STATE OF THE FIELD

STUDYING WOMEN AND GENDER IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Historians of Southeast Asia have begun to consider the history of women and gender relatively recently, even though the complementary relationship between men and women has long been cited as a regional characteristic. In the last twenty years or so the field has witnessed some important advances, most notably in the study of the twentieth century but also in the preceding periods as well. Generalizations advanced in the past are now being refined through a number of new case studies. The second half of this essay, surveying recent publications primarily in English, focuses on pre-twentieth century history, identifying the areas where research has been most productive and suggesting lines of inquiry that might be profitable in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Historians of Southeast Asia have come late to the study of women and the related notion of gender, and to an investigation of how the complexities of male–female interactions have been negotiated, accepted or contested at different times and in different contexts. They have thus lagged behind their colleagues in anthropology, although even in the latter case the expansion of interest in gender – the cultural systems by which roles are assigned to men and women – has been relatively recent. It is worth remembering that in 1950, when the Dutch scholar Hendrik Chabot defended his Ph.D. dissertation *Verwantschap, stand en sexe in Zuid-Celebes*, gender issues were of little interest to anthropologists (at that time mostly male) then working in Southeast Asia, and if discussed at all were typically treated briefly in a section on “family life.” Influences from the feminist anthropology that coalesced in the 1970s and the debates thus stimulated came somewhat slowly; as late as

1 Given the international audience to which this journal is directed, I have concentrated here on recent publications in English.
2 Translated as *Kinship, Status and Gender in South Celebes*.
1990, Shelly Errington and Jane Monnig Atkinson, editors of a path-breaking collection on insular Southeast Asia, remarked that very few publications in the region focused specifically on women, and that gender as a topic had excited little attention. Less than a decade afterwards, however, Mary Steedly could note that for anthropologists gender-related research had become one of Southeast Asia’s “primary growth areas.”

In Western historiography we can also track an intellectual shift from an initial focus on “women” to broader and more refined analyses of gender relationships, although the orientation is still towards female experience. One can only be struck by the contrasting “female gap” in the standard histories of Southeast Asian societies, a fact that is of particular note because women’s relatively “high status” has long been claimed by historians as a regional feature. As early as 1944, when George Cœdès published his influential *Histoire ancienne des états hindouisés d’Extrême-Orient*, he remarked specifically on “the importance of the role conferred on women and of relationships in the maternal line.” Over forty years later Anthony Reid was even more forthright, arguing that a unifying feature of Southeast Asia was “the prominence of women in descent, ritual matters, marketing and agriculture.” The comparatively favorable position held by females, he contended, represented one aspect of the social system in which a distinctive Southeast Asian pattern was especially evident.

Various reasons might be advanced to explain the general absence of women in the standard Southeast Asian histories. In the first place, the history of women (and subsequently, of gender) has only attracted attention in western scholarship over the last thirty years, and Southeast Asian studies is still responding to theories and methodologies developed elsewhere. Second, any research progress in Southeast Asian history is destined to be slow because the number of specialists with an interest in women and gender is small, and because their training requires the time-consuming and difficult acquisition of specialized language skills, notably when working with indigenous sources. A third impediment is the limited nature of written material, especially before the twentieth century; in no Southeast Asian country, for instance, can we find the ongoing discussions of male–female relations that have been uncovered in China’s immense official and literary archives. While these factors provide the most obvious explanations for the historical indifference to women’s concerns, it could also be argued that a more invidious reason has been a long-standing preoccupation with the origins of contemporary states, and the tendency to see “history” primarily in terms of its contribution to an understanding of political evolution.

As feminist writers have long recognized, the definition of national history as “good” history is destined to exclude or marginalize women because it focuses on issues such as inter-state diplomacy, political leadership and warfare where men play the major role and where the written sources privilege male activities. More specifically, when the national epic has already been laid out according to certain accepted formulae, the experiences of women can only be admitted as footnotes and marginalia. Histories already articulated in

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6 Cœdès 1944, pp. 7–10; Reid 1988, pp. 6, 146, 162.
7 See for example, the long list of citations in http://hua.umf.maine.edu/China/womtxt.html
8 Scott 1992, p. 49; Enloe 1989, p. 64.
terms of themes such as the suppressed people, the emergence of leaders, the awakening of
popular consciousness, and the successful revolution have proved highly resistant to the
incorporation of female perspectives. In 1932 the Filipino historian Gregorio Zaide was
ahead of his time in arguing that “a true history” of the nation would give adequate attention
to the role played by women in our famous struggle for political emancipation.” At
home at least his exhortation did not fall on deaf ears; though the total output of pre-war
publications relating to women’s history is small, the overwhelming majority originated in
the Philippines, with Encarnacion Alzona’s *The Filipino Woman* a foremost example.6
Nonetheless, through the very act of relegating “women” to a separate chapter, Zaide’s classic
*History of the Katipunan* presents female participation as simply an insertion, an interrup-
tion in a metanarrative dominated by men. The division of Southeast Asia into colonized
compartments (with Thailand occupying its own category) encouraged the tendency to
look inwards, and when European officials took an interest in what we would today term
“gender relations,” it was usually in regard to local matters of inheritance and land rights.7
Given the specificity of this country-bound approach, there was little incentive or opportu-
nity to adopt a regional perspective, although *Women East and West*, by Magnus Hirschfeld,
the pioneer sexologist, offered an insightful if impressionistic review of cultural differences
in sexual behavior written after a period traveling in Asia.8

