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Book Review: *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements: A Biographical Approach*

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Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements: A Biographical Approach
Blackburn, Susan & Ting, Helen (Eds.). 20130 National University of Singapore Press:
Singapore. 133 pages. ISBN: 978-9971-69-674-0. \$38.00. Paperback.

By Madhavi Venkatesan¹

Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements: A Biographical Approach is a compilation of biographies of women engaged in leadership positions within country-specific nationalist movements, included are: Burma, Vietnam, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Laos, and Timor-Leste. Each chapter provides a biographical sketch of a woman or women who dedicated their efforts to promote nationalism and independence from colonial rule. On the surface the value of the text may not garner the significance of its objective. However, in evaluating the purpose and seemingly simple contribution, the life stories included promote an evolution of perspective through the mere animation of the individuals, cultures and national identities that have been masked in stereotype by dominant and colonizing nations. This book is a contribution to enlarging perception and thereby encouraging an understanding of the common interest in autonomy across groups and nations. In highlighting the sacrifices that have been made by fringe to popular nationalist organizations the text weaves a common thread across time. The focus on women is crafted to promote the holistic nature of nationalist movements and establishes a balanced approach that enables a realistic understanding of sacrifice and desire for self-rule consistent with the concept of nationalism itself.

Editors Blackburn and Ting, note that the purpose and method of approaching the compilation was to focus on the gender contribution and this was best enabled by biographical sketches. For this reason, depiction of the women included in the text focuses on their personal story, contribution and sacrifice with respect to their participation in nationalism. Further, the discussions provided are focused on increasing understanding as to why in an area of the world where women have held a more prominent role in community and family life have there been observable limitations to the attainment of more significant political position and fundamentally power.

The text follows a chronology starting with the 1920s through the early twenty-first century. The first chapter depicts the life and contributions of Daw San in Burma. San was inspired by the India nationalism movement and used her position as a writer to contribute to the nationalism movement in Burma, which was to lead to an independent Burma in 1948. Interestingly, though well known as a journalist, little official recognition was ever given to her for her efforts. This latter characteristic is a repeated attribute of the legacies of other women highlighted in the text.

The second chapter focuses on the contributions of Nguyen Thi Giang in Vietnam. The circumstances of her position, nationalist affiliation and limited surviving detail, much of which is attributable to the pen of French colonial rule, are all limitations to the robustness of the biography assembled. Nonetheless, the depiction of her character was assembled and surfaces in the writing of Micheline Lessard.

The third chapter is based on the Indonesian national movement and Suyatin Kartowiyono, for whom more information is available relative to Giang yet recognition remains forthcoming in

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spite of the significance of her contributions. An Indonesian contemporary of Suyatin, Rasauna Said is the subject of chapter four. Unlike the subjects of chapter one through three Rasauna led an overtly political life; however, as noted with the other subjects limited biographical or autobiographical information was compiled or remains extant. The chapter focuses on Rasauna from the perspective of her public communications and speeches, providing a public view albeit not incorporating an insight into her personal journey.

Chapter five relays the nationalist movement in the Philippines. The contribution of Salud Algabre is presented to promote an understanding of the role and involvement of women but also spotlight the variations that existed within the broad categorization of nationalism. Chapters six and seven focus on what is now referred to as Malaysia. Chapter six highlights the contributions of two women and their independent efforts for nationalism, Shamsiah Fakeh and Aishah Ghani. Using both published sources along with interviews, the chapter provides not only an understanding of the motivations and unique circumstances of each woman but also the significance of affiliation in the subsequent significance provided to each. Lily Eberwein is the subject of chapter seven. Her unique circumstances as a foreign educated Eurasian who was reintroduced to her birth country, provides a variation in perspectives from the other women introduced in the text.

Chapter eight focused on two women who actively participated in the nationalism movement in Laos, Manivanh and Khamla. Both women shared similar backgrounds and both provided a conduit for the nationalism movement by serving as a communication channel between their ethnic groups and the larger movement. Unlike the outcome of the other women highlighted in chapters one through seven both women were recognized by their people for their contributions, with Manivanh garnering the title of National Hero. Bisoi's experience is the subject of chapter nine. Like the women in the preceding chapter, Bisoi came from an impoverished rural background. The nationalist movement of which she was a part did succeed in meeting its goal of independence; however, unlike other subjects of the text, Bisoi found the outcome of the movement to fall short of addressing the needs of rural women, as the movement from her perspective failed to acknowledge the role of women in enabling its eventual success.

Zipporah Sein is highlighted in the final chapter. Zipporah's role in the Burmese opposition is more visible than that of Daw San, revealing the evolution in the status of women. However, the chapter highlights the continued role that gender has played in limiting the potential of women in nationalism movements. The latter promotes the view that though nationalism may tether differences, it is only one of many needed catalysts required to establish cultural change as defined by the abolishment of gender delineation in society.

The text provides a significant entry point for enlarging the understanding of the holistic nature of Southeast Asian nationalism. Most significantly it provides historical case studies to increase the tangibility of the role of women. Given the multi-country and chronological perspective, the text also provides insight into both temporal attributions as well as the evolving roles and acceptance of women.