

Editorial Foreword

Introduction: The greening of Southeast Asian history

If the change in the contemporary scene is extreme and rapid, we may speak of a crisis in historiography. This is the case with the present-day history of Southeast Asia, where the past forty or fifty years have seen great changes in social and cultural climate and the past fifteen years or less even greater changes in political structure with the rise of new and sovereign states where before there were colonies.

John R.W. Smail, 1961¹

Hey, hey Woody Guthrie, I wrote you a song
 'Bout a funny ol' world that's a-comin' along
 Seems sick and it's hungry, it's tired and it's torn
 It looks like it's a-dyin' and it's hardly been born

Bob Dylan, 1961²

For historians of Southeast Asia, John Smail's essay 'On the possibility of an autonomous history of modern Southeast Asia', published in this Journal's second year in 1961, was important for its novel critique of a Eurocentric 'angle of vision' that undergirded much of the literature at the time. Smail reminded his readers of a Dutch colonial historian of the 1930s, J.C. van Leur, who likewise challenged colonial perspectives on the 'Indies', arguing that Dutch colonial expansion was *not* the defining feature of history in the archipelago, at least before the transformations wrought by industrial changes in the 1800s. Van Leur claimed that his countrymen were of 'limited political significance' to the millions of people living across this vast expanse of islands, and Smail highlighted Van Leur's work to posit a similar challenge for historians in the 1960s. He urged readers to reconsider history in Southeast Asia from the perspectives of Asian 'others' who had so often appeared as minor characters in European accounts, as rulers, traders and people working just outside the

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1 John R.W. Smail, 'On the possibility of an autonomous history of modern Southeast Asia', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 2, 2 (1961): 72–102.

2 Bob Dylan, 'Song to Woody', recorded 20–22 Nov. 1961; *Bob Dylan*, Columbia Records, 1962.

gunwales and balustrades of colonial operations. Since Smail's essay and the founding of this Journal, several generations of scholars have advanced this decentring perspective far beyond its initial scope, establishing postcolonial studies as an important field in the history of Southeast Asia.³

I return to Smail's essay not for his critique of colonialism but to reflect on the 'crisis of historiography' that he described, for today we find ourselves in a different 'crisis' with a world in the grip of a pandemic where disease, natural disasters, and climate change are combining to fatally undermine, much like industrialisation and revolutionary ideologies had done in Smail's time, a political ecology long accepted as 'natural'. In 1961, few people questioned the industrial and scientific revolutions that helped colonial and postcolonial states transform remote environments and reconfigure everyday life over much of the region. Edifices of colonial governance in 1945 such as hill stations and European-language schools may have dissolved in the flames of revolution or via semantic erasures with post-revolutionary name changes; but the colonial world of plantations, extractive industries and urban centres had, to paraphrase Dylan in 1961, 'hardly been born'. Sukarno's Indonesian Republic had not yet succumbed to the bloodshed of Suharto's 1965 coup. The Vietnam War had not yet caused millions of deaths and widespread destruction in Indochina. Singapore was not yet an independent state nor a global financial centre.

However, the forms of industrial capitalism that Smail and Van Leur identified as causes for the erosion of economic and cultural 'autonomy' in the 1800s rapidly expanded after 1960. The Green Revolution boosted agricultural yields and replaced thousands of rice cultivars developed over centuries with a handful of high-yielding varieties that, with industrial fertilisers and pesticides, doubled and tripled output. Two colonial imports, the Amazonian rubber tree (*Hevea brasiliensis*) and the West African oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*), multiplied with help from national governments and multinational corporations, now cover millions of hectares of former coastal and upland forest land, replacing them with monocultures. Transnational corporations and international development banks funded new infrastructure such as highways and dams along with commercial ventures in textiles, mining, agriculture, energy and electronics. The end of the Cold War in the 1990s brought more regional integration as Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia joined this surge in foreign direct investment and export-oriented development under a policy of market-oriented Socialism. Within about a decade after 1961, a majority of people living in Southeast Asia transitioned from a reliance on animal-, foot- and oar-power to fossil fuel-powered cars, mopeds, buses and boats. Today a majority of Southeast Asians live in cities and work in urban and industrial settings. Their material lives and popular cultures reflect increasingly urban, industrial experiences and their personal histories are intertwined with global travels and transnational connections.

