

Book Review

O Myeongseok [Oh Myung-Seok] 오명석, Hong Seokjun 홍석준, Chae Suhong 채수홍, Kang Yunhui [Kang Yoonhee] 강윤희, Yi Sangguk 이상국, Seo Bogyong 서보경, Jeong Beopmo 정법모, Kim Hyeongjun 김형준. 2020. 『인류학자들, 동남아를 말한다: 호혜성, 공공성, 공동체의 인류학』 [Anthropologists talk about Southeast Asia: Anthropology of reciprocity, commonality, and community]. South Korean anthropology series by Cross-Cultural Studies Institute of Seoul National University, vol. 6. Seoul: Nulmin 놀민. 428 pp. ISBN 9791187750406 ₩18,000

Lee Kyung Mook*

Anthropological Study of a Region Called Southeast Asia

This book is not academic literature in the general sense, nor is it a textbook introducing the history of Southeast Asia. Although it is based on the experiences of researchers who have conducted studies in various parts of Southeast Asia, it cannot be summarized as a compilation of experiences either. I believe a small secret lies hidden in the title of this book. That is, this book is not a study of Southeast Asian anthropology; instead, it is an

* Assistant Professor, Shinhan University.

anthropological study or field study of the region called Southeast Asia. This is because it does not limit Southeast Asia to a single system or subject nor try to bring it under a single theme that binds and connects various regions.

Let's look at the main title and subtitle of the book. The title is *Anthropologists talk about Southeast Asia: Anthropology of reciprocity, commonality, and community*. It would not be appropriate to change the main title of this book, which covers different regions and topics, to "Anthropology of Reciprocity, Commonality, and Community." Also, the book cannot be regarded as an anthropologist's personal account of experiences in Southeast Asia. This book shows the kind of "Southeast Asia" that "South Korean" anthropologists have encountered since they began research in Southeast Asia and what they have been doing. The book—which seeks to bridge the gap between Southeast Asia-related travel books and specialized research articles as well as to convey the experiences of living and researching in the various regions of Southeast Asia—is not just a book about Southeast Asia but a book of anthropology. To exaggerate a little, the consistency of the book would not be compromised if it contained case studies on China or Africa. Through this book, readers will encounter the history of questions and the critical minds of South Korean anthropologists who have chosen Southeast Asia as their region of study.

For the reasons stated above, it is difficult to find a "single" explicit theme running through the entire book. Instead, one can discover the history and style of Southeast Asian anthropology as viewed by South Korean anthropologists. Hong Seokjun, the author of chapter 1, summarizes that his writing contains epistemological reflections and tasks for understanding Southeast Asia's culture, racial and ethnic issues, modernity, and history as well as field research experience on Southeast Asia's social culture (24). As such, this book gathers the writings of eight scholars who have studied a region with astonishing diversity and yet is commonly referred to by one name. In *Anthropologists talk about Southeast Asia*, which brings together multiple research subjects and topics that are not of the same region, debate over whether or not the cultures of eleven countries classified as Southeast Asia can be grouped into the same category is not the key topic. Rather, the question of what can be grouped together and to what extent, using a single theory, topic, or word, appears in every writing. In other words, this book shows what kind of story can be told through the

topic and perspective of anthropology in general, rather than presenting a collection of studies on a single subject called Southeast Asia.

