

The World beyond the Nation in Southeast Asian Museums

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National museums are exemplary sites through which nations tell their story and represent themselves to their citizens and others. The national museum has replaced the colonial museum identified by Anderson in *Imagined Communities*, as a modern technology and form of communication through which national communities are brought into being. Yet national museums tell other stories as well. In this article, I examine how national museums represent the world beyond the nation. Based on an examination of twelve national or national-type museums in seven Southeast Asian countries, I argue that national museums produce representations of the world beyond the nation and specifically of Southeast Asia that enframe and produce the geo-body of the nation state while simultaneously creating particular imaginaries of the world beyond, including a common use of contemporary Southeast Asia as a regional enframing device. While all national museums frame the nation in reference to the world beyond, they do so in significantly different ways with implications for the international and regional orientations of citizens of Southeast Asia.

Keywords: museum studies, national identity, regionalism, ASEAN, international relations.

Museums tell stories. A national museum tells a story about the nation. It invites visitors to think about the nation spatially, historically, and ethnologically. The purpose of a national museum is to endow the nation with symbolic substance — using images, objects, and narratives to specify where, what, and when the nation is. In the second edition of his seminal work, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (1991) identified museums — along with censuses and maps — as an “institution of power” which under nineteenth century

European colonialism ushered in the imaginings that made possible twentieth century nations, particularly in Asia. While Anderson concentrates his attention on colonial states, there is no doubt that museums have continued to thrive, even proliferate, in the post-colonial era.¹ National museums are a particularly explicit site in which symbolic and narrative imaginings of territorial nation states are produced and expressed.

In this article, I argue that national museums not only construct narratives of nations, they also tell stories about what lies beyond the nation. While the national story is the explicit narrative that national museums seek to tell, the national museums of Southeast Asia inform visitors about the world beyond through varied means and to varying degrees. We could imagine a national museum in which the world beyond the nation is not explicitly represented, existing only as an absence beyond the territorial and ethnological boundaries of the nation conveyed in the museum’s displays and textual explanations. Of the museum’s surveyed in this article, the Myanmar National Museum and Indonesian National Museum come closest to presenting their displays with exceptionally little reference to the world beyond. By contrast, the displays and textual narrative of the Malaysian museums discussed below contain extensive references to the world beyond the nation.

While the styles and degrees of representation vary, in the national museums of Southeast Asia there is always already, implied (as an absence) and more often than not expressed (as a presence), a world beyond the nation in the narrative of national museums. The world beyond the nation necessarily enframes the nation and through that enframing creates (an imagining of) a national order (cf. Mitchell 1991).² The purpose of this article is to bring that frame of extra-nationality into focus. As much as national museums serve a didactic purpose, aimed at teaching citizens how to think about themselves as nationals, they also contain messages about the relationship of territorial and ethnological others to the national self. My interest lies particularly in how national museums across Southeast Asia represent the region as a entity that enframes their diverse national

imaginings. Nation building in Southeast Asia has been a fraught, contested, and ongoing project (Funston 2001; Lockard 2009; Mulder 2003; Tarling 1998). National museums are material sites where that project has been carried out. As Wang Gungwu (2005, p. 271) points out, while nation building is a never-ending process, an earlier generation of anti-colonial nation builders who took the European nation state as a model are now giving way to a younger generation of postcolonial nationals, “exposed to transnational, multi-national, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural ideals ... although they are yet to find a clear sense of direction as to where they are eventually going”. One dimension of the process of nation building is efforts to establish positive international relations, of which the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has become a cornerstone in Southeast Asia, despite all its critics and shortcomings (cf. Glassman 2005; Jones and Smith 2007; Tham, Lee, and Norani Othman 2009). In the past decade, ASEAN has moved towards developing a stronger sense of community among member nations (Thompson and Thianthai 2008). National museums, as documented below, have already been a site for representing and promoting ASEAN-based community building. In the conclusion of this article, I suggest ways in which the national museums of Southeast Asia could further facilitate positive internationalism, whether through an ASEAN framework or otherwise.

My discussion is based on a study of twelve national-type museums in seven Southeast Asian countries: Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.³ I visited the museums primarily in a period from 2005 to 2007, and during 2010–11 have revisited several of them (see Table 1).⁴ Several of the museums, including those in Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, are ones which I have visited on several occasions since the 1990s, prior to this study. Many of the museums, such as those in Laos and Thailand, have not been substantially changed or renovated between the early part of the past decade and the most recent years (2010–11) when I made return visits. By contrast, in 2006, I initially visited Malaysia’s National History Museum located adjacent to

Independence Square (Dataran Merdeka) in Kuala Lumpur, as it had a much richer historical narrative than the older National Museum (Muzim Negara). In 2007, the National History Museum closed and its exhibits shifted to the National Museum, which underwent a substantial renovation and upgrading of its exhibits.

My interest in these national museums (particularly during the visits listed in Table 1) has been to study the ways in which regional, Southeast Asian frames of reference appear in the museums and more broadly in how the world beyond the nation is imagined in national museums. To this end, I visited the museums, taking notes and

Table 1
Museums Studied

Museum	Location	Date Visited (Revisited)*
Cambodian National Museum	Phnom Penh	24 July 2005
Indonesia National Museum	Jakarta	16 March 2006
Indonesia National History Museum	Jakarta	16 March 2006
Lao National Museum	Vientiane	20 September 2005 (23 February 2011)
Malaysian History Museum**	Kuala Lumpur	05 May 2006 (closed 2007)
Malaysian National Museum**	Kuala Lumpur	13 November 2011, 19 March 2011
Malay World Ethnology Museum	Kuala Lumpur	19 March 2011
Myanmar National Museum	Yangon	16 June 2007 (22 June 2011)
Thailand National Museum	Bangkok	31 July 2005 (10 December 2010)
Vietnam History Museum	Hanoi	27 July 2005
Museum of the Vietnamese Revolution	Hanoi	27 July 2005
Vietnam Museum of Ethnology	Hanoi	27 July 2005

Notes:

*In cases where more than one visit was made, the latest date is listed; except in cases of revisits during 2010–11, listed in parentheses.

