For

the Peace Corps Generation of the 1960s who made Australia their home
and
whose distinction of intellect and character innovatively moved the
boundaries of teaching and research in Asian Studies

John Butcher
Malcolm Mintz
Craig Reynolds
Carl Trocki
and
Carol Warren.
Foreword

James Warren’s work over the past three decades has become essential reading to anyone interested in the modern history of Southeast Asia as a region. The word ‘region’ is important in this context, because Warren imagined Southeast Asia differently than many scholars before him—his project was not a national one, but rather a trans-national and indeed trans-regional one from the outset, reaching back to his first forays into monograph-length publishing with the appearance of The Sulu Zone in 1980. Though this was the heyday of nation-based histories of the region, Warren started from a different direction—he imagined spaces that were not ‘national’ in character, but rather that had survived at the interstices of developing colonial states, whether these were in the Philippines, British Malaya, or the evolving Dutch East Indies. The Sulu Zone defied national categories, and stood out as different in this era when writing histories of the nation was all the rage. I still remember picking up this book for the first time as a graduate student in the early 1990s, and putting it casually on the edge of my desk; it had a solemn weight to it, and I eyed it warily in thinking how much time it would take to digest. Hours became days, and days become weeks, and before I was done I had written twenty-five pages of tiny chicken-scratch notes (we took notes by pen in those days) on the entire corpus of its findings. I suspect that Warren’s work has found its way into the lifeblood of many historians in this same way, a process of osmosis over long periods of time spent poring over his texts.

No one can doubt that Warren is an archival historian. He has paid his dues in the archives more than most scholars of his generation. His books have the scent of the archives, and he even has gone into detail in a few of them about where and how he found certain still-undiscovered sources, sometimes finding ant-chewed papers in damp heaps on the floors of Southeast Asian basements. His footnotes are small essays unto themselves, occasionally—data is almost sacred in Warren’s historical world, where he has sought to pull together stories that others have not yet seen. Yet to envision Warren as a purely archival scholar would be a mistake of the first order. While the archives form the bare bones of his narratives, his stories are fleshed out very clearly from his own vision of ‘what matters’ in Southeast Asian history. This vision has been remarkably constant over time—a concern with subaltern voice, and the experience of those whom History leaves behind; a penchant for re-ordering geography, so that liminal places become central, and central places liminal, over what Fernand Braudel called the longue duree; and a moral concern to explain suffering, usually endured on the backs of the region’s urban poor.

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of these themes stand out in Warren’s histories—they are the meat and potatoes of historical writing to him, or perhaps more properly the water and rice of what was left to those who had few options in life. Reading Warren can be a depressing enterprise, but only because he has taken the downtrodden to be his muse, and we feel their collective pain—often in extraordinary detail—when he writes.

The essays in this collection skirt the three great projects of his scholarly life thus far. The volume starts off with several musings about the Sulu Zone, the open, maritime space separating modern Malaysia, Indonesia, and the southern Philippines in a realm of small islands and open water. In this space new possibilities of the evolving global economy, or what Wallerstein called the ‘world-system,’ came into being in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Taosug and their client sea-peoples, the Balangingi Samal and the Iranun, forged a production regime whereby other sea-peoples, mostly notably the Bajau, were predated upon to collect sea-produce for eventual shipment to Chinese markets. All of this was accomplished under the eye of a powerful sultanate; Europeans in other parts of Southeast Asia could only marvel at the strength of Sulu for many decades. This system empowered some people and enslaved many others, and it also became one of the main engines of inter-Asian trade at the dawn of the modern era. When Spanish gunboats and declining fortunes eventually weakened the Sulu Sultanate in the second half of the nineteenth century, a way of life over large parts of maritime Southeast Asia finally ended, after a long period of operation which had fundamentally transformed the region. Warren studies these processes from a variety of vantages and through many different sources, piecing together a story that had never previously been told. His essays and books on the Sulu Zone announced a new way of looking at Southeast Asian history, where the ‘edge’ was the center and where ‘margins’ were worth as much critical review as any other ‘central’ place.

