a Javanist reviewed a paper on early Vietnam, a Malay specialist reviewed a paper on Arakan. Of course, authors took part in subsequent discussion and were permitted the final word. On the first morning some participants regarded the method with a certain trepidation, but by lunchtime it was clear we had an intellectually stimulating atmosphere in which the research materials themselves were being subordinated to the issues raised and the problems demanding further investigation. Towards the end of proceedings a number of scholars commented on how they had gained a better conceptual context for their own highly specific work.

Fortunately this spirit did not dissipate when scholars returned home, and has been captured in the revised papers published in this volume. Readers not familiar with the early history of the region will discover that Southeast Asia was a lively place in the ninth to fourteenth centuries, with extensive trade, bitter wars, kingdoms rising and falling, ethnic groups on the move, impressive monuments being constructed, and profound religious issues being debated. Readers vaguely aware of such grand Southeast Asian kingdoms as Angkor, Pagan, Majapahit, Champa or Dai Viet will see them take on colour and character. On the other hand, readers already well versed in the available literature will find that a number of contributors to this book are uncomfortable with established labels, asking

whether they oversimplify reality, or obscure important developments elsewhere in the region.

To push deeper and wider in early Southeast Asian history demands discussion of specific texts, authors, artefacts and concepts. These are the building blocks which allow analysis to reach beyond mere speculation. The editors of this volume urge readers not to be daunted by erudite passages. As students of nineteenth and twentieth century Southeast Asia, we share your difficulty. Nonetheless, amidst all the inscriptions, genealogies, poetic allusions and Old Javanese kinship terms, we are rewarded with a far better understanding of how people lived in Southeast Asia five hundred to one thousand years ago. Today's Southeast Asia cannot be comprehended without reference to those seminal developments.

This volume is directed not only at the regional specialist, however. As Wang Gungwu explains in the introduction, all of the contributors address questions which concern historians of many parts of the world. The student of history having no training in Southeast Asian studies will, we hope, find much of interest in the way the authors in this volume analyse the development and character of the early polity, the processes of culture contact, and the methodologies which might be most rewarding in the investigation of the historical records of a distant civilization.

In an endeavour of such complexity, it is impossible to name all the people who helped make it possible. Our first thanks go to the Departments of Pacific and Southeast Asian History and Far Eastern History at the Australian National University, which provided institutional support from the moment the conference idea was conceived to the day we sent off camera-ready text to the publisher. The Research School of Pacific Studies, ANU, and the ACLS/SSRC Joint Committee on Southeast Asia both responded generously to our applications for conference funding, thus enabling us to invite a number of participants from overseas. Jennifer Cushman and Jennifer Brewster helped to plan and implement the conference. Among the many other scholars who participated in the conference proceedings but are not represented in this volume, special mention and gratitude is extended to J.M. Gullick, Michael Aung Thwin, Christian Bauer, Peter Burns, E. Edward McKinnon, and Ian Proudfoot.

At the close of the conference, everyone agreed we must not allow the process of revision, editing and printing to delay dissemination of important findings for many years. Fortunately, most authors returned their revised manuscripts in reasonable time, and the editors received expert local assistance from a number of individuals. Jennifer Brewster, Ian Taylor, Claire Mandle, and Jacqui Parkinson shared copy-editing chores with us. Karen Haines devoted uncounted hours to preparation of the camera-ready text and diagrams, extracting every ounce of potential from our imperfect word-processing equipment, always trying to improve the consistency and aesthetic quality of printing and formatting. Triena Ong, Managing Editor of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, gave us valuable advice from the moment the ISEAS accepted the manuscript for publication.

Introduction

Wang Gungwu

For several decades non-Western history has attracted a new breed of historian, who accepts that an interdisciplinary approach is essential to the study of the past. The traditional historian, who depends primarily on archival records, has of course accepted this approach when normal sources prove inadequate to deal satisfactorily with all the complex features of the past. For most modern periods, however, an interdisciplinary approach has had little appeal to the historian already faced with a superfluity of material in large and orderly archives. Only when it comes to the non-Western past has it been conceded that interdisciplinary studies might be necessary.