**In 2007, the Malaysian History Museum closed and some or all of its exhibits were transferred to the newly renovated Malaysian National Museum.

photographs (where permissible) and when possible followed guided tours and discussed the exhibits with tour guides and officials at the museums. My approach to the museums stems from a larger project concerned with the development of Southeast Asian regionalism (cf. Acharya 2000; Thompson 2009) and perceptions, awareness, and attitudes towards Southeast Asia from within Southeast Asia (Thianthai and Thompson 2007; Thompson 2006; Thompson and Thianthai 2008; Thompson, Thianthai, and Hidayana 2007). My analysis rests on a comparative, cultural critique of the museums' representations and narratives. In this respect, it is not focused on the details or practices of museum curation (cf. Keur 2007). Similarly, while I focus on the historical narratives of the museum, I am not engaging with contemporary theories and evidence of Southeast Asian history (cf. Thompson 2009). Rather, I discuss the historical narratives of the museums as they are presented (although I have included a few explanatory endnotes with regard to some of the more contested historical themes).

In the following I examine the numerous ways through which museums produce narrative, visual and symbolic constructions of nations and, at the same time, ideas of the world beyond the nation, including regional imaginings of Southeast Asia. Of special importance are the interrelated territorial and ethnological representations — that is representations of places and of people — within the national museums. I focus first on the idea of enframing the nation, particularly through maps, drawing both on ideas from Thongchai (1994) of cartography as a modern form of power and Mitchell (1991) on the ways in which enframing — drawing boundaries around subjects and nations — creates senses of order, both internal and external. The internal order of the nation and the external order of international relations are simultaneously produced through the narratives and visual representations found in national museums. Further, I examine fields of representation within the museums, including national ethnology, origin stories and histories in which nations emerge and broader connections fade away. As modern nations appear in these historical narratives, they become increasingly

embodied (Thongchai's idea of the "geo-body") and these national geo-bodies become sites threatened by outside forces (particularly foreign invasions) and subject to territorial loss and expansion. Finally, I discuss how, with the establishment of the territorially robust nation state geo-body, a new form of engaging the world becomes not only possible, but hegemonic — international relations in the form of relations between nation states (cf. Wang 2005). These are represented within national museums as a final form of framing and reification through narratives and images of such relations, as well as through expatriated exhibits travelling from one national museum to another.

Mapping and Enframing the Nation

The entry foyer of the Vietnam History Museum in Hanoi is lined with four large maps. Three of these maps — of points of interest, ethno-linguistic groups, and a geographic relief map — show Vietnam in detail, with Cambodia and portions of Laos, Thailand, and China outlined around the edges. The fourth map is of "Vietnam within Southeast Asia (Đông Nam Á)". Maps, such as these scattered throughout national museums, are the most obvious and explicit mode through which the nation is enframed and the world beyond the nation is represented. Such enframing simultaneously produces a national-territorial order and extra-national territorial order. Maps produce a visual image and representation of the abstract concept of a national geo-body as a territorially bound nation state (cf. Thongchai 1994). At the same time, they situate the nation state in a broader frame of reference (at least for those that have some reference to the world beyond the geo-body — which is the case for most but not all maps). While the intention of national museums is to celebrate and symbolically embody the nation, they also produce narratives of wider regions and peoples — geographic and ethnological others — in reference to the nation.

Throughout the national museums of Southeast Asia, maps of various scales are used to orient and instruct visitors. Many, such

as three of the four maps in the foyer to the Vietnam History Museum, display the national geo-body with only minimal marginal acknowledgement of bordering nations. In some cases “outline maps” represent only the outlined shape of the nation with no reference to adjacent countries. For example, just past the entrance to the Lao National Museum in Vientiane, visitors are greeted with a large relief map of Laos, displaying only the territory within the national boundaries. Such outline maps are found here and there in almost all national museums. The most extreme exclusion of the world beyond the nation is found in the Myanmar National Museum in Yangon. Of the dozens of maps scattered throughout the museum, all but a few are outline maps of the national geo-body with nothing represented beyond. The few exceptions provide only the barest suggestion of a world beyond the territorial nation, with the names China, India, Laos, Thailand, and the Bay of Bengal written in Burmese around the borders but no other details provided. As Thongchai (1994, p. 137) points out, an outline map is a popular and powerful symbol of the nation; becoming a “logo” of the national imaginary (see also Anderson 1991).

Outside Myanmar, maps that situate the nation framed by Southeast Asia are common, such as the fourth map in the Vietnam History Museum mentioned above. A similar map appears (somewhat inexplicably) in the National Museum of Indonesia in Jakarta. This map — not obviously connected to any particular exhibit — highlights the pre-1995 members of ASEAN (with Singapore and Brunei both enlarged), while the frame of reference of the map encompasses all of contemporary Southeast Asia. Other maps situate the nation in a wider context. In 2005 the entrance to the Hall of Thai History in the National Museum in Bangkok displayed two maps — one an outline map of Thailand indicating the provinces of the nation; the other of the world, showing nation-state boundaries. In the latter, Thailand was not highlighted or identified in any way to differentiate it from the other hundreds of nations shown on the map.⁵ This world map was a rare instance in which the nation appeared, cartographically represented, as one in a series of territorial nations

without special emphasis on the particular nation of the museum (cf. Anderson 1991).