With the post-war establishment of “Southeast Asia” as an academic field, the popular-
ity of research topics related to nationalism, independence, and political leadership largely
eliminated any concerns with female agency. Published in 1950, a modest overview of
women in Vietnam went virtually unremarked, and even Indonesianists (who have since
produced the largest body of gender research) paid little heed to the translation of a pio-
neneering French monograph on Indonesian women in 1960.9 David Marr’s *Vietnamese
Tradition on Trial*, published in 1981, was unusual in the attention the author accorded “the
question of women” in Vietnam’s nationalist movement, but his discussion was motivated
at least in part by personal unease at the disjuncture between socialist goals and lived reali-
ties.10 Elsewhere in Southeast Asia historians rarely felt impelled to invoke a “female” per-
spective, and if they did so it was almost invariably as an appendix to the national epic. The
reunification of Vietnam in 1975, for example, provided the occasion for the publication of
*La femme au Vietnam*, which linked the “emancipation of southern women” to reunification
of the country and the institution of socialist goals.11 When the Indonesian Government
declared 1994 to be the Year of Women, Tourism and Youth, three (male) historians were
hurriedly commissioned to produce a commemorative volume of heroic female achieve-
ment.12 A similar approach is followed in a celebratory book for the 1996 Philippine Revo-
lution, which consists of over thirty biographies of women who all “loved their country

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9 Zaide 1939, pp. 19–24; Alzona 1934.
10 Lustéguy 1935; Faber 1895.
11 Hirschfield 1935.
12 Coughlin 1950; Vreede-de Stuers 1960.
14 Mai and Le 1976.
and cherished the freedom of their people. All made great sacrifices and are indeed great
examples of human altruism and dedication to the land of their birth.”

Against this background, one must be wary of adopting what has been described as a
triumphal “me too” attitude that “discovers” past instances of goddesses, priestesses,
women warriors, queens and huntresses. Fulminating against a seemingly indifferent disci-
pline raises the very real prospect of “ghettoization,” which runs counter to the goals of
bringing women into the historical mainstream and is inimical to the interests of a field
like Southeast Asia where specialists are relatively few. At the beginning of the twenty-first
century it is therefore heartening that a new cohort of (still largely male) historians is
more attuned to female sensitivities, more cautious about rendering the past essentially in
terms of men’s activities, and simultaneously more aware of the difficulties involved in
any re-orientation. If the field has not yet fully accepted that the doings of women are as
legitimate a topic for investigation as those of men, there is at least a general view that an
appreciation of male–female relationships is critical if we really want to understand how a
particular community functioned.”

In 1999, in a frank rewriting of what will remain a
standard and highly influential text, the late O. W. Wolters commented that gender studies
had hitherto not attracted his attention. However, he now doubted “whether any [other
topic] would contribute more to rendering early Southeast Asian societies credible or
...full-bodied.” In a somewhat similar mode, Craig Reynolds argued that “gender relations
in Thai history should not become a sub-field in Thai historiography, a specialized
compartment of Thai history, but that it is really central to the history of the Thai/Tai
people and the Tai states in mainland Southeast Asia. Studying gender relations could
help us untangle nationalist historiography which reads the past in the image of the
nation-state.”

Although few male scholars have been so unequivocal, it is now not unusual to find
some attention to women even in the formerly neglected area of national history. Thus in
1997, although Martin Stuart-Fox insisted that “the historiography of Laos” required
“a narrative that provides support for the existence of a nation state,” his index included
entries to women and gender, signaling a trend that one expects will become more
general. We are probably justified in expecting some acceleration as academics respond
to the interests of an increasing female population in undergraduate classrooms, and as
Southeast Asian studies feels the effects of a more general rise in the number of female
historians employed as researchers and teachers. In the United States in 1979 women
comprised only 16 percent of new history Ph.D.s, but in the last twenty years the figure has
grown to around 40 percent. One could well claim that the somewhat greater space

20 For example, Day 2002, especially Chapter 2; Stuart-Fox 1997; Lieberman 2003.
number of female undergraduates increased by 18 percent to around 56 percent of the total as opposed to
to 10 percent increase for men. In the same time period the number of male full-time graduate students rose by
20 percent, compared to 61 percent for full-time women. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for
accorded women in the revised edition of *In Search of Southeast Asia* (now renamed as *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia*) can be explained not merely by contemporary interest in social history, but by the fact that Jean Gelman Taylor joined the previously all-male team.  

