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As a student of history of science and technology who stumbled on the category “Southeast Asia” and attempts to understand its meaning at an institution currently lacking a Southeast Asian Studies program, I find Suzanne Moon’s *Technology in Southeast Asian History* a useful guide into a splendid field that has been growing in the past decades. Facing a formidable task to fit such a huge, diverse, and contested region into only 152 pages, she created a book that is understandably selective and based largely on summary of secondary literature. The introduction defines the goal of the book: to delineate how technologies “circulate,” and thereby “dismantle polarizing narratives of technology as either simplistically ‘indigenous’ or ‘foreign’ by exploring technological dynamism over long historical periods” and attend to “processes of innovation, adaptation, and domestication that have embedded technologies firmly (or less so) in the social fabric of Southeast Asian societies” (p. 2). Eight short chapters then follow tracing the common threads, entanglement, continuities, and ruptures across the various areas that have become known as Southeast Asia.

The first two chapters provide a broad stroke overview of technology up to 1500 CE. Covering such topics as archaeological evidence of first human settlements, the Austronesian migration, and the emergence of urban polities, the chapters detail the technological foundation of economic and social lives that encompasses hunting, farming, seafaring, irrigation and other infrastructure, and religious and political architecture. The next three chapters turn to the period that can be loosely referred to as early modernity (1500–1800 CE) and scrutinize technological changes in selective industries including textiles, mining and shipbuilding, and farming amid shifting trading patterns. Chapter 3 highlights how weaving techniques adopted and improved by women in maritime Southeast Asia competed with the growing popularity of silk and cotton products from China and
India and how increasing European demands for spices, as well as the growth of long-distance trade, led to conflicting labor demand and challenged women’s status in economic and technological activities. Chapter 4 shows the importance of hybrid knowledge in the shipbuilding and mining industries, calling attention to Chinese migrant miners and “the sociotechnical dimensions of immigrants’ lives,” which demand further research from historians of technology (p. 71). Meanwhile, hybridization of shipbuilding methods crucial for European as well as inter-Asian trade generated new tensions and dependencies between diverse immigrants, local inhabitants, and competing European powers. Chapter 5 studies farming population’s responses to pressures of agricultural intensification, along with their socio-ecological impacts. The Riau region of Sumatra, for instance, developed the rotation of pepper and gambier as a “technical solution to the joint labor and environmental problems” of intensive pepper production as well as “an important adaptation to shifting economic circumstances” (p. 87).

Chapters 6 and 7 focus on technologies of warfare. After discussing the ritual and political significance of weapons like poison, blades, and firearms, and the knowledge behind their crafting, use, and maintenance, the chapters show how different societies upscaled warfare in the early modern period by incorporating and adapting imported firearms to land and sea conflicts both locally and against Europeans. Through understanding local terrains and hybrid technologies, many polities were able to resist Europeans well into the nineteenth century, thus refuting earlier scholarship on the deterministic effect of gunpowder in reconfiguring warfare in the region. Instead, Moon suggests that it may be a more fruitful endeavor for historians to study how “warfare accelerated the circulation of technical knowledge on military matters, agriculture, and artisanal production” (p. 121). Chapter 8 continues the thread of hybridity and shows an alternative reading of the consolidation of European imperial control in Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century not as a reflection of technological deficiency in the region but as the intensification of change in technological assemblages. Using examples of rice production in Burma, sugar industry in Negros Island and Java, and rubber in Vietnam, the chapter highlights incremental modification in the making of modern monoculture landscape. Finally, the chapter illustrates how technology became integral in rising nationalist and anticolonial aspirations in Southeast Asia. Rather than just a tool of empire, technologies reflected the “ongoing and indeterminate processes of reconfiguration, negotiation, and struggle over the region’s future” (p. 149). The conclusion then reaffirms the need to trace long-term resilience and stability in the entanglement between technology and society to better understand Southeast Asia today.

Considering that it is intended as an entry point rather than a substantial addition to the literature of Southeast Asian history, it is perhaps natural for the book to leave readers with more questions than answers. One may finish the book with renewed questions about what “Southeast Asia” and “technology” exactly mean. Since such a short book does not have space to dive into the formation of national and ethnic boundaries and a deep analysis of the human and nonhuman actors involved in its stories, it might be most beneficial to read Technology in Southeast Asian History as a general invitation for scholars to think from the perspectives of circulation and hybridity about various forms of objects and knowledge, be they religion, ideology, crops, organisms, tools, legends, or ecologies. Similarly, the circulation perspective might be applied to the study of not only region—and reflexively deconstructing the discipline of area studies—but also to organizations, borderlands, colony-metropole, and trans-local connections across various scales. Ultimately, Moon elucidates the difficulties of writing about Southeast Asia and technology but also demonstrates how such ambivalences themselves underscore the

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need to think beyond bounded geographical entities and challenge self-evident categories.

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