THE RISING ASIA REVIEW OF BOOKS

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OUT OF STONES WE CAME
And Stones We Worship

Holly High (ed.), *Stone Masters: Power Encounters in Mainland Southeast Asia* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2022), 346 pages, SGD$38/US$32.

We live in a disenchanted world. The forces of modern science and technique in which we are all deeply enmeshed have made more prominent a one-dimensional lens that perceives only what we can see and touch, perhaps at the expense of what is beyond the visible and the empirical world. Through this lens, the mosaic realities of human life and society that once animated the world are purged in favor of bland one-dimensional human culture and reality propagated by the liberal capital order of arranging societies and cultures. Our sense of wonder is mostly 'educated out.' What we now find is the 'sameness' everywhere promulgated by economic rationale to standardize everything under the sky.

The present volume, *Stone Masters: Power Encounters in Mainland Southeast Asia*, edited by Holly High, is best seen as an exercise in

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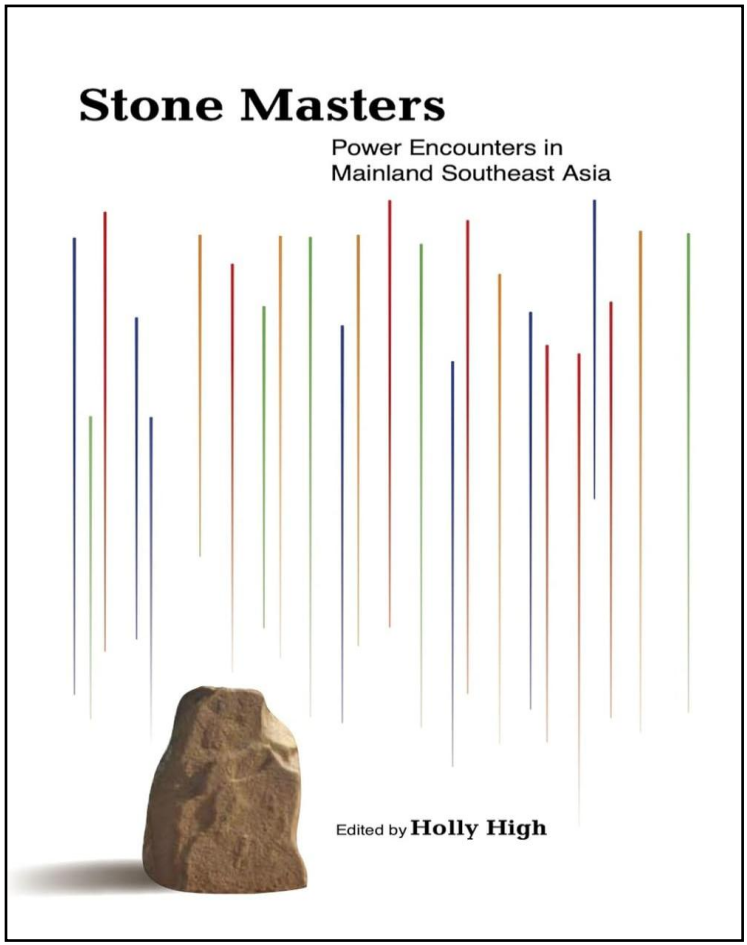
comparative ethnology of regional similarities in cosmology, ritual practices, materiality, and myth across the region. The book helps in identifying universal patterns as well as unique cultural traits across mainland Southeast Asia, by examining cases from Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

The book is divided into three sections. The two chapters (Chapters 1 and 2) in the first section frame the subsequent chapters in the book as a way of providing context to what follows. The chapters introduce and contextualize the key variables and scholarships in terms of the central object of the study, stones. We are introduced to stones of various sorts ranging from megaliths, statues, and city pillars to termite mounds, mountains, and stupas. These stones are manifestations of local or territorial-centric occult potency that require and perhaps even demand constant negotiations for efficacious social life. The concept "Masters" as indicated in the book's title refers to the authoritative spirited, nonhuman presences, who are the original owners of that particular territory or bodies (such as stones). Simultaneously caring and capricious, these spirited nonhuman masters display the generative life-giving power 'to life' as well as the destructive power 'over life.' These stone masters are negotiated with or dealt with by appeasing and pacifying, rather than adored or worshipped. This way humans are compelled to adroitly construct mutually beneficial relations with this master who can bestow great benevolence through fertility of the soil, higher yields, good health, and by keeping at bay malevolent misfortunes.

The chapters in section II explore the different patterns and variations in terms of stone pillar (Chapter 3) and mountain ridge veneration in Laos (Chapter 5), termite mound veneration in Thailand (Chapter 6), and soil veneration in Cambodia (Chapter 4) that animate

the enduring negotiation between the people and the elemental life-giving force for a successful social life. The chapters in section III provide a historical perspective on stone veneration or cults, which are sets of highly localized devotional practices and rituals.



