

Book Review

Southeast Asia in Global Context: A Historical Perspective

By Prima Nurahmi

Victor Lieberman. 2003. *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830, Volume I: Integration on the Mainland*, New York: Cambridge University Press. pp. xxiii, 484.

Victor Lieberman. 2009. *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830, Volume II: Mainland: Europe, China, South Asia and the Islands*, New York: Cambridge University Press. pp. xxvi, 976.

Victor Lieberman's *Strange Parallels* aims to discuss the history of Southeast Asia by reflecting the region's historical experience in the discourse of world history. By doing so, he compares the different realms of the Eurasian continents from c. 800 to c. 1830. He demonstrates that these realms share common characteristics and phases in the administrative integration and disintegration that progressively synchronize during this time period. Addressing the under-represented Southeast Asian historiography, he wants to initially reconceptualise the region's past, incorporating it with the thousand year Eurasian history. He observes, anyway, the marginalisation of Southeast Asian history in the global historical context.

Distinguished by various types of early civilization, domination of Inner Asian conquest, and scale of empire, Lieberman divides the region under review into two moderately distinctive models, the "protected realms" and "the exposed realms". By definition, the "protected realms" refers to the zones that were not occupied by inner Asian conquest while "exposed realms" refers to the zone directly influenced by inner Asian conquest.

In volume one, he explains territorial consolidation in Mainland Southeast Asia. Burma, Siam and Vietnam for instance, share a similar historical progress, despite of the assorted impetus and divergent chronologies in respective events. Lieberman rejects Anthony Reid's argument of maritime commerce¹ especially "Seventeenth Century Crisis" in the case of mainland Southeast Asia and further elaborates that mainland Southeast Asia should not consider as part of the insular Southeast Asia, where maritime networks played a large role. Being a specialist in Burmese history, Lieberman elucidates that besides the international trade that historian focuses on, the politico-economic

1 See Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce Vol. 2 : Expansion and Crisis*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.

integration of mainland Southeast Asia was spurred also by local agricultural development and domestic factors.

In volume two, chapter two to four, he focuses on France, Russia and Japan. He believes that these “realms” share numerous similarities in developmental features with mainland Southeast Asia. There is integration in administration systems, and acceleration in economic and culture developments in the early modern era. Here, he finds the phenomenon of *Idiosyncrasies* among the realms. One example is the period of 1600-1830, the most peaceful period in Japan due to the isolation of Tokugawa shogunate. In contrast to other regions under review, that period is seen as the most expensive time in which some military campaigns were held. In chapter five and six he talks about China and South Asia as “exposed realms” where political life during the second millennium was an extent, dominated by nomads invading from inner Asia. Cavalry, archery and military techniques were crucial in conquering these areas.

The last chapter of volume two deals with insular Southeast Asia. The history of these territories shared a common past with mainland Southeast Asia until the seventeenth century onwards. European intervention and later colonialism were in some ways similar to what he discusses in China and South Asia. They, owing to their naval technology and desires for spices, came to dominate the region. Lieberman ends his discussion around the year of 1830. According to him, the circumstances among these regions varied after this period. Late 1800s, he observes the period of industrialization in Japan, following Meiji Restoration. On the contrary to Southeast Asia where, not to mention Thailand, all regions were colonized by Europeans.

Lieberman provides several variables of integration. They are territorial consolidation, administrative centralization, cultural and ethnic integration, military, economic growth, the spread of literacy, and commercial intensification, in which he elaborates to explain his invented word, “strange parallel”. According to the model, each of the mainland Southeast Asia polities, Russia, France, Japan, China, South and West Asia as well as Island Southeast Asia, underwent parallel periods of administrative integration and disintegration. Between, c.800-1300, all realms experienced what he calls, in his own words, “charter states”. This phase was marked by grand monumental architecture such as Notredame in Paris, Angkor Wat in Cambodia, Borobudur and Prambanan in Java. Later period, 1300-1400, the charter states fragmented to integrate again in the mid 1400, except Japan which had the only longest period of interregna which called *Sengoku*. In the mid-late of 1500s, these consolidations collapsed again and got integrated only in the late 1500s – early 1600s as we see Tokugawa, Bourbon, Romanovs, Mataram, Qing, Mughal, Restored Toungoo, Ayutthaya.

