

The greening of Southeast Asian history

David Biggs

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If the change in the contemporary scene is extreme and rapid, we may speak of a crisis in historiography. This is the case with the present-day history of Southeast Asia, where the past forty or fifty years have seen great changes in social and cultural climate and the past fifteen years or less even greater changes in political structure with the rise of new and sovereign states where before there were colonies.

John R.W. Smail, 1961¹

Hey, hey Woody Guthrie, I wrote you a song
 'Bout a funny ol' world that's a-comin' along
 Seems sick and it's hungry, it's tired and it's torn
 It looks like it's a-dyin' and it's hardly been born

Bob Dylan, 1961²

For historians of Southeast Asia, John Smail's essay 'On the possibility of an autonomous history of modern Southeast Asia', published in this Journal's second year in 1961, was important for its novel critique of a Eurocentric 'angle of vision' that undergirded much of the literature at the time. Smail reminded his readers of a Dutch colonial historian of the 1930s, J.C. van Leur, who likewise challenged colonial perspectives on the 'Indies', arguing that Dutch colonial expansion was *not* the defining feature of history in the archipelago, at least before the transformations wrought by industrial changes in the 1800s. Van Leur claimed that his countrymen were of 'limited political significance' to the millions of people living across this vast expanse of islands, and Smail highlighted Van Leur's work to posit a similar challenge for historians in the 1960s. He urged readers to reconsider history in Southeast Asia from the perspectives of Asian 'others' who had so often appeared as minor characters in European accounts, as rulers, traders and people working just outside the gunwales and balustrades of colonial operations. Since Smail's essay and the founding of this Journal, several generations of scholars have advanced this decentring

David Biggs is Professor of History, University of California Riverside. Correspondence in connection with this article should be addressed to: dbiggs@ucr.edu. Special thanks to the UC Riverside Center of Ideas, UC Riverside–Palm Desert Campus, UC Riverside SEATriP Program and a Mellon Foundation conference grant that supported a 2018 workshop, 'Southeast Asian natures: Defining environmentalism and the Anthropocene in Southeast Asia', of which these essays were a part. Thanks also to all participants at that workshop who offered valuable feedback, especially Professor Hendrik Maier, to anonymous reviewers and the JSEAS staff.

1 John R.W. Smail, 'On the possibility of an autonomous history of modern Southeast Asia', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 2, 2 (1961): 72–102.

2 Bob Dylan, 'Song to Woody', recorded 20–22 Nov. 1961; *Bob Dylan*, Columbia Records, 1962.

47 perspective far beyond its initial scope, establishing postcolonial studies as an import-
 48 ant field in the history of Southeast Asia.³

49 I return to Smail's essay not for his critique of colonialism but to reflect on the
 50 'crisis of historiography' that he described, for today we find ourselves in a different
 51 'crisis' with a world in the grip of a pandemic where disease, natural disasters, and
 52 climate change are combining to fatally undermine, much like industrialisation and
 53 revolutionary ideologies had done in Smail's time, a political ecology long accepted
 54 as 'natural'. In 1961, few people questioned the industrial and scientific revolutions
 55 that helped colonial and postcolonial states transform remote environments and
 56 reconfigure everyday life over much of the region. Edifices of colonial governance
 57 in 1945 such as hill stations and European-language schools may have dissolved in
 58 the flames of revolution or via semantic erasures with post-revolutionary name
 59 changes; but the colonial world of plantations, extractive industries and urban centres
 60 had, to paraphrase Dylan in 1961, 'hardly been born'. Sukarno's Indonesian Republic
 61 had not yet succumbed to the bloodshed of Suharto's 1965 coup. The Vietnam War
 62 had not yet caused millions of deaths and widespread destruction in Indochina.
 63 Singapore was not yet an independent state nor a global financial centre.

