

Festschrift: Asia in three parts

Symon, A. 2009.

Writing from Asia.

Newcastle, Australia: Global Exchange. 220 pages, ISBN: 9781876438418 (paperback)

ANDREW SYMON WAS AN AUSTRALIAN JOURNALIST who was based in Southeast Asia, first in Indonesia in the early 1990s and then in Singapore from 1998. He specialised in mining and energy resources, although he also wrote about people and politics and had a deep personal interest in colonial history and its legacy which he also expressed in his journalism.¹ His understanding of Southeast Asia was held in high esteem before his unexpected death in October 2009.

Writing from Asia has three parts, containing 49 chapters consisting of articles he researched and wrote. The first part, *Politics and Personalities*, contains twenty articles that explore major geopolitical issues that confront the countries of Southeast Asia, such as climate change, energy resources, environmental degradation, political developments and population growth.

The second part, *Energy and Resources*, contains the meat of Symon's researches. These are detailed, carefully documented and wide-ranging studies of developments and issues related to mining and energy resources. The highlight of his career was probably a report commissioned by the Lowy Institute, an independent think-tank based in Sydney, in preparation for a conference dealing with Asia-Pacific perspectives

The Three Gorges Dam (hydroelectric), Yangtze River, China (CC License Attribution: Harvey Barrison <http://www.lickr.com/photos/hbarison/5891613667>).

on nuclear energy and global governance in April 2008: *Nuclear Power in Southeast Asia: Implications for Australia and non-proliferation*.² The report makes the point, among others, that the general public in Southeast Asia and Australia already had little confidence in the safety of nuclear energy. This, of course, was prior to the Fukushima disaster.

The third part of the book, *Book Reviews*, showcases his multi-dimensional interests in the society and history of Southeast Asia. The book reviews are mainly essays that paraphrase and retell the messages of the authors in a way that reflects his focus on the public interest. The books covered in the reviews are varied: the story of Chin Peng, leader of the Communist rebellion in Malaya, explores the nationalist thinking behind his existential struggle;³ in *The New Chinese Empire*, veteran China watcher Ross Terrill forecasts likely future political developments in China; *Target North Korea* explicates the development of the paranoid psychology of the North Korean regime and discusses the possibility of bringing them in from the cold to end the suffering of the unfortunate populace. His review of Elizabeth Economy's *The River Runs Black* details the efforts of the Chinese to address their pressing need to prevent further environmental degradation. He also reviews Anthony Reid's *An Indonesian Frontier* by retelling the long history that preceded the Acehnese rebellion. He reminds us of the significance of the first great meeting of newly independent Asian and African states in 1955 in Bandung, explained by the late Jamie Mackie in *Bandung 1995* as one of the first and most significant steps towards the

emergence of a new multi-polar world that developed later as the sharp polarities of the Cold War disintegrated. He also reviews John Monfries' *Different Societies, Shared Future*, clarifying that it is the cultural differences between the two societies that are the root cause of the continuous see-sawing that is a notable feature of the relationship between Indonesia and Australia, which needs ballast in the form of more institutional and people to people links. Another article introduces us to the charm of the unique architecture of the Khmer modernist movement that flourished under Prince Sihanouk, which was characterised by diversity, subtlety and innovation, but is now being lost through demolition and unregulated development as more money flows into Cambodia (*Building Cambodia* by Helen Ross and Darryl Collins). These are a few of the offerings in the last section of the book, which unlike the earlier more dispassionate sections is imbued with humanitarian and aesthetic values, and this enhances the other chapters for the reader by displaying the underpinning basis of Symon's world-view.

The paperback volume presents well, appears well-edited and includes an index, although on closer examination one finds quite a number of mangled sentences, incorrect page references, and so on, which betray its hasty compilation. For students and scholars, the value of this collection is faceted, like the structure of the book. For those interested in the region, not just in terms of mining and energy resources, it provides an extremely well-informed and broad, yet deep, introduction to enhance their understandings in many disciplines such as economics, engineering, environmental studies, history, politics and public policy. For students and professionals in mining and energy resources it should be required reading, one would think.