**EARLY HISTORY**

The remainder of this essay reviews some of the current trends in Southeast Asian historiography as they pertain to the study of women and gender. I have given particular attention to research on pre-twentieth century history because I believe it is in this area that the need for further study is greatest. The limited scholarly output dealing with Southeast Asian societies prior to about 1900 has accentuated the imbalance between our expanding knowledge of twentieth-century developments and our relative ignorance about the more distant past. However, there are hopeful signs of increasing interest in the history of women and gender in pre-modern Southeast Asia, with indications that research is following a pattern observable in other world areas. A first stage, the process of recovering women in the historical record, is typically followed by a more inclusive approach that stresses the ways in which women and men interact, rendering “gender” an attractive organizing principle for historical work. It has also been common in women’s history for general overviews to advance broad propositions ahead of case studies, with subsequent questioning encouraging scholars to assess the evidence by analyzing specific contexts. Again, a similar process can be found in Southeast Asia. As the received wisdom of “high female status” is interrogated, there is a new insistence that such claims be supported with solid findings. The ripples of these debates have made their presence felt even in Asian archaeology, where specialists have traditionally been reluctant to address matters of gender. While feminist archaeologists have criticized what they see as the bias of a male-dominated discipline, other researchers feel that there is a temptation to push the data too far, and to look for conclusions that cannot be supported on the available evidence.

Warnings about the need for caution are particularly pertinent to Southeast Asia. In the Philippines, for example, large cemeteries with over two hundred burials do exist for pre-Hispanic times, but the first application of scientific sexing procedures was only initiated in 1983 and problems of preservation have resulted in a lack of the mortuary data necessary for examining differential treatment of males and females. In other sites, however, it is possible to determine the sex of skeletal remains and individual finds attesting the high status of individual females can be sometimes quite dramatic. The current furor over the significance of the 2004 discovery of a three-foot adult female skeleton, reputed to be about 18,000 years old, on the Indonesian island of Flores is a case in point. Other finds are less controversial. Charles Higham and Rachanie Thosarat have drawn attention to the grave of

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24 Nelson 2002, p. 73.
26 The issues are explained in http://www.time.com/time/asia/magazine/article/0,13673,501050606-1066965-2,00.html
a woman found in a district of southeastern Thailand occupied from about 2000 BCE to 1500 BCE. This so-called “princess” was evidently a person of standing in the community, since she wore several necklaces as well as a shell bracelet and ear ornaments and was interred with about 120,000 shell-disc beads.27 Excavating a skeletal sample of fifty-seven individuals in another site in northeast Thailand, Michael Pietrusewsky and Michele Toomay Douglas found that the sex ratio gave no indications of overt bias by sex; although more females than males died as young adults (presumably because of pregnancy and child-bearing), around 7 percent survived beyond the age of fifty. One might expect that in the future more sophisticated analytical techniques and the identification of sex differences will enable archaeologists to gain a better idea of comparative health, especially in relation to conditions such as osteoporosis, iron deficiency, and anemia. Some intriguing and as yet unexplained findings are already on the table. Can we infer anything at all from the fact that women buried in one cemetery in Thailand had fewer teeth than their menfolk?28

Archaeologists are also beginning to look more closely at how men and women are represented in material evidence from ancient sites, such as Thai rock-art, and to consider the possible technological changes suggested by the presence of women’s tools like bark beaters and spindle whorls among mortuary goods. In noting the increased number of spindle whorls in Visayan burial sites during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries Elisabeth Bacus speculates that female textile production may have expanded because of greater access to suitable weaving materials and enhanced participation in trade.29 Discoveries of locally made earthenware are of particular interest when thinking about the sexual division of labor, since later evidence from Southeast Asia indicates that women almost invariably played a dominant role in production. It is thought, for example, that much of the Lapita ware found in New Guinea and eastern Indonesia was produced by women, always remembering that pots themselves are not amenable to gender analysis.30

The boundaries between archaeology and early history in Southeast Asia have long been blurred, but the emergence of written sources from about the fifth century or so is generally considered to mark what has been termed the “classical” period. Yet the availability of such records, surviving primarily in the form of stone inscriptions, does not represent a watershed in our ability to reconstruct Southeast Asia’s social history. One can make a comparison, for instance, with Anglo-Saxon England, where Henrietta Leyser depicts the coming of Christianity and the literate material it engendered as breaking the “silence of centuries” by opening a new chapter in the reconstruction of a more female-oriented past.31 It would be difficult to make the same argument in Southeast Asia. Though Indian influence is apparent in the increasing number of inscriptions, both in Sanskrit and local languages, these linguistically testing and often obscure sources are only indirectly concerned with male–female relations, serving primarily to glorify the royal genealogy, or to record matters such as the establishment of a temple, the dedication of rice lands, the drawing of village boundaries, or the collection of taxes.