64 However, the forms of industrial capitalism that Smail and Van Leur identified as
 65 causes for the erosion of economic and cultural 'autonomy' in the 1800s rapidly
 66 expanded after 1960. The Green Revolution boosted agricultural yields and replaced
 67 thousands of rice cultivars developed over centuries with a handful of high-yielding
 68 varieties that, with industrial fertilisers and pesticides, doubled and tripled output.
 69 Two colonial imports, the Amazonian rubber tree (*Hevea brasiliensis*) and the
 70 West African oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*), multiplied with help from national govern-
 71 ments and multinational corporations, now cover millions of hectares of former
 72 coastal and upland forest land, replacing them with monocultures. Transnational cor-
 73 porations and international development banks funded new infrastructure such as
 74 highways and dams along with commercial ventures in textiles, mining, agriculture,
 75 energy and electronics. The end of the Cold War in the 1990s brought more regional
 76 integration as Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia joined this surge in foreign direct invest-
 77 ment and export-oriented development under a policy of market-oriented Socialism.
 78 Within about a decade after 1961, a majority of people living in Southeast Asia tran-
 79 sitioned from a reliance on animal-, foot- and oar-power to fossil fuel-powered cars,
 80 mopeds, buses and boats. Today a majority of Southeast Asians live in cities and work
 81 in urban and industrial settings. Their material lives and popular cultures reflect
 82 increasingly urban, industrial experiences and their personal histories are intertwined
 83 with global travels and transnational connections.

84 This urban-industrial Southeast Asia rests, like much of the world, on an energy
 85 regime of fossil fuels, what Lewis Mumford in 1934 called carboniferous capitalism.
 86 Fossil fuels, first coal and then petroleum, helped colonial governments physically
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88 3 Laurie Sears' Introduction and the collection of essays written in honour of Smail in *Autonomous his-*
 89 *tories, particular truths*, provide an especially rich account of the formation of postcolonial studies in
 90 Southeast Asian scholarship, noting how Smail's decentring effort was eventually eclipsed by newer
 91 works focusing on what Sears calls 'negotiated knowledges and situated truths' (p. 17). See Laurie
 92 J. Sears, ed., *Autonomous histories, particular truths: Essays in honor of John Smail* (Madison:
 University of Wisconsin Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1993).

93 power colonial economies and thus helped a handful of colonial officials reign over
94 millions of mostly rural people for some fifty years. After the Second World War,
95 the proliferation of cheap engines and the widespread adoption of surplus equipment
96 helped power an economic boom that, after a series of anticolonial struggles, benefited
97 new national governments. Meanwhile, this postcolonial wave of industrialisation fur-
98 ther planted the seeds of a developing climate crisis. Few historians today still read
99 Mumford, but like Smail and Van Leur his words bear reading for their prescience
100 on the metabolic and political rifts caused by this switch from living to fossil fuels:
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102 In the economy of the earth, the large-scale opening up of coal seams meant that indus-
103 try was beginning to live for the first time on an accumulation of potential energy,
104 derived from the ferns of the carboniferous period, instead of upon current income.
105 In the abstract, mankind entered into the possession of a capital inheritance more splen-
106 did than all the wealth of the Indies; for even at the present rate of use it has been cal-
107 culated that the present known supplies would last for three thousand years.⁴
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109 ‘More splendid than all the wealth of the Indies!’ Mumford probably did not antici-
110 pate that Indonesia would in time become the world’s second largest exporter of coal,
111 but here we see an anticipation of the political and cultural effects that this *metabolic*
112 shift unleashed.

113 Karl Marx, writing at the British Library in the 1850s, witnessed it first-hand in
114 Europe, and he described it as an unprecedented ‘rift’ forming between town and
115 country.⁵ A similar cultural and political rift emerged between colonial outposts
116 and villages in Southeast Asia from the mid-1800s as a growing network of coaling
117 stations, railroads, steamships, electric lines and telegraph stations produced cities
118 out of swamps and convinced many a budding nationalist that the future required
119 wholesale adoption of this new regime and the Western know-how to sustain it. By
120 the 1920s, younger nationalists largely dismissed traditional models of kingship and
121 authority and instead promoted this spread of Western know-how in vernacular edu-
122 cation and technical schools. Sukarno, a civil engineer trained at the Bandung
123 Institute of Technology, was a model nationalist in this respect.