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Notes

- 1 In 2000, he wrote a popular series of articles about STOVIA (the Vocational School of Medicine for Indigenous Doctors), an institution of the Dutch Colonial Government that produced many thinkers of the revolutionary generation in Indonesia, for the Jakarta Post.
- 2 The report is also available on the Lowy Institute's website.
- 3 Published as *Fact and Fiction on Chin Peng* by Andrew Symon, IAS Newsletter #33, March 2003.

Double feature

Nearly all works on United States relations with Southeast Asia have traditionally started their analysis with 1945, or perhaps 1941, the author observes. (p. 9) Her book adopts a different line. That is welcome in at least two different ways. It tends to bring Southeast Asia into larger and more comparative studies, for example on US imperialism. That diminishes the risk, still prevalent, that Southeast Asia is ghettoised in more general works that draw their evidence and examples from other parts of the world, indeed other parts of Asia.

Nicholas Tarling

Anne L. Foster. 2010.

Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919-1941.

Durham and London: Duke University Press. xii + 241 pp, ISBN: 978-0-8223-4800-9 (paperback)

IT ALSO OFFERS US A LONGER-TERM PERSPECTIVE on America's role in Southeast Asia. She takes little account of the role of Americans and occasionally their state in nineteenth-century Southeast Asia: we do not hear of the pepper-traders in northern Sumatra, nor of the adventurers in northern Borneo, though the Baptists in Burma there before the British conquerors are mentioned. Her focus is, as her subtitle indicates, on the inter-war period. But she might perhaps have criticised her colleagues not for starting in 1941 or 1945 but for regarding those as the

crucial dates for American involvement in the region. Surely it did not become a focus until 1950. The Cold War and in particular the triumph of the CCP and the loss of China are indeed the turning-points that historians seek, even if that should not make the study of Southeast Asia, or of Vietnam, merely a Cold War study, as Foster rightly suggests has often happened.

The title indeed prompts a question. What was striking about the whole period up to 1950 was surely that the US did not project its power. That negative role indeed helped to determine the role of others. It enhanced the ambitions of the Japanese, who were to be all the more frustrated in 1941. It was only in December that year, however, that the US indicated that it would support the British in the event of invasion, and only after that could the British reassure the Dutch.

Movie theater in Phnom Penh (CC Attribute: Jen Leung; <http://ic.kr/p/6kpMqd>).

No doubt the author recognises that, and the closing section of her final chapter offers some account of the reaction to the Manchuria incident. Japan became like a sore tooth, a curious simile runs, everyone felt compelled to poke at it, but no one really wanted to know how serious the problem was. (p. 158) The subsequent pages rise above that level, but still are barely adequate. If she felt a need to defend her treatment of the subject, she would surely argue that she is concerned with power of kinds other than those the title would normally imply. The book, however, is weakened by an emphasis on them that displaces that larger context. She recognises the paradox in the US position—a world power with only limited interest in the region—but rather misses a dimension of it. The United States projected its power during

Powerplay

Research sometimes serves to deconstruct power relations: to show how some groups are disenfranchised, marginalised or removed from histories of nations through literature, film or other cultural practices. Academic work, in such cases, provides theoretical and direct criticisms of how power structures, institutions, politicians and others, assert power.

Andy Fuller

A review of two films on power:

Performances of Authority and *Being prominent in Indonesia, a day in the life of Ibu Mooryati*

RESEARCH PROVIDES GROUNDS for rights, representation, equality – at least in the mind, if not beyond it. Research often seems inextricably linked to causes, despite an academic's own claim to impartiality and objectivity. Sometimes an academic's cause, however, might just be to assert the importance of his or her own field. The political significance or actuality of a subject helps an academic gain prominence, funding and in some rare cases, fame beyond seminar rooms and lecture halls half-filled with familiar faces and indifferent students.

Two recent films from the KITLV¹ – *Performances of Authority* (*Performances* for short) by Fridus Steijlen and Deasy Simandjuntak, and *Being prominent in Indonesia, a day in the life of Ibu Mooryati* (*Being prominent* for short) by Henk Schulte Nordholt and Fridus Steijlen – present two different examples of inquiries into the power-plays and power structures of present day Indonesia.