Pre-colonial Asia, Africa and the Americas, sadly without archives, could not be studied by historians at all without the help of other kinds of scholars. For this reason, most of the best-trained professional historians in the West either ignored the non-Western world entirely or limited themselves to the history of Western settlement or Western imperial and colonial enterprises outside Europe. The non-Western past was impossible to study by conventional historical methods because much of that past was by definition unhistorical. It consisted largely of exotic if not esoteric materials gathered by travellers, discoverers, missionaries, colonial administrators, even merchant-adventurers, and ultimately systematically recorded and explained by professional ethnographers and, for Asia and North Africa, by orientalists.

Despite questions about their dubious origins in Western expansionist history, both ethnographers and orientalists are descended from a highly respectable group of scholars, the classicists, whose broad, almost encyclopaedic tradition of learning may be traced back to the Greeks and Romans, the Arabs and then the Renaissance Europeans. The tradition still survives in some departments of classics in modern universities. Unfortunately, in recent times it has been regarded as a revered, but not greatly relevant, holistic approach towards knowledge, which may be still useful for the study of remote antiquity, but whose capacity to say anything new about that antiquity now depends mainly on the discoveries of the archaeologists.

However useful that classical tradition may have been in the past, it is not considered of much help for scholars today. The scholarly world increasingly believes that professional skills in well-established

modern disciplines are essential at the frontiers of knowledge. This applies to the study of the past as much as to the study of contemporary problems.

Increasingly, from the achievements of a multitude of scholars who have had to master many kinds of skills to deal with the history of cultures and civilisations other than their own, evidence is gathering to show that interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches have advanced our knowledge of the past for areas where professional historians have been unable to work. I am not referring here to the example of the **Annales** school of history, where the use of modern disciplines, including those of the natural and biological sciences and the social sciences, has greatly enriched our understanding of the dynamics of social and cultural change. Achievements there are primarily in areas where written and archival sources are dominant, and the new disciplines have served to widen the range of questions asked of these sources. Similarly, the belated use of similar disciplines in the study of Japanese and Chinese history has not brought about real advances in methodology. There, too, documentary sources abound, and advances in knowledge have come from re-examining the sources with new sets of questions stimulated by new academic disciplines.

Far more dramatic have been the achievements of those scholars who have focused on the pre-modern history of the Americas, Africa south of the Sahara, and South and Southeast Asia. Here the shortage of written sources has pushed students of history to depend more and more on the skills of anthropologists, archaeologists, linguists and art historians. Furthermore, a distinction can be made between Africa and the Americas on the one hand and the South and Southeast Asian regions on the other. Where the former is virtually devoid of indigenous written sources, the latter does offer some documents to satisfy classically trained historians, philologists, and scholars of **belles-lettres**; the skills of these scholars can in turn attract the attention of modern social scientists who are usually more concerned with literate and developed societies and polities. In short, South Asia and Southeast Asia are ideally placed to bring the maximum variety of traditional and modern scholarly skills together. Several scholarly books and articles during the past decade or so confirm that this conscious coming together of skills has been fruitful and the results remarkably encouraging.

This volume of essays on Southeast Asia takes another step forward in efforts to elucidate the pre-modern past through the integration of various scholarly skills. While these essays do not constitute a revival of the classical skills, they do demonstrate how these fine old skills can work together successfully with technically sophisticated new skills in order for progress to be made.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the beginnings of history in Southeast Asia had to be reconstructed by using the methods of epigraphy and philology on a small number of literate sources. During the twentieth century, sustained work by archaeologists and social anthropologists has opened wide the range of reconstructions possible. It has filled in many gaps in knowledge, as well as offering more sophisticated explanations for what we do know. Since the end of World War II, there have been further improvements in the methods of studying pre-literate and barely literate societies,

and scholars have been asked to re-examine their texts afresh in the light of what is now known about the nature of pre-modern societies around the world.

