

ASIANetwork Conference 1999

Tacoma, Washington

This issue features the final installment of selected papers from the ASIANetwork Conference 1999.

Books That Change the Way We Teach Panel: Barbara Watson Andaya, University of Hawaii; Timothy Cheek, The Colorado College; Samuel Hideo Yamashita, Pomona College; Anand Yang, University of Utah

Possibilities for Inserting Gender into the Teaching of Southeast Asian History **Barbara Watson Andaya** **University of Hawaii**

Coined during the Second World War, the term "Southeast Asia" has become the standard means of collectively referring to the ten countries that lie between China and India. Most textbooks will remind students of the often extreme differences—religious, linguistic, cultural, political—which typify the region and which have defied attempts by social scientists to establish "Southeast Asian" models. Yet for many years specialists have argued that the term is more than simply one of convenience, and that shared core characteristics do imbue "Southeast Asia" with its own coherence and integrity. As early as 1944 the doyen of Southeast Asian scholarship, Georges Coedès, suggested that the "austro-asiatic civilizations" of the "Far East" could be grouped together on the basis of common cultural features. Significantly, among these he noted not merely irrigated rice and navigational skills, but "the importance of the role conferred on women and of relationships in the maternal line." While Coedès himself offered no explanation for these regional characteristics, others have since cited a number of contributing factors, including the prevalence of cognatic descent, the frequency of bridewealth and matrilocality, the largely rural nature of local societies, and the late arrival and localization of the world religions. These features can be discussed and qualified, but the point is that the "high status" of women in Southeast Asia has become part of the received scholarly wisdom. It is also a view that has been reiterated and endorsed in the first volume of Anthony Reid's *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), where the author argues that "relatively high female autonomy" was one aspect

of the social system in which a distinctive Southeast Asian pattern was especially evident.

My own experience indicates that social history, and especially the ways in which relationships between men and women have changed and evolved in different cultures, has enormous potential to engage the attention of today's college students. But by considering gender issues we also equip ourselves with a useful pedagogical tool. In Southeast Asia, gender stands as one way of approaching what is an extremely complex region, precisely because it supplies the basis for comparison while remaining sympathetic to specific local paradigms. Furthermore, the application of a gendered framework can encourage students to think about the historical craft by identifying and debating methodological problems as they have been addressed in the Southeast Asian context.

Yet despite the touted importance of women in Southeast Asia, a teacher looking for suitable classroom material will discover that consideration of gender issues is virtually absent from the standard historical texts. For the most part, such books lay out the history of the region as a metanarrative that traces the evolution of the contemporary nation state. However, as feminist scholars have long recognized, the definition of national history as "good" history is destined to exclude or marginalize women because of its concentration on issues like inter-state diplomacy, political leadership and warfare, where men play the dominant role and where the written sources privilege male activities. Histories already articulated in terms of themes such as the suppressed people, the emergence of leaders, the awakening of popular consciousness, or the successful revolution have proved highly resistant to the incorporation of a women's perspective. This has been especially evident in Southeast Asia, where nationalist movements and the struggle against colonialism or Western influence have been infused with masculine pride. The tendency to equate "history" with the political development of the nation has allowed only a small space for areas such as the family and the domestic economy, where women have a more enhanced role.

The preoccupation with colonialism and post-independence developments means that Southeast Asia's earlier history is too often taught merely as a backdrop to the unfolding of the national story. In recent times it is thus heartening to see more interest in the pre-nineteenth century, and particularly in the period stretching roughly from 1500 to 1800, previously located uneasily between the classical and the "colonial." Since the early 1990s this period has even acquired a new nomenclature as the use of the term "early modern," ultimately borrowed from Europe, has crept in on the coat-tails of publications on China and Japan. Though the chronological boundaries and the appropriateness of the term for Southeast Asia are still debated, "early modern" history is attracting genuine interest both within and outside the field. Furthermore, because the weight of the nation state is not quite as heavy in this period, particularly in the island areas, new possibilities have opened up for the integration of Southeast Asia's social history into comparative "Asian history" courses.

In this regard, Anthony Reid's two-volume work, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680*. Vol. I: *The Land Below the Winds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) Vol. II: *Expansion and Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) is an important contribution. In the present context it is also significant because it is the first broad history of Southeast Asia in which the position of women is accorded real attention. Through an impressive investigation of source material from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Reid has reconstructed a picture of "traditional" Southeast Asian life. In so doing he has emphasized and illustrated the important female role in agriculture, in marketing, in ritual, and not infrequently in political life. Of course, specialists were all aware that this was the case, but the value of Reid's work is that material dealing with male-female relations is brought together and presented in a readable style that makes it readily accessible to the undergraduate. More particularly, his interpretation of the data is integrated into a larger discussion that seeks to identify commonalities across Southeast Asia. Reid's second volume also pays particular attention to the changes that typify the early modern period, in part attributable to the spread of the world religions, the growing strength of states and their agencies, and the increased commercialization of the domestic economy. It is thus not surprising to see that by the eighteenth century female rulers are found far less frequently than before, that Chinese men are taking over much of the market and peddling trade previously controlled by women, and that male religious specialists are replacing noble women as intermediaries in inter-state negotiations.

But there is another reason why these books provide a useful teaching tool, for the very approach which Reid adopts mirrors several problems inherent in Southeast Asian historiography. By critiquing his treatment of issues related to gender, students can be alerted to certain methodological difficulties which, while certainly not confined to Southeast Asia, are particularly problematic for regional specialists. The use of sources, for example, generates several

provocative questions. While indigenous material is best read in the original language, it is obviously impossible to master all those relevant to the construction of a general overview. What are some of the pitfalls involved in relying on translated material, especially when this is virtually all the work of (unknown) men? How should a historian deal with oral accounts, which are often preserved in the female domain? And although European sources are relatively plentiful for the early modern period, what allowances must be made for the cultural ignorance of their male authors and their stereotypes of "native" women?

A second area of concern is the appropriateness of using European categories, especially in establishing historical periods. I have already referred to scholarly differences about the applicability of "early modern" in Southeast Asia, but one could take the point further and consider the extent to which this can be legitimately employed in the context of male-female relations. What features of this period (for example, expanding commerce, urbanization, arrival of Europeans, spread of Islam and Christianity) might have influenced gender roles and hierarchies? In short, was there an "early modern" period in gender history?

A third area for discussion might concern the whole question of generalization across Southeast Asia. Students should be aware that classroom presentation often entails the condensation and simplification of very complex material. Precisely because of a broad-brush approach which makes the region explicable, Reid's work will remind students that generalizing about "Southeast Asians," whether women or men, is highly problematic. In what ways can we connect the world of the highly literate, Sinicized Vietnamese court with that of a small kinship-based village in a remote Indonesian island? Because the dynamics of lived history are always local, gender themes can open the door to discussions about the particularity of historical processes, and the numerous ways in which the interaction of class, ethnicity, religion, culture, language was played out in different environments.

Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce is a significant contribution to the small corpus of literature that can be assigned for undergraduate reading on Southeast Asia's social history. Some of Reid's conclusions have certainly been disputed, but his work has the great merit of rejecting the notion that "early modern" Southeast Asians lived in an unchanging "traditional" world. For teachers of Asia anxious to incorporate gender into the curriculum, it also provides a wealth of interesting material with which students can readily engage. At the very least, it will provide classroom practitioners with new perspectives on Southeast Asia, and perhaps encourage college teachers to give greater attention to this much-neglected region.