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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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## TALES OF PLUCK, MAGIC, AND DYNASTIES From Vietnam's Prehistory To The 14th Century

I AM delighted to present to our readers a special issue on ancient and relatively younger tales from Vietnam, with Emeritus Professor Eric Henry serving as Guest Editor and translator of these stories. The settings of the tales extend from the prehistoric or mythical period on down to the early imperial eras, the latest tale originating around 1380 CE in the late Trần Dynasty. Many of them deal with events that occurred during the long period when the Việt people were subject to Chinese overlordship. The tales appear to have first been written down in the Lý and Trần Dynasties (1009–1400), a few originating in even earlier times. Professor Henry has translated the forty-one items in *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái* 嶺南摭怪 (“Wonders Plucked from the Dust of Lĩnhnán”). It is an anthology of tales written in classical Chinese many centuries ago in what is now North Vietnam. The Guest Editor, an erudite scholar of ancient Chinese and Vietnamese languages, explains that for many centuries the text remained unpublished, existing only in manually produced copies, and that fourteen of these hand-copied texts still exist in Hanoi. Professor Henry believes that this work is a goldmine of information with regard to beliefs and practices of Vietnamese people of all social classes from 1300 CE to 1750 CE.

In his regular column, *Road to Malaya*, Philip George, born on a Colonial plantation in Malaya, and now living in Tuscany, gazes at the *longue durée* of history, observing rubber trees in Malaya, sugar fields in the Caribbean prospering on slavery, oil rich plains of Venezuela, and corridors of power in Washington, DC and Beijing. They are not stories in isolation, he writes, but nodes in a single, sprawling network of extraction and order. If the Empire seems to be returning, the fact is it never really went away.

*The Rising Asia Review of Books* features timely explorations of how Asian countries are eyeing the Arctic, as well as an anthology of essays by a Vietnamese diasporic Pulitzer Prize winning author looking inwards at his many identities, plus the experiences of Japanese emigrants and immigrants, and the emergence of post-Angkorian Theravada Buddhism across the Khmer Empire.

The independent scholar, Manashjyoti Karjee, who specializes in the geopolitics of the Arctic, reviews four books—Aki Tonami (2016), Nong Hong (2020), Woon and Dodds (eds. 2020), and Martin Kossa (2024)—depicting Asian states casting a competitive gaze at the Arctic. Karjee explains that he is reviewing the four books together because they fit into a single timeline, and because they address the same puzzle—what does it mean for Asian states to become durable actors in a faraway region that was designed to govern the Arctic with the active participation of the Arctic Eight states and Arctic Indigenous peoples. The puzzle, he argues, does not gel with a simplistic narrative around the much-publicized “scramble” for resources or new sea routes in the region. Instead, the reviewer finds a more interesting thread running through all four books, such as the entry of Asian states into an established order, their presence and capacity in the frigid North, and the competition to define what the Arctic is for.

An advantage to reviewing the four books together is their timing, he writes. Tonami’s monograph was published in 2013 soon after several Asian states were formally recognized as observers to the Arctic Council. Hong’s book was released after China issued a 2018 White Paper outlining a unified framework to articulate China’s objectives. Woon and Dodds’ edited volume studies how the

“Asian presence” is interpreted and managed by Arctic institutions and communities. Kossa’s more recent book integrates Arctic engagement into the larger context of China’s national strategy and comprehensive security during the Xi Jinping Era.

Salikyu Sangtam, Fellow, Geopolitics and International Relations at the Logdrum Foundation in Dimapur, India (concurrently Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Tetso College), reviews *Early Theravadin Cambodia: Perspectives from Art and Archaeology*, edited by Ashley Thompson (National University of Singapore Press, 2022). This book examines the emergence of post-Angkorian Theravada Buddhism across the Khmer Empire, territories that now constitute present-day Cambodia and Thailand. The reviewer writes that this volume addresses a gap in the literature by adopting a transregional framework that transcends national boundaries that have traditionally circumscribed art history and archaeological inquiry in this region. The volume editor explains there is a growing need to break down the national barriers which have long defined the bulk of art historical and archaeological research on Cambodia’s post-Angkorian or Middle period. Beyond art history, the book examines the politics of knowledge production, such as borders and formation of national identities, especially in those fluid times from the decline of the usage of Sanskrit to the emergence of Theravadin Buddhism, the pervasiveness of the Pali texts, and the Bayon art style of Cambodia. It studies how art illustrates the underlying political and social dimension of power.

Aurko Chakrabarti, an applied geopolitical researcher, reviews Viet Thanh Nguyen’s, *To Save and to Destroy: Writing as an Other*, an anthology consisting of six essays delivered as a part of Harvard University’s 2023–24 Norton Lecture Series. The reviewer finds that the book insightfully blends “scholarly intent with bouts of subtle humor.” Chakrabarti writes that Viet Thanh’s own conflicting identities are shaped by his experiences of immigration and generational trauma, fleeing to the United States after the fall of Saigon in 1975 with his family having to start anew. He explains that “Viet Thanh grapples with the idea of how otherness is impacted by the difficulty of assimilation while reconciling with one’s own past and heritage.” Chakrabarti explains that

“otherness presents challenges and opportunities to understanding oneself through the many perceptions—both internal and external—that shape an identity,” and “it provides a latitude to both create and dispel narratives as Viet Thanh describes the ‘tragicomic joy’ of being viewed as ‘the Vietnamese, the Asian, the minoritized, the racialized, the colonized, the hybrid, the hyphenated, the refugee, the displaced, the artist, the writer, the smart ass, the bastard, the sympathizer, and the committed.’” The reviewer explains that not only does “otherness” exist as a phenomenon through which one is viewed by others, it can also exist in the ways one sees their self. “How we perceive ourselves is not how others see us” is Viet Thanh’s way of describing his first encounter with his own otherness.

Vinod Pillai, an independent scholar specializing in the region, reviews *Unsilent Strangers: Music, Minorities, Coexistence, Japan* in the current inward-looking political climate in that country. This collection of essays studies the experiences of Japanese emigrants and immigrants through ethnomusicology studies, with implications not just for Japan but also for Southeast Asia and the rest of the world. The reviewer explains that the word “unsilent” in the title of this book denotes voicing and musicking, and that “strangers” refers to Japanese emigrants before 1945 and newcomer and Indigenous minorities in today’s Japan. Pillai writes that, on the one hand, the volume is a study of immigrants in Japan in the process of adjusting to their new environment, relying on music and dance to facilitate their well-being, as well as to mediate their engagement and connect with other members of the migrant community and also with the hosts. On the other hand, the book juxtaposes the experience of Japanese emigrants in other countries for a better understanding of this process. The study shows that an appreciation of social engagement and cohabitation through musical activities offers important insights.