

## History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives. 2nd Revised Edition. [book review]

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### **Abstract:**

The late Oliver William (O.W.) Wolters long stood at the forefront of scholarship on the early history of Southeast Asia, having helped shape the contours of this field of study. Among his writings, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* has retained its prominence since its first publication in 1982. Few scholarly works explore such a variety of subjects in so few pages. However, this book is neither a broad outline of Southeast Asian history, nor is it an essay prepared merely for a small professional audience. Instead, Wolters attempted in the 1982 edition to "generate discussion of what is meant by earlier Southeast Asian history and the ways in which the subject could be presented" (p. 12).

**Keywords:** book review | Southeast Asia | history

### **Article:**

***History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives.* Revised Edition. By O. W. WOLTERS. Ithaca: Southeast Asian Program Publications, Cornell University, in cooperation with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Singapore), 1999. 275 pp. \$17.00 (paper).**

The late Oliver William (O.W.) Wolters long stood at the forefront of scholarship on the early history of Southeast Asia, having helped shape the contours of this field of study. Among his writings, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* has retained its prominence since its first publication in 1982. Few scholarly works explore such a variety of subjects in so few pages. However, this book is neither a broad outline of Southeast Asian history, nor is it an essay prepared merely for a small professional audience. Instead, Wolters attempted in the 1982 edition to "generate discussion of what is meant by earlier Southeast Asian history and the ways in which the subject could be presented" (p. 12).

One would be hard-pressed today to discuss either premodern or modern Southeast Asian cultural history without referring to ideas raised in *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, specifically, cultural matrix, 11 men of prowess," mandala, and localization. Although Wolters himself acknowledged that aspects of these concepts were first developed in the work of other scholars, his efforts to apply them across the region and occasionally outside the disciplinary confines in which they were first introduced is one of the book's enduring contributions to the field.

Seventeen years later, scholarly debate generated by Wolters's slim volume justified the republication of the work in expanded form. The second edition of *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* is, in fact, a comprehensive review of the first by the author himself. Wolters has produced his own self-criticism in the form of six postscripts, in which he addresses specific comments leveled at his work. He reviews the book point-by-point, including further clarification and occasional repudiation of his original views where necessary. Wolters does not hesitate to acknowledge the shortcomings in some of his ideas; however, he stands by most of his main arguments.

Wolters began the first edition by questioning "whether Southeast Asia was indeed something more than just a geographical space between India and China" (p. 11). As did many Southeast Asianists teaching in the late 1970s, Wolters became dissatisfied with George Coedes's "Indianized States" paradigm as a general framework for shaping studies of early Southeast Asian history. Likewise, Wolters rejected the "Lesser Dragon" image of a diminutive Viet Nam obscured by China's cultural shadow, which had been promoted by an earlier generation of Western scholars. In the first edition, Wolters attempted to answer his own question by seeking out what he termed "cultural commonalities" that gave Southeast Asia a distinctive regional character.

Wolters initially introduced four common characteristics that could be applied throughout Southeast Asia. These characteristics include social organization based on cognatic kinship that he labels the "cultural matrix," a pattern of borderless political organization shaped by devotional cults that he calls the "mandala," a type of charismatic leadership by locally powerful individuals whom Wolters calls "men of prowess," and strategies of "localization" by which Southeast Asian societies borrowed foreign materials to make local cultural statements containing "something else" (p. 91). At the end of the book, however, Wolters highlighted the cultural diversity within the Southeast Asian region, maintaining that subregional study should be the field's first priority. Here he introduced the close reading of local sources as a method of producing cultural texts to track the process of localizing sources borrowed from Indic and Sinic traditions. In the first volume, Wolters stopped short of defining Southeast Asia in absolute terms. He concluded by suggesting that "we and our students have to keep as close as possible to the subregional sources, treated as cultural texts, and forego efforts for the time being to delineate a shape to regional history" (p. 91).

With the publication of this revised edition of *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, Wolters modifies his thinking regarding several of the ideas he forwarded in the first volume. In general, however, these changes point to Wolters's even stronger conviction that there exists a collection of cultural characteristics that give Southeast Asia a separate regional

shape. Wolters accepts Charles Higham's criticism of his description of mandalas in early Southeast Asia as "numerous networks of relatively isolated but continuously occupied dwelling sites," conceding that these settlements likely maintained trans-regional trade routes at a greater level of interaction than Wolters had first supposed (p. 107). Wolters also concedes that his earlier description of mandala societies suggested a pacific state of affairs, while other scholars have produced a litany of bloody conflicts in this region (p. 163).

Wolters acknowledges his own omissions and the emergence of new scholarship in other areas of the book as well. Regarding "men of prowess," Wolters admits that he neglected to examine the role that women played in the political life of these societies, a point that he now tries to rectify (pp. 165-71). Moreover, he once argued that the linguistic diversity of the region was proof of Southeast Asia's cultural diversity. He changes his position in the second volume to acknowledge Richard O'Connor's contention that the "polyglot" nature of most Southeast Asian societies produced closer ties between otherwise diverse groups in the region (p. 158).

Wolters ends the second edition with a note of concern, reflecting on the hard times the field of regional studies faced in the late 1990s. He also issues a challenge to regionalist Southeast Asian scholars, calling on them to find common interests with like-minded scholars studying other parts of the world. Some scholars who consider their topics to have universal application may heed this call. However, trends in the field point in the opposite direction. Students of Southeast Asian cultures who once generalized their findings to apply to large areas of the region now cautiously limit their subject matter to fit smaller, strictly defined areas at the "regional, subregional, local, sublocal" levels (Mary Steedly, "The State of Culture Theory in the Anthropology of Southeast Asia," *Annual Reviews of Anthropology* [1999] 28:439). Wolters still defines Southeast Asia quite broadly as a region of "shared cultural traits and historical experience" (p. 171). Although he does not dissuade others from pursuing detailed studies of local cultures, Wolters never digresses from his interest in the whole of early Southeast Asian history and the nature of this region's cultural relations with its Indian and Chinese neighbors. With interests and expertise in the academic community shifting to smaller and smaller units of study, Wolters's broad categories may become increasingly difficult to apply effectively.

However, the second edition of *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* will no doubt provide a new source of inspiration for many readers, including graduate students and instructors engaged in introducing Southeast Asia to a new generation of students. Readers of the first book will recognize the feat Wolters accomplishes in revisiting old arguments now part of conventional thinking in the field and pushing these arguments a step further. Wolters is largely successful in responding to his critics, although his broad regionalist approach to the field has less widespread appeal today. Nonetheless, in this uneasy "new world" in the aftermath of the World Trade Center and Pentagon bombings, in which we could find ourselves at war over cultural differences, Wolters's call to rekindle interest in "regional studies" and the understanding of universal themes in their local contexts may well find a receptive and growing audience.