1 Introduction

As a region, Southeast Asia is indelibly marked by centuries of mobility into and between the different geographical spaces that now comprise its contemporary states. The introduction of modern technologies like passports was preceded by extensive patterns of mobility across what have since become national borders, from the sea people (*orang laut*) of the Malay World to the upland tribes that inhabit the mountainous region traversing parts of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar. The legacies of these historic flows are evident in Southeast Asia's ethnic make-up, but also its architecture, languages, religious practices and cuisines. They have shaped trading relationships and the contours of the region's economic development, and fuelled social tensions, separatist conflicts and border disputes.

Cross-border mobility also contributes to the region's contemporary demographic structure. Migrants represent a much smaller proportion of the population in Asia than in Oceania, North America or Europe. However, the Asian region is the source of over 40 per cent of international migrants – some 111 million people – 66 million of whom live in another Asian country or in the Middle East. Many of these migrants are from Southeast Asia. In absolute terms, the Philippines and Indonesia are among the top twenty countries of origin for international migration, while Thailand and Malaysia are among the top twenty destination countries. As a proportion of its population, Singapore has one of the highest concentrations of migrants in the world. Myanmar, meanwhile, is a top-ten source country for refugees and is in the top four globally for stateless persons.

It is no accident, then, that cross-border mobility has such a strong influence on the region's political and social terrain. It is impossible to truly understand diplomatic relationships *between* Southeast Asian states without considering cross-border flows. As I argue in this Element, moreover, serious consideration of contemporary patterns of cross-border mobility is necessary if we are to understand social and political dynamics *within* the region's key destination countries for asylum seekers and economic migrants. Yet, beyond studies of borderlands, refugee flows, labour migration – and to some extent the scholarship on international relations – cross-border mobility barely registers with the vast majority of scholars of Southeast Asia.

This Element sets out the case for recognition of cross-border mobility as a defining feature of Southeast Asia. Section 2 provides an historically situated discussion of bordering processes within the region, examining evolving historical conceptions of power and sovereignty, and processes of bordering in colonial and post-colonial times. Section 3 then outlines the political, environmental and

economic drivers of contemporary cross-border mobility, while Section 4 turns to governments' efforts to manage asylum seekers, temporary labour migrants and spontaneous economic migrants, and the tensions that arise in the process. The final section examines the politics of mobility in host communities, with a focus on processes of othering, the emergence of a foreign underclass and the fossilisation of gender norms. The Element concludes by returning to the question of why consideration of bordering practices and cross-border mobility is so necessary if we are to understand contemporary Southeast Asia.

2 Of Nations and Borders

Borders define modern nation-states in ways both physical and symbolic, acting as pivots between territorial states and transnational flows (van Schendel 2005). As border studies scholars argue, borders play an active role in the construction of the nation-state as markers of statehood, 'the political membranes through which people, goods, wealth, and information must pass' (Horstmann 2004, 8).

Many Southeast Asian borders are surrounded by dense economic and social webs that bind the communities they divide (Mahanty 2022). It is these webs, along with the different opportunity structures available on each side of a border, that encourage cross-border flows of people and goods (Horstmann and Wadley 2006). Of course, not all borders are equal: before the advent of the oil palm boom, isolated borderlands in the middle of the island of Borneo were barely visible to the Indonesian and Malaysian authorities. Many borders in the highlands of Mainland Southeast Asia remain invisible even today. By contrast, some borders within the region – most emblematically, the narrow straits between Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia – are among the most closely surveilled borders in the world (Ford and Lyons 2013).

But even the most highly policed borders in the region are to some extent porous, as the Singapore example reveals. When I was conducting fieldwork in the mid-2000s in the Singapore-Indonesia borderlands, I met Jali in the Indonesian port town of Tanjung Pinang in the Riau Islands. Jali told me how he would drop loads of mangrove wood from at an unofficial port (*pelabuhan tikus,* lit. mouse port) at the mouth of a small stream in the Singapore district of Jurong before returning with second-hand goods, which he sold upon his return.[1] According to Jali, 'The Singaporean customs guys didn't care what we brought in, but Indonesian customs boats patrol the straits. The most that ever happened though is that they'd ask for one of the TVs.'

