This short book discusses what Shakespeare’s Hamlet [Act 4, Scene 4] might have termed ‘an egg-shell’, something small over which armies of ‘mass and charge’ might contend. But nationalism has made frontiers an even more sensitive matter than in the great playwright’s time, and the popularisation of politics can conduce to outright conflict. The tussle between Thailand and Cambodia over the temple of Preah Vihear – which led to some loss of life, notably in 2011 – is a case in point. As Dr Puangthong R. Pawakapan suggests, it raises other issues too, given, for example, the fact that the two countries are members of ASEAN and that the regional organization is aiming to make itself more people-centred.

Nicholas Tarling


Geopolitics of energy

Secure oil and alternative energy is the second and last volume coming out of a research project shared by the KNAW and the Chinese Academy of Sciences respectively. In their introduction, the editors argue that shared interests of China and the EU create conditions for cooperation between these large energy importers and point to the obstacles to overcome.

Henk Houweling


THE WORK DIVIDES its 13 articles into two parts, respectively entitled “Geopolitics, geo-economy and energy” and “Renewable energy and sustainable development”. The papers are written by specialists, often drawing from their ongoing research, yet address a larger audience. The editors have cast their net wide. At the regional level, Cutler and Umbach each focus on Caspian-Central Eurasian energy, though from a different perspective, while Sun Hongbo studies energy linkages between China and Latin America with the focus on Venezuela. The work has three chapters on Iran as foreign policy actor and oil exporter. At the national level, Ruelk reports on elite change and its impact on the foreign policy orientation of Iran since the presidency of Ahmadinejad. Yu Guoqing studies Chinese – Iranian relations since the conclusion of the 1942 Friendship Treaty between Persia and the Kuomintang government. Currently, Iran is a substantial oil supplier to China. Unlike China, Japanese – Iranian relations, studied by Raquel Shauli, are severely constrained by Japan’s alliance with the US. Despite America’s inability to supply oil to Japan, its government has duly supported US sanctions on Iran since 2005. Zhao Huining and Wu Hongwei follow up the theme of Umbach and Cutler with a case study of Chinese – Kazakh bilateral political economy of oil and gas deals, competing with the geo-political interests of particularly Russia. Chen Mo, reflecting on the long bilateral relations between China and Angola, writes on the current exchange relation between them of oil for infrastructure. In the 1970s, Chinese-Russian competition in Angola landed China on the same side as the US, both supporting UNITA of Savimbi.

Clean energy

Part two, on clean energy, comprises five chapters, four of which are at the national level. Scholten writes on green innovation, Li Xiaoxia studies the Chinese solar energy sector; Lima reports on biofuel developments in Brazil and its contested sustainability. Veermeier investigates causes of the slowing down of the hydro-energy projects announced in the 2008 National Development and Reform Commission’s plan. Hydropower is the largest source of efficient renewable energy. He finds that the 2007 change from high to low electricity prices, affecting investor’s rate of return, is one cause; the fragmented policy making machinery, driven by conflicting national and provincial actor interest, resettlement costs and concerns about responses to environmental impacts of the often large projects, are part of the equation. At the same time solar and wind energy equipment producers pressure for the expansion of their business. The recent trade conflict between the EU and China about solar panel subsidies testifies to the link-up between the industry and the Chinese government. The disappointment expressed by the US for the EU’s compromise with China, highlights the global importance of solar...
Engaging the spirit world

As the contributions to this collection rekindled my early experiences ‘in the field’, reading through the ten chapters of *Engaging the Spirit World* was great fun. As the greenhorn I was, I laughed at my initial encounter with ‘spirits’ (phi) in Thailand, which so upset my girlfriend that she slapped me in the face. It spilled the end to my fun. I not only learned to take beliefs seriously – whether western, eastern, religious, or political – but also to realise that for the believers concerned these represented their living experience. In that sense, beliefs are as tangible as a bowl of rice and have to be explored concretely before we, ‘servants of science’, put any ‘theoretical’ à priori on top of them.

Niels Mulder


IN SEVERAL EARLY CHAPTERS of the collection, researchers apparently struggled with the above caveat. Rather belatedly, they discovered that ‘modernisation theory’ about disenchantment, rationalisation, and its supposed correspondence with capitalism consisted of heaps of untenable hypotheses. This I experienced on Java while doing research among sophisticated man-made theories of interactions in the late 1960s. To them, the practice of mysticism or the development of the secretive ‘inner man’ (kebatinan) was at least as real as their Dutch taught ‘rationality’. It spilled my escape from the intellectual straight-jacket of high-flown ivory tower assumptions. I realised that the world is an enchanted place, with or without religion. Imagine the desert that life would be without fantasy and art, without dreaming and making love. We simply need these spaces. Besides, don’t most people in this world take the existence of an esoteric double – their soul – for granted?

