

**IMPERIAL ALCHEMY: Nationalism and Political Identity in Southeast Asia.** By *Anthony Reid*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. *xiii*, 248 pp. (Tables, figures, maps.) US\$29.99, paper. ISBN 978-0-521-69412-4.

Here are five erudite essays, each recounting the history of how one ethnic identity has been transformed in opposition to, or in support of, state-based national identities. The author's deep insights into pre-colonial history allow him to follow each "ethnie" (he uses Anthony D. Smith's term) from the time they are first mentioned in a document up until today. Reid discerns how criss-crossing identities, some state-based, some religious, some linguistic, and variously named, inter-acted with twentieth-century nationalism, with a few being marginalized, others absorbed, and some becoming cores in a nation-state. A key feature of the book is how ethnical names have evolved over time.

Perhaps surprisingly, the first essay is about Southeast Asian usage of the term "Chinese". Reid shows how fluid Chineseness has been, and looks at repeated instances of tension and violence. The next essay is on the term "Malay", which is equally ambiguous or fluid. "Malay" or "Melayu" have been used with widely different meanings. The first book using "Malaya" as if it were the name of a country is dated 1906. The formation of Malaysia in 1963 luckily weakened the identification of a perceived Malay "race" with Malaya as a "country". The third essay, on memories of the Aceh monarchy, is perhaps the most impressive one. It provides essential insight not just into how Acehnese identities have evolved, but also into the difficult considerations forming the background for the 2005 peace agreement, which left Aceh in Indonesia. The Sumatran Bataks, who are presented in the fourth essay, seem to be Reid's ideal ethnical group, having found out how to live comfortably with several layered identities. Reid's fifth and last essay regrets how the Kadazandusun in Sabah have succumbed to Malaysian-style politics, but looks back with nostalgia at the inclusive ways in which Kadazan or Dusun leaders managed Sabah politics in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Each essay is immensely valuable in its own right, but the book also claims to be a monograph, and probably rightfully so. Each essay is presented as a case study with the purpose of exploring theoretical propositions spelled out in two introductory chapters as well as a concluding one. Reid wonders why Southeast Asia has not had more divisive ethnic nationalism of the European kind, with states being unified or split in wars, and borders being drawn and redrawn by the victors. The arbitrary borders drawn by the colonial powers have mostly been respected, and the states within them been endowed with vibrant nationhoods. Ethnics have found ways to express their own particularities while also embracing a larger national identity. Reid admires the way identities are layered in Indonesia, and hopes to see Chinese and Indonesian identity being as frictionlessly combined as Chinese

and Filipino. In terms of language use, he says, the Chinese Indonesians are more Indonesian than any other Indonesians.

What Reid means to say with his book's tantalizing title is that today's inclusive nationhoods are lucky and surprising products of imperial arbitrariness. I cannot quite share his surprise. While it is true that today's Indonesia converges exactly with the former Netherlands Indies, since West Papua and Aceh remain Indonesian while East Timor was given up, the alchemy behind Indonesia's unitary constitution was not imperial but revolutionary and nationalist, as Reid himself says. On their side, the British failed to produce unitary "gold" in Malaya, and were forced to make do with a federal alloy. Brunei and Singapore went their own ways. Although Burma has not been divided, its history of ethnic struggle does not exactly testify to an absence of European-style separatism. Indochina is also not a good case for the theory of imperial alchemy since the French both failed to divide the "Annamite" lands in three (later two) and to keep Indochina together. So I cannot understand how imperial alchemy should be typical of the region. Is it not rather more relevant in Africa?

This is the kind of book where the reader learns something new on every page. We must continue studying how and under what conditions ethnies can accommodate several layers of identity without resorting to regional autonomy arrangements. Reid's essays are insightful, sharp and stimulating contributions to this endeavour, and "imperial alchemy" is such a nice title that we should not be too much bothered by its lack of explanatory power.

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STEIN TØNNESSON

**VIETNAM: Le Moment Moderniste. Collection Le Temps de L'Histoire.**  
*Sous la direction de Gilles de Gantès et Nguyen Phuong Ngoc. Aix-en-Provence : Publications de l'Université de Provence, 2009. 306 pp. (Figures, maps.) €27.00, paper. ISBN 978-2-85399-732-4.*

In titling their book *Vietnam: le moment moderniste*, the editors of this book focus less on an ideology or even a movement than a sensibility (19). They examine an understudied period in Vietnamese history from the end of the nineteenth century to the first decade of the twentieth. By avoiding strict definitions of the term "modernism" or "modernist," the editors manage to sidestep interminable terminological debates, but the object of their study—a sensibility—remains elusive. The essayists emphasize the roles of intellectuals and elites in the creation of this sensibility. Surprisingly, the French colonial state, a major vector of modernity (and a research interest of one of the editors) is little discussed. The major laboratory of modernity, the south, gets little mention. There is no discussion of the economics and materiality of modern life: cars, fashions, new products, urban design, advertising, and