In my reading and teaching on Southeast Asia over the past several years, I have come to believe that existing scholarship has underestimated the role of transnational forces – most notably the nineteenth-century Liberalism, twentieth-century Communism, and Islam – in shaping Southeast Asian politics. Therefore, in the course of two years of research and writing, I shall be working to elaborate and substantiate a revisionist account of what scholars have described as nationalist struggles in Southeast Asia, one which shows how the driving forces behind these struggles were profoundly transnational in nature.

By John E. Sidel

T he intellectual backdrop to this pro-
ject is, of course, the influential
account of nationalism provided by
Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Commu-
nities: Reflections on the Origins and
Spread of Nationalism, which draws on
Southeast Asian history and has power-
fully shaped its subsequent historiogra-
phy. Anderson sees the nation as
the role of colonial administrative bound-
aries, bureaucratic and educational pel-
grimages, and languages of state in
the Southeast Asian archipelago. Indeed, I
trust that the once seemingly arbitrarily, but strikingly
enduring, boundaries of national identity
are now becoming more fully appreciated, albeit
independently of nationalist struggles. These accounts show that so-called ‘nationalist struggles’ – as they are usu-
ally glossed – are driven by transnation-
al networks, movements, and horizons.

A rising out of Southeast Asians’
encounters with capitalist modernity and the colonial experience. Among
within international ideological currents and
institutional networks, these cur-
rents and networks extended beyond the
boundaries of the colony and even of the
colonial realm. Yet, these networks
provided a particularly subversive vantage
point from which Southeast Asians could understand, and challenge, colo-
nial rule. Thus, rather than nationalists
undertaking nationalist struggles, the
proponents of Liberalism, Commu-
nism, and Islam actively constituted the
driving force of anti-colonial revolutions.

With national independence and
the inevitable crystallization of ‘official nationalism’ the most subversive
and mobilizing impulses of these move-
ments, networks, and horizons were
domesticated. Their roles in independ-
ence struggles have been somewhat
ly downplayed and attributed to that of
‘popular nationalism’. Yet, some of these transnational forces lived on, most notably those associated with modern learning, worship, and associational activity.

It is essential to trace these transna-
tional forces towards an understanding of national independence through rigorous comparative analysis of the diverging forms and outcomes of anti-colonial struggles in Southeast Asia. I argue that the first threads relate to the inher-
ent transnational force of capitalism, specifically with regard to the diverging facies of the immigrant ‘Chinese’ (and Arab and Indian) merchant commu-
nities. Through the lens of transnational intermediaries they played crucial roles in
colonial Southeast Asia and have
dominated its business classes since independence. The second and most
original thread entails the three most
important transnational ideological
networks, and horizons which captivated the hearts and minds of Southeast Asians in the nineteenth and twentieth
centuries – Liberalism, Communism,
and Islam – in the lived experiences and activities of both the urban intelligentsia(s) and broader mass publics.

The third thread concerns colonial and post-colonial responses of state author-
ities, as they have regulated and stimu-
lized, and with diverse (and often unin-
tended) consequences, to create
boundaries of various kinds to contain
domesticating constraints on
other, profoundly transnational impul-
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