The newly renovated National Museum in Kuala Lumpur situates Malaysia in a global context as well. Both in maps and narrative, its global framing provides the greatest contrast to the Myanmar National Museum’s insularity. The first hall in the Malaysian National Museum provides maps and narratives of world history, with an account of the creation of continents and evolutionary history. The Myanmar National Museum provides a similar account of prehistoric human evolution. The key difference is that while the National Museum in Kuala Lumpur represents this as global history (and then rapidly zooms in on Southeast Asia and Malaysia in particular), in Yangon the representation of geological and evolutionary history make it appear as if all the events described happened solely within the contemporary territory of Myanmar. For example, one map in a section of exhibits on early human evolution shows “regions where fossilized primates [are] found in Myanmar [from] 40 million years ago”.

The varied cartographic representations engage in a discourse about the international order and the nation’s place within that order. The Malaysian museums tell the most expansive, global history, presenting the broadest frame of reference. Thailand’s National Museum presents similarly broad, global connections and framing, though not to the same extent. Many more of its exhibits make reference to a closer, regional frame of reference and engagements with neighbouring people and places. The cartographic representations of museums surveyed in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam are largely regional as well. The exhibits of Myanmar and Indonesia’s museums are the most isolated, with only fleeting cartographic or other references to the world beyond the nation.

National Ethnology and Origin Stories

In addition to their cartography, national museums represent the world beyond the nation through their ethnology; that is, the ways in which they represent peoples of the nation and beyond. People are given to moving around. This social fact is a problem in the

territorialized logic of modern nation states. The symbolic production of nationalism within sites such as national museums must come to terms with this inconvenient fact. Every museum addresses national history, ethnology, and origin stories in slightly different ways, with important implications both for understandings of the nation and its relationship to the world beyond.

Prehistoric migrations are on display in many, though not all, of the national museums studied. In 2006 the National History Museum of Malaysia, for example, displayed fossils, other artefacts, and a map indicating the presumed route of prehistoric migrations — suggesting movement through the Malay Peninsula and Indo-Philippine archipelago. The movements exceeded any sense of contemporary nation-state boundary. But the national narrative was already evident — moreover, it was a particularly *Malay* (as opposed to *Malaysian*) national narrative. The two lines of movement, one down through the Malay peninsula and the other across the Philippine-Indonesian archipelago from present-day Taiwan, traced the presumed movement of “proto-Malay” peoples; i.e., ancestors of present-day Malays.⁶ While present-day Malaysia comprises a wide range of people with varied ancestral migrations, especially from China and India, no similar reference was made to these migration histories. In 2011 the newer displays of the National Museum had an even more expansive narrative, as mentioned above, which situates Malaysia within world history and even evolutionary history. Yet again, an emphasis is placed on ancient migrations of Malay peoples with little reference to the more recent ones of Chinese and Indians.

Since the ethnological representation of history in the former National History Museum of Malaysia and the current National Museum are remarkably Malay in orientation, emphasis is placed on the history of Malay states (sultanates), Malay leaders, and Malay culture. References to Chinese, Indians, and others, who make up nearly half of the nation’s population, are marginal at best. In the long-standing discursive conflict over Malaysia as founded in Malay nationalism versus Malaysian (multi-ethnic) nationalism (see Cheah 2002), this museum’s narrative expresses the former

position. In terms of the museum’s themes of a world beyond the nation, many connections are thus suppressed (e.g., connections to Southern China) while others are highlighted (e.g., Islamization and connections between the Malay Peninsula and the Islamic world — especially Arabia).

Prehistoric migrations feature in the National Museum in Bangkok as well. The first set of displays in the Hall of Thai History poses the “origin and habitation of the Thais” as a matter of debate. Text in the exhibit proposes five possible scenarios for the origin of Thai people (prior to settling in Thailand), including from southern China, from the Himalayas, and from the Malay Peninsula. While considering these various possibilities (or “assumptions”, as they are called in the English text), the text concludes that, “In contrast to many assumptions, Thai did not migrate from other regions, but they lived, settled and developed civilization in this land long before the history has been remembered [*sic*].” Similar to the history museum in Malaysia, the ethnological imagination of the nation of Thailand in the National Museum in Bangkok is strongly mono-ethnic.⁷

The National Museums in both Laos and Myanmar eschew any suggestion of migration into the national territory, while at the same time linking national history to modern human evolutionary theory. They do not explicitly argue that human beings evolved solely within the national territories of Laos and Myanmar. In the Myanmar museum, for instance, replicas of the skulls of “Peking Man”, “Java Man”, and “Rhodesia Man” were on display. Provocatively, I asked a student who was leading me on a tour through the museum if all those skulls were from Myanmar? He said of course not, translating the names. At the same time, unlike the Museums in Thailand and Malaysia, any mention of ancient migration from elsewhere is absent from the Lao and Myanmar museums. Their implicit narrative, like the explicit argument of the Thai museum, is that the people of Laos and Myanmar have always lived in those places.

In contrast to the Thai and Malaysian museum’s mono-ethnic emphasis, other museums celebrate multi-ethnic national imaginaries.

The fourth floor of the Myanmar National Museum is devoted to “the cultures of national races”. It prominently displays maps, costumes, and other artefacts emphasizing the major ethnic groups of Myanmar associated with the seven states of the Union of Myanmar (Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan). At the entrance of the hall is a map of the “Seven States and Seven Divisions Unified in the Union of Myanmar”. Each of the seven states is marked by a postcard with a couple (man and woman) wearing traditional dress of that state and in the centre over the seven divisions is a postcard of a man and woman wearing traditional dress and labelled “Bamar” (Burmese).

The Vietnam History Museum and Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, both in Hanoi, provide contrasting images of the nation, one largely mono-ethnic and the other multi-ethnic. The History Museum relates a historical narrative founded in Viet (Kinh) ethnohistory and southward expansion from the Red River Delta in the north to the Mekong River Delta in the south.⁸ The museum of ethnology, by contrast, expresses a radically multi-ethnic conceptualization of the Vietnamese nation. The Viet or Kinh are presented as one of dozens of ethnic groups of which Vietnamese people are composed. Of all the museums surveyed, the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology is most suggestive of the possibility for museums to present innovative counter-narratives to established and relatively banal national histories. While the museum is clearly a national-type museum, it represents the nation very differently from the older established History Museum or, for that matter, the Museum of the Vietnamese Revolution, which focuses on armed struggles of national liberation.

