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A FORMIDABLE WORK THAT OPENS THE DOOR FOR OTHER SCHOLARS TO FOLLOW

WEN-QING NGOEI

Ang Cheng Guan's *Southeast Asia's Cold War: An Interpretive History* makes a welcome scholarly contribution to the field. As he rightly points out in the introduction to his book, the "voluminous" literature concerned with the Cold War in Southeast Asia has too long centered on the United States, European decolonisation, and/or the Sino-Soviet competition for Hanoi's loyalty.[\[1\]](#)

And apart from the growing number of insightful studies focused on Vietnamese actors and their considerable influence upon the big powers, historians of the Cold War with few exceptions have continually bypassed the perspectives of Southeast Asians from other states in the region. Only Robert McMahon's *The Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia since World War II* offers a broad, regional view of Southeast Asia's post-1945 developments, examining the actions and agendas of statesmen throughout the region. But McMahon's work remains primarily about the U.S. point of view and does not dwell on the roots of the Cold War that predate the Second World War. At any rate, *Limits of Empire* is now almost two decades old.[\[2\]](#)

Omissions in the field of Southeast Asia's Cold War experience are numerous and problematic. The wealth of existing scholarship concerned with Vietnam's story, albeit intertwined with the fates of the world powers, also tends to obscure other critical developments in the wider Southeast Asian region. For one, U.S. cold warriors actually took it for granted that Indonesia was economically and strategically the most important Southeast Asian state, far more consequential to American foreign policy aims than Vietnam or Laos. Beijing and Moscow, too, were fixated with courting the Indonesian republic, the

world's fifth largest nation. All three Cold War powers expended resources to win Jakarta over; they all watched and hoped to shape the foreign policies of the Sukarno government, the ill-fated *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (PKI)—the biggest non-bloc communist party in the world—as well as the Suharto regime.^[3]

So, it is a testament to Ang's ambition that *Southeast Asia's Cold War* strives to place Indonesia's story alongside that of Vietnam, to give both their due and thereby redress the imbalances of the field. And he attempts far more than that, taking his readers on a relentless whirlwind tour of the other significant events unfolding simultaneously across the region. (He frequently deploys variations of the phrase 'the details need not delay us here' to keep racing through the narrative.) Through six chapters, he shifts rapidly between critical turns in the Cold War histories of Burma/Myanmar (for example, the ascent of General Ne Win and his tetchy relations with China over Beijing's support of the Burmese Communists); Malaysia and Singapore (the failures of each country's homegrown communist movements; both countries' support for the U.S. intervention in Vietnam); along with several twists in the fates of the pro-U.S. governments in Thailand and the Philippines as well as their domestic rivals.

In executing all of the above, *Southeast Asia's Cold War* does represent what Ang claims: "the first book by a single author to study the subject based on a synthesis of secondary as well as primary sources." Other forays into telling this story have come in the form of edited volumes whose very strength—a smorgasbord of chapters delving into a range of themes, seminal events, as well as bi- or multilateral relations between the big powers and select Southeast Asian states—can also be a serious drawback. Collections of particularised chapters, each informed by an individual scholar's expertise, do not guarantee we will glimpse the big picture. As Ang notes, the sum of an edited volume's many components can often "lack[s] a certain degree of cohesion."^[4] His goal is to transcend such piecemeal renditions. One crucial part of his project is to begin his book (as few others have begun theirs) with a sustained examination of the Cold War's antecedents in the interwar years, reminding us of the importance of the communist revolution in Russia and the rise of the Chinese, Indian and Southeast Asian communist parties as opponents of the western capitalist

powers.^[5] Another vital component is how the book extends its narrative well past the fall of Saigon in 1975, through the tragedy of the Cambodian genocide, the Sino-Vietnamese War, tracing how these developments shaped U.S.-Asean relations in the 1980s. Between these bookends, Ang does a yeoman's work to speedily describe events—the Bandung conference, the creation of the South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), *Konfrontasi*—familiar to most scholars of twentieth-century Southeast Asia, though it bears emphasis that their encounters with analyses of these events would likely be derived from several different monographs.

