

Strange parallels: Southeast Asia in global context, c. 800-1830

Review >
Southeast Asia

Victor Lieberman's *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830*, which won the prestigious 2004 World History Association Book Prize, connects a millennium of Southeast Asian history with long-term administrative, cultural, economic, demographic, even climatic developments and cycles on the Eurasian continent. This remarkable book will become one of the seminal studies on the history of pre-modern mainland Southeast Asia.

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More than a decade ago, Anthony Reid published his two-volume study *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1988 and 1993). Mainly relying on evidence from the insular world, Reid tries to demonstrate that Southeast Asia as a whole went through a rapid phase of economic development sped up by maritime trade. This upturn was followed by a decline due to European interference in the Asian trading system.

In the introductory chapter of *Strange Parallels*, Lieberman criticizes Reid's concept of a '17th century crisis' - perceptible in a deteriorating climate, falling profit margins, and competitive disadvantage due to advances by European and Chinese traders. Lieberman argues that a seventeenth century crisis may have some explanatory strength for developments in Insular Southeast Asia, but does not hold true for the mainland, which enjoyed a period of sustained territorial consolidation and economic growth throughout the seventeenth century.

Refuting the dichotomous distinction between the 'West' and the 'Rest' of the Eurasian landmass (i.e. Europe and Asia respectively), Lieberman reveals parallel long-term trends in large parts of Europe, Japan and mainland Southeast Asia. He argues that 'the combination of accelerated political integration, firearms-based warfare, broader literacy, religious textuality, vernacular literatures, wider money use, and more complex international linkages' marked the period between the mid-fifteenth to early nineteenth centuries 'as a more or less coherent period' in each region of this 'Eurasian periphery' (p.79). Island Southeast Asia, on the other hand, though sharing similar 'early modern features', had more in common with the Eurasian 'heartland', namely China, the Middle East and India. These zones, all ruled by conquest elites at the turn of the seventeenth century - Manchu, Turkish, Persian, Dutch and Iberian - did not experience growing cultural unity between elites and masses, and entered the nineteenth century politically fragmented (p.80).

For the millennium spanning the period 800-1830, Lieberman identifies four roughly synchronised cycles of political consolidation in mainland Southeast Asia, as well as in France and Russia. It is indeed striking that in all these disparate regions a period of rapid demographic growth and commercial expansion began in the tenth and eleventh centuries, followed by a general political and social crisis extending from the early thirteenth to the late fourteenth centuries. The causes of crisis were, however, quite

different. In Southeast Asia, the 'charter polities' of Pagan (Burma) and Angkor (Cambodia) succumbed to a combination of foreign invasions, shifting trade relations and ecological strains to core areas (p. 242). The collapse of Kiew Rus can largely be attributed to conquest by the Mongols, while the crisis in France, it can be argued, resulted from the Black Death and military conquests by England in the Hundred Years' War.

The reader may also be stunned by the coincidence of short-lived political crises in the second half of the eighteenth century, followed by a long period of intensified administrative and cultural integration. Lieberman concludes: 'Whereas Europe as a whole in 1450 had some 500 political units, by the late nineteenth century the number was closer to 30. Between 1340 and 1820 some 23 independent Southeast Asian kingdoms collapsed into three. Each nineteenth century survivor was more effectively centralized than any local predecessor' (p.2). This last quotation shows Lieberman sometimes oversimplifies arguments to draw parallels between incompatible phenomena. The vast majority of the more than 500 political units identified by Lieberman in mid-fifteenth century Europe were German kingdoms, duchies, counties, and imperial free cities (*Reichsfreie Städte*). The German Empire at the time still possessed powerful imperial institutions that tied together its member states, the autonomy of which were probably less than that of several nineteenth century Siamese and Burmese vassal states.

As to the 'strange parallels' that link Vietnamese and Japanese history, Lieberman does not provide concrete details but leaves the reader's anxiety to the second volume of his oeuvre, to be published separately under the title *Mainland Mirrors: Russia, France, Japan, and the Islands*. One is tempted to speculate that such an analogy seems obvious due to the political, cultural and demographic expansion of Vietnam and Japan along an axis running from North to South and from South to North respectively. Whether such a comparison is the only and most suitable choice for putting pre-modern Vietnamese history into a wider Eurasian perspective remains to be substantiated.

For Southeast Asia specialists the first volume nevertheless offers many insights into the *longue durée* histories of the three parts of the mainland: the western mainland (mostly Burma), the central mainland (Siam, Laos, and Cambodia) and the eastern mainland (Vietnam). The book discusses historical developments in these three distinctive regions, characterised by agriculturally productive river basins running in a north-south direction and separated

from one another by mountain chains, in three chapters of roughly equal length. At the beginning of each chapter, Lieberman explains which regions are included in the respective 'mainlands'. Then he discusses in detail how the three parts of the mainland developed politically, economically, and culturally over a period of one millennium. The rise, consolidation or collapse of political entities are discussed chronologically and in relation to their modes of economy and trade relations; Lieberman frequently neglects ecological and climatic factors. The reader also gains a state-of-the-art overview of changes in the cultural landscape, ranging from religious dynamics to linguistic and ethnic changes.

Lieberman is a highly reputed and prolific writer of Burmese history, and it is not surprising that the chapter on Burma is by far the most convincing. It relies on decades of original research, and will serve as a standard work on pre-modern Burmese history. The sections

on Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, on the other hand, rely on the work of recognised authorities such as David Wyatt and Dhiravat na Pompejra (on Thailand), David Chandler and Charles Higham (on Cambodia) and Keith Taylor and Li Tana (on Vietnam). Lieberman thus succeeds to write balanced and highly informative chapters on the central and eastern 'mainlands' as well. In each chapter, results of the preceding ones are used to highlight political, economic, and cultural interactions among the different parts of the mainland.

While *Strange Parallels* is an extraordinary book of superb scholarship, it has its lopsidedness. In Lieberman's discussion about the Tai polities of Lan Na (Northern Thailand) and Lan Sang (Laos), for example, he has not made use of the most recent scholarship. Although important studies of Southeast Asian history written in German are quite rare, some of them should not be ignored. To give one example, for the economic history of Pagan, Lieberman relies almost entirely on Michael Aung-Thwin's work, the leading authority in this field. If he had consulted Tilman Frasch's PhD thesis *Pagan: Stadt und*

Staat (Stuttgart 1994) he probably would have qualified Aung-Thwin's theory that the decline of Pagan was spurred by excessive donations of royal land to religious institutions.

Such reservations, however, are of minor importance. Lieberman has written an impressive work of great importance in the field of Southeast Asian history. It is certain that this book will stimulate further debate among historians specialised in the region and, probably, also in world history. His work has opened a new window of approaches to Southeast Asian history, and deserves to be highly recommended. <

- Lieberman, Victor. 2003. *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830. Vol. 1: Integration on the Mainland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, xxiii + 484 pp. ISBN 0-521-80496-5 (paperback)

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