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Warring Societies of Pre-Colonial Southeast Asia: Local Cultures of Conflict within a Regional Context

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Warring Societies of Pre-Colonial Southeast Asia: Local Cultures of Conflict within a Regional Context

Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2018. 230 pages.

War! One would be hard pressed to find a topic that either historically or contemporaneously has received an equivalent amount of coverage. From the wars of the mythological past to the guerrilla conflicts of the twenty-first century, warfare seems to be a topic perpetually leading someone somewhere to put ink to paper. Ranging from the socioeconomics of warfare to the possibility of military revolutions, the study not just of warfare in general but of select individual wars could quite possibly carry their own academic departments. Under such circumstances, developing new perspectives from which to analyze the topic could appear to be a difficult task. Nevertheless, recent historiographical developments, provided by the “new military histories,” have shown areas, such as global comparisons of military technology or the role of the environment in warfare, that remain ripe for future examination. To these recent developments, *Warring Societies of Pre-Colonial Southeast Asia* provides an inventive avenue through which to simultaneously approach the local and regional dynamics of warfare.

The volume was edited by preeminent historians of warfare in early modern Southeast Asia, Michael W. Charney and Kathryn Wellen. As a historian of Burma and professor of Asian and Military History at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Charney has taken a leading role in advancing the study of Southeast Asian warfare. Conducting pathbreaking work on pre-Islamic South Sulawesi, Kathryn Wellen is currently historian for the Royal (Netherlands) Academy of Arts and Sciences. As the editors themselves effectively describe, the volume contains several historiographical interventions. First, within the scholarship on the global history of warfare, the collected works provide valuable insights into a region underrepresented in the existing literature. Second, the editors situate the volume in response to three existing approaches to the history of warfare in Southeast Asia: the so-called *old* cultural, state formation, and military technology. While the latter two approaches are relatively self-explanatory and require little elaboration, the “*old* cultural approach” emphasizes borderline-essentialized regional Southeast Asian characteristics, such as the

role of bloodless conflict resolution and an emphasis on controlling people. By focusing on regional characteristics, each of these three approaches deemphasizes the diversity of local forms of warfare within the region (10). To these I would include an additional intervention: the volume also implicitly responds to questions about the interaction between exterior and interior influences on the history of warfare in Southeast Asia (e.g., Indianization, Sinicization, Islamicization, or Europeanization). In these studies, the flow of military technology plays an important role, but, as will be discussed later, it should not be understood as an exterior impact and local response; rather, the local context exerts significant influence.

Responding to a previous lack of explanation for local variations in warfare, the volume advocates a so-called *new* cultural approach. In contrast to the regional emphasis of the old cultural approach, the new cultural perspective focuses on “particular warfare cultures and politics, the latter shaped by both local and regional factors” (13). Throughout the individual chapters, a diverse set of local cultures of warfare appears while simultaneously being influenced by the regional flows of commerce, military technology, and people. The relationship between military technology and political control emerges as a common, yet varied, theme throughout the volume. Looking at Maguindanao, Ariel C. Lopez emphasizes the role of maritime raiding in and the importance of religion and kinship ties to state consolidation. While Kathryn Wellen shows the importance of weapons to political centralization in South Sulawesi, Hans Hägerdal argues modern weapons played a contrasting and destabilizing role in nineteenth-century Bali. In what is the most ambitious chapter in its geographical coverage, Gerrit Knaap brings together examples of weapons, strategies, and political implications stretching from Taiwan in the northeast through Luzon to the southern reaches of the Indonesian archipelago. Knaap’s chapter truly demonstrates the complex diversity of warfare cultures present within the region. Although each chapter reinforces the argument for the new cultural approach, a deeper examination of two chapters (selected because of the reviewer’s own professional background and expertise) will help draw out its significance and contribution.