In conclusion, he insists that the same factors which stimulated integration in “protected realms” also encouraged integration in the “exposed realms”.

Although each realm endures its own internal variables, thus in other words, it is neither so parallel nor so strange but all are comparable. Besides, they were also connected by at least three external variables, climatic-demographic change associated with Medieval Climatic Anomaly, firearms technology, and maritime trade. In the other hand, he is too against assumption that his idea opposes to European exceptionalism.

Lieberman read so many reading materials, mostly secondary sources, to conduct his remarkable research that his description of the whole book is admirably detailed. Unfortunately, he does not include the role of prominent figures behind the integration. Indeed, he mentions Agung of Mataram, Anawrahta of Pagan, Bayinnaung of Toungoo, Asoka of Maurya, Tokugawa of Japan, Allaungpaya of Konbaung and others, as the leading actors of centralization, but he does not mention any further how the rulers consolidated and maintained their unification. He also sometimes rather imposes his opinions particularly in view of idiosyncrasies, though most of his readers would not see this as a weakness. JM Romein, an expert of theoretical history, says "notwithstanding this uniqueness it could be fruitful to compare historical phenomena with one another, differences being eventually as instructive as resemblances."²

From time to time, Southeast Asian historiography develops gradually. The change was not only a matter of perspective, but also in the methodology.³ One may familiar with euro-centrism, autonomous history and total history. Commonly few historians, unlike social scientists, use comparison for their approach. Lieberman's approach of comparative studies, therefore, is a great contribution to enrich methodology. Still one may ask, either how reliable his case studies regarding to his preferences of region are, or to what extent this model suit to explain another parallel in world history? Yet, in short, nevertheless, his model of Eurasian region dynamics presents, positively, a new analytical method to promote comparative studies in Southeast Asian History. He, at once, offends Romein's statement of historian's reluctance to do the comparative approach.⁴ Through *Strange Parallels*, Victor Lieberman does his mission repositioning Southeast Asia in the stage of World History.●

2 J.M Romein, "The Significance of the Comparative Approach in Asian Historiography", in Soedjatmoko (ed). 2007. *An Introduction of Indonesian Historiography*. (Jakarta: Equinox Publishing) p.381.

3 John Legge, "Southeast Asian History and the Social Sciences" in C.D Cowan and O.W Wolters. 1976. *Southeast Asian History and Historiography : Essays Presented to D.G.E Hall* (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1976) p.389.

4 J.M Romein, *op.cit.*, p.380

TENTANG PARA PENULIS

Ahmat Mustofa adalah Alumnus University of Queensland Australia dan sekarang bekerja pada INFID (International NGO Forum on Indonesian Development), Jakarta.

Ekoningtyas Margu Wardani adalah peneliti pada Pusat Studi Asia Pasifik, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta dan Fellow Asia Public Intellectuals 2008-2009.

Khairu Roojiqien Sobandi adalah dosen pada Jurusan Ilmu Politik, Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik, Universitas Jenderal Soedirman, Purwokerto.

Ulii Amri adalah peneliti pada Pusat Penelitian Sumber Daya Regional-Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia (PSDR-LIPI), Jakarta.

Herman Hidayat adalah peneliti senior pada Pusat Penelitian Masyarakat dan Kebudayaan-Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia (PMB-LIPI). Dia mendapat gelar doktor dari The University of Tokyo (2005). Publikasi utamanya antara lain: *Pulp and Paper Industries in Japan and Indonesia* (IDE-JETRO, 2007); *Review on Illegal Logging from the Soeharto Regime until Autonomy Era* (Penduduk dan Pembangunan Journal, 2008); *National Park Management in Local Autonomy: A Case Study of Tanjung Puting (Central Kalimantan)* (CSEAS-KYOTO & LIPI, 2007); *Foreign Workers in Japan: Problems and Challenges* (Manabu-UI, 2006); *In Search of Sustainable Plantation Forestry, Pulp and Paper in ASEAN: Political Ecology Analyses on Stakeholders* (2010) in CSEAS, Kyoto University.

Muhtar Habibi adalah peneliti pada Magister Administrasi Publik, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta.

Prima Nurahmi adalah peneliti pada Pusat Penelitian Sumber Daya Regional-Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia (PSDR-LIPI), Jakarta.