Although both films are drawn from KITLV's *Recording the Future* project,² the two films were made in different ways. Steijlen has said that *Performances* came about after a reviewing of recorded material made throughout the eight years of this ongoing audio-visual archive project. He said that they didn't set out to film 'performances of authority', but that instead, performances of authority were revealed in their recordings of everyday life. As such, *Performances* is a gleaning of diverse material cut from recordings from

different locations and years. Locations are named, and the credits inform us that filming was completed between 2003 and 2009; viewers are thus given a taste of some of the 'performances of authority' in post-New-Order and perhaps post-*reformasi* Indonesia.

Being prominent, on the other hand, is an up-close and personal encounter with Indonesia's rich. Ibu Mooryati is a member of the Solonese royal family, founder of Mustika Ratu cosmetics company and a political representative. Recordings were made during several days in 2007. Andre Triadiputra (camera) and Lexy Rambadeta (camera and interviews) follow Ibu Mooryati on a tour of her 'everyday life'. The footage shows Ibu Mooryati with one of her grandsons, her personal assistant, her PhD supervisor, at a factory for her cosmetic products, at one of the Mustika Ratu spas, in parliament fulfilling the role of speaker, and at a promotional launch of traditional Javanese medicine attended by President Yudhoyono. The story of her everyday life is told in her own words and in responses to questions from the film's interviewer, Lexy Rambadeta. She speaks mostly in Indonesian, yet sometimes elaborates in Javanese or English. Javanese seems to be her language of familiarity and intimacy, while her use of English appears to be invested with a sense of authority and power.

Ibu Mooryati glides through her day, fully in control of herself and her surroundings. Yet, for brief moments, the veil of control and order is slightly dislodged: in one instance she admonishes Lexy for asking too many questions, while in another she scolds her assistant for not being on top of matters. These are rare moments and the somewhat manicured vision of Ibu Mooryati suggests that the film was intended to be made



Ibu Mooryati, Jakarta 2007.



Performer of authority, Jakarta 2003.

with her full collaboration. The lack of unguarded moments and the relative uniformity of the elite circles in which she moves, makes the film somewhat sterile, flat and lacking in conflict. But perhaps, that is the point. A different approach could have had the camera crew remaining in the background. Or, interviews could have been conducted in a more analytical manner. Perhaps these approaches could have provided a more nuanced perspective on her everyday life. But *Being prominent* shows Ibu Mooryati as she would like to see herself. As such, the viewer is given a first-hand experience of how she performs her authority – in this case, over the camera crew and over the viewer.

Performances, however, presents a greater opportunity for the viewer to derive meaning from the film. The film is fragmentary, questioning and postulating: it presents kinds of 'performances of authority' as practiced in everyday life in Indonesia. These range from the selected location for the new regional offices in Payakumbuh, the provision of security on the streets of Jakarta, the collection of small fees from bus drivers in Delanggu, the singing of the national anthem in Sintang and the attitudes of civil servants in Northern Maluku province.

The film is narrated through a multiplicity of voices, all representing different power structures. Interviews are carried out with both the disenfranchising and the disenfranchised. In Bintan Buyu, a narrative is given by a worker involved in the construction of a new office building, in which he speaks of corruption and malpractice. The film then cuts to an interview with a resident who is about to be removed from his property against his will and with little prospect of being appropriately reimbursed for his loss.

Authority, the film shows, is performed in many ways and by many actors. The film is not an exhaustive collection of all kinds of 'performances of authority' from the *RtF* archive; rather, it provides a model for ways in which the archives can be read.

Authority is performed through architecture, through uniforms, through body language, through paying protection money, through sitting around and guarding a foreign government representative's house. The interview with Mas Manca, a local tough guy (*preman*) in Pasar Baru, came about after he inquired as to what the crew were doing. His interview was both a skilful act to ingratiate themselves with the local and informal authority and also gave an insight into the way a local *preman* seeks to imagine his role amongst his community and how he seeks to imagine his identity. Mas Manca's manner of delivery, however, stands out from other encounters in the film – where he is smiling and opening up to the camera, others appear defensive and restrained in their comments; this is particularly evident in the "timer's" interview in Payakumbuh, when he whispers in reference to his semi-illegal role.