The multi-ethnic narrative of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology also engages a broader regional imaginary in multiple ways. The entry foyer to the main exhibits features two maps. One is of all the major ethno-linguistic groups of Southeast Asia; the second is a much more detailed map of the geographic distribution of ethno-linguistic groups within Vietnam. Further, passages explaining the main ethno-linguistic groups shift between situating each group within the Vietnamese nation state and relating the position and

history of each group within the region (e.g., noting which groups “created nations such as Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines”).

A very different sort of national ethnology appears in the Malay World Ethnology Museum, located adjacent to the Malaysian National Museum in Kuala Lumpur. The Malay World Ethnology Museum focuses on the broad dispersal of Malay peoples across Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean (cf. Benitez-Johannot 2010). A display entitled “Faces of the Malay World” presents a map surrounded by headshots of individuals with ethnic labels printed below them, such as “Dusun, Sabah”, “Nias, Indonesia”, and “Filipina.” The map is labelled with three coloured areas: the broadest “Melayu Diaspora” covering parts of South Africa, Madagascar, Sri Lanka, and Western Australia (Christmas Island); “Melayu Inti” encircling Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and parts of Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam; and “Melayu Polinsia” encompassing most of the South Pacific. Rather than casting expansive ethnic groups as minorities within the contemporary territorialized nation, the Malay World Ethnology Museum claims a broad, ethno-national Malay identity extending far beyond the boundaries of the contemporary nation state of Malaysia.

By contrast, Myanmar’s National Museum and also Indonesia’s National Museum display multi-ethnic imaginaries that do not engage a regional narrative beyond the boundaries of the modern nation state. While the Myanmar and Indonesian museums feature ethno-linguistic maps similar to that in the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, neither the maps nor the accompanying text provide any reference to migration nor ethno-linguistic connections of the peoples within Myanmar and Indonesia to people living outside the current national borders.

Emerging Nations, Disappearing Connections

Most of the museums discussed here display their exhibits to visitors through an unfolding historical narrative.⁹ In the historical narratives of national museums across Southeast Asia, a common pattern holds in which nations emerge and come more sharply into focus over

time. Simultaneous to the emergent reification of the territorially defined nation state, broader connections to places beyond the emergent geo-body of the nation disappear as the narrative moves from past to present. The prominence of this pattern varies. In Myanmar's National Museum, so little of the world beyond the national geo-body is represented, either past or present, there is little or no trace of connections. Neither are they very prominent in Indonesia's National Museum. At the other extreme, the role of connections to places beyond the nation plays a very prominent role in Malaysia's current National Museum and in the earlier History Museum. The pattern of emergent nations and disappearing connections is prominent as well in the museums of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. Two distinct themes through which these connections are embodied are participation in broad zones of cultural interaction and the importance of long-distance trade.

All the national museums (except in Myanmar) make reference to Dong Son culture — represented and remembered in the form of large bronze drums thought to have been symbols of authority throughout much of Southeast Asia, including the southern provinces of contemporary China, where Dong Son drums and motifs also feature prominently in museums in Guangzhou and Guangxi province.¹⁰ In the Indonesian National Museum, reference to these drums is one of the very few references to anything outside the borders of contemporary Indonesia and said to attest to a history of long-distance trade. Similarly in the National Museum in Bangkok, Dong Son drums are on display in a section entitled "Beginning of the Historic States in Thailand". The text associated with the drums states that artefacts of Dong Son culture "clearly attest to widespread contact with exotic lands"; and further mentions artefacts that demonstrate contact with India, Greece, Rome, and Persia (present-day Iran). The National Museum of Vietnamese History focuses on the geographic origins of "Dong Son Culture", relating how the drums were created in areas of contemporary Vietnam and exported widely throughout Southeast Asia. The National Museums of Laos and Malaysia likewise display Dong Son drums prominently

among the earliest artefacts through which the museums represent national history.

Later periods also feature as eras of regional and long-distance trade in nearly all the museums: with maps of trade routes and displays of ceramics and other trade goods and artefacts (such as Greek and Roman coins; suggesting an early history of connectivity between nations or what we now call "globalization"). The role of long distance trade in the prehistory of nations is particularly prominent in the national museums in Thailand and Malaysia, both of which devote many panels of text, maps, and graphics to the subject of trade stretching to China and Japan to the north and east and to India, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe in the west. The Malaysian national narrative in particular hinges on the rise of "Malay Sultanates" (broadly construed to include Srivijaya, Majapahit, and Mataram, among others) and especially the glory of Malacca in the fifteenth century.

Unsurprisingly, regional themes and regional cultural or social patterns are subsumed within national narratives in the museums. A striking example is the translation of the term "Suvarnabhumi" in the Malaysian history museum. The text of a display on "Malaysia's Proto-History" tells the reader, in Malay and English, that:

(Malay) "Sumber bertulis asing khususnya sumber Yunani (Ptolemy) dan India menggambarkan tentang kewujudan perdagangan di antara Tanah Melayu (Suvarnabhumi) dengan India dan Barat."

(English) "Written sources in foreign countries, particularly Greek and Indian sources, point to the existence of trade relations between Malaya (Suvarnabhumi), India and the West."

The Sanskrit term "Suvarabhumi" is translated as "Malaya" (in English) and "Tanah Melayu" (in Malay — literally meaning "land of the Malays"). This is one of the most obvious examples of the many ways in which signifiers of a region that exceeds the boundaries of modern nation states are transformed and subsumed within national frames of reference.

