

Special Focus

**THE MOST
INFLUENTIAL BOOKS
OF SOUTHEAST
ASIAN STUDIES**

Editor

Hui Yew-Foong

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Editor's Note

The Most Influential Books of Southeast Asian Studies

A brief note is in order to explain this special issue, which is quite unlike most special issues of journals. To mark the 40th Anniversary of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in 2008, the editorial team of *SOJOURN* decided to come up with a list of “Ten Most Influential Books on Southeast Asia”. The idea seems straightforward, but the discerning will quickly realize that generating such a list is an encounter with controversy at every turn.

We decided to pass the conundrum to our eminent International Advisory Members (IAM). They were each invited to nominate ten books that:

- a) have influenced theory formation and/or empirical perceptions in Southeast Asia;
- b) continue to serve as pivotal reference points for contemporary scholars; and
- c) transcend the period they were written in.

Most of the IAM responded, some with more than ten nominations, and some with less; and some, with good reason, declined to send in their nominations. Altogether, forty-five books were nominated. Because some books tied in the number of nominations they received, we ended up with a “Top 14” list rather than a “Top 10” list, which has been reproduced below.

Any such list, as mentioned earlier, is bound to be controversial because of the biases involved. There is, first, the bias implicit in the criteria we gave the IAM. For example, we had asked that they

nominate books written in English. This seemingly straightforward request already privileges books over other forms of influential publication, and even more controversially, English publications over much excellent scholarship not available in English. (Nevertheless, some IAM still felt compelled to send us nominations of books in non-English languages, which we gladly accepted.) Second, the biases of the IAM would, quite necessarily, be reflected in their choices of books, whether these be due to their training or areas of expertise. Instead of seeing this as a limitation, we see this as an opportunity to tap on a broad base of collective wisdom. Towards this end, we have decided to display the entire nominations list instead of just the most popular ones. To students and scholars of Southeast Asia, we offer this list as a resource.

Needless to say, there are probably methodologically more rigorous ways to go about this. For example, we could have extended the vote to the scholarly community at large. Or, instead of asking for nominations of books, ask for nominations of the most influential scholars, which would bring to the fore an assessment of their oeuvre instead of just one or two books. Nevertheless, with our limited resources, we have decided to initiate this limited first effort as a service to the scholarly community on Southeast Asian Studies. We do not expect everyone, or in fact, anyone, to agree with the entire list. In fact, we would be happier if the list generates debate rather than quiet acquiescence. The verdict, in the end, on which books are the most influential should lie, not with us at *SOJOURN*, but with the discerning reader.

As a guide to some of the most influential ideas embedded in what has been considered the most influential books, the editorial team has also undertaken, according to individual expertise and inclinations to write review essays on selected books. We regret that not all books can be reviewed, but do hope that what we have lined up would serve as a good introduction. Finally, we would like to thank our IAM, which had graciously offered us the benefit of their collective expertise in the drawing up of this list.

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