The Transformation of Southeast Asia: International Perspectives on Decolonization. **Edited by Marc Frey, Ronald W. Pruessen, and Tan Tai Yong,** New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2003. 358pp.

In the present era of postcolonial studies and postcolonialism, talking about decolonization is not the in-thing in the theatre of global academia. Decolonization has been viewed as a deeply flawed analytic concept, indeed an illusory one, both at the epistemological and ontological levels.

Epistemologically, as some scholars have argued, nothing has been really decolonized in the ex-colonies even after independence. For instance, the core of the postcolonial state's rationale for existence itself, namely, its "history, territory and society", has been a colonial construction based on colonial knowledge. In short, the epistemological core of postcolonial states has never really been decolonized. The famous Census, the Annual Surveys, the Museum, the Archives and many more important structural institutions, all invented as part of the colonial "technology of rule" remain critical in the day-to-day running as well as in the macro exercise of policy-making in the independent state today. Court cases from 19th century West Bengal or England, for instance, are still used as precedents in trials conducted in Malaysian High Courts in 2003.

Discourse on decolonization, too, has been viewed by some quarters, such as members of the Subaltern Studies group of South Asia, as a problematic historiography. Others have also characterized the discourse as an "orientalist" one. Besides, it is always the voices of the elite, leaders, heroes and whoever dominates the regime that dominate the discursive space. As such, for some, the absence of the grassroots perspective in the discourse renders it biased and incomplete. If viewed in the Malay world context, it could be said that the discourse on decolonization is almost totally *istana*-centric, which is indeed a problematic epistemological position.

What has been transformed as a result of decolonization is often perceived by critics, such as from the Subaltern Studies group, as ontologically superficial, because most of the colonial institutions, structures and practices, especially in terms of form, are usually re-invented to suit the demands of the day without the content of the concept, originally constituted by the colonialist, really being transformed. In other words, there was a changing of the guards no doubt, but the fortress remains the same. To scholars, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty (see his famous book, *Provincializing Europe,* 2002), the so-called decolonized postcolonial states are akin to "little European

provinces" (it reminds us of the "Little India" of Serangoon Road, Singapore, certainly a product of British colonialism).

Admittedly, the kind of intellectual discourse that groups like the Subaltern Studies group in India or Thesis 11 in Melbourne, has not really reached the ambit of the *kraton* of historiography in Southeast Asian studies, both within and outside the region. If it has arrived at the shores of Southeast Asian historiography, it still has to take root in history classes in the local universities across the region or articulated in the respective national histories textbooks. This limitation is evident in the present volume being reviewed, *The Transformation of Southeast Asia*, which boasts as its contributors a number of established and well-known historians of Southeast Asia, such as Paul Kratoska, Nicholas Tarling and Wang Gungwu.

Five central chapters of the volume that indicate clearly the conceptual orientation and parameters of the book are the editors' Introduction, Paul Kratoska (Chapter 1: Dimensions of Decolonization), Jost Dulffer (Chapter 2: The Impact of World War II on Decolonization), Thomas Lindblad (Chapter 3: The Economic Impact of Decolonization in Southeast Asia), and Karl Hack (Chapter 7: Theories and Approaches to British Colonization in Southeast Asia).

Interestingly, brilliant as ever, the contribution of Wang Gungwu in this book (Chapter 17: Afterword: The Limits of Decolonization) reveals the limitation of contemporary analyses on the concept and process of decolonization in Southeast Asia, despite their empirical richness. For instance, he is very concerned that, if there is no clear distinction between "the colonists, or colonialists, from various kinds of immigrants … then an ancient and powerful phenomena like migration gets drawn anachronistically into the modern problem of migration" (p. 272). Quite clearly, his concern is both epistemological and ontological with an eye on methodological issues.

It is quite clear from the discussions and analyses in the five central chapters mentioned above that the overall conceptual concern is more on the "structure" (the institution, the polity, the economy, the social, the political, the legal, etc.) and very little, in fact none really, on the "agencies" or ordinary people. This is also evident in the remaining 13 chapters of the book — two of which are on French Indochina (Chapters 4 and 5), one on Dutch Indonesia (Chapter 6), four on British Malaya (Chapters 8, 9, 10 and 11), and five on the United States' relationship with Southeast Asia (Chapters 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16). These chapters are indeed impressive and detailed narratives and descriptions of the different experiences of colonization and decolonization in different communities within Southeast Asia. They

also allow us to understand the different nature of colonial rule as practised by the British, Dutch, French and the Americans. Notably absent in the volume is a discussion on Brunei and the Philippines. This certainly has denied us the possibility of deepening our understanding of the two unique cases of "late decolonization" in Southeast Asia.

These comments and criticisms notwithstanding, the publication of this volume is very timely and useful to those interested in Southeast Asian history in general, because the modern history of Southeast Asia is either about colonization or decolonization of the region. This volume covers a major part of the story.

Of course, from the viewpoint of this reviewer, the best empirical parts of the volume are the chapters on the United States (Chapters 12 to 16), from which many readers would learn a number of new and interesting facts about the United States as a "colonizer", albeit in a new form, through an account of the Vietnam War and the implementation of the famous World Bank-funded "Green Revolution" in the region. Yet nothing in this volume predicted the rise of the United States as the single most powerful state in the world today. Nor do any of them envisage the rise of radical Islam in the region.

The final question one would ask from the authors and editors of this volume is: What happened during Japanese colonization, and more importantly, Japanese decolonization? Perhaps these themes can be included in a sequel to this volume with the same title with a different subtitle, namely, "Perspectives on Japanese Decolonization".

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