

Editorial: Authority, Meaning, and Justice in Everyday Southeast Asia

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The contributions assembled in this issue of *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies* 19(1) reflect the diversity of contemporary Southeast Asian realities while also pointing to shared concerns that cut across the region. They address such diverse themes as meditation practices among young Muslims in Indonesia, contested graveyards in the aftermath of environmental disaster in East Java, authority struggles in Aceh's forest governance, ghost narratives and postwar memory in Vietnam, transformations in Thailand's sports broadcasting landscape, employees' experiences of service robot integration in Malaysia's hospitality industry, and language-related support for migrant workers in Thailand. Yet, these contributions reveal a common thread. Across different empirical settings, they examine how authority, meaning, and justice are negotiated in everyday life under conditions of social transformation, unequal power relations, and institutional asymmetry. This shared concern is particularly visible in the ways the articles trace the lived mediation of broader processes: religious self-cultivation amid moral and social change, memory-making after violence and disaster, contestations between customary and state governance, the reconfiguration of labor under technological transition, and the uneven opportunities for inclusion for marginalized groups.

This issue thus brings into focus a central insight for Southeast Asian Studies: large-scale processes such as neoliberal restructuring, technological change, environmental disruption, state regulation, post-conflict memory, and labor precarity are never experienced as abstract forces alone. They are mediated through embedded practices, institutional arrangements, moral frameworks, and struggles over recognition, legitimacy, and access. In this sense, the issue resonates with longstanding scholarship that foregrounds everyday life as a key analytical site for understanding the region (Adams & Gillogly, 2011). The articles gathered in this issue show that everyday life is not merely the background against which politics, religion, governance, and labor unfold. It is the very terrain on which these are enacted, contested, and reworked. At the same time, the issue suggests that authority in Southeast Asia is produced through ongoing encounters between official institutions, local practices, spiritual worlds, technological systems, and unequal social relations. In addition, questions of justice appear as a set of lived and negotiated concerns which may be social, spatial, communicative, and labor-related, and emerge in struggles over welfare, remembrance, belonging, participation, and the conditions of everyday survival. In this respect, the issue also addresses broader discussions of

haunting, interaction, and socio-technical change, while remaining grounded in the empirical textures of everyday Southeast Asia.

MEANING, MEMORY, AND LIVED EXPERIENCE

Several contributions in this issue highlight the importance of meaning-making in relation to moral life, memory, and lived experience. In their article, **Stanley Khu and Izmy Khumairoh** examine how Muslim meditation practitioners in Indonesia understand and apply Buddhist meditative practices. Focusing on the narrative of a practitioner in Semarang, they illuminate the place of *vipassana* within the everyday life of a Muslim and show how meditation becomes intertwined with prayer, mindfulness, and moral striving. Particularly important is their argument that meditation can be framed as ‘cultural’ and ‘scientific,’ enabling practitioners to incorporate it into Islamic self-formation without necessarily perceiving it as doctrinally incompatible. The article thus offers a nuanced account of how ethical self-cultivation is shaped through the interplay of everyday practice, narrative work, and broader pressures of self-discipline and social change.

Questions of meaning, memory, and attachment also shape **Anton Novenanto’s** study of graveyards and survivors of the Lapindo mudflow disaster in Sidoarjo, East Java. Conceptualized by the author as “deathscapes”, these graveyards are shown to be more than burial sites. They are spaces where sociocultural, economic, and symbolic values converge, and where struggles over memory, identity, and justice continue long after the disaster itself. Drawing on David Graeber’s (2001) anthropological theory of value, Novenanto demonstrates how these spaces are continually redefined through social and political practice. For disaster survivors, graveyards can become sites of resilience and resistance, including in relation to contested compensation regimes and processes of displacement. The article is especially significant in showing that sacred space cannot be reduced to a singular meaning or function. Instead, it is negotiated through lived attachments and broader structures of power, thereby illuminating the entanglements of urban political ecology, value, and socio-spatial justice.

While Novenanto’s article highlights the contested meanings of sacred space after environmental disaster, **Hoàng Hữu Phước’s** contribution turns to the afterlives of mass violence and the role of ghost narratives in postwar remembrance in Mỹ Lai. Examining contemporary ghost legends related to the Mỹ Lai Massacre of 16 March 1968, during the Vietnam War, the article argues that remembrance in Mỹ Lai is organized through two interrelated layers: institutionalized memory and vernacular memory. Rather than treating ghost narratives as peripheral superstition, Phước shows how they function as active forms of remembrance through which local communities negotiate grief, moral obligation, and the lingering presence of violent pasts. The proposed Space, Spirit, and Ritual (SSR) framework offers a useful way to understand how memory operates through the interaction among commemorative structures, spiritual idioms, and ritual practice. In this regard, the article relates to broader discussions of haunting and the unresolved afterlives of violence in social life (Gordon, 2008). The article also highlights how the vernacular memory differs from the institutionalized memory, where war heroes are named and celebrated, while hundreds of common people who were murdered are often sidelined. The discussion also highlights the importance of reflecting local cosmologies and informal practices of remembrance within wider debates on cultural heritage, reconciliation, and postwar memory.