While *Being prominent* appears as the more complete and polished film, *Performances* raises more telling questions: it cuts closer to actual conflicts between different performers of authority and those who may or may not be the subjects of this authority. Indeed, there are moments when some of its subjects are either caught off-guard or in somewhat compromised situations. Some encounters between civil servant teachers and the candidates of civil service are particularly fraught; but is the bullying of one candidate strengthened by the presence of the camera – and the fact that the footage is being watched out of context? Elsewhere, a policeman responds in a confused manner to the interviewer's questioning. This policeman is shown to be compromised and unsure of how to articulate what his work entails (*antisipasi*). This provides a moment of humour and the viewer can ask: is one laughing at an individual, or is one laughing at a caricature of a representative of authority and power in Indonesia?

Being prominent, on the other hand, doesn't contain the practical dilemmas of *Performances*, for it is made in collaboration with Ibu Mooryati. The two films, each with their own set of questions about both authority and ways of documenting and filming, provide stimulating portraits of everyday life in Indonesia. They present audiovisual analyses and narratives that counter the overwhelming majority of written texts on studies of contemporary Indonesia. Moreover, the critical aspect of KITLV's *Recording the Future* project becomes apparent in these films.

This review is based on preview editions of the two films. Some minor details of the films may have been changed in the final stages of editing prior to the films' public release in December 2011.

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1 Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies; www.kitlv.nl

2 See <http://www.kitlv.nl/home/Projects?id=20>

these years in ways which have eluded the gaze of traditional diplomatic historians, but which structured the choices, dreams, and possibilities perceived by Southeast Asians and Europeans.' (p. 13) But she seems to have eluded the diplomatic historians, and indeed missed some of the contributions they have made even to her topic.

Parts of her case are thus made to appear more novel than they really are. '(S)cholars rarely know, let alone consider the implications of, the fact that from about 1910 the United States was the key recipient of exports from British Malaya, and in most years from the Netherlands Indies.' (p. 185n.) Surely it is widely known among scholars of the region at least. They also know of the low-level intelligence contacts among the governments of the region, well discussed in Chapter One. More might have been said of Quezon's ambivalence over the prospects for an independent Philippines. The 'diplomatic historians' offer evidence of his hopes of protection from the British Commonwealth and of the concern of the British that they might be burdened with an additional responsibility.

Foster looks rather to the 'power' represented by US trade and investment, focused mainly on oil and rubber, and thus largely on the Indies. She also discusses the penetration of American consumer goods and American movies. What their impact was remains unclear. Scholars of popular culture suggest that audiences and individuals in audiences react in ways not expected by the auteurs. The author relates a nice story of a French traveller who finds montagnards watching their first Chaplin. They found none of his antics at all amusing, but laughed uproariously at the 'young heroine ... weeping glycerin tears'. (p. 96)

In such cases assessing impact is certainly problematic. Here indeed the argument seems least well supported. Foster has read widely and explored unusual sources.

But too often she makes statements or extrapolations that seem to have no clear basis just when they most need them. 'Americans touted the benefits of American cultural products for Southeast Asia. ...they believed that American cultural influence produced modernity. But equally important, many Americans believed that if Southeast Asians did develop along this American path, these Southeast Asians would evolve, perhaps slowly but steadily, into people deserving of self-rule.' (p. 74) The backing for such generalisations seems insufficient. Some of it comes from consular reports. Whether that justifies talking of 'Americans' or 'many Americans' seems doubtful. Those phrases appear too often.

A review often terminates with what some see as nit-picking. Penultimately, this reviewer finds that Foster has created a governor-general of the Straits Settlements (pp. 32, 98), and put Sir George Grindle in the Foreign Office (p. 66). Patrons could stay as long as they wished in Malayan cinemas, she notes, and so four-hour shows 'closely approximated the length of traditional entertainments' (p. 101). But the practice of sitting through long shows was true in Britain, too: in the reviewer's remote youth, a ticket would allow you to stay as long as you liked, and see the A or B movie a second time should you wish.

Ultimately, he has to conclude that he was stimulated by the book, but also irritated. And the reason was rather fundamental. The author's case has been exaggerated rather than made.

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