Book Review

Empire of Seas: Thinking About Asia by Shiraishi Takashi. Tokyo: Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture, 2021. 187 pages. ISBN: 9784866581262

In 1983, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* introduced Southeast Asia to a general Western readership, showing how national consciousness formed differently in the said region in the nineteenth century. The most cited English-language text in the social sciences and the humanities, Anderson's book has inspired many of his contemporaries, as well as a later generation of scholars, to deconstruct Southeast Asia and rethink the region away from conventional conceptualizations and traditions.

Shiraishi Takashi's *Empire of Seas: Thinking About Asia* (2021) is one of the works that exemplified Anderson's cult following in area studies. According Shiraishi, it was a product of his sojourn at Cornell University from 1987 to 1996, where he witnessed the disappearance of the Soviet Union and Eastern European area studies program following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. Those events made him contemplate the same for Southeast Asia (158). The 1990s also saw Southeast Asia's rise not only in the global economy but also as a strategic partner for the West in forging new security alliances. Southeast Asia's resilience in the Asian financial crisis from 1997 to 1999 was an excellent example of how it constantly dealt with burgeoning global crises. For instance, economic and financial recovery in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia—though imperfect—proved exemplary. In other words, the timing of the book's publication came at a critical time.

Empire of Seas was first published in Japanese in 2000. The book was a product of Shiraishi's fear that Southeast Asia would fall victimto the broader decline of area studies. For him, Southeast Asia's preservation goes beyond the political and economic union that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) provided, as well as the "unified history" woven by single histories given by

academia (160). Therefore, the region can be recollected in the context of an internationalism through its role within a historical maritime regional system—in the book's trajectory, a relationship with Japan (156).

Empire of Seas has two directions. First, the book was not only Shiraishi's studious reflection about Southeast Asia as a vibrant region deserving attention; it was also meant to introduce the region's progression and how it came to embody the concept of "Southeast Asia" to a Japanese audience. How did this "Southeast Asia" come to exist as a regional unit similar to East Asia or even South Asia? I say this because almost all the ideas in the book are foundational in thinking and looking at the region. Scholars familiar with the canons of Southeast Asian studies, mainly produced by Cornell, can predict the book's intention of making the region relevant in light of Shiraishi's intellectual training and experience in Ithaca.

Second, the book attempts to show how colonial empires shaped Southeast Asia's transition to modernity. The book's choice of interest is the British Empire, beginning with Stamford Raffles's ambitious colonial project of a "maritime empire based on free trade" (23). The choice of the British Straits Settlements was essential, because it was the best option to introduce O. W. Wolters's groundbreaking idea of the mandala system (43–44), which was conceptualized in the 1980s, coincidentally when Shiraishi was finishing his studies at Cornell. This framework mapped the region according to borderless city centers.

I believe that *Empire of Seas*, simply by looking at its notes and references, is Shiraishi's gratitude to his mentors and colleagues at Cornell. His choice to entitle his work *Empire of Seas* emerged from the framework of maritime Asia, which looks at the region based on economic activity, political imagination, and imperial ambition. In this case, the book focused on the historical progression of Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand—all connected by the region's maritime channels. Following all Southeast Asianists before him—D. G. E. Hall, O. W. Wolters, Benedict Anderson, and John R. W. Smail, among others—Southeast Asia, for Shiraishi, is like a petri dish of domestic systems externally

influenced by foreign visitors, leading to the germination of new concepts unique to the region. The best example pertains to how Southeast Asian nations treated power in the postcolonial period (see Chapter 7).

The book can be divided into three parts. The first part, chapters 1–3, concerns European attempts to build colonial projects in Southeast Asia, with the British Empire as a choice for departure. This project resulted from a changing world pressured by modern capitalism and the integration of colonial settlements into one trading system. The second part, Chapters 4–5, describes the emergence of modern states as a product of the colonial systems that later turned into civilizing-liberal projects. The third and last part, Chapters 6–8, contextualizes Southeast Asian nations facing another form of modernity through globalization, especially following the end of old (Europe) and new (Japan) empires that culminated in a period of decolonization.