These developments in the study of Southeast Asia led to a major conference in London in 1974 to evaluate the results of new research and the application of new methods. That conference produced an excellent collection of papers, **Early South East Asia**, edited by Ralph Smith and William Watson (Oxford University Press, 1979). The volume confirmed the value of combining various techniques and disciplines for building a picture of the region's ancient history, and offered stimulating new perspectives on the two millennia before the tenth century AD. In particular, it showed to what extent the discoveries of the archaeologists have challenged the picture offered by the scant written sources, and how the new reconstructions of pre-modern societies by social anthropologists have refined the questions which need to be asked of those sources. The most dramatic successes have surfaced in work on prehistoric periods, notably findings about the origins of horticulture, agriculture and bronze metallurgy in mainland Southeast Asia. However, many gaps in the story remain, and much work still has to be done.

In the meantime, a later period in pre-modern Southeast Asian history has been under investigation by several groups of historians. Not surprisingly, their findings have been influenced by the methods of the social sciences, and they too challenge many of the interpretations accepted earlier this century. Among these, perhaps the most significant effort involves re-examination of the theme of 'Indianisation', and the extent to which exaggeration of that theme led to serious errors of interpretation of earlier archaeological materials. Another area of scholarly revision relates to ancient maritime trade, where the concern is to rectify a misleading picture of the region as merely a passage-way for foreign merchants, providing stopping-places and shelters for ships sailing between India, West Asia and China. Yet another reconsideration focuses on the nature of indigenous political structures, including the difficult problem of how states came into being, and how their evolution proved to be far different from the picture derived from the records kept by Chinese mandarins from afar. There remained, however, interesting differences in interpretation between the 'ancients' (those who looked forward from the earliest beginnings and depended mainly on archaeology) and the 'moderns' (those who turned backwards and concentrated on new written sources and on what re-reading the known texts could reveal).

These differences are manifested largely in an intermediate historical zone, where written sources are thin or fragmentary and where protohistoric archaeology is constantly finding materials which do not quite fit what has been preserved in writing. Broadly speaking, this coincides with the period chosen for the 1984 conference in Canberra, from which this volume of essays derives - the period between the ninth and fourteenth centuries. This is a zone into which both the 'ancients' and 'moderns' venture and occasionally meet, but it remains difficult, partly because archaeology has not revealed enough, partly because written sources have been either inadequate or too cursorily examined so far. Over the decades, four scholars have stood out in seeking to bridge the gaps - J.G. de Casparis, Oliver Wolters, Boechari and Paul Wheatley - and their distinguished contributions have

challenged others to re-examine all that has been said, especially about these intermediate six centuries. Indeed, it was the recent bold effort by Wolters to analyse the total range of evidence for a new explanation of what happened to early Southeast Asian states and cultures (in his book **History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives**, Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1982) that led to the 1984 conference.

The organisers of the conference had begun with other plans. They were first interested in the border areas between mainland Southeast Asia and southwestern China. After reading Wolters' book, virtually as it came hot off the press from Singapore, they realised that he had taken the subject further afield and had set out some key questions about the continuities which make Southeast Asia a historical unity. Wolters not only focused on the time zone between the 'ancients' and the 'moderns', but also sought to reformulate the old image of the region as intermediate between India and China. His delineation of sub-regions was particularly helpful. Geographical zones within the region could now be discerned which were just as important as the well-known ones between Java-Sumatra and South and Southwest Asia, between the mainland valley states and India, and that with which the conference organisers started between the valley states and southern China. During the conference this fruitful approach encouraged discussion in depth of relationships among sub-regions, especially Java-Sumatra and the mainland valley states, the intermediate Malay peninsula areas, Cambodia and Champa, and between the latter two and Vietnam.