The largest body of Southeast Asian stone inscriptions, consisting of two thousand or more, is from Cambodia, and although they have been studied primarily for the reconstruction of political history, it is heartening to see the kinds of insights that can be offered by scholars sensitive to changes in language and context. Michael Vickery has shown, for instance, that in the initial stages of Hindu influence non-menstruating women could occupy official positions in religious ritual, and could serve as scribes and record keepers. Trudy Jacobsen’s recent work has tracked the continuing influence of Khmer queens, giving particular attention to early examples of autonomous female rulers, the relationship between women and the land, and the transmission of sovereignty through the maternal line. Though there is only one known instance of an inscription composed by a woman, a careful investigation of the original Sanskrit and Old Khmer material could almost certainly yield further information on specific matters ranging from the gender balance in the slaves donated to temple foundations to particularities of the vocabulary used in propitiating goddesses.

Obviously, such research requires linguistic and epigraphic skills that only a very few specialists have acquired. For instance, there has been no detailed study of women in the inscriptions of Burma for seventy years, and it is unclear how much can be added to Pe Maung Tin’s article of 1935. On the other hand, while it is unlikely that early Thai material would supply sufficient detail to support a monograph, preliminary research suggests that inscriptions from Sukhothai and the northern muang could yield useful information on elite female donors and the part played by royal women in diplomacy. Examination of ninth- and tenth-century inscriptions from Java show that men usually held village positions and were considered to be the head of the household, but that women entered into contracts, incurred debts, owned property in their own right, and played a part in village decision-making. Balinese inscriptions also contain a sprinkling of information concerning financial transactions involving women of means, including patronage of religious foundations. However, historians interested in questions of gender must be prepared for disappointment; even a close review of these early inscriptions has not been able to move very much beyond the broad comments made by previous scholars, although occasionally a particular case affirms situations well known from later sources. For example, while the economic independence of ordinary Southeast Asian women has become a truism in the literature, as early as 907 CE a Javanese edict ruled that a husband ignorant of his deceased wife’s debts was not responsible for repayment.

“EARLY MODERNITY”

The situation is very different when we enter what is now increasingly termed (with some reservations) the “early modern period” in Southeast Asia. Although regional periodization

34 Pe Maung Tin 1935.
35 B. Andaya 2002; Terwiel unpublished.
36 Van Setten van der Meer 1979, pp. 94–96; Barrett Jones 1979, pp. 96–98; Suprodjo 1993, p. 89; Dr Jan Wisseman Christie, personal communication, 24 April, 4 May 2006.
will always be problematic, Anthony Reid has reminded us that the late fifteenth century can be distinguished from preceding centuries in a critical regard: historical sources are far more extensive. It is not just that the arrival of Europeans generated new and often rich material, augmented by accounts from visitors from China and elsewhere. There is also a significant rise in indigenous documentation because of the shift from royal inscriptions to court chronicles, and the expanding corpus of religious texts. If historians interested in the female experience can pose new questions of both new and familiar sources, the potential for future research is promising. It is almost certain, however, that whether questioned or supported, the vexed question of women’s “high status” in Southeast Asia (which Anthony Reid specifically addressed nearly twenty years ago) will be a recurring theme. Whatever the findings, the greatest challenge will be to ensure that research finds its way into more general works. Unfortunately, relevant essays can sometimes go unnoticed because they are simply one of several articles in a journal, or are included in a collection where the bulk of the contributions concentrate on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To date, only one collection (Other Pasts) has focused absolutely on women and gender issues in the early modern period (conventionally ending around 1800). 

Apart from rare cases, it would be hard for Ph.D students or junior scholars to embark on a “female-focused” topic for this period, since (with the exception of travel accounts) archival and literary sources rarely identify “women” as a separate category. The majority of the historians who contributed to Other Pasts had not previously worked on women or gender issues, but they all had a strong grasp of the primary material and could draw on a reservoir of stored knowledge. Their ability to range over different types of sources was a distinct advantage when information was scarce, and demonstrated that meeting the intellectual challenge of “good questions, poor data” could stimulate creative solutions. For Cambodia’s shadowy “middle period,” Ashley Thompson’s reading of sixteenth-century inscriptional evidence in conjunction with an orally transmitted legend adroitly addressed the question of how historical methodologies can be adapted to reveal something of past concerns when the sources are silent.

Several other possible lines of inquiry emerged during the conference that provided the basis for the Other Pasts collection. One of these was the influence of imported religions and belief systems in reshaping the relationship between men and women. An obvious area for research is the Philippines, where the Spanish became intensively involved in a missionizing effort. Although there has been a long-standing interest in the position of women in the Philippines,41 and in the role of the Filipino baylan/catalonan (pre-Hispanic indigenous priests and priestesses), Carolyn Brewer’s contribution to the conference volume heralded the publication of her revised dissertation. Shamanism, Catholicism and Gender Relations in Colonial Philippines, 1521–1685 is the first monograph to offer an holistic interpretation of the relationship between Filipino women and the Christianizing