But while Ang's book represents a worthy effort at synthesis, it remains unclear how it constitutes an “interpretive history” as its subtitle claims. For, Ang does not venture an over-arching interpretation, a unifying theme, to tie together the Cold War experiences of different Southeast Asians, at least not explicitly. The book's many events are usually bunched together by virtue of their simultaneity and relationship to major developments like the Vietnam War. Beyond these discrete clusters, however, these events (unfolding in countries across the region) are bound by little more than Ang's statement that they represent the “Southeast Asian dimension” of the Cold War, or the Southeast Asian communists and the Left, those “losers of the Cold War” whose perspectives are “often ignored, forgotten, or interpreted through the lens of the winners.”^[6] Unfortunately, the book rarely offers us interpretations of these Southeast Asian perspectives beyond elite decision-makers mulling their options in the strategic realm, beyond the limited repertoire of deliberations about armed revolt, military retreat, subversive activities, and estimations of big powers' strategies. The book does not probe deep into Southeast Asians' profounder yearnings for political and social continuity or revolution, what the Cold War meant to the region's elites and non-elites in visceral or imaginative terms, or the shared worldviews of colonised peoples arising from their everyday experiences of formal colonialism's transition into the Cold War struggle.^[7]

In the absence of such an interpretative through-line, Ang's book may be fairly said to “lack a certain degree of cohesion,” much like the edited volumes he critiques in his introduction. Some readers may even find the book's multiple and rapid segues between events, countries and

actors disorienting, and more difficult to keep track of as the book progresses. Ang knows this well enough. He plants numerous signposts stating “we will remember from earlier discussions/chapters” throughout the book to help his readers along. In effect, though, these recurring signposts beseech more than confirm. And here, Ang’s determined resistance to the cultural turn in diplomatic history—stated in his introduction and conclusion—seems an unfortunate misstep. The cultural turn does not (as Ang contends through Holger Nehring’s words) “dilute significantly” the meaning of the ‘Cold War’ as a “concept” so much as reveal the complexities of individuals’ and communities’ conceptions of the Cold War.^[8] After all, historians of the Vietnam War concerned with U.S. policymakers’ thinking on race, religion and gender have largely enhanced our understanding of the U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia and illuminated the driving forces of American conceptions of the Cold War.^[9] Put simply, harnessing the cultural turn has yielded a richer appreciation of the U.S. perspective of the Cold War in Southeast Asia. So why not apply these analytical tools to a study of the Southeast Asian dimension? Would they not produce a richer “general interpretative history” of the Southeast Asian perspectives of the Cold War?^[10] We can but rue these lost opportunities.

Even so, *Southeast Asia’s Cold War* remains a valuable contribution, a formidable work of synthesis that will be (as Ang intends) “useful to both scholars and students alike.”^[11] Though the book falls short as an interpretative history, its very existence now underscores the feasibility of crafting a broad, regional perspective of the Cold War from the view of Southeast Asians, an approach still rare in the field that demands to be revisited and promises new insights. Above all, Ang has pushed a door open for others to follow through.

Wen-Qing Ngoei is Assistant Professor of History at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. He completed his PhD at Northwestern University and specialises in the history of U.S.-Southeast Asian relations in the twentieth century. His first book, *The Arc of Containment: Britain, Malaya, Singapore and U.S. Hegemony in Southeast Asia, 1941-1976* (Cornell University Press) is due out in

May 2019. *The Arc of Containment* shows that anti-communist nationalism in Southeast Asia intersected with pre-existing local antipathy toward China and its diaspora to usher the region from European-dominated colonialism to U.S. hegemony. Ngoei's research has been supported by the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, postdoctoral fellowships from Yale University's International Security Studies and the Chabraja Center for Historical Studies at Northwestern University and Nanyang Technological University. His 2017 article in *Diplomatic History*, "A Wide Anti-Communist Arc," examines how British decolonisation in Singapore and Asean (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) shaped the Nixon administration's triangular diplomacy. In 2014, his article on the origins of the domino theory, "The Domino Logic of the Darkest Moment," won the *Journal of America-East Asian Relations'* Frank Gibney Award. He has penned review essays in *H-Diplo*, *Reviews in American History*, and *Orbis*. His op-eds, commentaries and interviews have appeared in *The Diplomat*, *History News Network*, *Channel News Asia*, and on *Voice of America*.

END NOTES

[1] Ang Cheng Guan, *Southeast Asia's Cold War: An Interpretive History* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), 1.

[2] Robert J. McMahon, *The Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia since World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

[3] Bradley R. Simpson, *Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and U.S.-Indonesian Relations, 1960-1968* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

[4] In the introduction to this book, Ang refers to four prominent edited volumes on the "Southeast Asian dimension" of the Cold War and offers passing critique of their relative merits. See Ang, 1-2.

[5] Anne L. Foster's *Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919-1941* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) is one insightful work that, in part, skillfully examines these Cold War antecedents and the responses of the colonial

powers. Curiously, Foster's work does not appear in Ang's bibliography.

[6] Ang, 1, 194.

[7] For contrast, consider Masuda Hajimu, *Cold War Crucible: The Korean Conflict and the Postwar World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[8] Ang, 3-5, 194. In his introduction, Ang refers to Holger Nehring, "What was the Cold War?" in *English Historical Review* 127. 527 (August 2012): 920-949.

[9] See, for example, Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); and, Robert Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001).

[10] Ang, 1.

[11] Ang, 2.