3 Laurie Sears' Introduction and the collection of essays written in honour of Smail in *Autonomous histories, particular truths*, provide an especially rich account of the formation of postcolonial studies in Southeast Asian scholarship, noting how Smail's decentring effort was eventually eclipsed by newer works focusing on what Sears calls 'negotiated knowledges and situated truths' (p. 17). See Laurie J. Sears, ed., *Autonomous histories, particular truths: Essays in honor of John Smail* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1993).

This urban-industrial Southeast Asia rests, like much of the world, on an energy regime of fossil fuels, what Lewis Mumford in 1934 called carboniferous capitalism. Fossil fuels, first coal and then petroleum, helped colonial governments physically power colonial economies and thus helped a handful of colonial officials reign over millions of mostly rural people for some fifty years. After the Second World War, the proliferation of cheap engines and the widespread adoption of surplus equipment helped power an economic boom that, after a series of anticolonial struggles, benefited new national governments. Meanwhile, this postcolonial wave of industrialisation further planted the seeds of a developing climate crisis. Few historians today still read Mumford, but like Smail and Van Leur his words bear reading for their prescience on the metabolic and political rifts caused by this switch from living to fossil fuels:

In the economy of the earth, the large-scale opening up of coal seams meant that industry was beginning to live for the first time on an accumulation of potential energy, derived from the ferns of the carboniferous period, instead of upon current income. In the abstract, mankind entered into the possession of a capital inheritance more splendid than all the wealth of the Indies; for even at the present rate of use it has been calculated that the present known supplies would last for three thousand years.⁴

‘More splendid than all the wealth of the Indies!’ Mumford probably did not anticipate that Indonesia would in time become the world’s second largest exporter of coal, but here we see an anticipation of the political and cultural effects that this *metabolic* shift unleashed.

Karl Marx, writing at the British Library in the 1850s, witnessed it first-hand in Europe, and he described it as an unprecedented ‘rift’ forming between town and country.⁵ A similar cultural and political rift emerged between colonial outposts and villages in Southeast Asia from the mid-1800s as a growing network of coaling stations, railroads, steamships, electric lines and telegraph stations produced cities out of swamps and convinced many a budding nationalist that the future required wholesale adoption of this new regime and the Western know-how to sustain it. By the 1920s, younger nationalists largely dismissed traditional models of kingship and authority and instead promoted this spread of Western know-how in vernacular education and technical schools. Sukarno, a civil engineer trained at the Bandung Institute of Technology, was a model nationalist in this respect.

Today’s environmental crisis for historians concerns not so much the charting of such environmental problems, accounting for the spread of new technologies or episodes of ‘decline’, but more how historians now and in the future will develop narrative frameworks that allow for unexpected environmental events, following novel biological and cultural ‘transmutations’ that link humans with various other species and inevitably link contemporary life with certain pasts. Author and anthropologist Amitav Ghosh tackles this problem of accommodating strange, ‘uncanny’ events in literature in *The great derangement*, noting major difficulties that authors face in

4 Lewis Mumford, *The future of technics and civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1934), p. 157.

5 For a detailed exploration of this term, see Jason Moore, ‘Transcending the metabolic rift: Towards a theory of crises in the capitalist world-ecology’, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38, 1 (2011): 1–46.

shifting from conventional stories with ‘moral directions’ or a definite sense of linear progress. This sense of direction is less evident when so many ‘uncanny’ events such as powerful typhoons, pandemics and spring tides leave parts of our modern world uninhabitable, requiring salvage. This uncanniness, he argues, ‘lies precisely in the fact that in these encounters we recognise something we had turned away from: that is to say, the presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors’.⁶ Scholars, artists and politicians alike are coming round to this problem in an ‘environmental turn’, that there may not be a definitive next step for what our world is becoming. Some places might undergo de-industrialisation, weeds growing in the concrete and old ships becoming offshore reefs, while others have yet to become the peri-urban centres envisioned on planners’ maps. Nonhuman actors in this history pose special challenges for historians in the attempt to delineate agency; the ‘archives’ describing such non-human agents are invariably human-generated.