The literal translation of Suvarnabhumi is "golden land". In various inscriptions and texts dating to the era of Sanskrit cosmo-

politanism (during the first millennium AD; see Pollack 1998, 2001), Suvarnabhumi appears to refer in a general way to the area or areas of what is now commonly called Southeast Asia (see Thompson 2009). It is not a common term anywhere in contemporary Southeast Asia, but it is a more familiar term in Thailand than in Malaysia, especially since being adopted as the name for the new international airport in Bangkok.

In similar fashion in the National Museum of Thailand, “*Srivijaya Culture (8th–13th Century AD)*” is one of several chronologically organized “cultures” of the museum’s historical narrative. The text of the display tells us that:

Srivijaya was a state that rose to power as a port city and grew prosperous through trade. It was the most important trading port for traders from India, Arabia, China, Java and the Cape of Malaya ...

Surat Thani province, in southern Thailand, is mentioned as one site where “*Srivijayan*” art and architecture have been found. But the text is vague at best as to where the *Srivijayan* state or empire was located or centred. The visitor is left with the impression that *Srivijaya* was a proto-Siamese state — one of several political and cultural precursors to modern Thailand, including *Dvaravati*, *Sukhothai*, and *Ayutthaya*.

“*Srivijaya*” refers to a complex socio-political entity with material traces over a broad area of Southeast Asia. The areas that now form Southern Thailand, which have been settled mainly by Malay speakers since at least the *Srivijaya* era, were certainly part of the socio-political entity referred to as *Srivijaya*. But there is little doubt that the focal point of the *Srivijayan* empire, if we should call it that, was in the area of southern Sumatra; Palembang on the Musi river, and Jambi/Melayu on the Batang Hari River. The exhibits in Bangkok work to obfuscate the extent to which *Srivijaya* was located outside of contemporary Thailand.¹¹

Elsewhere in the national museums of Southeast Asia, a broad range of cultural and other forms of influence and interaction are subsumed within a national frame such that any sense of their expanse

is suppressed. This is most striking when one walks through the courtyards of Cambodia’s National Museum in Phnom Penh and the National Museum of Indonesia in Jakarta. Both feature remarkably similar displays of Brahmanic (Hindu) and Buddhist statuary, recalling the era of “*Sanskrit cosmopolitanism*” (Pollock 1998, 2001), which is also when the term “*Suvarnabhumi*” mentioned above was first popularized. Only an expert might be able to distinguish between the statues in the two museums based on artistic features. Yet, nothing in either museum gives the visitor much sense that this was anything more than a local (i.e., national) cultural trend — or at best a local variation on South Asian motifs (despite evidence that a great deal of intra–Southeast Asian interaction was taking place at the time; see Hall 2011). A section of Bangkok’s National Museum, in a building separate from the Hall of Thai History, has a similar display but places it in a broader regional history and identifies its collection of statuary as coming from around the region (including pieces from Java, Sumatra, and elsewhere).

Consistently across national museums, as their historical narratives move closer to the present, themes of regional culture, connection, trade, and interactions exceeding the borders of modern nation states disappear. The national geo-body takes on increasingly defined shape and substance in maps, texts, and other forms of representation. This geo-body is subject to threat and manoeuvre and to territorial loss and gain.

Mapping Manoeuvres and Threats to the Nation

As the territorial geo-body of the nation comes more sharply into focus in the historical narratives of national museums, the region and world beyond the national border becomes a space of threat to the ethnological and territorial integrity of the nation and nation state. Chief among the visual representations of such threats are maps of military manoeuvres that penetrate the national geo-body. A broadly important and early example is the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century presented in maps and historical murals in

the National Museum of Vietnamese History. A Eurasia-scale map shows the routes of Mongol movement with sharp arrows radiating out from Central Asia in westerly, easterly, and southerly directions, penetrating Europe, West, South, Southeast, and East Asia. A detailed map of the Red River Delta region recounts successive waves of Mongol invasion and Vietnamese repulsion of the invaders during the mid to late thirteenth century.

European colonial expansion and subjugation of Southeast Asian populations is a prominent theme in nearly all the museums; with important variations depending on the specifics of each nation's colonial experience. Similarly, American military adventures in Southeast Asia — and resistance to American hegemony — are central aspects of the narratives of museums in both Vietnam and Laos. As in other cases, one of the greatest contrasts is between the National Museums in Myanmar and Malaysia. The colonial period is largely absent from the National Museum in Yangon, with only minor references to the British presence. In Malaysia, one quarter of the museum (one of four large halls) is devoted to the colonial period, from the fall of Malacca at the hands of the Portuguese through conquests by the Dutch and British and ending with the Japanese Occupation, during which the British were expelled from Malaya.

Threats to the national geo-body closer to home and nearer to the present are abundant. The Lao National Museum in Vientiane emphasizes the threats to Lao independence posed by Thai/Siamese geopolitical power in the region, while generally portraying Vietnam as a supporter of Lao independence and autonomy. The National Museum in Bangkok recounts repeated threats to the nation posed by Burmese military adventures over many centuries. Both the National Museum of Vietnamese History and Museum of the Vietnamese Revolution portray the long years of conflict in terms of threats to the territory of the nation through maps of territorial penetration such as troop movements during World War II.

In 2006 the former National History Museum of Malaysia recounted similar regional, geopolitical threats to the nation but, in this case, through narrative and photographic exhibits rather than maps.

A substantial display was devoted to “challenges and obstacles” to the formation of Malaysia — chief among which was the opposition of Indonesia and the Philippines; both of which sought to claim and incorporate all or part of the territories that were to become Malaysia. In 2011 a similar display was not in evidence in the renovated National Museum.

In portraying earlier eras, such as the Malacca Sultanate in the Malaysian National Museum or Ayutthaya in the National Museum in Bangkok, manoeuvres and threats are often displayed in maps that project contemporary nation-state borders back into the historical past before such borders were established. More significantly, however, the narratives of threat and manoeuvre give the nation state a prehistory of struggles through which it came into being. These struggles are also intertwined with narratives and maps of territorial loss and expansion that brought the national geo-body into being.