The experience of Mukyu, now the owner of a small furniture shop in Tanjung Pinang, attests to the porousness even of Singapore's official border

[1] For a discussion of 'mouse ports' in the Riau Islands, see Ford and Lyons (2013).

posts. Although she did not have an import permit, or even an appropriate visa, Mukyu used to travel back and forth on a commercial ferry, bringing clothes from Indonesia to sell in Singapore. Indeed, it was only with the advent of COVID-19 that this particular border effectively closed when the commercial ferries plying the routes between the Indonesian islands of Bintan, Batam and Karimun ceased operations in response to border restrictions and declining income (Fadli 2020a, 2020b). Such stories of border-crossing – but also of states' attempts to control or prevent it – abound in contemporary Southeast Asia.

2.1 Conceptions of Sovereignty

Before reflecting on the contemporary nature of Southeast Asia's borderlands, it is helpful to take a step back and understand the history of contemporary national borders, and the processes through which those borders formed. Even more so, it is necessary to consider the precolonial conceptions of sovereignty displaced by them, and the insights that those conceptions provide into contemporary bordering practices.

Southeast Asia has long been an important focus for theorising alternatives to Westphalian models of sovereignty. Famously, Anderson (2007, 28) captured the concrete, embodied understanding of power found in classical Javanese thought by likening the traditional Javanese polity to 'a cone of light cast downwards by a reflector lamp', in which the power of one ruler merges 'imperceptibly with the ascending Power of a neighbouring sovereign'. This 'gradual, even diminution of the radiance of the lamp with increasing distance from the bulb', he argued, 'is an exact metaphor for the Javanese conception not only of the structure of the state but also of center-periphery relationships and of territorial sovereignty'. This model of 'graduated sovereignty' stands in contrast to its modern conceptions, in which power no longer exists on the other side of the border and where the power of the centre is 'theoretically uniform in weight' (Anderson 2007, 22, 29–30).

This understanding of power is influenced by the Sanskrit concept of the mandala. Academic discussion of the term mandala is generally considered to have begun with Wolters (1968), who described a fourteenth century Javanese poem in which the island was depicted at the centre of the Majapahit empire surrounded by Thai, Khmer and Cham vassal states. As he noted, however, the concept had a much longer history in Indic Southeast Asia, stretching back to ninth century Angkor. The mandala is also invoked through Tambiah's (1977, 1985) concept of the 'galactic polity', which he used to explain precolonial sovereignty in mainland Southeast Asia. This model of sovereignty incorporated

both a secular monarch and a religious authority, wherein the religious authority bestowed its blessing on the monarch on the condition that he ruled in accordance with Buddhist teachings (Schobrer 1995). Many others have built on this understanding, for example, Stuart-Fox (1997), who used the model of the galactic polity to describe how pre-colonial Lao *muang*, or petty chiefdoms, functioned by garnering support through tribute and taxes from surrounding villages in exchange for military protection.

Another influential reading comes to us through Winichakul's (1994) description of the situated nature of sovereignty in the territory that is now Thailand. Prior to the late 1880s, the Siamese Court saw its kingdom as an agglomeration of towns separated by vacant territory, in effect an archipelago surrounded by a vast sea. Neighbouring kingdoms were separated by corridors of forest and mountains which lay beyond the boundaries of authority of either kingdom and thus constituted a border without boundary lines and without a frontier. Since no boundary line was recognised, the position of a guardhouse and the distance a guard could patrol from it defined the extent of Bangkok's reach. As such, the boundaries of sovereignty were not coterminous with a border, as the former was geographically well inside the latter, and the latter was beyond the limit of sovereign authority and without a boundary (Winichakul 1994).

Importantly, also, the sovereignty of this pre-modern polity was neither singular nor exclusive; it could be distributed among different rulers, as overlords shared sovereignty with tributary states in the buffer zones. Thus, in addition to spaces where no authority was exercised, there were spaces where power fields intersected, constituting a 'sovereignty of hierarchical layers' (Winichakul 1994, 88). This was a conception of boundaries and borders that stood in contrast to colonial understandings of territoriality and sovereignty in neighbouring Malaya, where the British insisted that a border marked the edge of state power. Maps became an essential tool in this process of demarcating boundaries and a device for new administrative mechanisms and for military purposes, in the process creating Siam as 'a new entity whose geo-body had never existed before' (Winichakul 1994, 130).

Sovereignty was much less clear-cut in some other European colonies in the region, most notably the Dutch East Indies. Van der Kroef (1958, 366) argued that from the 1870s the Dutch administration not only believed that it was sovereign but also 'coerced the Indonesian principalities to recognize this sovereignty' such that it not only managed external affairs but also had authority to intervene in the domestic affairs of those principalities. However, there have been challenges to this position. Working from the texts of official memoranda, ordinances, and legal sources, Resink (1968, 335) describes Dutch control of the archipelago as a 'dust cloud of sovereignties'. This assessment has also been

questioned but, as Locher-Scholten (2004, 34) asserts, there is value in Resink's approach which 'sharpened our awareness of the varicoloured exercise of power within the archipelago'.