The middle essays of this book take the trope of the margin to a different place—to the heart of the very ‘center’ itself. Spun from the author’s book *Rickshaw Coolie*, these articles tell the story of the rickshaw pullers of Singapore, a desperate class of men who journeyed far from their homes in Southern China to try to make a life in the ‘Southern Ocean.’ Histories of Singapore up until this time were fairly uniform, and even the most accomplished of them stressed a normative narrative of British expansion and the establishment of colonial control, which certainly did happen from 1819 onwards. Warren, however, took a different tack. He asked how the poorest of the poor lived in this age of expanding possibilities, which offered them manual labour but little
else in the founding of Singapore's 'miracle'. Warren's rickshaw-pullers lived lives of near-constant depravation: the depravation of calories, as they strove to feed their meager bellies; the depravation of families, as most were too poor to even hope to marry; even the depravation of hope, as the option of returning home to China became more and more distant. The rickshaw-men pulled their loads all day for a tiny recompense, and endured the full heat of the sun and the full fury of monsoon rain in accordance with the seasons. Many were broken men by the time they slipped out of 'the life'—they could no longer pull their rickshaws, and a number of them turned to suicide when it became clear that they would no longer have a way to support themselves as they aged. Yet even here, Warren finds agency, and occasionally, the possibility of small happiness: a hit of opium to kill the pain of physical labour; a game of chance, in one of Singapore's numerous gambling dens; a night with a prostitute, who would have to stand in for the possibility of having a wife. These were meager chances of pleasure for these men, but it was all they had in many cases, and we are given an unparalleled glimpse into the lives of the working poor in the pages of Warren's texts.

These same prostitutes—forlornly awaiting the visits of the rickshaw-men, and others besides them—make up the essays in the last third of this book. If the rickshaw-men had few chances to attain any kind of happiness in the modernisation of colonial Southeast Asia, then these women had fewer still. Most came from poverty-stricken areas of Southern Kyushu and South China; almost all endured years of back-breaking work in the region's colonies, sometimes in the cities but also on plantations and in the mines. Warren focuses his research down onto the thousands of women who serviced Singapore's sex industry, and made it a famous port-of-call for men looking for 'any race of girl'. The essays here tell the stories of the ah-ku and karayuki-san as an occupational group, but they also narrate the lived experiences of several women in particular—faces who stay with us because we know of their sorrows and trials as individuals, and not just as an exploited group. It might be argued that Warren's study of the ah-ku and karayuki-san is his most powerful work—it is probably the part of his research that has most seized public imagination, so that even theatre productions have been based upon it. Taken together with the experiences of the rickshaw-men, Warren's accounts tell the stories of an entire range of ordinary Singaporeans whose lives had been virtually un-chronicled before his work came along—everyday men and women who possessed almost nothing in their countries of origin, but who at least had a chance if they came to the South Seas to try to make a future, in a seemingly-limitless new landscape. The fact that most of these
laborers—pullers and prostitutes alike—never realised their dreams is central to Warren's story, and to the labouring history of places like Singapore. What held promise from afar very often turned out to hold far less than that upon arrival, and the chapters of Warren's books are often chronicles of failure, paved with sweat, tears, and the loss of hopeful intent.

The final essay rounds out the collection by focusing on the relationship between transnational crime—piracy and human trafficking—and the second opening of China in the twenty-first century. This study brings together these essays in one volume, so that the reader gets a sense of these narratives in a single, convenient book. More perhaps than any other historian, Warren has staked out the underside of Southeast Asian history as his scholarly domain, a place rife with disappointment and hardship, but also with the seeds of hope and the promise of a better life. Bajau slaves in Sulu, rickshaw-men in Singapore, and prostitutes in the bellies of coal-steamers all felt these emotions, from the anticipation of potentially-better times to the disappointment of how their journeys ultimately turned out. These are sad stories but they are necessary stories, and over the course of time they have become part of the essential revisionism of Southeast Asian history as a coherent, true-to-life whole. Much of this fact is thanks to James Francis Warren.

Eric Tagliacozzo
Associate Professor
History Department and
Southeast Asia Program
Cornell University
Ithaca, April 2007
Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed towards the writing of these essays, which span more than a quarter of a century. I am indebted to the following colleagues for their valuable comments, criticisms and encouragement over the years in helping me to revise these essays for publication—Gregory Bankoff, Jeremy Beckett, Carolyn Brewer, John Butcher, Bruce Cruikshank, Shinzo Hayase, David Henley, Reynaldo Ileto, S. J., Maria Jaschok, Tsuyoshi Kato, Adrian Lapian, John Legge, Alfred McCoy, Lenore Manderson, Suzanne Miers, Malcolm Mintz, Norman Owen, Anne L. Reber, Anthony Reid, John Schumacher, William Henry Scott, Sow Theng Leong, Jonathan Spence, Paul Stange, Kurt Stenross, Heather Sutherland, Eric Tagliacozzo, Nicholas Tarling, Carl Trocki, Esther Velthoen, Wang Gungwu, Carol Warren, O. W. Wolters, Tim Wright, Yen Ching Hwang, and Brenda Yeoh.

