

SUSAN BLACKBURN AND HELEN TING, EDS.

Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements A Biographical Approach

Singapore: National University Press, 2013. 352 pp.

The late 1960s and early 1970s engendered deep changes to the study of history the world over, which continue to affect and guide the discipline today. Peasantry studies gained vigor and traction in this period, on the heels of at least three decades of anti-colonial rebellion and the rise of certain radical Third World states, particularly in Southeast Asia. The political history of Vietnam, in particular, and the Vietnam War's globally politicizing effect alerted Western scholars and activists to the possibilities of peasant political action and widened their range of political actors as legitimate subjects of scholarly analysis. It is in this context that social history emerged as a new mode of academic inquiry and that Southeast Asia emerged as a primed site for analysis—and a wide site indeed, becoming a live testing ground for modernization and development theories in the political realm, as well as a heuristic testing ground for the evaluation of Western post-structural theories in application beyond their origin. Half a century later, the lack of studies treating the social history of women in Southeast Asian nationalist movements, which Susan Blackburn and Helen Ting's edited volume seeks to address, is thus striking.

There exists extensive literature on gender and nationalism, as Susan Blackburn notes, particularly on the ways in which women emerge as objects of a nationalist discourse and in which the male voices that have articulated the hegemonic understandings of the nation continue to take center stage. This volume, however, aims to inhabit the woman's voice and positionality as it traces the paths that women nationalists carved for themselves within nationalist movements. Indeed, the essay on Suyatin Kartowiyono treats at length her autobiography about her political activities—a rare and fascinating first-person document for the literature on Southeast Asian women nationalists. It is this commitment to inhabiting the women's voices that drives the choice of a biographical methodology. Susan Blackburn, Helen Ting, and their contributing writers aim for this approach to attend to the true diversity and importance of women's contributions to nationalist movements, as well as the impact of those movements on those

women's lives. Thus, the women and the nationalist movements are of equal importance. "If we understand identity formation as a dynamic and intersubjective *process* of practice," Helen Ting writes, "the role of nationalist movements as a site of reproduction and reinforcement of the political identity of our protagonists should be foregrounded" (286). Through such foregrounding, the tensions between the social construction of gender and the obligations to the nation that these women felt emerge forcefully.

While adopting the biographical approach, *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements* explicitly strives to counter the tradition of Southeast Asian nation-states that offers a "few sanitised female nationalists for public consumption," which, Susan Blackburn writes, has only "done a disservice to the pluralism of most nationalist movements and the role of women in them" (4). The choice of women subjects here, true to the aims of social history, enlarges the field of political agency while eschewing the "celebratory" style of traditional biographies. Indeed, Daw San of the anti-colonial movement in Burma was a well-known journalist, editor, and leader of women's organizations, who nevertheless received no official recognition, and in this volume her lack of sympathy for minority ethnic groups is trenchantly discussed, underscoring the riven tensions embedded in the Burmese nationalist movement.

This book treats women involved in nationalist movements from the 1920s to the present and from all of Southeast Asia with the exception of Thailand, Singapore, Cambodia, and Brunei. Many of the essays treat the issue of omission and exceptionality. Nguyen Thi Giang was a member of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party, and as the losing party in opposition to the Communist Party that has since authored the orthodox national history, Nguyen Thi Giang's story recovers two levels of historiographical loss: that of her party and that of women's participation in her party. Meanwhile, Rasuna Said is a Minang-kabau who became a leader in the 1930s of the radical, male-dominated Islamic nationalist party Permi, and whose leftist and radical politics have since been omitted from the Indonesian historiography that celebrates her as a national hero, having gone on to participate in mainstream parliamentary politics in decolonized Indonesia. Similarly, the essay on Salud Alagbre recovers the story of the only female member of the 1930s Sakdal peasant movement that challenged the mainstream nationalist Philippine movement as well as American colonial rule.

The position of women in nationalist movements, as opposed to women in other movements, is a productive site of inquiry for the way in which such movements explicitly deal with the rights of citizens and consciously seek to enact the kind of nation that should and could command the loyalty of those citizens. The essay by Helen Ting comparing two women's conceptions of the Malay nation, and the place of non-Malays within that nation, provides an especially interesting discussion of these questions. What structural factors and historical processes shaped the different dimensions to these questions—pertaining both to the socio-historical construction of women and minorities within the nation and to the construction of that nation itself? In pursuing these inquiries, three thematic threads seem to emerge: those of colonialism, emancipation (political and economic), and ethnicity, which cut across structures and processes, as well as “cultural forms”—the categories, norms, concepts, idioms, and practices to which they were exposed. While the authors make explicit the reasons for and limitations to their choice of a biographical approach, given the deep resonances across the essays, particularly centering on these three thematic threads, the volume would have benefited from a deeper engagement with their transnational logic and consequences. It is in this light that the volume could have offered conclusions from its deep, impressive empirical work as to what the history and positionality of women nationalists uniquely illuminates in Southeast Asian nationalist movements.

Indeed, the introduction states that the volume's study of women who operated within both “bourgeois-led” and “revolutionary” nationalist movements places the volume “in a position to test the validity of [Kumari] Jayawardena's distinction” between these two types of nationalist movements (8). Yet, at the end of the volume, the conclusion weakly states that “given the gender orientation of nationalist movements involved was not examined in all the chapters, we are not in a position to discuss in depth or verify Kumari Jayawardena's contention that ‘revolutionary’ nationalist movements were more receptive to the feminist agenda than ‘bourgeois’ nationalist movements” (290). In this way, the volume at times seems positioned to evaluate theories and questions of women's political history, particularly in Southeast Asia, but ultimately shies away from doing so. This may be a function, however, of the great dearth of studies on Southeast Asian women nationalists, rather than a failing of this particular volume, which sets out for itself very specific goals. It is a testament to the great need that

this volume seeks to address that what the reader asks of this volume is simply further multidimensional engagement with the histories it has recovered. A project for a future book, perhaps, one that too remains sorely needed even a half-century hence.

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