Anthropologists and geographers have perhaps made the most headway in theorising new, multi-species assemblages and eco-political frameworks for understanding life in a more precarious world; and these frameworks are of particular interest to historians. In *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*, anthropologist Anna Tsing addresses a core phenomenon of the nineteenth century, industrial capitalism, showing how even a political-economic system that historians have long understood through such abstract entities as commodities, labour and capital is nevertheless still deeply enmeshed in ecological processes that run beyond the boundaries of markets, factory floors, trade bulletins, and taxonomies. She terms processes where traders and factory owners rationalise and commercialise products derived from largely unknown, black-boxed ecological processes as ‘salvage accumulation’.⁷ The book is an ethnographic journey across two continents as Tsing traces social and ecological processes associated with one of the world’s most valuable mushrooms, from supermarkets and distribution centres to buyers and middlemen and mushroom hunting spots in Asian and American forests. Such a tracing of life forms, non-human events and ecological processes, following them into and out of human communities, has yet to really take hold in the historiography of Southeast Asia; but this idea of ‘salvage’ is particularly useful not only for describing the present but also the past.

The current environmental crisis begs a rethinking of frontiers and rifts and a decentring of historical perspectives from capital cities, railroads and forestry offices outward into ‘undeveloped’ back country. Recent studies, including many new historical works on Southeast Asia, have yet to fully take on episodes of environmental salvage as a central argument; but increasingly they are critiquing something largely unthinkable in 1961, the formation of knowledge systems, museums, zoos and especially gardens describing natural worlds and nonhuman life. Sixty years ago, botanists, geologists, agricultural engineers, naturalists, biologists and doctor-explorers had been for centuries the unchallenged authorities on Southeast Asian environments.

6 Amitav Ghosh, *The great derangement: Climate change and the unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 30.

7 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 63.

In the early twenty-first century, however, problems ranging from collapsing fisheries to sinking cities and unprecedented wildfires are prompting new looks at colonial science, and especially the broader histories of scientific knowledge production in Southeast Asia. There is also renewed attention to alternative ethical systems and indigenous cosmologies being re-purposed to understand current changes in weather, health, forests, fisheries, and soils.

Green perspectives in Southeast Asian history tend to challenge modern ideas of nature and especially rifts between traditional and modern environmental knowledge. Anthropologist Michael Dove and geographer Nancy Peluso have long challenged the pre-eminence of colonial, Western knowledge in their work, for instance, they both examine such terms as ‘dead lands’ and ‘wasteland’ as used by Western-trained foresters versus indigenous peoples.⁸ What a state forester views as ‘dead’ and thus economically worthless differs greatly in settings where local inhabitants often value the same lands for all manner of uses. Terms like ‘waste’ and ‘dead’ are not universally translatable, and it is in these spaces of different, contested meanings where historians might find alternative ‘life’ and ‘salvage’ events.

In this Introduction and the essays that follow, there is more than a nostalgic echo of Smail’s call to de-colonise Southeast Asian history. The industrial fabric of modern life that powers universities, prints journals and sends scholars to conferences has long rested on the colonisation of Earth’s fossilised and living energy sources. Becoming ‘carbon neutral’ or ‘sustainable’ for individuals as well as universities, cities and states requires radical shifts in perspective. Like revisionist histories of colonialism in Southeast Asia, we must reconsider invisible or undervalued factors important to the ‘making’ of history. Green history, like green politics, asks that historians expand their analyses to include not only relationships with other life forms and geological events, but also to consider new, hybrid and alternative perspectives.

