

Editorial Foreword

The seven research articles in this issue of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* concern only two countries, Thailand and Vietnam. Thematically, however, they encompass a wide range of issues — from historical mythmaking and cultural translation to the challenge to religious institutions, from autobiographical self-representation to the social production of space, and from the political implications of the colonial economy to the plurality of precolonial history — which should be of interest to all scholars of the region.

Thailand's turbulent politics have in recent years figured prominently in regional and international news coverage — most recently of the July 2011 election of the country's first woman prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra (sister of ousted prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra). The first two articles — written during the escalating political confrontation primed by Thaksin's deposition in 2006, which exploded in the Bangkok riots of May 2010 — consider the roots of Thailand's political instability from the perspective of, respectively, political and intellectual history. Questioning the historical myth of King Prajadhipok (the kingdom's last absolute monarch) as the 'founding father' of Thai democracy, Federico Ferrara reviews contemporary documents and existing historiography to provide a detailed account of the king's conduct between the coup d'état of 1932 and his abdication three years later. His actions appear to have been directed at sabotaging the constitutional government and discrediting the emerging political leaders. Revisionism is admittedly a staple of the historiography of Thailand as practised outside the national academia, but Ferrara's contention that the palace 'deprived Siam of the best chance to develop, early on, the kind of institutions that might have helped consolidate a functioning democracy' carries important implications for the near future, when the palace will have to manage a succession that is the source of much apprehension.

Michelle Tan follows with a discussion of the problematic localisation in the Thai intellectual landscape of the concept of 'ideology' by tracing the genealogy of the term *udomkān* that translates it. Regarding *udomkān* as a misinterpreted coinage, Tan poses the question: 'How is the confused spectrum of Thai politics reflected in the fact that there has been no direct transference of ideology?' Her examination of the shifting meanings of *udomkān* since the 1950s, from its original Marxist connotation to its neutralisation as a carrier of statist ideals, reveals its current usage in political discourse as a signifier without a stable signified. Although Tan's claim that *udomkān*'s semantic ambiguity can be seen as reflective of the 'failure of democracy to arise' is debatable, her article contributes an original understanding of Thailand's political divide as involving not two conflicting ideologies, but rather a conflict over *udomkān*.

The following article, by Tomomi Ito, keeps the focus on Thai public discourse by exploring the issue of the ordination of women as Buddhist nuns (*bhikkhunī*), which has stirred considerable controversy over the past decade. The issue, Ito points out, revolves around the formalisation of a 'valid' method for female ordination given that its lineage in Thai Theravāda Buddhism was disrupted long ago. While some women were ordained abroad, public scepticism of internationally ordained *bhikkhunī* indicates that most Thais still regard ordination through the national Saṅgha as the only legitimate one. So, despite the fact that Thai women were able to challenge gender discrimination within the Saṅgha, the author somewhat disconsolately concludes that, in the continuing absence of a legitimate method, newly ordained *bhikkhunī* face 'a rough and thorny path' towards social recognition.

The first two articles on Vietnam variously touch upon sociality and public culture. John C. Schafer scrutinises the autobiography of Vietnamese songwriter Phạm Duy, whose 'colourful life' and especially unrepentant admission to several extramarital affairs are taken to exemplify Vietnamese attitudes towards gender roles and social norms. 'Phạm Duy,' writes Schafer not without irony, 'must have found it difficult to turn nights of joyful sex into sad songs of unfulfilled love.' Such poetic licence reflects for Schafer not only unconventional artist behaviour, but also a culture that values sacrifice as a pre-eminently female virtue. But if public indifference to Phạm Duy's womanising can be explained in light of prevalent gender relations, the fanfare surrounding his return to Vietnam in 2005 — thirty years after his flight to the United States (as a result of which his songs were banned) — bespeaks the government's attempt at reaching out to the Vietnamese diaspora. And even though Phạm Duy's late-life status as a national figure is unlikely to make his re-released songs hits with the younger generations, his controversial persona may come to stand as the epitome of independence from social and political conditioning.

Vietnamese social life has its pivot in the seasonal festivity of Tết Nguyên Đán (Tết), the lunar New Year. Patrick McAllister, in his conceptually grounded urban ethnography, theorises the conflation of public and private places associated with Tết in Ho Chi Minh City through place-making practices. Homes, shops and streets are said to coalesce into a festive landscape that people in the city simultaneously produce and consume: 'participating in Tết involves a temporal series of embodied actions and interactions that links places as well as people, and that embeds aspects of places into each other'. Yet it is the home, where New Year rituals are concentrated, networks of family and friends are centred, and Tết-associated sites are condensed, that according to McAllister represents at once a utopia, as the imagined locale of social harmony, and a heterotopia, as the place that interfaces with the whole festive urban landscape.

The two final articles focus on Vietnam's colonial and precolonial history, respectively. Gerard Sasges examines the monopoly on distilled rice alcohol instituted by the French colonial regime, which was known as one of the colonial economy's three 'beasts of burden' (along with the opium and salt monopolies). Countering historiography's assumption of the alcohol monopoly's high profitability, Sasges argues that 'while the monopoly was a remarkably inefficient means of wresting surplus from Vietnamese, it was a somewhat more effective means of enacting their domination' since it required 'the creation of invasive and violent systems of control'. So, while

the alcohol monopoly made the fortunes of the one company that had secured it, it even more importantly supported the political ambitions of Indochina's Governor-General as it vested considerable power in the Department of Customs and Excise, whose agents were militarised in order to carry out surveillance and repression of Vietnamese villagers unwilling to give up domestic rice distillation and buy duty-paid spirits.

Nicholas Weber's article engages the old dictum that history is written by the victors by shifting the chronological focus back to the early nineteenth century, when Vietnam itself was pursuing territorial expansion at the expense of its neighbours. While Vietnamese records present the annexation of the last principality of the kingdom of Campā (Champa) in 1832 as the administrative reorganisation of a province, Cam versified narratives (*ariya*) depict it as a traumatic event. Until recently, however, the veracity of Cam accounts was dismissed. Through a close reading of several Cam texts, Weber complements Po Dharma's groundbreaking edition of the Cam royal chronicles by focusing on the experience of ordinary people, who saw their social fabric and cultural norms uprooted under the Vietnamese occupation. Weber poignantly notes that 'the themes and expressions used in nineteenth-century Cam texts ... are strikingly similar to anti-French texts written by Vietnamese intellectuals ... in the early twentieth century'.

The expanded book review section showcases 18 recent works by senior scholars, including the second volume of Victor Lieberman's magnum opus on Southeast Asia in world history perspective (appraised by historian Prasenjit Duara in a suitably extended review), as well as younger scholars, some at their first book publication.

Finally, *JSEAS* inaugurates its forty-third volume with a revamped front cover that is a timely celebration of the lunar New Year (and also hints at this issue's contents). We wish all our readers a serene and fulfilling 2012!

Maurizio Peleggi