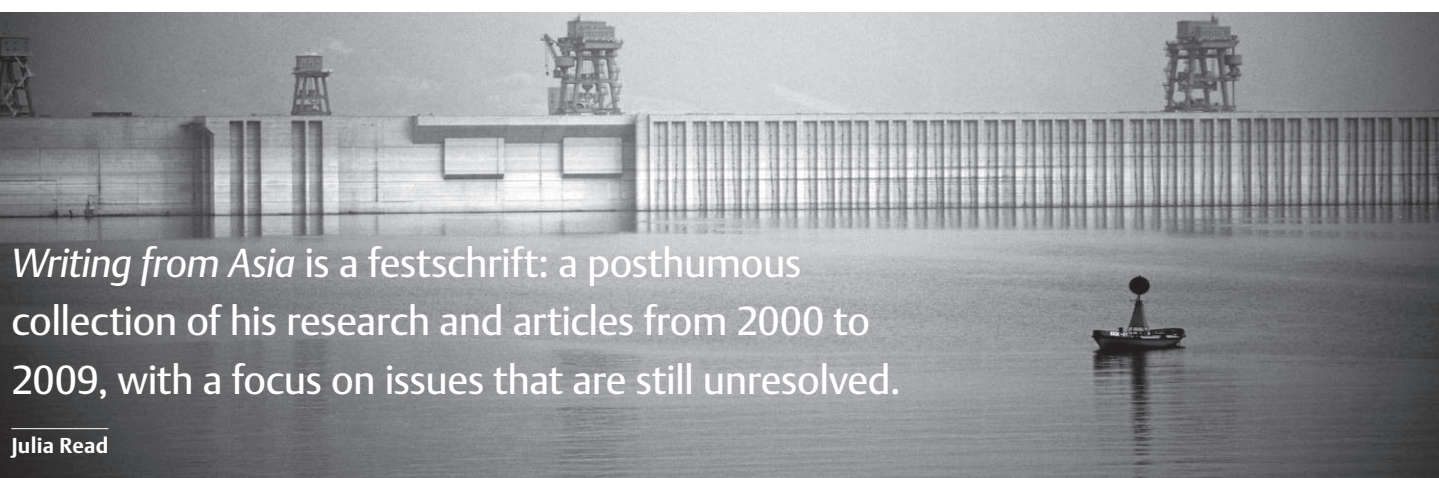


# Festschrift: Asia in three parts



*Writing from Asia* is a festschrift: a posthumous collection of his research and articles from 2000 to 2009, with a focus on issues that are still unresolved.

Julia Read

Symon, A. 2009.

*Writing from Asia*.

Newcastle, Australia: Global Exchange. 220 pages, ISBN: 9781876438418 (paperback)

ANDREW SYMON WAS AN AUSTRALIAN JOURNALIST who was based in Southeast Asia, first in Indonesia in the early 1990s and then in Singapore from 1998. He specialised in mining and energy resources, although he also wrote about people and politics and had a deep personal interest in colonial history and its legacy which he also expressed in his journalism.<sup>1</sup> His understanding of Southeast Asia was held in high esteem before his unexpected death in October 2009.

*Writing from Asia* has three parts, containing 49 chapters consisting of articles he researched and wrote. The first part, 'Politics and Personalities', contains twenty articles that explore major geopolitical issues that confront the countries of Southeast Asia, such as climate change, energy resources, environmental degradation, political developments and population growth.

The second part, 'Energy and Resources', contains the meat of Symon's researches. These are detailed, carefully documented and wide-ranging studies of developments and issues related to mining and energy resources. The highlight of his career was probably a report commissioned by the Lowy Institute, an independent think-tank based in Sydney, in preparation for a conference dealing with Asia-Pacific perspectives

The Three Gorges Dam (hydroelectric), Yangtze River, China (CC License Attribution: Harvey Barrison <http://www.flickr.com/photos/hbarison/5891613667>).

on nuclear energy and global governance in April 2008: 'Nuclear Power in Southeast Asia: Implications for Australia and non-proliferation'.<sup>2</sup> The report makes the point, among others, that the general public in Southeast Asia and Australia already had little confidence in the safety of nuclear energy. This, of course, was prior to the Fukushima disaster.