37 Reid 1993, p. 10.
38 Reid 1988a.
40 Thompson 2000, pp. 27–46.
41 For example, Mananzan 1987.
Spaniards in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Her controversial challenge to established historiography will certainly generate some response in the historical literature. In the meantime, other relevant publications have appeared. Although Brewer gives some attention to the beateros, or houses for indigenous lay sisters, 2005 saw the welcome re-publication of Luciano P. R. Santiago’s four articles in a single volume, entitled To Love and to Suffer: The Development of the Religious Congregations for Women in the Spanish Philippines, 1565–1898. While Santiago’s collection will undoubtedly remain a standard citation for many years to come, an interesting companion piece is Nhung Tuyet Tran’s recent essay on the Catholic houses in northern Vietnam in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Another scholar working on this period, Nola Cooke, also draws on material from the Missions-Étrangères de Paris to provide fascinating insights on the ways in which women in southern Vietnam responded to missionizing efforts and on the manner in which Vietnamese situated Christianity within existing belief systems.

Although the depth of the mission sources has made it possible to think in terms of a monograph focusing specifically on women and “early modern” Christianity, it seems unlikely that a similar work could be produced for Buddhism or Islam, especially when so few scholars have been sympathetic to the nuances of gender. In the case of Islam, says Virginia Matheson Hooker, “history has not been the primary discipline for researchers on Muslim women, although many writings using other disciplines provide some historical context.” Nonetheless, recent publications have demonstrated the roles that women could assume, such as sponsors of Islamic learning. Merle Ricklefs, for instance, gives considerable attention to the religious leadership of Ratu Pakubuwana in the Kartasura court during the early eighteenth century, and Leonard Andaya’s essay on one of the seventeenth-century Acehnese queens provides additional detail on the constraints and opportunities open to an influential and devout Muslim woman. It can only be hoped that this new research will find its way into larger studies, and rectify a situation in which a collection on women in the medieval Islamic world (a volume of nearly five hundred pages) omits any mention of Muslim societies in Southeast Asia.

A second area of interest that emerged in the course of the Other Pasts conference was the prominence of women in the market, often touted as a “Southeast Asian” characteristic. As George Dutton has noted for Vietnam, European sources are usually the most revealing in regard to economic matters, but surviving material may not meet expectations. For instance, Portuguese documents from Southeast Asia cannot match those available for seventeenth-century Brazil, and the letters written by English factors from their Indonesian posts are meager when compared with the voluminous correspondence of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). As studies of individual areas have shown, the interaction between

43 Santiago 2006.
44 Tran 2005; Cooke 2004.
45 Hooker 2003, p. 351.
47 Dutton 2003.
VOC representatives and local women, both villagers and elite, was a significant aspect of daily life in virtually every trading post that the Company maintained. Undoubtedly, however, the most consistent body of material comes from the VOC administrative center of Batavia. Jean Gelman Taylor’s early work alerted historians to the importance of marriages and family alliances in the formation of early colonial society, while Leonard Blussé provided further evidence of the value of the VOC archives in resurrecting Batavia’s social history, particularly the world of women.48 Only in exceptional cases, however, are we able to track a woman’s life over an extended period. Blussé’s biography of the feisty Eurasian, Cornelia van Nijenroode (1629–1691?), and her legal battles with her Dutch husband provides a rare view of one woman’s efforts to combat the gender inequality that typified European law in the seventeenth century. Battles were often fought out over custody, as graphically shown by Dhiravat na Pombejra in his study of the Mon trader, Osoet Pegua, in seventeenth-century Ayutthaya.49 Long-neglected VOC documents, especially court and notarial records, still preserved in present-day Jakarta have provided the framework for a major new study of Batavia’s social history by Hendrik Niemeijer in which relationships between men and women are central. Batavia: Een koloniale samenleving in de zeventiende eeuw will become a standard citation for the next generation of scholars, and it is to be hoped that it will soon be translated into English.50

A third area on which discussions focused was indigenous literature, which holds out enormous potential for exploring regional differences and similarities in representations of women, and for investigating the ambiguities inherent in cultural understandings of “femaleness.” Obviously such research will have a particular appeal for those who can read the material without difficulty, since a literary piece or an author can provide a defined, bounded and “manageable” topic. In consequence, university departments in Southeast Asia as elsewhere have witnessed a virtual explosion of student papers, theses, and academic articles dealing with the representation of “women” in premodern literature. Here I cite only a few examples available in English, all of which supply excellent bibliographies. Developing her approach in an English department rather than Malay Studies, Ruzy Hashim has drawn on literary theory to develop a critique of the depiction of women in Malay court texts, while arguing that a gender hierarchy solidified by patriarchal strategies ran counter to the position accorded women in Islamic teachings. In Women of the Kakawin World, Helen Creese skillfully interweaves the motifs of gender, literature and history in Old Javanese texts from Java and Bali to provide a model approach for scholars working elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Olga Dror’s 2004 article on the eighteenth-century Vietnamese poet Doan thi Diem signals her forthcoming monograph on the cult of the goddess Lieu Hanh, often termed the Mother of the Vietnamese people.51