In his chapter, “Armed Rural Folk: Elements of Pre-colonial Warfare in the Artistic Representations and Written Accounts of the Pacification Campaign (1886–1889) in Burma,” Michael Charney provides an illuminating study of how local culture simultaneously shaped and was

influenced by regional warfare. Crafting a history from below, Charney examines what one could identify as rural-local styles of warfare within the local-regional Burmese context, all under the regional Southeast Asian setting. Utilizing rural sources created after the collapse of the Burmese royal court, he shifts the geographical and temporal focus, thereby realigning our perspective to a moment when no centralized state existed to craft narratives about warfare. In the absence of court-focused sources, the impact of rural culture on Burmese warfare emerges. Developed in response to local communal conflicts, these rural practices included the taking of heads and communal resources, along with “little distinction between combatant and non-combatant”; however, the regional flow of weaponry also emerges in the presence of the kris and firearms (171–73). Reinforcing the argument of the new cultural approach for understanding the local diversity within a regional context, Charney’s contribution leaves one curious as to what other local variations and multidirectional influences wait to be uncovered through such a tripartite (rural-local, local-regional, and regional) perspective.

Vu Duc Liem’s chapter, “The Age of the Sea Falcons: Naval Warfare in Vietnam, 1771–1802,” shifts the focus from land to water. Recalling what the late John Wills Jr. labeled as “interactive emergences,” I find that Vu’s discussion of the amalgamation of domestic and foreign military technology provides intriguing possibilities of how local warfare interacted with the regional context. On the one hand, by integrating nonlocal designs into the local shipbuilding industry, Tayson warships could withstand the shock of firing higher-poundage weapons and consequently expanded their armament. Vu writes, “One of those ships known as a *ting*, was said to be much larger, sturdier, and better armed than other Asian ships, including Qing war junks. Each vessel had 80-foot (24 metres) masts, sides protected by layers of thick leather and nets and cannon weighing as much as 2,500 kilograms” (119). On the other hand, the changes in overall size remained of secondary importance since both Tayson and Nguyen naval forces retained the shallow-draft design required to operate in the local riverine and coastal waters. Vu’s discussion recalls findings by Sun Laichen on the fifteenth-century Vietnamese state adopting and adapting to Ming Chinese firearms, with the new models subsequently circulating back to the Chinese military. Vu reports that the burgeoning Vietnamese shipbuilding industry produced for both domestic naval operations as well as sales to regional Chinese and

Portuguese merchants (111–12). These developments provide intriguing evidence regarding the potentiality of a naval revolution in Southeast Asia. However, keeping in mind the interactions between politics and warfare, the editors note that the higher level of governmental funding present in Vietnam sets it as an outlier compared with other locales in the archipelago (17). Nevertheless, regional flows (in this case military technology) both influenced and were influenced by the local setting.

The so-called *new* cultural approach provides an exciting new framework through which to simultaneously reevaluate the local characteristics of warfare in the Philippines and place it within the Southeast Asian regional context. Specifically, applying the tripartite perspective that Charney has developed may generate new insights into the relationship between rural-local (i.e., Luzonese, Visayan, or Mindanaoan) warfare cultures and local-regional politics. In the volume, Ariel C. Lopez has already begun to illumine how religion and kinship influenced patterns of maritime raiding and state consolidation in Maguindanao, while Gerrit Knaap discusses the cultural characteristics of local-regional warfare. As an advocate of writing history from below, I am particularly curious to see a comparison of how local weapons, tactics, and styles of warfare may have influenced state consolidation and military campaigns throughout the archipelago. By utilizing the new cultural approach, microhistories of military campaigns may help to illuminate how warfare cultures in the Philippines both influenced and were influenced by the regional context of politics, people, material culture, and quite possibly the environment. Like other recent historiographical developments coming out of the new military history school, placing these local histories within the regional (and, if I may add, potentially global) context creates inspiring avenues to further reevaluate the multidirectional influences and diversity in the history of warfare.

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