Chapter 7 documents the historical versions of the myth associated with Vientiane's city pillar, 'Lady Luck,' and its relation to modern state-building and consolidating people in its polity-creating exercises. Chapter 8 analyzes the reverence shown toward a diverse pantheon of spiritual entities exemplified by the pavilions, shrines, statues, and

pillars within the twelfth- and nineteenth-century royal palaces in Myanmar. Chapter 9 documents the myth of the pillar of Indra in Chiang Mai (Thailand) and elucidates its centrality in the founding of the city and kingdom in the ancient past. Chapter 10 explores the rituals of territory cults and spirits among the Tai Khuen people of Chiang Tung, Myanmar, and how such rituals are essential to the fertility, wealth, and prosperity of the people. Chapter 11 examines the appropriation of the veneration of an ancient king at the temple on Hung Mountain and the modern Vietnamese nation-state. The book concludes with an afterword (Chapter 12) by way of critical reflection on the materiality of stones and the grand narratives that cloud the Southeast Asian scholarship about stone masters.

What can be stated at the outset is that this book, even though an edited volume, is best seen and read as a single standalone volume. As Costa in his foreword to this volume states, "One of the recurring issue (*sic*) with edited volumes is that we may be interested in one or two chapters but not so much in the others. With *Stone Masters* I would say that a reader who does not read the whole book will miss out—the big picture emerges from the sum of the contributions, again, quite naturally, without being overstated or exaggerated (p. xv)." Indeed, the chapters are intricately interlaced to clearly illustrate how even the most mundane of episodes and events highlight the vital generative life force that animates people and places. The (ontological) question of people and places and their relation to the stones, which is the main object of this book, is most adroitly discussed and explained.

The Cosmic Power of Stones

Stones are perhaps one of the most vital ontological concepts in Southeast Asia, especially because of their significance to their place and

people. From a cosmological perspective, it is believed throughout Southeast Asia that stones are repositories of cosmic force, i.e. vital life-giving or generative forces. In the Kelabit Highlands and elsewhere in Borneo, Indonesia, it is believed that placing thunderstones, carrying vital generative life force, in granaries causes an increase in the amount of rice stored in them (Janowski and Barton 2012; Sillander 2016). Similarly, among the Tenyimia Nagas (i.e. Angami Naga, Chakesang Naga, Rengma Naga, Pochury Naga, Zeliangrong Naga, Maram Naga, Thangal Naga, and Inpui Naga) in Northeast India bordering Myanmar, it is believed (according to their myth) that grains multiply when dried on top of a flat stone. The stone is still there in Khezhakeno village. In the Chizami village of the Chakesang Naga, there is a stone that is believed to cause heavy torrential rain and storms when touched.

The power of the stone illustrated above may seem specious; after all, how can a stone cause rain or the grains to multiply? The hegemony of Western modes of thinking that pervades the world through its social, economic, and political worldview—evident from the Western mode of education to the popularity of Western philosophy and socio-political ideas and ways of organizing most societies around the planet— perhaps heavily colors how most people and societies interact with one another. This includes their interaction with nature as well. Today there is a heavy inclination to view most relationships as irreconcilable duality: 'domination' or 'subjugation,' an emblem of the Western worldview. Thus, for instance, the present environmental crisis is partly attributable to how nature is exploited, manipulated, and destroyed for economic gains. Here, nature is not only 'dominated,' but 'subjugated' for the benefit of man—a philosophy that clamors throughout the Enlightenment Age, where nature was to be dominated and subjugated for man's benefit. This philosophy is poignantly manifested in the rapid

industrialization of the West along with the subjugation of the other worlds (people and societies) through Western colonization. To dominate and subjugate not just the various people of the world, but their natural environment and their ways of life as well.

It is here that we can better situate the value of this book, i.e. "...what stones mean" (p. 294). Taken literally as a collected work on "stone," the present book would add no meaningful understanding of why stones are a pivotal cosmological concept that arranges the ontological basis of people and societies in Southeast Asia. Instead of 'domination' or 'subjugation,' the concepts that capture such ontological basis of life are 'care' and 'relationships.' These relational concepts illustrate the interconnectedness (pp. 88-90) of man, nature, and the immaterial world into a single unity. This unity suggests the essential aspects on the part of these three entities to "take care" and "maintain" the generative principles that underlie this relationship through constant "negotiation" (p. 107), "understanding and listening" (p. 149) to one another, and dealing with each other's foibles and caprices (p. 123) for "nurturing vital life-giving force." Organized and arranged in this manner, the concepts of 'domination' and 'subjugation' that accompany much of the modernizing processes seldom resonate within peoples' relations with their natural environment, which is reflected further in how they nurture, and what they deem to be proper relationship with one another (p. 98). And maintaining such relationships "...require[s] caretaking, restrain and respect..." (p. 99), for they entail the generative life-giving forces that nourish those who venerate, respect, and care for them, i.e. the stones. These stones are venerated precisely because of their life-giving force and nurturing principles. They are seen to be an enduring part of a particular landscape precisely because they are perceived to be "...storage places for spiritual

values and spiritual power" (295). Hence, these stones are venerated through offerings that usually "...include pig's head, blood, rice, special food dishes, betel nut, alcohol, and always flowers, candles and incense" (305)