Wolters' ideas were used also to organise the conference along the themes of 'Polity', 'Localisation and Cultural Diversity' and 'Approaches'. His use of the **mandala** to characterise the nature of the region's polities provided an excellent start. The **mandala** concept questions received ideas about the 'state', about 'big men' and their kin, about what constitutes a 'dynasty'. It emphasises the precariousness and subtlety of relationships between centre and periphery, where force is inadequate, administrative structures non-existent, economic ties minimal. The first nine essays in this volume explore the many facets of this subject from different angles and at the same time demonstrate how the same questions can be usefully asked of at least four sub-regions: the three major ones of Java, Cambodia and Vietnam, plus the less familiar one at the neck of the Malay peninsula (Stargardt). Two papers emphasise factors which Wolters has always recognised but does not deal with extensively in his new book: both Vickery and Stargardt examine economic and technological factors which helped determine the nature of the polities in Cambodia and at Satingpra.

What is common to the remaining papers is particularly striking. Two points deserve attention. The first involves examination not only of changing images and perspectives through time, but also of changing structures, as, for example, in the process of state formation through local and regional phases to an 'imperial' phase (Kulke). While this is more true of the mainland valley states than elsewhere in the region, it nevertheless provides a useful test, especially as compared with the ebb and flow of power distribution in Java (Christie and de Casparis), or the spatial (maritime) mobility of the Malay world (Manguin). The second point relates to the position of Vietnam on the edge of the core areas of Southeast Asia. Bearing in mind the extent to which indigenous societies and cultures in Vietnam have, like those of Kwangsi and

Kwangtung, been submerged through the lack of interest among the compilers of Chinese historical records, three papers on Vietnam (Whitmore, Taylor and Ungar) bring out political, religious and symbolic features which should be familiar to those specialising in other parts of 'Indianised' Southeast Asia (as do the other three papers on Vietnam by Wolters, Tran Quoc Vuong and Guy).

The second major theme of the conference concerned 'localisation'. This raised the question of whether specific integrated local cultures existed prior to the coming of foreign cultural elements, and to what extent the latter were accepted, fractured and restated, or 'localised', by pre-existing local cultures. In the Southeast Asian context, where totally indigenous data have until recently been deemed non-existent for the historical periods, scholars were notorious for their readiness to consider almost anything they found in the region, including archaeological artifacts, to have come either from outside the region or to have been influenced by external cultural elements. This has been one of the great burdens which Southeast Asian historians have had to bear. Eight of the essays in this volume were written partly in response to the 'localisation' theme, and they certainly show how difficult it is, in an area of such cultural diversity, to distinguish indigenous from foreign elements in the integrated cultures which eventually emerged.

Perhaps the most probing question is that raised by Macknight, when he examines the eastern edges of the region, which have been regarded as deep in the shadows of whatever light may have come from India in the distant past. Do the cultures of the Eastern Islands constitute a dark intermediate zone between 'Southeast Asia' and the largely indigenous cultures of Oceania (especially the Pacific world of the Melanesian and Polynesian peoples)? Or does their very lack of definition constitute proof that all light emanated from India and the West, and that it was their distance from that source which left them in shadow? In sharp contrast, the two essays on Vietnamese culture and technology (Tran Quoc Vuong and Guy) show what happened when the light from China was strong and the local peoples had to struggle hard to defend their 'local genius'. In between are even more kinds of responses, all conspiring to make the question of 'localisation' too multifarious to be easily pinned down (see the sophisticated discussions by Vallibhotama, Mabbett and Fox). The process of localisation involved ecological differences, distance or proximity from a Great Tradition, elite and popular responses to spiritual needs, deeply rooted kinship structures, different uses of rituals and regalia, processes of urbanisation and, not least, technology and modes of production.

Despite all that, a sense of what the 'localisation' process meant does come through all the essays and we are left in no doubt that it is a refreshing concept helping us to re-assess the 'Indianisation' and 'Sinicisation' motifs of much early writing. And, in each of these eight essays, there are further successful challenges to the idea that everything significant in the region came from somewhere else.

The conference ended with three essays on the theme of 'Approaches'. Although this did not attract as many papers as the other two themes, the three essays, especially Wolters' own on the reading of a particular Vietnamese text, demonstrated that the time has come for historians of Southeast Asia to look at 'texts' as a means of understanding how people who lived in a particular time and place

saw the world around them and communicated their ideas to contemporaries.