Most of the essays in this collection are based on a series of books written at Murdoch University and during several periods of residence in the History Department, and the Institute of Advanced Studies, The University of Western Australia. I want to express my gratitude to my friends and colleagues in a range of disciplines at both institutions who have provided fellowship and scholarly support for these major book projects over the years. I am also grateful to the postgraduate students who have worked with me during these years for their friendship and insights on the teaching and writing of history.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Murdoch University for its generosity and support during the past three decades. I also want to express my gratitude to the Australia Research Council for several large grants that have assisted me greatly in researching and writing the various books on which these essays are primarily based.

I wish to particularly express my gratitude to Carolyn Brewer, colleague and friend, for her intelligent and efficient assistance in preparing the final draft of this essay collection for publication. I am also equally indebted to the editors of the following journals for permission to reproduce material for this book: Archipel; Asian Ethnicities; Brunei Museum Journal; Bulletin of Concerned Asia Scholars; Itinerario; Journal of Asian Studies; Journal of the Malaysian Branch Royal Asiatic Society; Journal of Southeast Asian Studies. Finally, I want to express my gratitude and appreciation to my wife, Carol, and to my daughter, Kristin, who, as scholars and teachers, have helped and encouraged me over the years.
Introduction

Passing Over: Some Reflections on the Writing and Teaching of Southeast Asian Modern History

Passing over

I would like to begin by introducing John Dunne’s notion of ‘passing over’ as a way to comprehend a variety of autobiographical experiences and standpoints from which a life—that of mine as an historian—can be understood. The process of passing over is essentially a matter of sympathetic understanding. It entails the experience of ‘passing over’ from one culture to another, from one way of life to another. It also entails a shift of standpoint, a crossing over to the standpoint of another culture, another way of life, another human being. It is followed, as Dunne stresses in his deeply personal masterpiece, by an equal and opposite process—‘coming back,’ returning with new perceptions about one’s own culture, one’s own way of life, self, and possible pasts and futures.¹ There is a depth, call it an abyss or chasm, which appears in the most common human experience. An individual crosses this abyss in the course of passing over by sympathetic understanding to another culture and crosses it again in coming back to oneself, returning with new insights that lift the mind, the heart and the soul. What I will be doing in this section, therefore, is leaping over this abyss, crossing it and crossing it back again, albeit swiftly and briefly, going down into it and coming out again, to map a life on time.

New York born, to second-generation Irish and north-eastern European Jewish parents, I never intended to end up in Southeast Asia. While teaching African history at a suburban upper Westchester County High School, north of New York City in the mid-1960s, and passing over once a week, under the auspices of Columbia University’s Afro-American College Assistance Programme, into the streetwise world and emotional milieu of the black revolution sweeping Harlem, I had my future mapped out: finish my master’s thesis on the slave trade between West Africa and Brazil, and then join the Peace Corps in Peru. I wanted to learn Quechua and pass over the cultural frontier of the Altiplano, the high plateau, to live with vanquished Indian descendants of the great empire builders, the Incas. But when the United States government cut Corps funding to that area, my wife and I—we were then newly married—

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were given a choice of destination(s): initially, only Liberia, but several months later also either Korea or Malaysia. We chose the latter.