The intention of the book is to illuminate the wider context of the contemporary dynamics of religion in South-East Asia. The flourishing of religion, urban medium-ship, the worship of ancestors, heroes and deities, and the need to appease hosts of unfilled lives/souls evoked by unrecognised American barbarian in Vietnam – with which the editors are most familiar – led to inviting the contributors to the collection to relate and reflect on their research in Laos, on the Indonesian islands of Lombok and Java, in Vietnam, Korea, Malaysia, Burma, Southern Thailand, and on Thai ghost films-cum-horror movies.

The contributors’ contemporary engage-ments with the world of spirits, ghosts and ancestors, most contributors bend over backwards to offer insights and fresh interpretations that seek to contribute to the theoretical discussion of the relationship between religion and modernity. To their credit, all of them take the phenomena they encounter ‘in the field’ seriously and engage with these as the point of departure for building ‘grounded theory’.

Writing the last sentence made me conscious of the database of my earlier publication, as the ideas of phenomenology and grounded theory simply do not occur in the collection. The various researchers make an ‘ontological approach’ to their subject matter – which is fine by me – while proposing that modernity does not equate with the western ideal type of it. As a result, authors recommend ‘alternative modernities’ that assume their own characteristics depart from the modernity that in which they originate. Next to this, they recognise that the idea of the autonomous individual is an inapplicable construct to elucidate Southeast Asian personality. Life and self-definition thereafter are strongly relational1 and may make us aware that modern westerners are not such lonely monads, either.

A delightful observation professed is the idea that spirits and all the beliefs that surround them are pleasan-fy, whereby they do not escape from the wide realm of religion, they are impervious to dogma and doctrine. As a result, a new accommodation is proposed to any circumstance and practice of modern life. So, as we study them, we should be aware that they are in step with contemporary existence, which seems to me a rather basic field-anthropological assumption. The book is composed with the expectation to contribute to the

Engaging the Spirit World

Potential areas of cooperation

What to make of this vast and multi-authored study?

The editors of the work under review hint to potential areas of cooperation between these two large energy importers. However, this theme does not figure explicitly in the work. I find that unfortunate. Relations between domestic growth and international conflict about raw materials got, and still get, most of the scholarly attention. Take for example the still influential study of Nazli Choucri and Robert C. North, *Nations in conflict. National growth and international violence*. San Francisco: Freeman (1975). They developed a model, and tested its observable implications empirically, for the era of Europe’s second industrial revolution annex competitive colonization drive. They found strong linkages between and among the expansion of industry in western European countries, domestic pressures to go beyond borders to get access to resources, conflicting claims on territory and maritime trade routes, alliance activity, military build-ups and militarized inter-state disputes. National level rival mobilizations around these conflicts were not mediated by parliament, leading to rallies and clashes between large, organized sectors of the domestic economy. These domestic contests played role in conflict escalation. The editors of the work under review take exception to the inevitability of a repetition of such a development. They hint to potential areas of cooperation between these two large energy importers. For many, turning around the causal linkage between growing resource use from conflict towards cooperation instead, may come as a surprise. Why? According to the middle-income, China is urbanizing its vast peasant population at an unprecedented rate. These low per capita energy consum-ers in the most populous country of the world used to depend on biomass for cooking and heating. Bringing these people to an urban environment will increase their per capita fossil energy consumption, which interacts with food and water supplies as well as emissions. Accordingly, it should not come as a surprise that China is destined to pass the US as the largest oil-importer in the next couple of years, increasing its still relatively low per capita rate of consumption. High-income, highly urbanized Europe on the other hand, already operates on a high level of per capita fossil energy use. Indeed, World Energy Outlook 2010 estimates primary energy demand to increase by 30% between 2008-2035. As may be expected, most of that increase will come from Asian demand. In my opinion, these very characteristics of the Chinese versus European dyad do not do the only imply a potential for conflict. They also create a bargaining field for cooperation on the basis of shared interests. Chinese and European economies are connected through a dense network of trade, investment and transport linkages. It is in the EU’s interest to assist China further improving its energy efficiency in the fossil sector. It would slow down the rate of resource depletion when current oil exporters with high population growth are increasing their domestic consumption. Today, Saudi Arabia is the only exporter with an oil-surplus production capacity.

Another area of cooperation between China and the EU is the emerging clean energy sector. China and the European Union try to escape from the fossil-carbon emission trap by developing domestic sources of clean energy. If successful, developing domestic sources of clean energy should further reduce the level of lateral pressure in each of them to compete for access to sources beyond borders. The joint development of clean energy points to the shared long-term interest in viability of both societies in the face of climate change. In the European Union, international energy cooperation also serves the latent objective to contribute to the creation of energy policy competence at the EU-level, with the potential spin-off of for strengthening the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy.

Supported by, among others, the Chinese Academy and the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden, Aminneh and Yi Guo have currently underway a shared research project on the trans-nationalization of Chinese oil companies and their involvement with local governments and institutions. We are looking forward to seeing what is happening on the ground in several large energy exporting countries of Africa and Latin America.

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