

## **Introduction: Nationalism in Southeast Asia<sup>1</sup>**

Drawing on Benedict Anderson's thought-provoking idea that nationalism is less an ideology than a form of cultural expression (Anderson 1991: 7), this themed section explores nationalism in Southeast Asia. Here, as elsewhere, the enactment of a nation-state's sovereign integrity through identity and citizenship cannot be exclusively defined and limited by state territoriality. Pre-modern inter-regional connections and broad patterns of human mobility remain an important feature of contemporary Southeast Asia (Castles 2004; Amrith 2011). For many people, everyday life continues to take place in a social space that transgresses borders or (selectively) resists the encroachment of the nation-state. The border is clearly not only a physical site but also part of a multi-faceted nation-building process – understood here as state-legitimizing nationalism - that has emotional and material manifestations (Johnson et al. 2011). Turning a critical gaze towards the physical margins of the nation-state, this themed section proposes to go beyond the 'territorial trap' (Agnew 1994) of a neatly bounded political entity to focus on selected Southeast Asian sites of resistance and transgressive practice.

Beginning with Portugal's conquest of Malacca in 1511 and ending with its decolonization of Timor l'Este in 1974, Southeast Asia has been subjected to a continuous process of Western colonization, with different parts of the region variously coming under the control of Britain, France, the Netherlands, Spain and the United States during the intervening centuries. Of the ten Southeast Asian countries which now form the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), only Thailand escaped direct colonization.<sup>2</sup> The cases studies in this themed section cover recently established nation-states such as Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, which were incorporated into French Indochina from the late nineteenth century until independence in 1953-54. The colonial encounter turned the European concept of territorial sovereignty into

a transnational phenomenon, leading many newly independent Southeast Asian countries to create their own national geo-body through mapping (Thongchai 1994). Southeast Asia's rigid approach to borders and sovereignty can be considered one of the legacies of colonial power, but its nation-states are not simple derivatives of the European model; 'Asians have not just pirated European models, but have based the image of their nation on the differences that they themselves consider most important' (Tønnesson and Antlöv 1996: 23-24). While colonial rule 'provided the structures and boundaries of the new nation-states that emerged in the region after the Second World War' (Berger 2009: 44), the close of the Cold War has brought a reconfiguration in how state sovereignty is conceived and legitimated (Sutherland 2012).

In 2014, the stand-offs in both Ukraine and Thailand demonstrate how citizens and so-called 'netizens' play an important role in democratic and authoritarian systems alike, not least because they embody an internal threat to the continued legitimation of the nation-state. Today, everything from regional integration, through transnational migration and trafficking, to the global flow of goods and capital conspires to undermine the notion that the state is in full control of a neatly bounded territory and its residents (Ong 2000; Agnew 2009). Paradoxically, as globalization is weakening the sovereignty of individual states, these increasingly seek strong commitments from their citizens to maintain the nation-state construct (Tønnesson and Antlöv 1996: 2; Sutherland 2009). This themed section, in turn, is concerned with how people at the geographical and symbolic margins of specific Southeast Asian states are implicated in nation-building. It thereby heeds Ryerson Christie's call in this issue to take indigenous communities rather than state-centric sovereignty as an analytical starting point. If one accepts that competing identities and shifting markers of belonging are principally expressions of power relations, rather than any 'genuine' or 'traditional'

characteristics, it becomes possible to relate such debates to constructed binaries of state centre and the ‘marginal periphery’ of border zones (Winter 2009: 136).

In the same way as the phrase ‘ethnic minority’ only makes sense in the context of a national majority, forcing marginal spaces and their populations into the straitjacket of the nation-state can still smack of a *mission civilisatrice*, as Christie points out in this issue. With regard to Vietnam, Erik Harms (2011: 3) has observed that ‘[r]eimagining so-called marginal spaces as centers of their own fundamentally transforms the way we understand both “state-spaces” and zones on the perceived margins of the state.’ In the Southeast Asian cases analysed here, it is particularly misleading to consider border zones as marginal, since they are central to securing states’ undisputed sovereignty and control over the full extent of their territory. Rather, acknowledging that ‘margins are central to nationalism’ (Harms 2011: 11) questions the still dominant Southeast Asian imaginary of neatly bordered, sovereign nation-states, one that is potently expressed in the resolutely intergovernmental ASEAN. This idea echoes throughout Edyta Roszko’s paper, in the context of the conflict between China and Vietnam over the South China Sea’s Paracel and Spratly islands, and its wide-ranging repercussions at national and international levels. Roszko dwells on the Vietnamese state’s response to attempts by Lý Sơn islanders, living thirty kilometres off the central Vietnamese shoreline, to re-centre their marginal place in Vietnam’s imagined geo-body.

In *The Art of Not being Governed*, James Scott suggests that the inhabitants of so-called ‘Zomia,’ the mountainous upland region stretching across mainland Southeast Asia, have so far resisted state attempts to occupy and control the parts of Zomia that fall within their national borders. Others within the field of ‘Zomian studies’ (Michaud 2012: 1853) focus on the specific dynamics of people’s often incomplete integration into the nation-state, such as that of the Hmong ethnic minority in Vietnam’s northern uplands. Jean Michaud (2012:

1867,1868) explores the ‘everyday resistance’ or ‘perceptive resilience’ of one group of Hmong to the state apparatus, and asks how conscious or planned it is. A short survey of this particular people’s agricultural practices, clothing production, transport and education suggests that they use modern technology selectively ‘to confirm the world order from a Hmong viewpoint’ (Michaud 2012: 1865), choosing not to watch Vietnamese TV, send their children assiduously to school or abandon traditional forms of dress. Across the border in China’s Yunnan province, by contrast, many Hmong are assimilating quickly into Han-like ways of life (Michaud 2012, 1870). Similarly, Ryerson Christie in this section looks at state education in Cambodia as a key realm for exercising nation-state sovereignty and control. Christie’s analysis focuses on the international dimension embodied in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which further complicate the relationship between the Cambodian nation-state and its minority populations. Whereas education and literacy are assumed to empower upland communities within the state, Christie shows how the MDGs’ universalism simultaneously serves to silence indigenous community voices. With such tensions at work, education practices are also a site of resistance, in that residents in those ethnic communities may not want to be ‘developed’ in the way foreseen by either the international community or state institutions.