AUTHORITY, GOVERNANCE, AND INSTITUTIONAL POWER

Other contributions in this issue place authority and governance more explicitly at the center of analysis, showing how institutions, regulations, and competing legitimacies shape social and ecological life across Southeast Asia. In their article on forest governance in Aceh, **Fadhil Ilham-syah** and colleagues examine the persistent contestation between customary institutions and state authorities despite the formal legal recognition of customary rights. The article demonstrates how this contestation is produced through concrete governance mechanisms, including spatial mapping, zoning, permit systems, documentary requirements, and social forestry schemes. The authors show that customary actors govern forests through socially embedded norms, moral obligation, and collective stewardship, while state actors rely on bureaucratic and legal-administrative instruments. What emerges is an asymmetrical and negotiated configuration of authority in which customary institutions persist, but often only through conditional incorporation into state-led governance. The article contributes to political ecology and legal pluralism by showing that questions of sustainability and local welfare are inseparable from the practical management of institutional pluralism.

Thanavutd Chutipongdech, Apisara Chupan, and Pimsiri Aroonsri shift the discussion to media policy, where questions of governance and public authority emerge in Thailand's sports broadcasting landscape. Their article examines the shift from conventional broadcasting to digital sports media and analyzes its implications for regulation, access, and public interest. In doing so, it draws attention to the changing relationships between state institutions, market actors, and audiences in an increasingly digitized media environment. By arguing that the state should primarily function as a regulatory authority rather than a direct market participant, the article highlights the importance of evidence-based policymaking, market oversight, and equitable access to sports media. Within the broader thematic context of this issue, the contribution shows how questions of public authority and justice also develop in fields shaped by media transformation, commercial concentration, and changing technological infrastructures.

Questions of regulation and technological change are taken into a different arena in **Gary Daniels and Rita Lo's** article on the integration of service robots in Malaysia's hospitality industry. Based on survey data from 142 employees across 22 robot-integrated restaurants, complemented by open-ended comments, the study offers important insight into labor relations in a sector marked by labor scarcity, reliance on migrant workforces, and traditions of high-touch service. Particularly compelling is the identification of what the authors call an "anxiety paradox": while employees may appreciate service robots as supportive tools that alleviate workload pressures, stronger performance expectations regarding robots are associated with lower job satisfaction, suggesting concerns about human substitutability and the future value of service labor. The article is notable for foregrounding employee perspectives in debates that are often dominated by managerial or technological optimism. It thereby contributes to discussions in labor process theory and socio-technical systems and relates to debates on technology adoption and socio-technical transition in emerging economies (Anton et al., 2023).

Moving from technological transformation in hospitality to communicative inclusion and migrant precarity, the final research contribution by **Narongdej Phanthaphoommee, Kwanchit Sasiwongsaroj, and Koraya Techawongstien** examines the possibilities and limits of language-related support for migrant workers in Thailand. Drawing on their own experiences of providing language-related support, the authors reflect critically on the possibilities and limits of advancing social justice through participatory research. Their central point is that language

access cannot be understood as inherently emancipatory or sufficient in itself. Its effects depend on how such support is implemented within migrants' everyday constraints and within institutional structures that are themselves shaped by hierarchy, reporting requirements, and image management. In this respect, the article resonates with work that emphasizes the messiness of interaction, participation, and negotiated encounter in unequal social settings (Askins & Pain, 2011). By using co/autoethnography, the authors offer a reflexive and politically attentive account of the uneven conditions under which support mechanisms are enacted. The article thereby adds an important social justice perspective to this issue, drawing attention to the everyday workings of power in contexts of migration, language mediation, and institutional asymmetry.

The issue also includes a book review by **Haidar Masyhur Fadhil** of Syamsul Rijal's *Defending Traditional Islam in Indonesia: The Resurgence of Hadhrami Preachers*, a monograph on the changing configurations of Islamic authority in contemporary Indonesia. By examining the rise of Hadhrami preachers in urban religious life, the book review resonates strongly with the broader concern of this issue: how authority, meaning, and legitimacy are negotiated in everyday Southeast Asia.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The contributions in this issue demonstrate that the 'everyday' experiences in Southeast Asia are part of ongoing transformations and negotiations. Whether through mediation of sports, remembrance of tragedies, or the introduction of automated labor, these studies reveal how ordinary practices are entangled with broader questions of power, affect, and belonging. By centering these lived experiences, the articles challenge top-down narratives of development and governance, suggesting instead that the future of the region is being written in the mundane interactions between citizens, their environments, and their technologies, as also shown in other recent contributions in ASEAS (Lat & Fröberg, 2025; Rautan et al., 2025). The everyday, thus, becomes a site where emotions circulate and shape collective attachments, and in the region, these circulations illuminate how people navigate precarity, aspiration, and the politics of recognition.

Ultimately, these articles invite readers to view Southeast Asia through a lens of situated agency and relational processes. By positioning the region as a vibrant terrain for rethinking transformation as a lived negotiation rather than a structural inevitability, this issue contributes to critical debates on affective labor, postcolonial modernities, and the contested politics of memory. As Southeast Asia navigates the complexities of the 21st century, the research presented here serves as a reminder that justice and authority are rarely settled in courts or parliaments alone. Instead, they are continuously remade in such diverse and perhaps unexpected sites as the graveyards of East Java, the forests of Aceh, and the dining rooms of Kuala Lumpur. It is in these local, often quiet contestations that the most profound insights into the region's social and political character are to be found.



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DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.