Territorial Loss, Expansion and Consolidation

Tour guides in the Cambodian National Museum regularly stop in front of a large wall map of the “Indochinese Peninsula in the 12th and 13th Centuries” (the text on the map is French; the key is in French and Khmer). The map is territorially colour-coded. Prominent at the centre is a large red area labelled “Empire Khmer”, encompassing most of what is now contemporary Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and southern Vietnam. The north borders on “Chine”; the east on Dai Viet (Vietnam) and Champa; the west with “Birmans”, and the south with the contemporary Thai-Malaysia border; beyond which on the Malay peninsula, Kedah, Kelantan, and Trengganu are labelled. Enclosed within the large red area is a much smaller yellow area of “Camboge Actuel” translated into Khmer as “Cambodia Today”. Speaking in French, English, or Khmer, depending on their audience, the tour guides at the museum point to the small yellow area of the map, then to the large red area saying: “Now we are here, but we used to be here.”

The national museums of Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand all tell a rather similar story in this regard. The Cambodian museum

emphasizes the history of Angkor and the reign of Jayavarman VII. As the text next to the map mentioned above relates, "During his reign the Cambodian Kingdom spanned a huge area: extending beyond the Menam Basin to the west ... as far as the sea of Champa to the east; to the city of Sukhothai which was established on an older Khmer city to the north."

Like the National Museum in Phnom Penh, the Lao National Museum portrays maps of a political territory at the height of the kingdom of Lan Xang, covering all of present-day Laos, the Korat Plateau (northeast Thailand), and some regions beyond in contemporary China, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam. Subsequent maps show the disintegration of Lan Xang into three separate principalities, while the textual narrative tells of the role of Thais and others leading to the decline of Lan Xang. As the kingdom is portrayed as a precursor to modern Laos, its disintegration and decline reads as a weakening of the Lao state; drawing clear parallels between the earlier decline of Lan Xang in the late seventeenth century and later nineteenth and twentieth centuries when Laos suffered amidst Thai, Vietnamese, French, and American conflicts.

Similarly, the National Museum in Bangkok features an interactive map of "Territories Yielded to France and England" displaying nine losses of territory, which is one version of a geopolitical map that has played a powerful role in the historical imagination of Thailand (Thongchai 1993). According to this map, the territorial extent of Thailand prior to these nine territorial losses included all of modern Laos and Cambodia and parts of Vietnam, Malaysia, and Myanmar.

A similar set of maps in the History Museum in Malaysia was subtler and much less dramatic, but nonetheless implied an expansive prehistory of the nation state. Srivijaya and more so the Malacca Sultanate were both portrayed as precursors to the modern nation state of Malaysia. In the History Museum's displays, maps projected the extent of Srivijaya and Malacca's power well beyond the current territorial boundaries of Malaysia. As with other national museums, these exhibits staked an implicit claim to historically broader terri-

torial sovereignty than the nation state enjoys at the present. In 2011 the displays in Malaysia's National Museum did not project the same sort of territorial expanses, but they did narrate at great length the glory of the Malay Kingdoms generally and Malacca in particular.

Territorial mappings in the National Museum of Vietnamese History, by contrast to those of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Malaysia, chart a cartography of gain and expansion rather than loss. The historical narrative begins in the Red River Delta. Maps associated with the earliest sections of the museum show only the Red River Delta region. As the narrative progresses and Viet/Kinh states come to control progressively more territory southward along the coast, the maps expand to show all of contemporary Vietnam.¹² While there is little sense of territorial loss, as found in other museums, there is a claim to Vietnamese influence beyond the nation's current territorial borders in the displays of historical maps and documents.

In this Kinh (Viet) dominated narrative, conflict with external enemies, especially the Chinese, is prominent; but conflicts with those incorporated within the Kinh-dominated state are suppressed or marginalized. Most prominently marginalized is the history of the powerful state or states of Champa.¹³ In the museum, a substantial exhibit located in a cul-de-sac off from the main exhibit is devoted to the art and architecture of Champa. Whereas the main exhibit emphasizes a historical narrative linked to territorial expansion, the Champa section of the museum suppresses history, and with it issues of Viet-Cham conflict, in favour of art and architecture.

The National Museum of Indonesia is relatively mute on the subject of territorial expansion or loss. The nation is consistently portrayed in maps and narratives as already complete. However, the nearby National History Museum devotes some space (albeit much less than in the museums of most other nations) to the incorporation of various territories such as Irian Jaya and East Timor with which the national project is announced as "complete". As of 2006, no mention or update of the displays had been made to address the more recent breakaway of East Timor.

International Relations and Expatriated Exhibits

As museums' historical narratives move towards the present — especially the second half of the twentieth century — the nation state as an ethnological and territorial entity consolidates. As territorialized nation states become taken-for-granted realities, the modern world of coexisting nation states and “international relations” between these entities is naturalized and taken for granted (cf. Wang 2005). National and history museums in Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam all feature exhibits extolling national accomplishments, amidst which are displays paying homage to accomplishments in international relations. For example, museums in Indonesia and Vietnam pay tribute to the nation's recognition by the United Nations. In these cases, the “frame” of the world beyond the nation becomes the focus of national narratives.

The circumstances of national histories influence the framing of these international relations and, thus, representations of the world beyond the nation. In Malaysia, for instance, both the History and National Museums emphasize the nation's position within the Commonwealth of Nations (a legacy of the British colonial empire). This conceptualization of the place of Malaysia as a nation among other nations fits well into the museums' broader historical narrative that, more than museums in any of the other countries considered in this study, situates the nation in reference to the colonial empires of the Portuguese, Dutch, and British.