This themed section also explores the interplay between international, national and very local dimensions in the context of the ongoing international dispute surrounding sovereignty over the South China Sea. Roszko draws attention to China and Vietnam’s efforts to delineate material borders on the sea through customary fishing practices, manmade features, and mapping activities which paradoxically treat the sea as ‘land’. She analyses how these states seek to frame their territorial claims in the emotive terms of ‘ancestral land’ and ‘protection’ of their local fishermen, and co-opt the everyday practices of littoral populations into technologies of mapping. Her focus on new technologies and the new forms of knowledge

state governments adopt to demarcate their national borders at sea corresponds to Christie's discussion of the education practices that are intended to improve the quality of life in communities, but at the same time undermine indigenous sovereignty. Roszko shows that customary practices are increasingly used by different state actors as a legal argument, while ironically reducing coastal communities to silence on contested fishing territories which they historically considered their own. Instead, the idea of 'protecting' the fishing population projects Vietnamese fishermen as 'heroic vanguards of national sovereignty of the "East Sea,"' leading to 'the state geo-body capitalizing on strong nationalist sentiments.' Roszko's focus on performance also sheds light on a variety of different actors' capacity to produce sovereignty and nation-state spaces in non-normative and transgressive ways. Similarly, Roy Huijsmans and Trần Thị Hà Lan examine another case of minority engagement with and resistance to state sovereignty, this time on the Vietnam-Lao border.

Huijsman and Trần's analysis of how young people perform their identities through the use of mobile phones highlights youthful adaptability in crossing both territorial borders and language barriers in unanticipated and ingenious ways, even when the technology is officially controlled by Vietnamese state-owned enterprises. Mobile technology helps define what it means to be young, but also what it means to be at the margins of a national community. The authors' discussion of how technology is used to reshape or reinforce national belonging in a border zone parallels Roszko's work on the role of cartography in ongoing disputes over the South China Sea. Territory should not simply be understood as the political-economic notion of land but also as a process comprising techniques for measuring and controlling terrain (Elden 2013). Conceptualizing territory as a political technology resists defining it 'once and for all' (Elden 2013: 323). In other words, political and geographical analyses that conceptualize modern territory as the only political-legal space, or a political technology for measuring and controlling space (Elden 2009: 171), are not complete without taking into

account people's agency in the production of space. For example, Huijsmans and Trần show both that the digital capitalism of mobile services is deeply territorialized and how ethnic minority youth intentionally and intuitively position themselves within the imagined community of nation.

Territorial frontiers, the very stuff of neatly bounded sovereignty, are thereby recast as sites of social practice, which over time contribute to structuring an imagined entity called the state; 'To take a simple example, international border controls are only effective for as long as those enforcing them turn up for work each day' (Painter 2010: 1105). In turn, this provides a framework within or against which the 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991) of the nation develops, though we should beware of constructing artificial binaries, such as centre versus periphery (Roszko 2012). In line with the above-cited view that 'margins are central to nationalism' (Harms 2011: 11), then, vernacular perspectives on territoriality and belonging that do not match official narratives play a central role in all three articles. Christie's article emphasises resistance to and local struggles with state modernization and development, whereas Huijsmans and Trần identify both appropriation and hybridity in their case study. Somewhat paradoxically, the territorial borders between Lao and Vietnam seemed to be much more blurred through the use of cell-phones than in the watery realm of the South China Sea, where coastguards, human occupation, building and cartographic grid work have drawn and strengthened the division between the Chinese and Vietnamese fishermen who have fished there for centuries.

The contributors' critical re-reading of the entanglement of territory, sovereignty and nation-building through their accounts of contemporary life at the margins of the state provide us with a rich interpretation of responses to nation-building in Southeast Asia. Clearly, this is by no means exclusively a government affair, but is practised among a multiplicity of actors and in response to a range of audiences that are neither monolithic nor integrated in their goals.

Examining various communities' relative position vis-à-vis state authority (Scott 2009: 32) shows how actors select, re-appropriate and accommodate the hegemonic cultural forms that suit their purposes best. As Aihwa Ong (2012: 33) puts it; 'In contemporary Asia, experimental assemblages of sovereign powers, capital, *techné*, and ethics seem to produce circumstances that strengthen political sovereignty, nationalist sentiments, and collective ethos, not least in struggles to engage capitalism and to protect biological resources and life itself'. We would add that people both create and unmake nation-state legitimacy by positioning themselves strategically against this backdrop of constant change. This form of nationalism 'must continually be articulated and rearticulated in terms of "stylized repetition of acts"' (Johnson et al. 2011: 66) such as policies, customs and also resistance. It is much more flexible and relational than state-led nation-building that imposes legal, social, and political constraints on a 'national' space. This themed section has captured aspects of this process at work and charted some of its practical effects in contemporary Southeast Asian cases.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> ASEAN's ten members are Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

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