124 Today’s environmental crisis for historians concerns not so much the charting of
125 such environmental problems, accounting for the spread of new technologies or epi-
126 sodes of ‘decline’, but more how historians now and in the future will develop narra-
127 tive frameworks that allow for unexpected environmental events, following novel
128 biological and cultural ‘transmutations’ that link humans with various other species
129 and inevitably link contemporary life with certain pasts. Author and anthropologist
130 Amitav Ghosh tackles this problem of accommodating strange, ‘uncanny’ events in
131 literature in *The great derangement*, noting major difficulties that authors face in shift-
132 ing from conventional stories with ‘moral directions’ or a definite sense of linear pro-
133 gress. This sense of direction is less evident when so many ‘uncanny’ events such as
134 powerful typhoons, pandemics and spring tides leave parts of our modern world
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136 4 Lewis Mumford, *The future of technics and civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1934),
137 p. 157.

138 5 For a detailed exploration of this term, see Jason Moore, ‘Transcending the metabolic rift: Towards a
theory of crises in the capitalist world-ecology’, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38, 1 (2011): 1–46.

139 uninhabitable, requiring salvage. This uncanniness, he argues, ‘lies precisely in the fact
 140 that in these encounters we recognise something we had turned away from: that is to
 141 say, the presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors’.⁶ Scholars, artists and
 142 politicians alike are coming round to this problem in an ‘environmental turn’, that
 143 there may not be a definitive next step for what our world is becoming. Some places
 144 might undergo de-industrialisation, weeds growing in the concrete and old ships
 145 becoming offshore reefs, while others have yet to become the peri-urban centres envi-
 146 sioned on planners’ maps. Nonhuman actors in this history pose special challenges
 147 for historians in the attempt to delineate agency; the ‘archives’ describing such non-
 148 human agents are invariably human-generated.

149 Anthropologists and geographers have perhaps made the most headway in
 150 theorising new, multi-species assemblages and eco-political frameworks for
 151 understanding life in a more precarious world; and these frameworks are of particu-
 152 lar interest to historians. In *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possi-
 153 bility of life in capitalist ruins*, anthropologist Anna Tsing addresses a core
 154 phenomenon of the nineteenth century, industrial capitalism, showing how even a
 155 political-economic system that historians have long understood through such
 156 abstract entities as commodities, labour and capital is nevertheless still deeply
 157 enmeshed in ecological processes that run beyond the boundaries of markets, factory
 158 floors, trade bulletins, and taxonomies. She terms processes where traders and
 159 factory owners rationalise and commercialise products derived from largely
 160 unknown, black-boxed ecological processes as ‘salvage accumulation’.⁷ The book
 161 is an ethnographic journey across two continents as Tsing traces social and eco-
 162 logical processes associated with one of the world’s most valuable mushrooms,
 163 from supermarkets and distribution centres to buyers and middlemen and mush-
 164 room hunting spots in Asian and American forests. Such a tracing of life forms,
 165 non-human events and ecological processes, following them into and out of
 166 human communities, has yet to really take hold in the historiography of
 167 Southeast Asia; but this idea of ‘salvage’ is particularly useful not only for describing
 168 the present but also the past.

