

ERIC C. THOMPSON AND VINEETA SINHA, EDS.

*Southeast Asian Anthropologies: National Traditions  
and Transnational Practices.*

Singapore: NUS Press, 2019. 328 pages. Available open access: <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/id/29e1acc6-c25e-42fc-9699-801324fba039/1004899.pdf>.

In the past two decades, the flourishing of anthropology outside of Anglo-America has spurred a heated debate within the discipline about the emergent hierarchies between so-called “local/national” and “global” anthropology, and between “native” and “professional (foreign)” anthropologists. For example, in a move against the dominant position of Anglo-American anthropology that today largely dictates theoretical debates and fashions, Asian- or Eastern European-based anthropologists sometimes seek to elevate the “native’s view” to the status of the only valid criterion to judge Western anthropological knowledge. Occasionally, a lack of comparative anthropological perspective beyond the national context in the non-West might be excused by the false confidence that “local knowledge is best.” While acknowledging the problematic centering of Anglo-American anthropology as the core of the global system of anthropological production, *Southeast Asian Anthropologies* steers clear of the current that counterposes local/national anthropologies to Western anthropologies. Instead, editors Eric C. Thompson and Vineeta Sinha brilliantly build upon some of the theoretical discussions in *Asian Anthropology* (edited by Jan Van Bremen, Eyal Ben-Ari, and Syed Farid Alatas, Routledge, 2005) to emphasize the plurality of anthropology and the diverse historical and political contexts in which modern anthropological knowledge has been produced. As someone being trained in both Eastern European ethnological

*Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 17, Issue 2-3, pps. 172–175. ISSN 1559-372X, electronic 1559-3738. © 2022 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’ Rights and Permissions website, at <https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2022.17.2-3.172>.

and Western anthropological traditions, I find that *Southeast Asian Anthropologies* provides a great example of how scholarly dialogue can contribute to constructive debates on decolonizing and the indigenization of anthropological knowledge and on the development of anthropology as a universalizing discipline that acknowledges diverse social and cultural locations in its intellectual basis.

Thompson and Sinha choose the nation-state framework for the ten chapters that make up their edited volume. Yet they intentionally interrupt that frame by dividing the individual contributions into three thematic parts that illuminate wider intra-regional and transnational linkages, influences, and practices. Leading the reader through national anthropological traditions and the formations of professional communities in Brunei/Borneo, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam, the individual chapters discuss in depth (1) how the developments of the Southeast Asian traditions of anthropology are embedded in particular historical processes; (2) how these traditions have engaged with the discipline of anthropology as it emerged in the West and what challenges they have faced; and (3) how locally grounded but intra-regional and transnational connections and practices among anthropologists based in Southeast Asia have grown. I appreciate that not all the authors are anthropologists. Some have a background in sociology, offering an outside perspective and reflecting the complex historical and political contexts in which anthropology as a discipline has been shaped and institutionalized in Southeast Asia.

Readers of the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* will be particularly interested in two contributions that refer to Vietnam. With my Polish training in ethnology, I recognized many of the issues discussed by the Vietnamese authors in these chapters, such as the association of anthropology with history, the tendency to rely on interviews rather than long-term fieldwork, and an almost exclusive ethnographic focus on the home country. I particularly enjoyed chapter 3, by anthropologist Nguyễn Văn Chính, who received his training from the University of Amsterdam and who is currently teaching anthropology in the Department of Anthropology at Vietnam National University in Hà Nội. He carefully assesses the roles of both French and Soviet ethnology in the making of contemporary

Vietnamese anthropology, arguing that the continuities and influences from colonial and Western anthropology had at least as big a part in shaping the local disciplinary tradition as the Soviet tradition. His perceptive account shows that with the influence of Marxist theory, the evolutionary framework of colonial anthropology was extended into postcolonial and contemporary anthropology, informing the way in which ethnic minorities are (still) viewed as being on a lower level of social development and, therefore, in need of guidance by more “advanced” Kinh (Việt). At the same time, Nguyễn Văn Chính notes that the process of integration of Vietnamese anthropology with global anthropology has been hampered not only by a lack of anthropological theorization, long-term fieldwork, and comparative research experience but also by the instrumentalization of the discipline for the nation-state building process.

The second contribution on Vietnam is chapter 9 by Đặng Nguyên Anh who received his doctoral training in sociology from Brown University and who is currently vice president of the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences. Focusing on the more recent period of anthropological development during *Đổi Mới*, Đặng Nguyên Anh’s chapter addresses some of the issues critically assessed by Nguyễn Văn Chính but offers forward-oriented recommendations for the future development of anthropology in Vietnam. While acknowledging the need to uphold international standards and for the integration of research and teaching, he calls for a more applied role of anthropology in tune with national realities, for the discipline to provide “context-sensitive information through which positive development policies can be formulated” (285). In sum, these two chapters provide complementary perspectives on the position of, future directions for, and challenges for anthropology in Vietnam.

Not coincidentally, *Southeast Asian Anthropologies* is dedicated to the memory of Ananda Rajah and Pattana Kitiarsa—two prominent names in anthropology in their home country, Thailand, and in Singapore, where they pursued academic careers. Maintaining high professional standards, they boldly embraced both long-term fieldwork and academic mobility. Evoking these two dedicated fieldworkers and bringing the voices of “world anthropologies” from Southeast Asia, this edited volume will be enjoyed by those readers interested in the history of anthropology, the indigenization of

the discipline, and emergent hierarchies of anthropological knowledge. *Southeast Asian Anthropologies* broadens our understanding of the history of the discipline and deepens our awareness of the contexts where anthropology and ethnographic practices were and are produced. This volume will be useful for courses on the history of anthropology, the anthropology of colonialism and nation-state formation, and the anthropology of Asia. Importantly, published open access, the volume is accessible to scholars and students in the region.

*Edyta Roszko, Christian Michelsen Institute, Bergen*