Ultimately, the key criterion in gauging the validity of regional claims for women’s “high status” is the degree to which the difference between “Southeast Asia” and other world areas can be defended. This provokes questions not only about the acceptability of

49 Pombejra 2000.
51 Hashim 2003, p. 13; Dror 2003 (a revised version will be published by the University of Hawai‘i Press in late 2006); Dror 2004.
generalizing across such a very diverse area, but also about the tendency to essentialize “Chinese” and “Indian” women and to make broad assertions about their relative subordination in comparison to their Southeast Asian sisters. Not surprisingly, it is among scholars working on Vietnam where the acceptance of cultural clichés has generated the most trenchant criticism. Nhung Tuyet Tran, for instance, contends that specialists on Vietnam have largely ignored the multifarious manifestations of femaleness in China, and have exaggerated the differences between the situation of Vietnamese and Chinese women. In some cases the creation of stereotypes in both popular and academic literature has its own history. Chie Ikeya has argued that British colonial administrators, previously exposed to Indian practices such as sati, regarded the position of Burmese women as unambiguously favorable. In accepting and reiterating this judgment, she maintains, the British also ignored a long indigenous tradition that regarded females as spiritual tempters and potentially a disruptive element in men's lives. Bearing these caveats in mind, a volume by the present author, *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia*, adopts a regional perspective that deals with broad questions regarding religious, economic and political change while remaining cognizant of the extensive literature on neighboring world areas.

**THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

The beginning of the nineteenth century has traditionally marked a historiographical divide in Southeast Asia, although as yet there are few case studies of how the expansion of European control affected indigenous women. It is far from clear whether the western academic bias that makes 1800 or so an artificial gatekeeper is as significant in the evolution of gender relations as it became in the political and diplomatic arena. An essay on the activities of women in the central Javanese courts, for example, quite properly transverses the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Furthermore, while European documentation has fostered a growing corpus of research on the domestic interface between colonial and indigenous society under “high colonialism,” a space for women is less visible in studies dealing with the earlier part of the century. It is fortunate, therefore, that this period saw a marked expansion of indigenous writings in which female characters are often presented as more than one-dimensional. With its heritage of literacy, Vietnam provides a foremost example in Nguyen Du's *The Tale of Kieu*, which, while affirming the moral responsibility of individuals is also a remarkably modern account of a women’s fortitude. Elsewhere, as Nancy Florida and others have shown, male writings on desirable female qualities suggest a continuing and increasing female audience for literary production. Increasingly, too, nineteenth-century material can be confidently ascribed to a woman. The erotic, acerbic and insightful poems of Ho Xuan Huong (1775?–1821?) are

52 Tran 2004.
53 Ikeya 2006.
54 B. Andaya 2006.
56 Florida 1996.
perhaps exceptional; a century later the letters of Raden Kartini (1879–1904) are less caustic but are equally cogent in asserting her desire for greater male–female equality. With the pool of accessible material expanding, a compilation of women’s writings for pre-twentieth century Southeast Asia becomes increasingly feasible.57

One feature that does set the nineteenth century aside is the new availability of publications by European women who joined their husbands, or sometimes, like the intrepid Ida Pfeiffer or Isabella Bird or Anna Leonowens, traveled or worked independently. The “female gaze” that now augments male perceptions may itself have been culturally biased but, as Susan Morgan notes, the vantage point of European women was also “importantly different” from that of men.58 Inevitably, much of the investigation of male–female relationships in the period of high colonialism turns on the sexual encounter of European men and their native partners, a “cultural mediation” which was often inseparable from the economic exploitation embedded in the imperialist project. Ann Stoler’s *Capitalism and Confrontation* has set a high standard for this type of investigation, supplemented by a scattering of essays that accord particular attention to the nineteenth century.59 Nonetheless, despite the voluminous paperwork generated by European administrations, material relating to women is not always easy to locate in official sources and colonial depositories should not be regarded as an untapped gold-mine. As Elsbeth Locher-Scholten reminds us, “colonialism has always been largely a men’s affair,” and Dutch archival material on Indonesia has been described as “disappointing” for those investigating women’s history before the 1920s.60 Sometimes, it is true, nineteenth-century European laws and regulations could initiate a cumulative body of official reports and news items regarding matters such as prostitution, venereal disease, and public health, presumably accounting for several articles with this particular focus.61 Colonial governments also made concerted efforts to codify and amend indigenous law, and the documentation thus produced has supplied another potential source for tracking changes in male–female relations. Historians of Vietnam, for instance, have expended considerable effort in comparing the allegedly favorable position of women in the so-called Le Code with that compiled in the nineteenth century.62 The influence of missionaries and reform-minded colonial administrators in Southeast Asia has also been noted; Europeans were almost universally opposed to the payment of bride wealth, which was equated to “buying” a wife, and to a considerable extent the changes tracked by Sita van Bemmelen in Minahasa (northern Sulawesi) from the mid-nineteenth century were duplicated elsewhere.63 We still know too little about the ways in which women were affected by economic changes, but it is pleasing to see that a generation of scholarship has made real progress. In 1978 Norman Owen, an authority on the Philippines, commented that there was at that point little examination of the extent to

