

Introduction

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This volume is the second instalment of *Asian Review* vol. 32, which is an extended special issue celebrating the works involved in the Consortium for Southeast Asian Studies in Asia through the two international conferences, SEASIA 2015 in Kyoto, Japan and SEASIA 2017 in Bangkok, Thailand. The main theme of this instalment remains the same. There are three articles and a book review which have been selected for the Asian perspectives they provide as an alternative to the American-centric Cold War narrative that has dominated much of the area studies of Asia since the conclusion of the Second World War.

The first article, “An analysis of the constraining factors on the Greater Mekong Subregion cooperation: A case-study of the Kunming-Bangkok Channel” by Zhao Shulan, explores the difficulties involved in the construction of high-speed connectivity between China and the Greater Mekong Sub-region through the Kunming-Bangkok Channel. This mega project, which is supposed to originate in the southern city of Kunming, the People’s Republic of China, and pass through the northern part of Laos and end at the ports of Bangkok, Thailand, leading to further connectivity both by sea and by land to the rest of Southeast Asia, has been in the making since the late-1980s. Yet, it has suffered many socio-economic and political obstacles through the last decades of the 20th century and remains unfinished up to the present day, even though the Chinese president Xi Jinping’s inauguration of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 seemed to have breathed new life into this long stalled project. Zhao Shulan provides a thorough and novel analysis on the challenges and opportunities involved in achieving this long-awaited project of connectivity. What are the possibilities and ways through which close Southeast Asian neighbors, such as Laos and Thailand, could successfully incorporate their developmental policies into China’s BRI grand scheme without

putting themselves in too much of a disadvantageous position? Could the rise of China in the 21st century be managed as a win-win situation for close ASEAN neighbors as well?

The second article, “The urban development of Phnom Penh: “A happy garden with ever bright sun” by Christina Warning, also looks at the difficult negotiations, conflicts and compromises between economic development and social equality in the context of the vast expansion of PRC capital into mainland Southeast Asia—in this case, to the capital city of Cambodia, Phnom Penh. Warning’s article presents, in stark comparison, the two most disruptive cases of mass eviction in the modern history of the city of Phnom Penh—first, that of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1975, and second those undertaken for the city’s land and housing development projects in the 2000s. While both cases were significantly influenced by various forces from the People’s Republic of China and resulted in the displacement of thousands of urban families, the ideology behind the two cases as well as the regional and global political and economic contexts surrounding them differ significantly. The Khmer Rouge regime was strongly inspired by the Maoist extremism of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in the PRC while much of the capital behind the development projects of Phnom Penh in the 21st century came from China under the socialist market economy that has flourished since Deng Xiaoping introduced his radical “Reform and Openness” policies since the late-1970s. The first case was a classic example of the Cold War in Asia. The latter is one of the most outstanding examples of PRC capitalist influence in Southeast Asia in the post-Cold War. Yet the impact of these two mass evictions on the inner city communities of Phnom Penh appear to be not drastically different. This article poses important questions related to the transformation—or lack thereof—of the relationship between Southeast Asian regimes and the PRC from the Cold War period up to the present day. What are the different challenges in dealing with China as a Maoist superpower and a post-Cold War capitalistic superpower? How might small developing countries in Southeast Asia, such as Cambodia, deal with the seemingly unchanged power relations in the vastly different context of the globalized world?

The third article, “A short history of the transformation of ethnic Chinese organizations in Thailand: From seditious secret societies to patriotic cultural NGOs” by Zhang Ying and Wasana Wongsurawat,

investigates the transformation of ethnic Chinese organizations in Thailand from the 19th century to the present day, a process which mirrors, quite intriguingly, the development of Sino-Thai relations from the colonial era to the post-Cold War. Ethnic Chinese organizations have long served as an important medium between the states of China and Thailand. They have been widely active both as agents of trade and negotiators of political conflicts, alliances, and influences. They have had their fair share of conflicts with both the Chinese and Thai state through the tumultuous transformations of regional and global political contexts—from the height of the colonial era, through the Cold War and up to the present era of globalization. The history of the transformation of ethnic Chinese organization in Thailand provides an interesting case-study of how Chinese diaspora groups could continue to serve as an important cultural link between China and Southeast Asia even through drastically changed political circumstances from the 19th to 21st century. The case-study of the seemingly successful integration of ethnic Chinese organization into the Thai national narrative and the ethnic Chinese community into the greater Thai national community could provide an interesting—and perhaps even useful—reflection of the possibilities that Thailand and her Southeast Asian neighbors might be able to integrate and benefit from the grand scheme of transnational Chinese economic and political network of the Belt and Road Initiative of post-Cold War Asia as well. Might it be possible for post-Cold War ASEAN members to learn to adjust their relationship with rising China of the 21st century as the ethnic Chinese organizations have learnt to adjust their relationship with the state—in this article, with China and Thailand in particular—so as to survive and flourish through the changing political and economic regional and global contexts?

Finally, the book review of Hiroko Matsuda's *Liminality of the Japanese Empire: Border Crossing from Okinawa to Colonial Taiwan* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2018) provides an interesting comparative backdrop of a brief era during which another Asian superpower established its hegemony across East and Southeast Asia. *Liminality of the Japanese Empire* challenges the mainstream definition of what the Japanese Empire was from the conclusion of the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, when Japan first acquire Formosa Island as its colony, to the conclusion of the Second World War. It also questions what

it meant to be Japanese vis-à-vis Okinawan and colonized subjects of Taiwan. Aside from the legal borders between empires, there were also recognized borders within the Japanese Empire. And even beyond those, there were invisible yet potent divisions between the so-called mainland Japanese and their Okinawan counterparts. In this book, Matsuda tells an intriguing narrative of the transformation of the Japanese Empire into the nation-state of Japan in the postwar years and how that affected Japan former colonies, both Taiwan, which gained problematic sovereignty through the Cold War period, and Okinawa, which remained within the Japanese nation, yet was constantly discriminated against. As we progress through the era of globalization towards the end of the second decade of the 21st century, post-Cold War trade and corporate empires appear to transcend the borders of nation-states and propel the world towards an era of capitalistic imperialism once again. There are interesting parallels to be drawn between the transformation of the Japanese Empire in the late-19th century to becoming a postwar nation-state in the mid-20th century and the transformation of China as a Maoist People's Republic to a globalized economic empire under Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative of the 21st century. How similar and how different are these two campaigns of "Asia for Asia," and how might they affect our understanding of basic concepts, such as, nation and sovereignty for smaller and developing neighbors in Southeast Asia? There is definitely much that Asia in the shadow of the BRI could learn from the history of the rise and fall of the Japanese Empire in the 20th century.

There is indeed a whole new horizon to discover from investigating Asia from the Asian perspective. Especially with the Cold War becoming part of the not-so-recent history and with China rising to challenge US hegemony in the 21st century, there is a serious need to reconsider old paradigms of area studies, which have long dominated the studies of Asia since the conclusion of the Second World War. With the collection of new scholarship presented in these articles and book review, perhaps we could help spark some interest and carry the investigation further to build a more critical and comprehensive understanding of Asia in the globalized world.