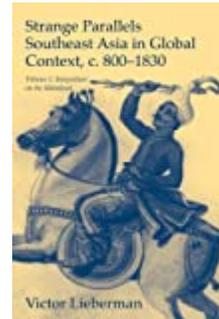




**Victor Lieberman.** *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c.800-1830: Volume 2: Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xxvi, 947 S. \$79.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-80086-0; \$29.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-80496-7.



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## V. Lieberman: *Strange Parallels*

This remarkable and original book will certainly become one of the most seminal and thought-provoking studies written in recent years on the history of pre-modern mainland Southeast Asia. Far more than that, Victor Lieberman's long anticipated book, which recently won the prestigious 2004 World History Association Book Prize, connects a millennium of Southeast Asian history with long-term administrative, cultural, economic, demographic, and even climatic developments and cycles on the Eurasian continent as a whole. This unique and ambitious approach has never been attempted before in such a consistent and comprehensive way.

More than a decade ago, Anthony Reid published his two-volume study entitled *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680*. Reid tried to demonstrate that Southeast Asia went through a rapid phase of economic development which had been speeded up by maritime trade. This upturn was followed by a decline due to European interference in the Asian trading system. In the introductory chapter of *Strange Parallels*, Lieberman criticizes Reid's concept of a 17th century crisis arguing

that this concept may have some explanatory strength for Insular Southeast Asia but does not hold true for the mainland which experienced a period of sustained territorial consolidation and economic growth throughout the 17th century. Refuting a dichotomous distinction between the *West* and the *Rest* of the Eurasian landmass (i.e., Europe and Asia respectively), Lieberman points out that a closer look reveals many parallel long-term historical trends in large parts of Europe, Japan and mainland Southeast Asia. Island Southeast Asia, on the other hand, shared similar *early modern features* with the Eurasian *heartland* China, the Middle East, and India. These zones, all ruled by conquest elites *Manchu, Turkish, Persian, Dutch and Iberian* at the turn of the 17th century, did not experience a growing cultural unity between the elites and the masses and entered the 19th century politically fragmented (p. 80).

For the millennium spanning the period 800-1830, Lieberman identifies four roughly synchronised cycles of political consolidation in mainland Southeast Asia as well as in France and Russia. It is indeed striking that in all these disparate regions a period of rapid demo-

graphic growth and commercial expansion began in the 10th and 11th centuries followed by a general political and social crisis extending from the early 13th to the late 14th centuries. The causes of crisis were, however, quite different. In Southeast Asia, the charter polities (named so because they provided a religious, political, and administrative charter for subsequent empires) of Pagan (Burma) and Angkor (Cambodia) that succumbed to a combination of foreign invasions (mainly Mongol-assisted Tai incursions), shifted the trade relations and ecological strains to the core areas (p. 242), whereas the collapse of the Kiew Rus can mainly be attributed to foreign conquest (by the Mongols). The crisis in France, it can be argued, was the interplay of demographic factors (a substantial decline of population caused by the plague or Black Death, a factor which failed to affect Southeast Asia) and military conquests (by England in the Hundred Years War).

The reader may also be stunned by the coincidence of short-lived political crises in the second half of the 18th century followed by a long period of intensified administrative and cultural integration. Lieberman concludes: "Whereas Europe as a whole in 1450 had some 500 political units, by the late 19th century the number was closer to 30. Between 1340 and 1820 some 23 independent Southeast Asian kingdoms collapsed into three. Each 19th-century survivor was more effectively centralized than any local predecessor" (p. 2). This quotation shows that Lieberman sometimes oversimplifies arguments in order to draw parallels between incompatible phenomena. The vast majority of the more than 500 political units identified by Lieberman in mid-15th century Europe were territories of the Holy Roman Empire, which at that time, to be sure, still possessed powerful imperial institutions that tied together its member states, the autonomy of which was probably less than that of several 19th century Siamese and Burmese vassal states. Moreover, if Lieberman would have asked for the number of independent European states in 1820, i.e., after the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire and half a century before the founding of the German Empire, he could have added several dozens of indisputably sovereign political units.

The comparison between Russia and Central Mainland Southeast Asia (i.e., present-day Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia) seems relevant at a first glance. Both regions saw the rise of charter polities in the 9th century: of Kiev and Angkor respectively. During the 15th century Muscovy and Lithuania emerged [on Russian soil] as rival heirs to a physically distant Kiew, whereas

the Siamese kingdom of Ayutthaya and post-Angkorean Cambodia, with its new political centre at Phnom Penh, regarded themselves as heirs to Angkor's classical brilliance struggling for hegemony in a region once dominated by Angkor. This perspective tends to minimize the political and cultural continuity of the Cambodian kingdom following the fall of Angkor (in 1431) which is in sharp contrast to the complete disintegration of the Kiew Rus.

As to the strange parallels that link Vietnamese and Japanese history, Lieberman does not provide more concrete details but leaves the reader's anxiety to the second volume of his grande oeuvre to be published separately under the title *Mainland Mirrors: Russia, France, Japan, and the Islands*. One is tempted to speculate that such an analogy seems obvious due to the political, cultural and demographic expansion of Vietnam and Japan along an axis running from North to South and from South to North respectively. Whether such a comparison is the only and most suitable choice for putting pre-modern Vietnamese history into a wider Eurasian perspective remains to be substantiated. Thus the reader is eagerly looking forward to Lieberman's forthcoming second volume.

Lieberman is a highly reputed and prolific writer of Burmese history; it is not surprising that the chapter on Burma is by far the strongest and most convincing. This brilliant chapter relies on decades of original comprehensive research by the author himself. It will certainly serve as a standard work on pre-modern Burmese history. The sections on Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, on the other hand, rely to a great extent on the works of internationally recognised authorities in the field. It is prudent that the author avoids the temptation to present developments in Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam from a Burmese perspective.

Notwithstanding that *Strange Parallels* is an extraordinary book of superb scholarship, it has its lopsidedness. In Lieberman's discussion about the Tai polities of Lan Na (Northern Thailand) and Lan Sang (Laos), for example, he did not make use of the most recent scholarship. Although important studies of Southeast Asian history written in German are quite rare, some of them, however, should not be ignored. To give one example: As for the economic history of Pagan, Lieberman relies almost entirely on Michael Aung-Thwin's work, who is the leading authority in this field. If he had consulted Tilman Frasch's Ph.D. thesis *Pagan: Stadt und Staat* (Stuttgart 1994) he probably would have contested Aung-Thwin's

theory that the decline of Pagan was spurred by excessive donations of royal land to religious institutions.

Such reservations, however, are of minor importance. Lieberman has written an impressive work of great importance in the field of the history of Southeast Asia.

It is certain that this book will stimulate further debate among historians specialised in this region and, probably, also in World History. His work has opened a new window of approaches to Southeast Asian history. It deserves to be highly recommended.

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