Acknowledgment of colonial-era graduated forms of sovereignty dimmed after Indonesia declared its independence in 1945; in practice, however, the capacity of successive governments to extend the reach of the state through the vast territories of the archipelago remains limited, in many ways reproducing the islands of authority that Tambiah (1985) described. Until today, the state's presence remains patchy in Indonesia's vast and varied borderlands. However, not all irregular border-crossings occur in spaces of state incapacity; many in fact occur in spaces of deliberate state absence (Ford and Lyons 2013) – as is nowhere more evident than at the Tawau–Nunukan border crossing in Borneo, where commercial ferry services routinely stop within sight of the Tawau port to allow undocumented returnees to board and again to allow them to alight before reaching the immigration checkpoint on the Indonesian side of the border (Field observations, May 2010).

2.2 As Borders Harden

In the second half of the twentieth century, the international community and individual countries began developing systems that accorded different groups of migrants, from permanent residents, to business and student visa-holders, to refugees and irregular migrants, with 'varying civil and social rights' (Morris-Suzuki 2006, 15). As Castles (2011, 318) notes, these systems of categorisation underpinned a 'new transnational class structure' in which the 'right' passports and qualifications open the door to 'mobility rights which come close to global citizenship' while the wrong ones leave individuals with little choice but to accept much lesser conditions or to 'move irregularly, running enormous risks'.

The intersection between different border-crossing identities allows states to cherry-pick labels in order to maximise their ability to deal with migrants in ways they see as politically beneficial. Around the world, governments have defined asylum seekers as economic migrants as a way of denying the moral validity of their claims for asylum. The Israeli government describes African asylum-seekers as economic migrants, arguing that protections in refugee law do not apply to them (Voss 2018). The government of the United Kingdom has also used assertions that asylum seekers are economic migrants both to justify the denial of their claims and to argue that their legal representatives are helping them to abuse the law (Zimmermann 2011). The government in Hungary, too, has claimed that asylum seekers are 'illegal economic migrants' as a way of justifying tighter border controls, although evidence shows that most people

seeking asylum genuinely fear persecution (Tetenyi, Barczikay and Szent-Ivanyi 2018). As these examples attest, it is not only Southeast Asian countries that have blurred this distinction to control refugee flows – but it is certainly a feature of border management in the region.

The prevailing global approach to migration deeply privileges countries' desire to maintain sovereignty through control of their borders. As McKeown (2012, 38) observes:

> Even as immigration restrictions based on race are disappearing, discrimination based on place of birth, wealth, education and family is not only tolerated but encouraged. A globalizing class that is free to cross borders is emerging hand in hand with an impoverished and uneducated class whose movement is possible only under conditions of severe restrictions, surveillance or illegality.

But, even after the advent of modern borders, Southeast Asians continued to traverse them largely unhindered. For example, large numbers of Laotians cross the border to work on nearby Thai farms (Rungmanee 2016). These border-crossers are well-received because of a shared cultural history and, although they are undocumented, neither the workers nor the farmers who employ them perceive them as engaging in illegal activities. Nevertheless, first anti-trafficking programmes and then the COVID-19 pandemic worked to restrict this community's ability to engage in cross-border mobility.

Like Thailand, Malaysia has a long land border (in Borneo), but also long sea borders (with Indonesia and its mainland Southeast Asian neighbours). There is an assumption that crossing a sea border is more arduous and time-consuming than crossing a land border, but this is not necessarily so. Indeed, from parts of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore are as little as half an hour away by boat (Ford and Lyons 2009).[2] This maritime border, a division based on colonial spheres of trade and influence rather than pre-existing cultural or political boundaries, was originally established as a 'line of demarcation' under the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824. Under this treaty, the Dutch agreed that the British would have the right to influence the Malay Peninsula, the island of Singapore at its tip and Dutch Sumatra, including the Riau Islands. Over time, this 'line of demarcation' evolved into a border between their respective colonial territories and, much later, between current-day Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia (Ford and Lyons 2009).

Until the 1960s, individuals crossed these straits regularly and with little regard for the markers of territorial sovereignty or jurisdiction, following well-travelled trade routes established during pre-colonial times and strengthened by

[2] This discussion draws on Ford and Lyons (2012a).