Venerating the Stone for Well-being

The veneration of these stones establishes a "promise" for mutuality of care between the natural beings or spirits (in this case, the stones) and the people, where each will care for the well-being of the other. The former provides for the latter the gifts of protection, fertility of land, and fecundity of yields. The latter reciprocates towards the former by making "ritualized" offerings, and through gestures of care, respect, and honor. One can relate to this act of ritual more in terms of "remembrance" (rather than a "promise" or a "contract") of the essentialities of one another from an ontological perspective. It is in the acting-out of the veneration through rituals that the remembrance is renewed, certified, and sustained for the vital purpose of mutual caring as well as validating each other's ontological existence.

This ontological interaction generally entails "the introduction of spirits into stones by humans [which] is a way of managing and manipulating the vital force in stone. Once a spirit is present in a stone, humans can relate to that spirit as a sentient entity and benefit from the relationship....The carving of the stone with human features...may perhaps be seen as a means of facilitating the introduction of those spirits into a stone..." (Janowski 2020, 120). Indeed, ancestral spirits, an object of veneration, may also be introduced into stones. Among the Dani of Western Papua, for instance, the ancestral guardian spirits and *wusa* (vital force) are channelled into *ganekhe* stones through rituals conducted in power-laden places (Hampton 1999, 125–127) or "hot

spots," i.e. places or things where vital life forces get accumulated (Janowski 2020, 137-138). These ancestral guardian spirits are deemed to "take care" of their posterity and vice-versa.

Hence, stones are widely associated with primal ancestral origin throughout Southeast Asia. For instance, the Sangtam Nagas and Ao Nagas, in Northeast India, are believed to have been born out of the stones. There are also myths that humans originated stones prevalent among the Minahasa of Sulawesi in Indonesia; Kukis, Tangkhul Nagas, Kabui Nagas, and Khasi in Northeast India; Puyama in Taiwan; and Posso-Todjo in Indonesia (Perry 1918, 77-80). There is also a widespread belief that humans originated from stones among the Polynesians (Williamson 2013 [1933], 16-8). There are several myths narrating ancestors being made from stones by deities or spirits. Among the people in central Sulawesi and Borneo in Indonesia, it is believed that their first ancestors were made by the beings of the sky-world. The first people were fashioned out of stone or made in the form of stone images (Perry 1918, 80).

A scientific mind may be suspicious of the stones and the beings or spirits that are ensconced in them. A disenchanted world is seldom able to observe beyond the observable and the visible. The spiritual and mythical basis of human life that animates human societies is no longer visible. This invisible world is still there, but perhaps our eyes, mind, and the rest of our senses are now mostly trained or 'educated' to see, feel, touch, and believe only what is visible, the literal. We have 'subjugated' our capacity to see and feel the invisible by dominating it with instrumental techniques of perceiving the previously enchanted world. Perhaps, the enchanted world still endures beside the 'disenchanted' world. The spirits exist, yearning to be recognized, validated, and cared for. Yet, in a world mostly defined by economic imperatives and scientific

slant, that which cannot be subjugated, exploited, or dominated for economic or financial profit, is seldom worthy of care, respect, and honor. In this disenchanted world, establishing relationships between people and entities is merely reduced to transactional or financial (quantitative) contracts, not relationships based on mutual respect and care. The present book, perchance, affords us to use this lens (stone) to view such a particular nature of being and existence to question our one-dimensional ontologies.

Note on the Reviewer

Salikyu Sangtam is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Tetso College in Dimapur, India. He teaches political theory and research methods. His research focuses on Chinese thought, and non-western political thought. He is a regular contributor for the *Rising Asia Journal.* In 2023, he was invited to an international conference held in Beijing, China organized by the School of Philosophy, Renmin University of China on the theme "Chinese-Style Modernization: Philosophical Perspectives in a Global Context." And in the early parts of 2024, he was also invited to an international conference organized by the Wuyi Research Institute of Chinese Civilization, Wuyi University, Nanping, China on the theme "Wuyi Forum on the Two Integrations of Five Millennia of Chinese Civilization and Socialism with Chinese Characteristics." In addition, he has served on numerous invited occasions as a resource person in academic workshops as well as delivering lectures.

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