169 The current environmental crisis begs a rethinking of frontiers and rifts and a
 170 decentering of historical perspectives from capital cities, railroads and forestry offices
 171 outward into ‘undeveloped’ back country. Recent studies, including many new histor-
 172 ical works on Southeast Asia, have yet to fully take on episodes of environmental sal-
 173 vage as a central argument; but increasingly they are critiquing something largely
 174 unthinkable in 1961, the formation of knowledge systems, museums, zoos and espe-
 175 cially gardens describing natural worlds and nonhuman life. Sixty years ago, botanists,
 176 geologists, agricultural engineers, naturalists, biologists and doctor-explorers had
 177 been for centuries the unchallenged authorities on Southeast Asian environments.
 178 In the early twenty-first century, however, problems ranging from collapsing fisheries
 179 to sinking cities and unprecedented wildfires are prompting new looks at colonial
 180 science, and especially the broader histories of scientific knowledge production in

181 6 Amitav Ghosh, *The great derangement: Climate change and the unthinkable* (Chicago: University of
 182 Chicago Press, 2016), p. 30.

183 7 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist
 184 ruins* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 63.

185 Southeast Asia. There is also renewed attention to alternative ethical systems and indi-
186 genous cosmologies being re-purposed to understand current changes in weather,
187 health, forests, fisheries, and soils.

188 Green perspectives in Southeast Asian history tend to challenge modern ideas of
189 nature and especially rifts between traditional and modern environmental knowledge.
190 Anthropologist Michael Dove and geographer Nancy Peluso have long challenged the
191 pre-eminence of colonial, Western knowledge in their work, for instance, they both
192 examine such terms as 'dead lands' and 'wasteland' as used by Western-trained for-
193 esters versus indigenous peoples.⁸ What a state forester views as 'dead' and thus eco-
194 nomically worthless differs greatly in settings where local inhabitants often value the
195 same lands for all manner of uses. Terms like 'waste' and 'dead' are not universally
196 translatable, and it is in these spaces of different, contested meanings where historians
197 might find alternative 'life' and 'salvage' events.

198 In this Introduction and the essays that follow, there is more than a nostalgic
199 echo of Smail's call to de-colonise Southeast Asian history. The industrial fabric of
200 modern life that powers universities, prints journals and sends scholars to conferences
201 has long rested on the colonisation of Earth's fossilised and living energy sources.
202 Becoming 'carbon neutral' or 'sustainable' for individuals as well as universities, cities
203 and states requires radical shifts in perspective. Like revisionist histories of colonial-
204 ism in Southeast Asia, we must reconsider invisible or undervalued factors important
205 to the 'making' of history. Green history, like green politics, asks that historians
206 expand their analyses to include not only relationships with other life forms and geo-
207 logical events, but also to consider new, hybrid and alternative perspectives.

208 Finally, a green 'angle of perspective' on Southeast Asian history might also
209 include more critical attention to the period sixty years ago when Smail wrote his
210 essay. John McNeil and Peter Engelke's *The great acceleration: An environmental his-*
211 *tory of the Anthropocene since 1945*, provides accessible language and frameworks for
212 making sense of the rapid environmental and political changes happening at that
213 time.⁹ They introduce the concept of energy regimes and show how shifts from 'som-
214 atic' (living energy) to 'paleotechnic' (fossil-fuel energy) systems reconfigured forests
215 and rural environments through such inventions as the chainsaw, petrochemical fer-
216 tilisers and the bulldozer. The Great Acceleration refers not only to the material trans-
217 formations wrought by this shift in energy sources and technologies, but also their
218 political and cultural effects among many different peoples. Trends in Southeast
219 Asia in the 1950s and 1960s sync very closely with the Global South in this period,
220 where rapid upward curves in population growth, carbon emissions, urbanisation
221 and energy consumption coincided with spikes in literacy, international tourism,
222 and life expectancy. To borrow from Patrick Geddes, a contemporary of
223 Mumford's and an advocate for green cities in the 1930s, a green perspective is one
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226 8 See Michael R. Dove, 'Living rubber, dead land, and persisting systems in Borneo: Indigenous
227 representation of sustainability', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 154, 1 (1998): 20–54;
228 and Nancy Lee Peluso, 'Rubber erasures, rubber producing rights: Making racialized territories in
229 West Kalimantan, Indonesia', *Development and Change* 40, 1 (2009): 47–80.