The most interesting component of the book, which is also an avenue for debate, is how Shiraishi cemented the idea of modernization in its capacity to shape the formation of modern states in Southeast Asia. Modernization, as Shiraishi explained, was vital in making Southeast Asia prosper (11). In this case, it is treated as a "single integral unit of time" that shaped the region for hundreds of years, which began with the Western colonial project of drawing a foundational regional system. The book's point of comparison is Japan, which also underwent modernization in the nineteenth century. It turns out that colonial empires only patterned their "colonial projects" according to existing precolonial systems like the mandala, which later became what the author believed was a "grand liberal project" (23–24), i.e., colonial state-building. Shiraishi would cite, for instance, Britain's introduction of "laws, systems, government, and policies" to its Malay possessions, creating a system of order similar to that of Europe (23). In *Empire of Seas*, Shiraishi borrowed the word "leviathan" not only as a metaphor for modern states but also as a term describing the "toddling growth" and transformation of selected imperial possessions from their colonial beginnings to their postcolonial phases (50). For Shiraishi, a modern state differs in totality from a nation—although nations are imagined or phenomena, states are "sociological structures with real

substance: a system and a machine" (52). But are nations not, after all, as scholars of nationalism have argued, colonial artifacts?

Apart from the British Straits Settlements, in the chapter "Toddling Leviathans," Shiraishi explained how modernization shaped the formation of Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand in the nineteenth century (58–67). These Southeast Asian states differed in their "models," or how the colonizers governed their colonial projects, and the later historical development of these toddling leviathans varied as well, and erratically so. These divergences explain and connect to what Shiraishi presented in the book's closing chapters: with how these states came to terms with decolonization.

Beyond any question, *Empire of Seas* is well-crafted—exceptionally organized so that the flow of arguments and presentation of ideas are easy to follow, but not so complex that the book can actually be finished in one sitting. Introduced to non-Japanese readers with this English translation, I think it will gain its rightful place in Asian studies catalogs in university libraries. However, I fear that the book will remain physically inaccessible outside Japan, given that this English edition is still printed under a local publisher there. A Southeast Asian publisher might take an interest in *Empire of Seas*, especially as the book can be a good primer on Southeast Asia from a *longue durée* point of view, beginning with the West's interaction with the region's mandalas up to the present-day experience of modern states.

For the general readership and primarily to policymakers, the book's significance lies in Shiraishi's idea of the region's potential within the future of international order orbiting around security issues, economic stability, and nonexistence of large-scale conflicts (Chapter 8). There is no denying why the United States tries to keep its presence in the region following the end of the Cold War. Take the Philippines as an example: in 1992, the U.S. had withdrawn its "permanent" military presence in its pre–World War II–occupied military bases. However, the termination of the 1947 Military Bases Agreement only paved the way for the U.S. to pursue bilateral agreements that provided it "temporary" presence in the country. In other words, it is more than just the U.S.'s special relationship with

the Philippines, but it is also for the preservation of U.S. hegemony and the protection of its national interests. In this sense, and related to Shiraishi's book, Southeast Asia remains a fundamental and strategic location for the West, particularly for the United States, in terms of military and diplomatic affairs.

Since the book was published in 2000, most of what Shiraishi had built on is generally out of trend today; there has been an emergence of frameworks and available sources looking into the region from a transnational point of view. However, I believe the book needs no update, as Shiraishi stated in his 2020 afterword. His concept of "seas" as bridges of transnationalism remains essential to developing similar frameworks. He remained firm in his assertions, which are only a drop in a bucket within the considerable and expanding understanding of the Southeast Asian region. They add nuances to how his contemporaries and the scholars before him defined the term, "Southeast Asia" amidst its conceptual "emptiness" since the postwar period (158).

Shiraishi provided an addendum in this translated edition. Twenty years later, he remains hopeful for the region, yet accepts the reality of a new great leviathan—China—looming over Southeast Asia and the world. This is something unexpected to most Western political commentators and public intellectuals. Looking at the patterns of history following the tearing down of ideological borders at the end of the Cold War three decades ago, today's unchecked transnationalism in this age of globalization supplies the possibility of a new Cold War. Even so, Shiraishi believes that just as Southeast Asia adapted to the colonial project, it can and has indeed done likewise with China's maritime ambitions (168). It is in this context that it is fitting to go back to the book's primary inquiry: how, therefore, should we think about Southeast Asia, if not Asia a whole, amidst the ever-growing power of Beijing?

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