60 Locher-Scholten and Anke Niehof 1992, p. 3.
which the position of women had changed over time. Subsequent historical research on
the Philippines in particular has greatly illuminated the ways in which urbanization and
shifting economic patterns in the nineteenth century affected the lives of working women,
simultaneously allowing for female exploitation while providing opportunities to display
ingenuity, assertiveness, and entrepreneurship. There are presumably many other areas
where women’s efforts to make a place for themselves in a largely male domain can be
given greater depth. For instance, social commentary by contemporary women artists in
Southeast Asia has attracted some attention, but a recent publication by Eloisa Hernandez
on nineteenth-century Philippines, when juxtaposed with commentaries on modern
media, shows how far women have traveled.

A prominent theme in scholarship on Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century has
been resistance to the foreign presence, and “rebellion” has often been interpreted as a fore-
runner to a burgeoning spirit of national identity. Women are rarely introduced as actors
in a domain that seems quintessentially male, although a recent monograph on premodern
Southeast Asian warfare actually gives some consideration to the place of women, and
regrets that the material is not more forthcoming. The notable exceptions to the “female
gap” of course, are the “warrior women” who have in some cases become national icons,
like the Trung sisters, who led the Vietnamese against the Chinese in 43 CE, Thao Suranari,
who repelled Lao forces advancing across northeast Thailand in 1827, and Cut Nyak Dhien,
the Acehnese woman who joined her husband to fight the Dutch in the late nineteenth
century. The one area where female resistance seems to have been discussed in more detail
is the Philippines, where the centennial of the revolution against Spain in 1996 inspired a
number of studies, primarily addressed to evaluating the participation of women in the
anti-colonial movement and in the conflict itself.

There are obviously other environments where the colonial presence had only a
marginal impact, and here relations between men and women can probably be most
readily explored in indigenous material. However, there is no easily accessible “index” and
the compilation of data will of necessity be slow. On the other hand, new translations,
computer technology, electronic databases and the feasibility of word searches make such
enterprises easier to contemplate. For instance, it would be intriguing to track the ways in
which the Islamic reformism of the nineteenth century affected the lives of women, espe-
cially in terms of elite behavior. The valuable Malay Concordance set up by Ian Proudfoot
at the Australian National University is much used, but there is a growing pool of other-
wise rare sources that have been placed in the public domain via websites. As an example,
I can cite the English translation of F. S. A. de Clerq’s *Bijdragen tot de kennis der Residentie
Ternate*, by Paul Taylor and Marie Richards, now accessible online. A local document dated
1261 AH (around 1843) records that the Sultan of Ternate forbade a number of customs
“because they have not been laid down in the Book of God.” The body of a deceased ruler
was no longer to be venerated; wives of notables would no longer be permitted to wear

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65 Hernandez 2004 can be read with Datuin 2002.
67 For example, Soriano 1995; Doran 1999; Doran 2001; B. Andaya 2001; Roces 2001.
sarongs of sago leaves and high hats with balls of red cloth during the funeral procession; nor could they perform the *lego-lego* dance or accompany the coffin to the graveyard.  

Less distracted by the colonial presence, contemporary work on nineteenth-century Thailand also has the capacity to yield intriguing results. In recent times, several historians have considered the “gender regime” associated with the Bangkok court, examining not only changing notions of family and husband–wife interaction, but the convoluted relationships among women within the royal household and in elite establishments.68 In *Subject Siam*, Tamara Loos has drawn from her 1999 dissertation, “Gender Adjudicated,” and from subsequent research to compile a study that makes gender central to the processes of transnational communication, legal reform and royal intervention by which Siam became “modern.” At the same time, *Subject Siam* is a salutary reminder of the manner in which the vocabulary of modernity could become an effective instrument in the hands of those who favored the maintenance of existing gender hierarchies.  

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The twentieth century marks a distinctive chapter in the historiography of women (and consequently of gender) in Southeast Asia because it has spawned such a wide range of source materials, variously written, visual, or oral. In consequence, it has become the primary research arena. Developments like the initiation of the Ethical Policy in the Philippines or the onset of American colonialism in the Philippines provide a further incentive to see the beginning of the twentieth century as the dawn of a new era in women’s history.71 Specialists on earlier periods will note somewhat wryly that “modern history” has acquired the all-important imprimatur of “relevance,” as anthropologists, political scientists, and development specialists all strive to construct an historical context for contemporary work. Yet despite the frequent invocation of “globalization” and the common themes it generates, research across all disciplines in Southeast Asia remains largely country-focused. Comparative work like that by Penny Edwards is rare, and a volume on “Southeast Asia” typically consists of an editorial introduction followed by individual essays focused on separate societies.72 The bulk of research on women’s and gender issues (often subsumed under “development studies”) has been carried out in Indonesia, where anthropology has traditionally been so dominant, and the matrilineal society of Minangkabau exercises a continuing attraction.73 Burma remains understudied, with Mi Mi Khaing’s *World of Burmese Women* still a standard reference; but there are strong showings in Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia and increasingly in Vietnam. Local scholars are making important contributions, and the expansion of a domestic as well as an international audience for their work is reflected in Mayoury Ngaosyvathn’s decision to publish