230 9 J.R. McNeill and Peter Engelke, *The great acceleration: An environmental history of the Anthropocene
since 1945* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2016).

that simultaneously thinks locally *and* globally with respect to local and worldwide events.¹⁰

In our environmental present where old ‘thought-worlds’ and endangered natural places appear fragile if not shattered in the wake of recent events, today’s crisis signals not so much an end to old systems but, to quote Dylan again, the emergence of a world that’s ‘hardly been born’. The greening of Southeast Asian history suggests new ‘angles’ to consider an emergent world with a precarious climate, dense urban populations, rising sea levels, genetically modified organisms and multiple, overlapping and hybridising ethical systems. If the epidemics, fires, and floods of today are any indication of what’s to come, then I expect most readers in the future will become very familiar with the sort of ‘salvage’ that Tsing articulates so beautifully. We may, after some unfortunate events, have to salvage our homes, cities, universities and libraries. What elements of Southeast Asia’s modern and ancient pasts will we repurpose along the way?

With these broader notions of our environmental present in mind, each essay in this special issue advances highly unique, green perspectives into Southeast Asian pasts. Hieu Phung’s study on ancient river names in Vietnam, ‘Naming the Red River — becoming a Vietnamese river’, takes readers back to the first centuries of an independent Đại Việt to explore a pre-modern past of state-building and conflict in northern Vietnam. She draws our attention to river landscapes and cultures that did not fit within any ideas of a networked river system. The name Red River, referring to the entire river network connecting Hanoi with the highlands and the delta, was a modern construction. Her essay reminds us, too, that acts of landscape erasure and centralisation were not unique to European colonial geographers in the nineteenth century, but followed earlier waves of local state-building.

Ruel Pagunsan’s ‘Nature, colonial science and nation-building in twentieth-century Philippines’ is a remarkable survey of science-as-ontology through the work of botanists, the colonial Bureau of Science and projects to catalogue more than 12,000 species of flora across the Philippines. He treats colonial-era herbaria, the *Philippines Journal of Science*, and several key botanical texts and exhibits as ‘archives’ important to understanding how Americans and Filipinos in the early twentieth century sought to map out ‘the nation’ botanically with floral surveys and recommendations for commercial applications of this knowledge. Filipino nationalist-botanists such as Eduardo Arguelles Quisumbing play important, mediating roles in borrowing elements from older, American colonial surveys and collections to map the nation.

Jonathan Robins’ ‘Shallow roots: The early oil palm in Southeast Asia, 1848–1940’ follows the travels of one industrial plant species, the West African oil palm, that reached Sumatran plantations in the 1840s but, unlike the Brazilian rubber tree, did not ‘take off’ as a commercial crop in Southeast Asia until more than a century later. This essay is global, as Robins compares colonial and indigenous responses to this plant in West Africa and island Southeast Asia. The essay also contrasts the

10 While the phrase ‘Think globally, act locally’ is ubiquitous after 30 years of Earth Day events, a Scottish town planner, biologist and activist in the 1930s, Patrick Geddes, first used a similar idea in developing a pioneering approach to green cities in the United Kingdom. See Philip Boardman. *The worlds of Patrick Geddes: Biologist, town planner, re-educator, peace-warrior* (London: Routledge, 1978).

277 rapid spread of rubber trees in the Malay Peninsula and Borneo with a relatively weak
278 spread of oil palms in the same era. It also offers a useful preview of the Great
279 Acceleration when spiking demands for palm oil (now one of the world's most
280 important 'somatic' fuels) have caused the palm oil industry to spread rapidly in
281 island Southeast Asia, where it now presents the single greatest threat to many endan-
282 gered forest ecosystems and species.