The third part of the book, 'Book Reviews', showcases his multi-dimensional interests in the society and history of Southeast Asia. The book reviews are mainly essays that paraphrase and retell the messages of the authors in a way that reflects his focus on the public interest. The books covered in the reviews are varied: the story of Chin Peng, leader of the Communist rebellion in Malaya, explores the nationalist thinking behind his existential struggle;<sup>3</sup> in 'The New Chinese Empire', veteran China watcher Ross Terrill forecasts likely future political developments in China; 'Target North Korea' explicates the development of the paranoid psychology of the North Korean regime and discusses the possibility of 'bringing them in from the cold' to end the suffering of the unfortunate populace. His review of Elizabeth Economy's 'The River Runs Black' details the efforts of the Chinese to address their pressing need to prevent further environmental degradation. He also reviews Anthony Reid's 'An Indonesian Frontier' by retelling the long history that preceded the Acehnese rebellion. He reminds us of the significance of the first great meeting of newly independent Asian and African states in 1955 in Bandung, explained by the late Jamie Mackie in 'Bandung 1995' as one of the first and most significant steps towards the

emergence of a new multi-polar world that developed later as the sharp polarities of the Cold War disintegrated. He also reviews John Monfries' 'Different Societies, Shared Future', clarifying that it is the cultural differences between the two societies that are the root cause of the continuous see-sawing that is a notable feature of the relationship between Indonesia and Australia, which needs 'ballast' in the form of more institutional and 'people to people' links. Another article introduces us to the charm of the unique architecture of the Khmer modernist movement that flourished under Prince Sihanouk, which was characterised by diversity, subtlety and innovation, but is now being lost through demolition and unregulated development as more money flows into Cambodia ('Building Cambodia' by Helen Ross and Darryl Collins). These are a few of the offerings in the last section of the book, which – unlike the earlier more dispassionate sections – is imbued with humanitarian and aesthetic values, and this enhances the other chapters for the reader by displaying the underpinning basis of Symon's world-view.

The paperback volume presents well, appears well-edited and includes an index, although on closer examination one finds quite a number of mangled sentences, incorrect page references, and so on, which betray its hasty compilation. For students and scholars, the value of this collection is faceted, like the structure of the book. For those interested in the region, not just in terms of mining and energy resources, it provides an extremely well-informed and broad, yet deep, introduction to enhance their understandings in many disciplines such as economics, engineering, environmental studies, history, politics and public policy. For students and professionals in mining and energy resources it should be required reading, one would think.

Julia Read PhD, Melbourne School of Graduate Research, University of Melbourne.

## Notes

- 1 In 2000, he wrote a popular series of articles about STOVIA (the Vocational School of Medicine for Indigenous Doctors), an institution of the Dutch Colonial Government that produced many thinkers of the revolutionary generation in Indonesia, for the Jakarta Post.
- 2 The report is also available on the Lowy Institute's website.
- 3 Published as 'Fact and Fiction on Chin Peng' by Andrew Symon, IAS Newsletter #33, March 2003.

## Double feature

'Nearly all works on United States relations with Southeast Asia have traditionally started their analysis with 1945, or perhaps 1941', the author observes. (p. 9) Her book adopts a different line. That is welcome in at least two different ways. It tends to bring Southeast Asia into larger and more comparative studies, for example on US imperialism. That diminishes the risk, still prevalent, that Southeast Asia is ghettoised in more general works that draw their evidence and examples from other parts of the world, indeed other parts of Asia.

Nicholas Tarling

Anne L. Foster. 2010.

*Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919-1941*.

Durham and London: Duke University Press. xii + 241 pp, ISBN: 978-0-8223-4800-9 (paperback)

IT ALSO OFFERS US A LONGER-TERM PERSPECTIVE on America's role in Southeast Asia. She takes little account of the role of Americans – and occasionally their state – in nineteenth-century Southeast Asia: we do not hear of the pepper-traders in northern Sumatra, nor of the adventurers in northern Borneo, though the Baptists in Burma – there before the British conquerors – are mentioned. Her focus is, as her subtitle indicates, on the inter-war period. But she might perhaps have criticised her colleagues not for starting in 1941 or 1945 but for regarding those as the

crucial dates for American involvement in the region. Surely it did not become a focus until 1950. The 'Cold War' – and in particular the triumph of the CCP and the 'loss' of China – are indeed the 'turning-points' that historians seek, even if that should not make the study of Southeast Asia, or of Vietnam, merely a Cold War study, as Foster rightly suggests has often happened.

The title indeed prompts a question. What was striking about the whole period up to 1950 was surely that the US did not project its power. That negative role indeed helped to determine the role of others. It enhanced the ambitions of the Japanese, who were to be all the more frustrated in 1941. It was only in December that year, however, that the US indicated that it would support the British in the event of invasion, and only after that could the British reassure the Dutch.



Movie theater in Phnom Penh (CC Attribute: Jen Leung; <http://flickr.jp/6kpMqd>).

No doubt the author recognises that, and the closing section of her final chapter offers some account of the reaction to the Manchuria incident. 'Japan became like a sore tooth', a curious simile runs, '– everyone felt compelled to poke at it, ... but no one really wanted to know how serious the problem was.' (p. 158) The subsequent pages rise above that level, but still are barely adequate. If she felt a need to defend her treatment of the subject, she would surely argue that she is concerned with power of kinds other than those the title would normally imply. The book, however, is weakened by an emphasis on them that displaces that larger context. She recognises the paradox in the US position – a world power with only limited interest in the region – but rather misses a dimension of it. 'The United States projected its power during