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Southeast Asian Warfare, 1300-1900

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Charney, Michael W.: *Southeast Asian Warfare, 1300-1900*, Handbook of Oriental Studies, Section Three: South-East Asia, Volume 16. (Leiden: Brill, 2004), xix + 319pp., €75.00, \$99.00. ISBN 90-04-14240-1.

Michael Charney's monograph on the tools, practices, and organisation of war in 'Southeast Asia' is only the second book-length treatment of pre-twentieth century warfare in the region. Drawing on the most recent scholarship and covering the early modern and modern periods, it is far more comprehensive than Quaritch Wales' seminal *Ancient South-East Asian Warfare* (1952).

The methodological challenges of covering such a diverse crossroads region over the course of six centuries are clearly laid out in Charney's introduction to the book's ten, mostly thematic, chapters. Chapter One identifies bravery in battle, beliefs in invulnerability, and the spiritual importance of women as among the common cultural underpinnings of warfare in Southeast Asia. It also refutes the thesis that the region's low population density led to lower casualty rates than in Europe. This chapter is usefully contrasted with chapters Nine and Ten, which cover the socio-political organisation of war.

The next four chapters (2 to 5) deal with what I would consider as the 'inanimate' hardware of war. They add significantly to our comparative knowledge of Southeast Asian warfare, as the early use of firearms, or the importance of siege or riverine warfare have until recently been neglected. Chapter Two hence introduces us to a wide range of close-range weapons and their battle-field use. In contrast to these personal weapons, access to firearms (ch. 3) was jealously guarded by the courts and usually only

made available to elite warriors and standing forces rather than to the majority of seasonally levied rural forces.

Chapters Four and Five present us with the military hardware used on land to create or break fortifications, and that used on water for maritime and riverine combat. Charney calls them 'mass warfare' weapons because their construction and deployment required co-ordination and tactics. The prevalence of sieges also counters the preponderant historiographical view that 'flight' rather than 'fight' and 'defence' dominated warfare.

The following four chapters explore the 'animate' hardware of war – animals (chs. 6-8) and human beings (ch. 9). The extensive coverage of animals in warfare is particularly refreshing as they have been generally absent in the literature on Southeast Asia.

Chapter Six pays exclusive attention to elephants, the most imposing and regal but also most sensitive of combat animals, while the next chapter focuses on horses and cavalry. The vital importance of the more lowly buffalo and ox for the logistics of war is emphasized in Chapter Eight, which further discusses the two-wheeled cart and the infrastructure of warfare.

Chapter Nine, finally, focuses exclusively on the soldiers rather than the tools at their disposal and introduces us to a world of palatial guards, foreign mercenaries, elite warriors and peasant conscripts. It is clear by here that Charney is primarily concerned with warfare between state-like polities rather than headhunting or raiding societies. Even the larger and more bureaucratic states had problems in maintaining more than a core of permanent troops, though the Vietnamese, Thai, and Burmese invented rotational systems to overcome seasonal limitations imposed by the monsoons,

agricultural cycles, and the weak tax base of predominantly subsistence-based economies.

The fateful 19th century encounter of Western with Southeast Asian warfare is the subject of Chapter Ten. Ironically, as argued by Charney, attempts to westernize local armies without parallel societal and attitudinal changes may have distracted from the potential of decentralized guerilla struggle. Coupled with the long-term decline of local elephantry and cavalry, inadequate weapons production capacities, and insufficient elite cohesion, this played into the hands of the Western powers. Powered by steam, the latter were now capable and willing to assert themselves inland and upriver rather than being content with controlling trade or saving souls. By 1910, all of Southeast Asia, bar Siam, was disarmed and intra-regional and civil warfare had been ended. This came at the price of foreign rule and vulnerability against foreign powers, for the newly created colonial armed forces existed primarily for policing rather than warring purposes.

Southeast Asian Warfare is well and engagingly written and offers the right combination of evidence and synthesis to give the reader a vivid impression of the perennial and changing patterns of warfare in the region. The extensive treatment of the inanimate and animate tools of war makes the battlefield come alive and significantly adds to our comparative knowledge. Charney's thematic focus on the military hardware does not prevent him from making a substantial contribution to our understanding of the 'soft' and organisational aspects of Southeast Asian warfare, though he readily admits that scope for more society-centred studies remains (p. 213).

However, the book's vast scope also presents a potential weakness. Hence experts of this period or that polity are likely to find the occasional error and omission. The French oil spot pacification technique in Tonkin, for instance, was pioneered by Pennequin rather than Gallieni. It is also regrettable that women disappear from this book after the opening chapter, despite female political leadership and the practice of some courts to employ female bodyguards.

Charney, a Burma specialist, has generally tackled well the problems inherent in writing on 'Southeast Asia' by carefully balancing his coverage of mainland and archipelagic warring practices. At times it could have been even more nuanced, as the author's claim that 'frenzied attacks' were an important feature of Southeast Asian warfare (p. 11) is not substantiated by sole reference to the Malay world.

On the formal side, the text is favourably complemented by 12 illustrations and photos each, while the 26-page bibliography and in particular the 10-page index make it user-friendly. However, several dozen spelling mistakes, unclear maps in the appendix and the rather confusing logo adorning the front cover slightly mar the overall good impression.

These minor issues notwithstanding, Michael Charney's *Southeast Asian Warfare* is a major contribution to the previously neglected military history of this crossroads region. It is a highly useful reference work to be recommended for under- and postgraduate courses in Southeast Asian and comparative military history, and a stimulating and rich source for scholars working in these fields.

Tobias Rettig