This approach is not new, of course. The best traditions of philology demanded the elucidation of source materials in this way. But the present effort is informed by more sophisticated developments in linguistics. It also has the great merit for historians of challenging them to stop plundering surviving documents for facts before they know the meaning and context of the words they pick out, before they can appreciate the circumstances and environment in which the authors lived and the words were uttered. On this point, the well-known strictures of Jacques (and, earlier, of de Casparis) are underlined repeatedly. Also, with fine imagination, Worsley is able to demonstrate that 'texts' of stone (bas-reliefs, temples, even whole cities?) can be equally revealing of the kind of self-conscious localisation which we are trying to depict in words. Perhaps the most illuminating point coming out of the essays on localisation and on approaches, however, is that examples of Indian ideals being emptied of meaning and filled with Javanese experiences are restatements. This leads to the view that no monument or statue in Southeast Asia is unmistakably Indian, every one of them being restatements expressing indigenous needs.

It can now be said that Wolters' new book provided a valuable handle for a score of scholars to take another look at early Southeast Asia, to open themselves to other disciplines, to adopt a sub-regional and multi-centred view of the region instead of a holistic one and, not least, to read the 'texts' correctly and not anachronistically. Beyond that, we came to realise that our separation of 'polity' as an institution from 'localisation' as a process implies a priority historians tend to give to 'polity'. Historians are inclined to identify the institution before they analyse the process (of localisation, in this case) by which that institution was formed and, through such analysis, try to understand the processes by which the polity could thereafter induce more and greater 'localisation'. That is understandable because it is futile to speak of processes in the abstract. Nonetheless, perhaps we could be more explicit in recognising that each polity was itself the product of localisation, that in reality they are inseparable, two sides of the same thing. Several conference participants did emphasise in discussion that localisation was natural and inevitable (how quickly did the dynamic process overshadow the institution!), and that the most interesting questions were which parts of the Great Traditions were localised, and why. It is undeniable that, in most parts of the region, elements of the Great Traditions appear dominant in form. The question remains, however, why some Traditions had the capacity to transform indigenous cultural elements so that the effort to localise that Tradition simply led to the submergence of those indigenous elements, whereas other indigenous cultures were so integrated and distinct that the Great Tradition they localised survived merely superficially.

The historical process of localisation is obviously a difficult one to describe and explain. What makes it even more interesting is that it did not stop with Great Traditions, but occurred also within the region as something that might be called re-localisation. For example, Javanese and Khmer influences on Champa, reciprocal influences between the Mons and the Burmans, numerous local or localised strands that became woven into what is now Thai, all take us away from the

grand themes of 'Indianisation', and from large and often misleading categories such as 'China' and 'India' which have dominated so much of the literature on early Southeast Asia until recently.

There were suggestions at the conference that, by plotting on the map these examples of local localisations within the region, we would have a clearer picture of how each localised polity might have determined the shape and nature of another. Equally important would be a map showing how 'Indian materials', already transformed and adapted locally, might have been secondarily relayed from the point of entry to other sub-regions in Southeast Asia. Such maps might help to determine whether indigenous cultures were receptive to Indian influences or to influences within the region; the degree of receptivity could be an index of the basic unity of something described as Southeast Asian cultural foundations. On the contrary, if what was accepted in one sub-region differed markedly from that in another, that would be a useful pointer to underlying cultural differences within the region.

The question of mapping touches on the factor of geography as well as the question of boundaries. Several essays discuss matters of ecology and environment, notably Stargardt's paper on Satingpra and Manguin's paper on ships as bearers of change. They both mention mobility, in one the common phenomenon of moving capitals around at frequent intervals, and in the other the cultural traffic and the maritime trade across what Wolters calls 'the single ocean' between the Arab world and East Africa at one end, and China at the other. This raises four questions which I believe deserve further attention.

Firstly, moving capitals was common also to the ancient worlds of China, Japan and Europe. How different was it in Southeast Asia, and to what extent was its survival till so late in history a measure of strong local cultural values? There may be scope for additional studies of comparable cultural traits in the ancient history of several other parts of the world.