Finally, a green ‘angle of perspective’ on Southeast Asian history might also include more critical attention to the period sixty years ago when Smail wrote his essay. John McNeil and Peter Engelke’s *The Great Acceleration: An environmental history of the Anthropocene since 1945*, provides accessible language and frameworks for making sense of the rapid environmental and political changes happening at that time.⁹ They introduce the concept of energy regimes and show how shifts from ‘somatic’ (living energy) to ‘paleotechnic’ (fossil-fuel energy) systems reconfigured forests and rural environments through such inventions as the chainsaw, petrochemical fertilisers and the bulldozer. The Great Acceleration refers not only to the material transformations wrought by this shift in energy sources and technologies, but also their political and cultural effects among many different peoples. Trends in Southeast Asia in the 1950s and 1960s sync very closely with the Global South in this period, where rapid upward curves in population growth, carbon emissions, urbanisation and energy consumption coincided with spikes in literacy, international tourism,

8 See Michael R. Dove, ‘Living rubber, dead land, and persisting systems in Borneo: Indigenous representation of sustainability’, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 154, 1 (1998): 20–54; and Nancy Lee Peluso, ‘Rubber erasures, rubber producing rights: Making racialized territories in West Kalimantan, Indonesia’, *Development and Change* 40, 1 (2009): 47–80.

9 J.R. McNeill and Peter Engelke, *The Great Acceleration: An environmental history of the Anthropocene since 1945* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2016).

and life expectancy. To borrow from Patrick Geddes, a contemporary of Mumford's and an advocate for green cities in the 1930s, a green perspective is one that simultaneously thinks locally *and* globally with respect to local and worldwide events.¹⁰

In our environmental present where old 'thought-worlds' and endangered natural places appear fragile if not shattered in the wake of recent events, today's crisis signals not so much an end to old systems but, to quote Dylan again, the emergence of a world that's 'hardly been born'. The greening of Southeast Asian history suggests new 'angles' to consider an emergent world with a precarious climate, dense urban populations, rising sea levels, genetically modified organisms and multiple, overlapping and hybridising ethical systems. If the epidemics, fires, and floods of today are any indication of what's to come, then I expect most readers in the future will become very familiar with the sort of 'salvage' that Tsing articulates so beautifully. We may, after some unfortunate events, have to salvage our homes, cities, universities and libraries. What elements of Southeast Asia's modern and ancient pasts will we repurpose along the way?

With these broader notions of our environmental present in mind, each essay in this special issue advances highly unique, green perspectives into Southeast Asian pasts. Hieu Phung's study on ancient river names in Vietnam, 'Naming the Red River — becoming a Vietnamese river', takes readers back to the first centuries of an independent Đại Việt to explore a pre-modern past of state-building and conflict in northern Vietnam. She draws our attention to river landscapes and cultures that did not fit within any ideas of a networked river system. The name Red River, referring to the entire river network connecting Hanoi with the highlands and the delta, was a modern construction. Her essay reminds us, too, that acts of landscape erasure and centralisation were not unique to European colonial geographers in the nineteenth century, but followed earlier waves of local state-building.

Ruel Pagunsan's 'Nature, colonial science and nation-building in twentieth-century Philippines' is a remarkable survey of science-as-ontology through the work of botanists, the colonial Bureau of Science and projects to catalogue more than 12,000 species of flora across the Philippines. He treats colonial-era herbaria, the *Philippines Journal of Science*, and several key botanical texts and exhibits as 'archives' important to understanding how Americans and Filipinos in the early twentieth century sought to map out 'the nation' botanically with floral surveys and recommendations for commercial applications of this knowledge. Filipino nationalist-botanists such as Eduardo Arguelles Quisumbing played important, mediating roles in borrowing elements from older, American colonial surveys and collections to map the nation.

Jonathan Robins' 'Shallow roots: The early oil palm in Southeast Asia, 1848–1940' follows the travels of one industrial plant species, the West African oil palm, which reached Sumatran plantations in the 1840s but, unlike the Brazilian rubber tree, did not 'take off' as a commercial crop in Southeast Asia until more than a century later. This essay is global, as Robins compares colonial and indigenous responses

10 While the phrase 'Think globally, act locally' is ubiquitous after 30 years of Earth Day events, a Scottish town planner, biologist and activist in the 1930s, Patrick Geddes, first used a similar idea in developing a pioneering approach to green cities in the United Kingdom. See Philip Boardman. *The worlds of Patrick Geddes: Biologist, town planner, re-educator, peace-warrior* (London: Routledge, 1978).

to this plant in West Africa and Island Southeast Asia. The essay also contrasts the rapid spread of rubber trees in the Malay Peninsula and Borneo with a relatively weak spread of oil palms in the same era. It also offers a useful preview of the Great Acceleration when spiking demands for palm oil (now one of the world's most important 'somatic' fuels) have caused the palm oil industry to spread rapidly in Island Southeast Asia, where it now presents the single greatest threat to many endangered forest ecosystems and species.