The authors of this book did not write a textbook that conveys “objective” knowledge of Southeast Asia. Rather to the contrary, the book refuses to convey any definitive knowledge in any of its writings. The author of chapter 1, Hong Seokjun, conveys the political and cultural nature underlying cultural writing by summarizing research on diversity and homogeneity, interaction with the outside world, and ethnic relations and ethnicity. In chapter 2, O Myeongseok, under the theme of gifts and reciprocity, summarizes and analyzes the cases of *utang na loob* in the Philippines, *gotong royong* in Indonesia, ceremonial gift exchanges in various parts of Southeast Asia, and merit-making in Buddhism and Islam. He then sought to find a potential for gift theory that differed from that of the West, represented by Mauss’ theory. In chapter 3, Chae Suhong described the rapid changes in Vietnam’s factories and in the daily lives of Vietnamese workers after postulating that it is difficult to find answers to questions about Vietnamese culture or the ethnicity of Vietnamese people. In chapter 4, Kang Yunhui explained the daily conversations, words, address and reference terms, performativity, and language policies of Indonesia, showing how language can give insight into social and political changes in Indonesian society. In chapter 8, Kim Hyeongjun introduces examples of national policies, religious expressions intricately blended in daily lives, the introduction of Islam, colonial rule, and Islamic movements, describing the aspects of religious life in Indonesia and asserting that its religion has a different connection to society.

No author in this book regards Southeast Asia, or any single national unit for that matter, as an object with fixed characteristics. In addition, the critical task of trying to establish the very meaning of cultural research through cross-cultural studies leads to a more direct connection between the research topic and social issues. In chapter 5, Yi Sangguk, who studied refugee camps in border villages, breaks away from the conventional practice of regional studies that set a country as the unit of research. Instead, he summarizes the history of changes in between national boundaries, claiming that the issue of refugee camps and refugees should be viewed as nodes and hubs of networks, rather than as villages that take up geographical locations. Seo Bogyong, in chapter 6, introduces the example of Thailand’s universal medical insurance, which was created and works on a different principle than does Korea’s medical insurance. The study raises

the need for international cooperation in the context of the spread of the novel coronavirus, arguing that the concepts of global health and public healthcare need to be revisited. In chapter 7, Jeong Beopmo discusses the identity and role of the anthropologist in the development field by revealing the limits of the principle of cultural relativism or moral relativism in his experience of investigating international development cooperation projects in the Philippines.

Possibilities of Korea's Southeast Asian Studies

There is a very small number of Korean researchers of Southeast Asia, and an even fewer number of who have majored in anthropology. Field research in Southeast Asia by Korean anthropologists started in the late 1980s and has continued for one generation as of 2021. The authors of *Anthropologists talk about Southeast Asia* have the relationships of seniors and juniors of the same university, colleagues, or advisors and students, which also applies to myself. The limitations and shortcomings of an academic community with few researchers and very few resources to mobilize are so obvious that they do not need to be discussed at length. Based on the sheer amount of research and diversity of topics in Southeast Asian studies conducted outside of Korea, the research on Southeast Asia conducted by South Korean anthropologists is lacking in many aspects. On the other hand, although it may not be viewed as an advantage, does the small academic community pose no possibilities at all?

There is a different possibility held by South Korean anthropologists and, further, by the community of researchers of Southeast Asia in South Korea. Doing anthropology cannot be summarized with only methodological guidelines such as long-term, local stay and participant observation. Southeast Asia as represented by anthropologists always challenges the long-standing research traditions and the latest trends. This book presents a broad spectrum of research by those studying Southeast Asia in South Korea. It includes criticism on the category of Southeast Asia itself and discussions on ethnic issues, reciprocity, labor and industrialization, border issues, medical insurance, development anthropology, and Islam's modernization. This proves that the authors, at least through continuous communication, are not trapped within the partitions of specific topics divided by country.

On behalf of the authors, Kim Hyeongjun explains that *Anthropologists talk about Southeast Asia* is intended to help overcome “the bipolarization of data on Southeast Asian societies and people, as the Southeast Asia-related materials that can be encountered around us tend to be divided into those based on personal experiences, as represented by travel journals and professional research findings as represented by academic papers” (7). This overcoming is made possible because the book, while telling a faithful and interesting story about Southeast Asia, presents an example of anthropological research rather than a study of a specific country in Southeast Asia. I hope that Southeast Asian studies in South Korea will further expand and, at the same time, continue to engage in various debates and stories with the changing locale. This book is a milestone, demonstrating that this ambition can be realized.