The Museum of the Vietnamese Revolution figures the nation's international relations more broadly. Among other things, there is an exhibit displaying a map of the world and pictures of events from the hosting of an ASEAN summit to visits by dignitaries from various countries. Like Malaysia's colonial history, Vietnam's communist history forms a subtext of the nation's relationship to the world in the modern era, as does a sense of broad internationalism. The last room of the museum features a large globe at its centre encircled by glass-encased displays along with gifts to Ho Chi Minh (prior to his demise) and to the People of Vietnam (after Ho Chi Minh's passing) from countries and national communist

organizations around the world, especially from communist and “third world” nations.

The National Museum in Bangkok also features many panels on “The Glory of Foreign Relations” and similar themes related to many of the eras covered in its historical narrative. The Thai museum's narrative focuses on royalty and culminates in honouring the (current) Chakri dynasty. The nation is embodied in the King and the nation's relationship to the world beyond is embodied in the King's travels abroad — particular the extensive travels of King Chulalongkorn. Similarly, in Vietnam, the nation is embodied in the personality of Ho Chi Minh; in this case, the nation's relationship to the world is represented in his travels to distant lands.

A final mode in which the world beyond the nation is represented in national museums is what I call “expatriated exhibits” — the appearance of exhibits from and about other nations within the space of a national museum. The most intriguing expatriate I came across in the course of this research is that which gives the National Museum of Indonesia its local name — “The Elephant Museum” (Museum Gajah). The appellation derives from the large elephant statue standing in front of the museum, which (it so happens) was a gift in 1871 to the government of Batavia from King Chulalongkorn of Siam during the very same travels recounted in the Hall of Thai History, as noted above.

Inside the museum, the connection with Thailand is reiterated in an expatriated exhibit from Thailand's National Museum — a display with formatting and features identical to those found in the Hall of Thai History in the National Museum in Bangkok. The display is presented as part of international cooperation and goodwill between the national museums of the two countries. But it also attests to the adjustments that expatriation (and, more broadly, post or extra-national imagining) may require. Like the display in Thailand, it features a section on Srivijaya; but with a substantially different text. Rather than implying that Srivijaya was centred in southern Thailand (as is the case in the museum in Bangkok), the display in Jakarta states directly that there “remain[s] ... debate until

now as to where it was situated, either in the Southern part of Thailand or in Palembang, Sumatra and other Indonesian areas”.

Another group of “expatriate exhibits” was the ASEAN exhibit hosted in 2005 at the Lao National Museum. This was a travelling exhibit displayed in many other ASEAN member national museums as well (I happened to come across it in Laos). Located at the end of the museum’s itinerary in a spare room, the display promoted ASEAN cultures and tourism. In 2011 the travelling ASEAN display had moved on, but had been replaced by a more modest display of framed posters representing the countries of ASEAN. In a similar fashion to displays of international relations, the nations of ASEAN in these exhibits are naturalized and dehistoricized. But unlike the national emphasis in local (national) museums, in the ASEAN displays, no nation is given priority in reference to others — each is equal and similar to all others within the association. For several months in late 2010 and early 2011, a similar but more extensive exhibition was hosted by the National Museum of Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur. In mid-2011 an ASEAN display had been installed in the National Museum in Myanmar as well.

Imagining the World beyond the Nation

The stories nations tell about themselves is the explicit story that national museums have to tell. I have focused here on a less obvious, largely implicit or unconscious story that national museums also tell — a story of the world beyond the nation, which frames the national narrative. I have been particularly interested in the regional story that the museum tells, of the nation’s relations with immediate neighbours in Southeast Asia. I expect that no scholar with expertise in any of the countries whose national museums I have described will find the narratives of these museums to be surprising. If anything, the sorts of stories found in national museums are particularly banal from the point of view of historians or area studies experts. In this paper, I have highlighted the frame of the world beyond the nation, which I argue produces enframing effects, following Mitchell (1991)

and earlier Heidegger (see Gregory 2001). In cultures of modernity, we live in a world awash with representations. The argument advanced by Mitchell, Heidegger, and others is that the “frame” of representations has powerful effects. Enframing creates an order of things — in this case a national and international order of things — which modern subjects use to orient themselves in the world and in relationship to others in their world.

In displacing colonial museums, national museums carry on with some of those colonial legacies (see, for example, Kuers 2007). Yet, just as importantly, they reorient their audience to the narrative and enframing practices of a national consciousness. Everywhere, the museums reviewed in this article are important cultural organs of postcolonial nation states, advancing narratives brokered through nation-building processes (see Wang 2005). The national narratives of these museums are for the most part recounting official histories — though, as most obvious in the case of Vietnam — there may be more than one vision of the nation found in such museums. And as the case of the Malaysian museum demonstrates in practical terms, museums are always subject to revision, renovation, updating, and even replacement. The narratives of museums likewise change and are rewritten over time. The purpose of this article has been to make more explicit the extra-national and international frame of reference that these museums use to orient their national citizen-subjects (not to mention, international visitors).

The stories that national museums tell, both about the nations and the world beyond, are important in shaping and reproducing a national consciousness. On more than one occasion while visiting the museums discussed in this article, I came across groups of school children who are regularly taken to national museums on school trips to learn about themselves and their nations. In the process, they also learn about the wider world in which they live. Representations of the world beyond the nation in Southeast Asia’s national museums are, on balance, symbolic representations of “others” through which a sense of a national geo-body and people are constituted. As suggested by the account I have provided, many, although not all, of the

representations reviewed here reflect the ugly side of nationalism — the creation of “them” of various sorts through which and against which the national “us” is conceived. Others, such as the ASEAN exhibits, narratives of trade relations and foreign relations, often cast the extra-national “frame” of the nation in a more positive light.

As I have shown, many of the museums highlight such themes in the nation’s history, but as the historical narrative moves into the present, these connections tend to disappear. The museums also tend to subsume regional or broader processes within a national context rather than presenting them as extra- or international connections as such. The narrative of the museums highlights the nation and moves the world beyond largely to the margins, as a framing device for that national narrative. These processes, of disappearing connections, subsuming broader processes within national contexts, and moving the world beyond to the margins, can all be understood in the historical context of postcolonial Southeast Asian nationalism.¹⁴ As cultural organs of the nation state, museums — along with modern schooling, national media, and other institutions — have played a role in creating the national political and cultural order of things over the past century. The question implicit in my analysis is: Do national museums have a role or responsibility in portraying the world beyond the nation? Is that or should that be part of their mandate?