I (we) lived for two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Semporna, on the east coast of Borneo (1967–69). The period from January to November 1969, spent in Kampong Bangau Bangau, a Samal Bajau Laut village consisting of a flotilla of boat-dwellers and a semi-sedentary population of Bajau Laut in varying stages of adaptation to a house-dwelling way of life, was particularly memorable. It was the rapid abandonment of sea nomadism—a lifestyle that has characterised the Samal Bajau Laut as a people and from which they drew their sense of identity—which first motivated my interest in Southeast Asian history. My subsequent experience of attempting to write my master’s thesis on the Samal Bajau Laut under North Borneo Chartered Company rule, a history involving a non-Western people based primarily on written (British) records, pointed out the extreme difficulty of presenting a balanced interpretation, using only traditional historiographical methods. It impressed upon me the vital importance of oral traditions and an ethnohistorical perspective in any future effort to investigate changes in identity, cultural values, social organisation, economic systems and political patterns of the maritime people of Southeast Asia; transformations and transition(s) initiated by the world capitalist economy, colonialism and modernity. There remained the need then to attempt to integrate my small-scale investigation of the problems of cultural ecological adaptation of the Samal Bajau Laut with the study of world historical events and experiences, and to show how they linked together as a world historical process. I felt the necessity too, to expand the temporal reach of analysis to better understand the response of a loosely structured port polity—centred around the Sulu Sultanate and the nearby areas of northern Celebes (Sulawesi), northeastern Borneo (Sabah) and the central and western territories of Mindanao—to the ascendance of global capitalist expansion and the imperialism of European dominance. While lying behind it all there was still the prewar challenge and vision of the Dutch sociological historian, J. C. Van Leur, to see the past through the eyes of those subject and subordinate people who became mere objects of conventional postwar Southeast Asian history.

Hence the origin of my work began in personal experience rather than with books and formal training. In a very real sense, my interest in studying Southeast Asian society and history, both from interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives, started at the edge. The reason is twofold. First, my introduction to Southeast Asia was based on witnessing the traumatic experience of adjustment of a maritime-nomadic people to a sedentary way of life—a pariah people who, socially and politically, were situated at the edge,
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on the margin of society and history. Second, to acquire the socio-historical methodology necessary to investigate problems of cultural-ecological transformation, such as their continuing adjustment to a sedentary way of life, I subsequently chose to study for my doctorate in Southeast Asian modern history at the Australian National University in 1971, rather than at Cornell University, at that time arguably the undisputed intellectual centre of the world for the study of Southeast Asia. The choice to opt for Australia, at that time considered in certain respects to be at the edge of Southeast Asian studies, was deliberate. It allowed me the ultimate practical experience of ‘passing over’ into another culture and society situated on the margin of Southeast Asia, and the chance of studying and working in a different system of education, which at the postgraduate level primarily emphasised research and participation in a variety of intra-university inter-disciplinary seminars. More importantly, the process of passing over was to provide the opportunity, albeit in a modest way, to help redefine where the centre and the edge were located for the international study of Southeast Asia over the next quarter of a century.

The Sulu Zone: Seeing the ‘zone’

In contemporary ethnohistorical studies of Southeast Asia the ‘zone’ and/or ‘border’ have recently become chosen metaphors for theorising the historically complex and contradictory ways in which cultural difference and ethnic diversity have been articulated in social relations and in political and economic practice across time. At that time, my doctoral research aimed to explore global cultural interconnections and interdependencies in the Southeast Asian world of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with particular reference to a polity and world that I dubbed the ‘Sulu Zone’. The thesis aimed to enhance critical understanding and discussion of historiographical methods and models used in problematising and investigating economic and cultural ‘border zones’ in a changing global–local context. My emphasis was on a ‘zone’ created through the intersections of geography, culture and history centred around the Sulu and Celebes seas, as well as China’s and the West’s complicated place within its long history of globalisation that can readily be traced back to the eighteenth century, if not earlier. Hence my approach, to framing and re-presenting the ethnohistory of the Sulu Zone on its own terms from the late eighteenth century, rather than merely as a corollary of the history of Western imperial expansion in Eastern Asia, was to tease out and, albeit, unravel the economic, cultural and ecological interconnections embedded in the world capitalist economy with particular reference to the evolution and transformation of the ‘zone’: namely,
globalised connections that have non-Western as well as Western origins. This broad conceptual schemata also aimed to enhance understanding of these global systemic links and interactions between geo-political core areas, notably China and Europe, and strategically positioned ‘zones’ or places with loosely structured polities, strong trading bases and thin populations like the Sulu Sultanate, which encompassed a variety of economic sub-regions and extremely specialised territories.