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70 Loos 1999; Loos 2005a.
71 For example, Gouda 1995; Locher-Scholten 2000; Holt 2002.
72 For example, Karim 1995; but see Edwards 2003.
73 On Minangkabau see, for instance, Van Reenen 1996; Blackwood 2000; Hadler 2000; Sanday 2002.
bi-lingual Lao Women: Yesterday and Today in both English and Lao.74 Thus, although in 1993 Mary Steedly could still remark on the anomaly between the statistical presence of women and the absence of female experiences in the ethnographic record, this discrepancy is rapidly lessening.75 As a result, a number of areas (for instance, the position of women in religion, and the changing nature of the family) seem ripe for comparative research.76

While far in arrears, contributions by historians are also increasingly evident, including a growing body of publications in local languages. Although a full review of trends in twentieth-century history is beyond the scope of this essay, it seems that the most common anchor for monographs has been state policies, education and women’s participation in national and resistance movements.77 The overlap between “literature” and history, long evident in Southeast Asian studies, has also encouraged historians to think about the manner in which ostensibly fictional material can be deployed to impart messages about maleness and femaleness.78 Nonetheless, despite an increasing preference for the term “gender” and a general acceptance of male–female complementarity in Southeast Asian societies, “gender studies” is still dominated by research by women on women. Yet as Joan Scott pointed out twenty years ago, the term “gender” carries with it the implication that information about women is necessarily information about men as well.79 In other words, a gendered framework should be based on the assumption that an understanding of “women” requires historians to think about men in different kinds of ways, and be alert to the range of strategies by which masculinity is culturally created. Research from this perspective is as yet weak in Southeast Asia, although some advances have been made. While “third gender” studies have only recently appeared, historians of the future will find an invaluable store of information in the research on contemporary times now being published.80

The historical study of women and gender in Southeast Asia is a new field. At first glance it might seem as if Southeast Asian historians have been left in the wake of the theoretical and methodological advances made in other disciplines and in other world areas. Nonetheless, a growing number of analyses that trace the manner in which gender roles have been created, reshaped or rejected in the past are providing social scientists with a stronger basis for understanding that problematic concept, “change.” Furthermore, the region as a whole can bring a useful heritage to the academic table. Conversations between disciplines have always been intrinsic to Southeast Asian studies, and the multi-authored collections that presently characterize research on women and gender are testimony to this collegial collaboration. It is in some ways a fitting coincidence that the anthropologist

74 Khaing 1984; Ngaosyvathn 1993.
76 For example, Carsten 1997; Claussen 2001; P. Taylor 2004; and the contributions in Findly 2000; Hooker and Saikal 2004.
78 For instance, Hooker 2000.
Rosemary Firth was completing her pioneering manuscript on Malay housekeeping at the very time George Cœdès was affirming “the importance of the role conferred on women” in his masterly *Histoire ancienne.*

As yet, however, specialists have not reached a unanimous acceptance of the idea of a Southeast Asian culture area where women’s “high status” is a defining feature. Historians have been among the most fervent advocates of regional coherence, but still find the formulation of overviews to be taxing, not only because of the array of cultures, languages, economies, religions and modes of government that typify “Southeast Asia” but because of the disparity between the historical work accomplished or indeed possible in different countries and different locales. While it is theoretically necessary to understand how gender operates within a particular context before regional and global connections can be drawn, historians will continue to face the methodological difficulties of capturing even glimpses of the past in societies that are primarily oral, and of deciding when a bank of case studies is sufficient to advance to broader propositions. Yet if we accept that comparative studies are “the ultimate justification for regional studies,” it follows that the incorporation of a gendered dimension will foster more nuanced discussions about Southeast Asia’s alleged distinctiveness and render conversations with authorities in other world areas more interesting and more rewarding.

As we move towards this gendered vision, an obvious question concerns future directions and priorities. In a field where generalizations have typically preceded detailed investigation, a primary task must surely be to return to sub-regions as a basis for further analysis. It is in this context that historians can best exploit the skills that have long characterized Southeast Asian scholarship – a deep knowledge of local languages, an ability to see source material in unlikely places, and a commitment to collaborative and cross-disciplinary communication. As the number of case studies increases, scholarly exchanges will become more informed, the comparative exercise more disciplined, and gender more central to regional historiography. Although many questions will probably remain permanently unanswered, the probable expansion of this field is an exciting prospect. At this point one can confidently reiterate that in Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, a greater appreciation of the historical experiences underpinning the cultural constructions of gender will “provide new perspectives on old questions . . . [and will] redefine the old questions in new terms.”

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81 Firth 1943; Cœdès 1944.
82 Wolters 1999, p. 235
83 Scott 1986, p. 1075.
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