

3-31-1986

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Recommended Citation

Polo, Jaime B. (1986) "Moral Order and The Question Essay," *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*: Vol. 34: No. 2, Article 13.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13185/2244-1638.1450>

Available at: <https://archium.ateneo.edu/phstudies/vol34/iss2/13>

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philippine studies

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Moral Order and the Question of Change: Essay on Southeast Asian Thought

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Philippine Studies vol. 34, no. 2 (1986): 246–248

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Anthropologist Shelley Errington concludes the volume with a study of the royal regalia of Luwu, a former kingdom in southern Sulawesi. She explains how Luwu people perceive a hierarchy as a ranking of "places" instead of persons. She then proceeds to hypothesize that the regalia, the repository of power, would serve as the perfect tool for a leader who would surpass any mortal.

This gathering of essays shows different methods used, and various approaches taken, but does not present definite parameters that would define a Southeast Asian state. Clearly, however, these endeavors reveal that various approaches and interests must indeed be encouraged so that further insights may increase our understanding of the formation of the state in Southeast Asia.

Jaime B. Polo

MORAL ORDER AND THE QUESTION OF CHANGE: ESSAYS ON SOUTHEAST ASIAN THOUGHT. Edited by David Wyatt and Alexander Woodside. Connecticut: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1982. v, 413 pages.

Although Karl Marx may have uncovered the linkage between the economic and noneconomic relations characterizing an historically determined social formation, he has left the concept of "superstructure" in his base-superstructure metaphor still a crucial question for current scholarship on culture and society to resolve.

Thus, Claude Levi-Strauss, for instance, while recognizing the primacy of the infrastructure in societies (although he doesn't show this systematically), seems to have foregrounded the superstructure as he aimed at uncovering the basic structure of the human mind. Although he may appear to have approached the subject more as an idealist than a materialist, he assures his readers that what he has studied (and will be studying) are simply the "shadows on the walls of the cave." Would he likewise endorse Maurice Bloch's argument that studies on society and social change emphasize mechanisms as occurring in terms the actors themselves use or totally alien to them, and so are "unable to explain how these mechanisms can be transformed into meaningful action."

The editors of this particular collection of seven essays on Southeast Asian thought seem to do so. They recognize the disadvantage of studying human thought mainly by investigating the mechanisms which the subjects under study would employ, as this brings about difficulty in understanding how these concerned subjects can find ways to work out social change and order.

They posit, however, with much cogency that the essays included in the compilation fill the need for materials on Southeast Asia — a dynamic region the complexity of which has been frequently oversimplified or distorted by Western paradigms — which carefully study the nuances of Southeast Asian thought processes grounded on specific histories and particular traditions. Indeed, the variety of research materials and methods used by the authors of the essays suggest ways in which more meaningful studies of Southeast Asian history, culture and society can be undertaken.

David K. Wyatt begins the collection of essays with an exploration of Siam during the last half of the eighteenth century and a “subtle revolution” under King Rama I. He closely investigates a variety of texts which encode the perceptions of the Siamese people—poetry, royal correspondences, ecclesiastical laws, ritual and other ceremonial texts, legal documents—and discovers a moralistic Buddhist perspective underlying the “subtle revolution” of King Rama I and his contemporaries: the “restoration” or “reconstruction” of the glory of Siam. Such a moral perception and imperative among both the rulers and the ruled held up the king as

responsible for the calamities and chaos . . . a monarchy better defined in Buddhist moral terms . . . a monarchy more willing to communicate with them as fellow human beings sharing a single vale of woe. (p. 17)

Similarly, Reynaldo Iletto makes use of a wealth of what he calls “submerged data”—myths, legends, tales, correspondences, etc. as he reads through a complex text of Rizal in the underside of the dominant *ilustrado* history. An exegesis of the *Pasyon* and the legend of Bernardo Carpio leads him to insights into “underside” perceptions regarding a Filipino hero who had always been held up as a national figure from the point of view of the status quo.

Iletto’s archaeology of knowledge is also evident in David Chandler’s study of Cambodian perceptions of order, and in Michael Aung-Thwin’s essay on the Burmese tools of historiography. Chandler studies a people’s perception of order characterizing the desperate, cacophonous world of nineteenth century Cambodia through a close reading of three texts—one, a chronicle which looks back over the century from the vantage point of 1856; and two folk tales: one revolving around the Cambodian magpie-like bird and how it became known by its cry *koun lok* and the other (which claims to be historical as it takes place during the time when Udong was the Cambodian capital) concerning a crocodile named Thon. Chandler notes that these texts refer to a moral order for both the powerful and the powerless based on a Buddhist orientation. In the midst of chaos in Cambodia, however, Chandler asks, what would these texts explain to the Cambodians? His concluding lines are suggestive:

But when hierarchies break down, spilling onto the roads of the forest like gold and silver trays, and when a society, like Cambodia’s in the 1830’s,

1840's and 1970's appears to have come to an end, where does one look for explanations? (p. 53)

Aung-Thwin's study of the guiding conceptions of Burmese historiography makes use of another set of materials—dialogues, prophecies, omens—from which (apparently following a structuralist mode of analysis) he abstracts ingredients essential for a Burmese intellectual history: concepts of man, of order, of disorder, of the state, leadership, legitimacy, authority. These historiographic tools enable Aung-Thwin to explain how Buddhism is introduced and preserved in Burma from one dynasty to another, and how persistent traditions and institutions of a custom-valued society relate to social changes.

Unlike the other writers mentioned above, Anthony Day decides to focus on one particular poem, the *Serat Comporet*, composed in 1870, and examines ways in which an historically inconsequential palace wedding is transmuted into a poetic work about Javanese history, prophecy and the nature of the sung poetry itself.

Two other scholars—Alexander Woodside and Alfred McCoy choose religious materials in which to investigate social perceptions. Woodside zeroes in on Confucian moral concepts and the great ancient reservoir of Vietnamese religious and mythical formulations. He traces the different variations of these concepts—their social extensions and oppositions—and perceives an interplay between Confucian morals and the ancient Vietnamese religion which shaped the Vietnamese views of change before 1860. Alfred McCoy looks at various Filipino myths, folk beliefs, tales and rituals as he attempts to define a Philippine peasant ideology in an “animist” religion. His survey of various folk narratives, uprisings, *oracions*, religious practices leads him to the conclusion that what he calls “indianization” and animist religion had profound consequences on the development of Filipino political culture.

The essays in this compilation present fresh insights into the complexities of a dynamic Southeast Asian life through a refreshing mode of analysis which clearly breaks from the functionalist mode which has dominated research into Southeast Asian lifeways. The authors imply, however, that a people's thought process, their perceptions, their constructs of meaning are intimately linked to a complex social process, and it is only when these are studied as processes related to specific historical, economic and political processes that research on the human mode of thought can be made more meaningful. Indeed, a more precise definition of this relationship between thought and society—its economics and politics—is what is set forth as a challenge to scholars by this compilation of insightful essays.

Jaime B. Polo