

Environmental and archaeological perspectives on Southeast Asia

Boomgaard, Peter, *Southeast Asia; An environmental history*. Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2007, xiv + 375 pp. ISBN 9781851094196. Price: USD 42.50 (hardback).

Boomgaard, Peter (ed.), *A world of water; Rain, rivers and seas in Southeast Asian histories*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2007, viii + 368 pp. ISBN 978906718294X. Price: USD 25.00 (paperback).

Glover, Ian and Peter Bellwood (eds), *Southeast Asia; From prehistory to history*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004, 384 pp. ISBN 9780415391177, price GBP 29.99 (paperback); 9780415297776, GBP 100.00 (hardback).

Gupta, Avijit (ed.), *The physical geography of Southeast Asia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, xxiii + 440 pp. ISBN 0199248028. Price: GBP 161.00 (hardback).

National University of Singapore
socect@nus.edu.sg

Studies of Southeast Asia most commonly come from fields of history, arts and social sciences. The four volumes reviewed here demonstrate the rich diversity of social, scientific and environmental research that takes Southeast Asia as a frame of reference. All four are ambitious undertakings, mainly with the aim of presenting 'state-of-the-field' compilations on themes of physical geography, archaeology, and environment.

Gupta's *The physical geography of Southeast Asia* is the most technically challenging of the volumes. Some of its chapters, most notably the first (Hutchinson, pp. 3-23), will be in parts incomprehensible to those who are not disciplinary experts in geology or physical geography. Most other chapters

are more accessible for a general scholarly audience, but the book is in no way a light read. It is, instead, a remarkable compendium of contributions providing a detailed and comprehensive overview of the physical geography and natural environment of Southeast Asia. The book is divided into three parts of six or more chapters each, moving from the region's landforms, rivers, soils, and the like), to six chapters on specific environments (including volcanic islands, karst lands, and coasts), and concluding with a longer section of eleven chapters on 'environment and people', providing detailed case studies of major environmental concerns (such as volcanic hazards, water management and pollution). While the level of accessibility to non-specialists varies, the quality of the contributions is consistently high. It is also the best-structured compilation of essays that I can recall reading. Gupta and his contributors have done a masterful job in pulling together writings by diverse authors into a thorough overview of Southeast Asia's physical geography. Although it will never be widely read, this book will undoubtedly be a primary reference work for those working on environmental studies, geology, and geography for years to come.

In comparison to Gupta's edited specialist-oriented physical geography, Boomgaard's single authored *Southeast Asia; An environmental history* aims to provide readers with a more accessible textbook-style introduction and overview of Southeast Asian history from an environmental perspective. This is an ambitious undertaking in many respects. Boomgaard presents a very long sweep of history and prehistory, starting with the natural environment before the arrival of humans in the region. Boomgaard's main focus is on population growth, economic growth and activity, and human-environment interactions. At some points, particularly in the middle chapters (on the development of states, for instance), the narrative reads very much like a more conventional social and political history of Southeast Asia with added emphasis on environmental impacts. The latter chapters return to a more detailed attention to specific environmental issues. The book is published as one in a series of parallel volumes on a dozen world regions. For environmental historians, this series may be a very useful, broad benchmark and reference material. (As Boomgaard points out, environmental history is a relatively new field.) Yet on reading this book, my impression was that it is both over- and under-specialized. On the one hand, as an undergraduate textbook (which is the level at which it is pitched), one wonders just how many university courses would adopt a full volume on Southeast Asian environmental history. On the other hand, in contrast to Gupta's edited volume, I expect that most experts beyond the undergraduate level would find Boomgaard's book too general to make it an enduring reference text (among other things, Boomgaard does not use intra-textual citation; though one of the book's strongest features is its

inclusion of lengthy bibliographic essays at the end of each chapter).

A further contribution to environmental approaches within Southeast Asian studies is Boomgaard's edited volume *A World of Water*. The contributions to this book are as diverse and eclectic as Boomgaard's *Southeast Asia; An environmental history* is a highly structured chronology. Contributions range from an account of the role of cosmological myths in constructing senses of place (Pannell) to a broad, systematic overview of empirical studies of communal irrigation (Hunt). Individually, the contributions have a lot to offer; as a collection the theme (or perhaps stream) of 'water' holding them together is rather thin. Many experts will find something in the volume of importance to their own work; but very few are likely to find the entire volume compelling (at least with regard to a particular field of investigation). On the other hand, it may be of use for overly specialized (or disciplinarily blinkered) academics to read through such a broad volume as this one. At the very least, the best of these works should be points of reference for a variety of future research from cultural and environmental studies to political economy.

Glover and Bellwood's *Southeast Asia; From prehistory to history* is another impressive compilation of contributions. In this case, similar to Gupta's edited volume, the chapters were newly commissioned for this book, lending a strong sense of coherence to the work (less perhaps than Gupta's highly structured *The physical geography of Southeast Asia*, but more so than Boomgaard's *A world of water*). The focus of the chapters is on human activity rather than environmental concerns, though as a work based on archaeological methodology, a considerable amount of material on human-environmental interactions can be found throughout the chapters. The way this book is framed, in comparison to Gupta's, is notable. Gupta and his contributors, insofar as is possible, do not adopt a nation-state framework. Physical geography rarely corresponds to such political territoriality. Gupta's collaborators draw their frames of reference from the substance of their study rather than containing them within social-political frameworks (except in a few the latter chapters, where attention is given to case studies of municipalities). Glover and Bellwood, by contrast, foreground the nation-state as vessel for archaeological investigation. While they explicitly recognize that 'modern political boundaries are often of little relevance for an understanding of prehistory or ancient history', they nevertheless adopt this framework as 'it is the modern world to which this book is addressed' (p. 2).

As forays into varied aspects of environmental and archaeological perspectives on Southeast Asia, all of these volumes are impressive undertakings. In most respects, they are 'state-of-the-field' accounts, collecting and presenting scholars' knowledge-to-date. In this they display both the breadth and depth of environmental and archaeological knowledge of Southeast Asia. In general, they do not propose radically new frames of reference or

theoretical paradigms to challenge conventional wisdom. There are hints of such an undertaking in some instances. Boomgaard's *Environmental history* does provide an account of history that highlights environmental concerns; but the narrative structure and much of the content conforms to a fairly standard history of the region. *From prehistory to history* succumbs to a nation-state framing of archaeology, thus possibly obscuring patterns of culture and interaction that archaeological investigation might otherwise reveal. *A world of water* attempts to take a rather unusual thematic approach to the region, though it is not entirely convincing in weaving together a narrative around 'water'. Gupta's *Physical geography*, while also primarily a 'state-of-the-field' account, is perhaps the most compelling in providing a framework for thinking about Southeast Asia differing from those most common in social, political and historical studies of the region.

All four books provide important benchmarks for research in Southeast Asia on physical geography, archaeology, and environment. While none of them is likely to appeal to a very broad audience, they deserve the attention of specialists in their respective fields. Gupta's volume in particular is likely to be an enduring reference text for the current and next generation of physical geographers of Southeast Asia. The prospects for significant impact and enduring legacy of the other volumes will be a matter for history, historians, and perhaps archaeologists to judge.