283 Anthony Medrano's essay 'The Edible Tide: How estuaries and migrants trans-
284 formed the Straits of Melaka, 1870–1940' likewise explores overlaps and transitions
285 from somatic to paleotechnic energy regimes in the late nineteenth and early twenti-
286 eth centuries. The rapid population growth that coincided with a boom in coal, oil
287 and mining required a parallel increase in the production of high-protein, portable
288 foods. Medrano shows how newer human communities in Southeast Asia, especially
289 Hokkien Chinese who settled a new village, Bagan Si Api Api in the Rokan estuary of
290 Riau in Sumatra and prospered by developing portable foods, especially to supply
291 ethnic-Chinese labour networks. Chinese labour was integral to the development of
292 early modern industries in Southeast Asia, especially mining for tin and coal. The
293 boom in industrial enterprises in nineteenth-century Southeast Asia rested largely
294 on older arrangements between local and European governments with Chinese
295 labourers. Medrano shows how allied Chinese communities established new fisheries
296 and coastal communities to supply products such as *belachan* (fermented shrimp
297 paste) to literally 'fuel' the bodies extracting ores, rubber, and coal.

298 Gerard Sages' essay 'Acceleration in a time of war: Technology, nation, and ecol-
299 ogy in the South China Sea 1956–1966' focuses specifically on the 'take off' moment
300 in the early 1960s when a rapidly growing percentage of people in Southeast Asia
301 adopted internal combustion motors, and a series of 'green revolutions' swept both
302 agricultural and coastal landscapes. While much work has been done studying
303 these changes in lowland ricelands and upland swiddens, comparatively little work
304 focuses on fisheries. Sages traces the introduction of nylon nets and more than
305 60,000 boat motors, mostly Japanese-made, to Vietnamese fishing fleets on the central
306 coast; he also follows the circulation of Japanese scientific and technical knowledge
307 that accompanied this programme to modernise Vietnam's fleet while traditional,
308 near-shore fisheries collapsed. Even here in this modernised coastal world that's
309 (again quoting Dylan) 'a'coming along', Sages reminds us of many local and cultur-
310 ally discrete threads that survive the transformation: centuries-old traditions such as
311 fish sauce manufacture survived, but made from new species. Meanwhile Japanese
312 fisheries science and supply chains tied fishing communities and government offices
313 more closely to Japanese practices.

314 The final essay in the collection by sociologist Victoria Reyes, 'Contractual and
315 stewardship timescapes: The cultural logics of US–Philippines environmental conflict
316 and negotiations', serves as a useful, chronological endpoint to the volume for its
317 examination of competing Filipino and American understandings of highly polluted,
318 toxic lands in and around the former American naval base at Subic Bay. Reyes takes
319 us from a modern world operating at full tilt in the 1950s and 1960s to a post-
320 occupation, demilitarised landscape where more than fifty years of accumulated
321 chemical waste and daily releases of millions of gallons of untreated sewage travelled
322 from the base through Olongapo town and into Subic Bay. With respect to the crisis

323 of historiography in our current environmental era, Reyes' focus on time and Filipino
324 notions of 'stewardship timescapes', similar to ideas of salvage above, is especially pro-
325 vocative as an endcap in the issue, to remind us of the incredible challenges awaiting
326 historians considering new perspectives, different rupture points and alternative con-
327 tinuities in Southeast Asia's environmental past.

328 Like Smail and Dylan in their 'contemporary scenes' in 1961, we're today stand-
329 ing in the midst of new 'ruins' as the infrastructures and formations of postcolonial,
330 industrial life continue to blend into a buzzing present where cities sink, storms inten-
331 sify, pandemics spread and once-stark boundaries between urban-rural, natural-
332 human, and indigenous-foreign divides continue to dissolve. Peering from our pre-
333 sent 'scene' backwards into a past made visible in new ways, historians have an oppor-
334 tunity and a responsibility to engage it. Greening history in Southeast Asia means
335 recovering and weaving into our historiography those narrative or causal threads pro-
336 duced by other species, bio- and geochemical processes, microorganisms, shifting
337 ontologies or climactic events. Like Smail and many who followed him, once we
338 look for these new threads, we may realise that — like the Javanese and Malay subjects
339 staring back at Europeans across the gunwales and balustrades — these other threads
340 were there all along.

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