Secondly, apart from Manguin and Macknight, I think the essays play down the role of early maritime trade as a determinant of polity and the localisation process, especially that role which kept the region open to sustained influences from India and China. Perhaps the fact that Wolters himself, who has been a major contributor to our understanding of this topic, is quiet about it leads us to feel that enough has been said. Yet Kenneth Hall, whom we had not brought to the conference, in his latest book **Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia** (University of Hawaii Press, 1985), demonstrates how important this international maritime trade could be to all the issues of polity and localisation the essays focus on.

Thirdly, the cultural traffic over land clearly involved different processes of change from that by sea. Different kinds of barriers were erected, soldiers were a different breed from sailors, different items of trade influenced local cultures and, of course, those population centres which evolved deep in the interior necessarily contrasted with those at great trading ports. How different these processes were could be tested by comparing localisation in the valleys of Yunnan, in the upper reaches of the Irrawady, Salween, Mekong and even the Red River (where the Indian materials came more directly into competition with Chinese materials among people who might have been, like other Southeast Asians, more inclined to respond to the Indian), with whatever localisation there was across the seas to the Eastern islands of Indonesia, to the Philippines, New Guinea and beyond.

This leads to the fourth question, that of the boundaries of Southeast Asia. It was not long ago that what today we call Southeast Asia was either part of Eastern or Southern Asia; bits of it were lodged elsewhere, for example Burma as part of British India, Vietnam and the Philippines as parts of the Far East, and New Guinea simply forgotten. After 1945, Southeast Asia appeared like a new bright star whose time had come and, within a decade or two, we were speaking of Southeast Asia as if the name had always been there. Nevertheless, there remains the need to determine what, other than geographical tidiness and modern political realities, justifies the separate treatment of the history of the region since the work of Brian Harrison and D.G.E. Hall in the early 1950s. For the ninth to the fourteenth centuries, the boundaries are not so clearly defined. If Vietnam was less Chinese, then so also were Yunnan and parts of Kwangsi, Kueichow and Kwangtung. Where were the western borders of Burma? Should we be more open-minded about Sri Lanka and parts of the South India and Bengal coasts? And could the region be said to have possessed an eastern or northeastern boundary among the islands as early as that? I thought it useful that conference participants noted from time to time that local peoples during this period showed little consciousness of strong cultural commonalities. There was no sense of belonging to a region, and it is probably anachronistic to expect such feelings. Was that very lack of consciousness of boundaries itself a major common trait that distinguished the region from others?

Finally, the conference found so much of interest in the cultural variety of the area and the complexities of polity and localisation that it did not seem to give enough attention to the boundaries of the period of the ninth to fourteenth centuries. Why begin at the ninth and why end with the fourteenth? Several papers here are convincing in establishing that the ninth century was significant for Java, and to some extent also in pre-Angkorian Cambodia, because of the way that localisation and state formation laid the foundation for early kingdoms and for the 'imperial' kingdoms of the future. For both areas, however, Kulke suggests that the end of the tenth century and the beginnings of the eleventh might have been more important where changes to the polity were concerned; this was certainly true for Vietnam as well. At the other end of the period, Vallibhotama emphasises the fifteenth century as a period of major change for Thailand, and this would also apply to Angkor. But again, the fourteenth century might well have been the vital period for changes to the polity in the Java-Sumatra sub-regions.

Perhaps our reluctance to nail these centuries down at the conference shows that we have reached a certain stage of maturity in our study of early Southeast Asian history. We know enough to sense that these dates could not be equally relevant for every part of the region, yet not enough to determine what dates might be more significant for a region which we believe had an historical unity all its own. This new-found maturity has brought us not only to realise that interdisciplinary approaches are integral to our work and probably to all attempts to write history; it has also led us to reach deeper into some of the complexities of time and space in the non-Western past. We have travelled beyond the point where each of us believes in the possibility of writing a comprehensive history of that past.