The first point to be made in reference to these questions is that national museums already present and inevitably present representations of the world beyond the nation. Many of these are explicit. In other cases, most notably the Myanmar National Museum, the world beyond is represented more as an absence than a presence, or “under erasure” (Derrida 1976). Even in such cases, the world beyond has enframing effects on national consciousness, orienting national self-identities in reference and contrast to an absent other under erasure beyond the nation. The question is thus not whether national museums can or should represent the world beyond, but how they do and the implications of those representations. Just as maturing nation states and their citizens must work through their

place in the wider world in other contexts, be it foreign relations or international migration, likewise the organs of cultural production of nation states (museums being only one) must as they mature take greater responsibility for orienting the nation within the world. Cooperation through “expatriate” and ASEAN exhibits, is just one sign that the curators and state officials who have a hand in these representations are taking on this role more consciously. Other examples can be cited as well. Recently, a team of researchers have provided one model for such regional imagining by drawing on the collections of the National Museum of the Philippines, the Indonesian National Museum, and the Netherlands Rijksmuseum voor Völkerkunde to narrate and demonstrate a shared Austronesian heritage across much of Southeast Asia (Benitez-Johannot 2010).

Just as the writing of national histories continues to be contentious and often politicized (Wang 2005), there are certain to be limits and struggles over the opening up of national museums to broader extra-national narratives. But we should not believe that museums are forever stuck in the present or, for that matter, chained to a historically determined set of representations. The museums discussed here have inherited much — good and bad — from the colonial museums that preceded them (see Hardiati and Keurs 2005–06). Yet in the half-century or more since colonial regimes collapsed, the museums have developed new national narratives and perspectives, whether they are the relatively isolated expressions of the National Museum of Myanmar or the long-distance trade and cultural connections emphasizing Malay-Muslim sensibilities in Malaysia. My critique in this article has been a consideration of the extra-national narrative and frame of the museums of Southeast Asia, with thoughts particularly to an emergent international and regional ASEAN consciousness. Taking a cue from the alternative national consciousness offered by Vietnam’s Ethnological Museum, I suggest that innovation in national and national-type museums is possible and that attention can be given to how the narratives of museums might invite a positive regional and international consciousness.

NOTES

1. Many of the museums discussed here were established as colonial museums and were transformed into national museums as the countries of Southeast Asia gained independence. Colonial legacies continue to shape the collections and narratives of these museums in a variety of ways, such as the attention to Hindu-Buddhist statuary in the Cambodian and Indonesian museums. In this article, I focus on the present and future of these national museums rather than the histories that shape them (cf. Hardiati and Keurs 2005–06; Keurs 2007).
2. The effects of “enframing” to produce order in a modern world of representations (presenting the world as a picture and acting on/in the world based on those pictures of the world) draws on Timothy Mitchell (1991) and earlier Martin Heidegger (see Gregory 2001, pp. 92–93). It is also influenced by Jacques Derrida’s discussion on the “supplement”; although here I focus on the frame (or supplement) more as a presence rather than an absence under erasure (cf. Derrida *Of Grammatology* 1976).
3. During the period of research (2005 to 2011), I also made visits to the Army Museum in Vientiane (Lao PDR), Royal Palace Museum in Luang Prabang (Lao PDR), Western Han Nanyue King’s Mausoleum Museum in Guangdong (People’s Republic of China), and Guangxi Museum of Nationalities (People’s Republic of China). The focus of analysis in this article is on the twelve museums listed in Table 1.
4. For a description of many of the museums discussed here, as well as others in the region, see Kelly (2001).
5. In the course of minor renovation to the foyer of the Hall of Thai History between 2005 and 2010, these particular maps were removed.
6. See Donohue and Denham (2010) for a recent challenge and critique of the proto-Malay or Austronesian migratory expansion theory.
7. For a more nuanced view of the complex history and prehistory of Southeast Asia, see Glover and Bellwood, eds. (2004).
8. For a critique of this narrative of Vietnamese history, see Taylor (1998).
9. The extent to which exhibits are historically sequenced varies. The National Museum in Malaysia is completely organized around a historical narrative, while the Vietnam Ethnology Museum is not. Other museums combine historically and ahistorically organized displays.
10. In Guangzhou, the Nanyue King Mausoleum Museum features Dong Son drums and motifs. The city of Nanning in Guangxi province is home to a large and relatively new Museum of Nationalities with a building shaped like a Dong Son drum and a large collection of such drums.

11. For an overview of the long-standing debates about the status and “location” of Srivijaya, see Coedès and Damais (1992). A fundamental problem with historical representations of Srivijaya is that the social, political, and economic entity to which that term refers has no adequate parallel or term through which to express it in English. It was not a kingdom or empire as such and certainly not a nation state. Earlier historians such as Coedès (1996) and Wolters (1967) imagined it as a sort of imperial state and sought to locate it geographically. More recent historians, particularly those who follow trends in American area studies programmes, are wont to treat the concept of “Srivijaya” rather dismissively as a colonial fantasy of those earlier historians. The truth lies somewhere in between.
12. See Taylor (1998).
13. As with Srivijaya, Champa refers to a complex socio-political entity, perhaps best described as a confederation of principalities (see Vickery 2009; Wade 2003).
14. By “postcolonial”, I am not referring primarily to the experiences of specific nation-states emerging out of colonial relationships, but rather the regional and global context across Southeast Asia and beyond. Thus, for example, while Thailand was never directly colonized, the Thai state has nevertheless experienced the shift from its existence in a regional and global colonial world to a postcolonial one.

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