

## Book Reviews

***Siam Mapped. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. By Thongchai Winichakul. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994, xvi + 228 pp. ISBN 0-8248-1337-5.***

*Siam Mapped* is an exceptional monograph which unraveled territory, practices, nationalism, and ‘geo-body’ as key points of Thailand’s cutting-edge development. The author accordingly scrutinized the intellectual and knowledge shift, especially in topography, geography, and map making in Siam or nowadays Thailand amid the early nineteenth to the dawn of the twentieth century. It was the period when traditional conceptions and values of territory and space were frequently contested from the growing colonization across the Southeast Asia.

The indigenous understanding of space rested heavily on Hindu-Buddhism cosmology that buttressed the rule and legitimacy of local elites. In this way, conventional maps in Southeast Asia rarely represented correct topographical or spatial setting. In contrary, Western ideas of boundary and outline served different purpose based on scientific measurements and observations to illustrate earth’s surface. These two distinct sets of knowledge were customarily debated amid the early nineteenth century when colonial expansion reached Siam.

Despite the fact that Siam was the only country that remained non-colonized in Southeast Asia, it was not immune from colonial regulatory design and technical information. Such novel practices accelerated and served as apparatuses and models of Siamese bureaucrats to dispatch their modernization scheme. As of the late nineteenth century, Western ideas of topography and mapping uprooted the indigenous ones, which subsequently

reshaped Bangkok elites’ perception on political space and coexistence with neighboring entities. As such, it permitted Siamese officials to dispatch appeasing campaigns toward its former tributary states.

The expansionist schemes had aimed to incorporate as many neighboring states as possible regardless of cultural or ethnic difference. Topography played a crucial role in this plan as those claimed lands were demarcated and recognized within Siam’s territory. Any challenges of such claims would be silent. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Bangkok hired British engineers and topographers then dispatched them with Siamese commissioners marching toward all frontiers – northward to Lanna kingdom and northeastward to Lao states.

This scheme plunged Siam into direct confrontation vis-à-vis imperial powers – Britain and France. In this regard, Thongchai reveals that rather being a victim and passive actor, Siamese elites orchestrated their own colonial projects and confidently, with newly learned Western technics, stood firm against two mighty European powers. However, such confident soon plummeted in the contestation with France, who resorted to gunboat diplomacy and forced Siam to relinquish all claims beyond the left-bank of Mekong River or nowadays Laos.

The aftermath of confrontation with France left a huge, traumatized scar in Bangkok elites and Thai historiography. They fabricated humiliated defeat into “loss territories” and treated Siam as a victim of a ruthless colonial power. The failure of expansionist scheme was translated into the acute sacrifice of organs to save the heart of Thai national body.

Nevertheless, topographical and geographical technics could not facilitate the ambition. It eventually forged up Siam as a geopolitical entity. Siam had been mapped and possessed a place in world map. Thongchai illustrates that it creates a ‘geo-body’ of

nation, which simultaneously exhibits two dimensions – firstly, the space of “we-self” vis-à-vis European colonization and neighboring countries. Secondly, the otherness or enemy of the state both external and internal one. Map is not just an object that represents spatial relationship between each country and others, instead a political means which emphasizes nationalism. In addition, Thongchai dauntlessly challenges Thai nationalism typically deemed to be long-time inherited value as a recently constructed political ideology through technical knowledge of mapping.

Although the work is published almost two decades ago and the central point of the book circles around Thailand and Southeast Asia, its contribution extends far beyond such themes. For the scholar of International Relations, this monograph can be a decent companion for a nuance understanding of many sticking usually treated as inherited issues like border disputes or international conflicts based on disputed historical claims. Overall, Thongchai illustrates that the idea of nation conceived through process of knowledge production amid the colonial period instead of the antiquity. This exceptionally thought is not a supreme truth but can be challenged and contested from other perspective.

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