Anthony Medrano's essay, 'The edible tide: How estuaries and migrants transformed the Straits of Melaka, 1870–1940', likewise explores overlaps and transitions from somatic to paleotechnic energy regimes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The rapid population growth that coincided with a boom in coal, oil and mining required a parallel increase in the production of high-protein, portable foods. Medrano shows how newer human communities in Southeast Asia, such as the Hokkien Chinese who settled a new village, Bagan Si Api Api in the Rokan estuary of Riau in Sumatra, prospered by developing portable foods, especially to supply ethnic-Chinese labour networks. Chinese labour was integral to the development of early modern industries in Southeast Asia, especially mining for tin and coal. The boom in industrial enterprises in nineteenth-century Southeast Asia rested largely on older arrangements between local and European governments with Chinese labourers. Medrano shows how allied Chinese communities established new fisheries and coastal communities to supply products such as *belachan* (fermented shrimp paste) to literally 'fuel' the bodies extracting ores, rubber, and coal.

Gerard Sasges' essay, 'Acceleration in a time of war: Technology, nation, and ecology in the South China Sea, 1956–1966', focuses specifically on the 'take off' moment in the early 1960s when a rapidly growing percentage of people in Southeast Asia adopted internal combustion motors, and a series of 'green revolutions' swept both agricultural and coastal landscapes. While much work has been done studying these changes in lowland ricelands and upland swiddens, comparatively little work focuses on fisheries. Sasges traces the introduction of nylon nets and more than 60,000 boat motors, mostly Japanese-made, to Vietnamese fishing fleets on the central coast; he also follows the circulation of the Japanese scientific and technical knowledge that accompanied this programme to modernise Vietnam's fleet while traditional, near-shore fisheries collapsed. Even here in this modernised coastal world that's (again quoting Dylan) 'a'coming along', Sasges reminds us of many local and culturally discrete threads that survive the transformation: centuries-old traditions such as fish sauce manufacture survived, but made from new species. Meanwhile Japanese fisheries science and supply chains tied fishing communities and government offices more closely to Japanese practices.

The final essay in the collection, by sociologist Victoria Reyes, 'Contractual and stewardship timescapes: The cultural logics of US–Philippines environmental conflict and negotiations', serves as a useful, chronological endpoint to the volume for its examination of competing Filipino and American understandings of highly polluted, toxic lands in and around the former American naval base at Subic Bay. Reyes takes us from a modern world operating at full tilt in the 1950s and 1960s to a post-occupation, demilitarised landscape where more than fifty years of accumulated chemical waste and daily releases of millions of gallons of untreated sewage travelled

from the base through Olongapo town and into Subic Bay. With respect to the crisis of historiography in our current environmental era, Reyes' focus on time and Filipino notions of 'stewardship timescapes', similar to ideas of salvage above, is especially provocative as an endcap in the issue, to remind us of the incredible challenges awaiting historians considering new perspectives, different rupture points and alternative continuities in Southeast Asia's environmental past.

Like Smail and Dylan in their 'contemporary scenes' in 1961, we're today standing in the midst of new 'ruins' as the infrastructures and formations of postcolonial, industrial life continue to blend into a buzzing present where cities sink, storms intensify, pandemics spread and once-stark boundaries between urban-rural, natural-human, and indigenous-foreign divides continue to dissolve. Peering from our present 'scene' backwards into a past made visible in new ways, historians have an opportunity and a responsibility to engage it. Greening history in Southeast Asia means recovering and weaving into our historiography those narrative or causal threads produced by other species, bio- and geochemical processes, microorganisms, shifting ontologies or climactic events. Like Smail and many who followed him, once we look for these new threads, we may realise that — like the Javanese and Malay subjects staring back at Europeans across the gunwales and balustrades — these other threads were there all along.

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