My initial thinking about how the late-eighteenth-century global economy created a ‘borderless world’ or ‘zone’, both spatially and historically in the area of the Sulu and Celebes seas, owed much to the influence of John Smail’s thought about autonomous histories and perspective in historical writing. Smail, in turn, had been strongly indebted to the writings of Van Leur and the hemispheric cross-regional historical orientation of Marshall Hodgson, who attempted to locate the history of Islamic civilisation and situate the history of European modernity in a parallel move within a world historical framework. Templates for the ‘zone’, and possible centre–periphery and trade-process models, were provided by the path-breaking works of E. R. Leach and Fernand Braudel, and Andre Gunder Frank. The inherent advantages of such a conceptual–theoretical, evolutionary–ecological approach for framing and interpretation in a shifting upland agricultural context were already apparent to me in Leach’s pioneering work on the political systems of highland Burma. In the Sulu context, however, insular Southeast Asia was a region in which the sea served as a major means of communication for a wider inter-regional economy in which national boundaries were fluid and by no means fixed. Following in the footsteps of Leach and Braudel, I abandoned the blinkered geographic perspective of earlier historians of the Philippines, Indonesia and Borneo, for a more dynamic definition of the Sulu Sultanate’s boundaries. It was based on larger scale processes of social-cultural change and a ‘borderless’ history of a global maritime trade network oriented towards China, Europe and North America. A history without borders was about entangled commodities and patterns of consumption and desire, which were linked to slavery and slave raiding, the manipulation of ethnically diverse groups, the formation and maintenance of ethnicity, and the meaning and constitution of ‘culture’ as all part of the same system of world commerce and economic growth. To be released from the conceptual constraints of conventional historical geography, I called this wide-ranging web of economic influence and interpersonal relations that centred on the polity of the Sulu Sultanate a ‘zone’.

My framing and interpretation of the ‘zone’ as a spatial system rested on the axiom that it was ‘inherently unstable and generally dynamic’, and that it was
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thrust on the global stage at a specific moment or era in ‘regional time’. Leach’s remarkable work on state and community structures in highland Burma aimed at tracing the pattern of the shifting balance between two representations of political order and social phenomena over some 150 years. Similarly, for me the ‘zone’ was also a process in time. It was a recognition that all ethnic groups and communities were being shaped and reshaped by the interplay between internal social and cultural forms, and ongoing, external courses of action and extrinsic factors. In a very real sense, the peoples of the ‘zone’—the Taosug datus, Iranun and Balangingi slavers, and the huge numbers of displaced captives or slaves—were in fact ‘products’ of large-scale processes of global socioeconomic change which had made them what they were and which continued to shape their responses in reaction to the uncontrollable and rapid impact of these globalising forces. The holism of the zone as a ‘spatial system’ was posited, both as a model and a necessary analytic fiction, not a given. The invisible connections linking the processes of structural change and the dynamic movement of local systems and networks of this complex, albeit difficult to see, ‘zone’ to the wider economic and political world(s) of colonial capitalism and free trade, of which it was becoming a part, had to be traced and explained in ‘regional time’. To rectify the presuppositions of earlier studies, I developed an ethnohistorical research strategy utilising a global, cultural-ecological perspective and framework where the interdependence of all states and societies could be seen at once, and their interconnectedness to one another within the framework of the world economic system was readily apparent. It is crucial to an understanding of the more flexible trans-disciplinary approach required to write The Sulu Zone that it was based on devising a new conceptual, analytical framework guided by the assumption that history and ethnography are inextricably linked. It was a conceptual framework and a paradigm of sorts to enhance our understanding of crucial economic and social processes in insular Southeast Asia—a broad, loose but nonetheless coherent explanation and model about the nature of a Southeast Asian polity and economic region that responded to a set of interdependent connections and relationships fostered by the ‘modern’ world system from the end of the eighteenth century. Apart from offering a panoramic perspective and a means of explanatory power for the understanding of these global–regional interrelationships, the diagrammatic ‘model’ and role of the zone provided the major principle for framing and organisation of the narrative; it was the essential backdrop or stage against which to begin unravelling the main elements in the development of these separate but increasingly related interregional and local histories of various societies and cultures in East and Southeast Asia, and beyond.
The Sulu Zone—The meaning and constitution of ‘culture’

By arguing for a broader interconnected global economic perspective, interesting complex questions were raised about what constitutes our conception of ‘culture’ and ethnicity. While thousands of captive people were allocated throughout the zone each year as slaves, in the period under consideration the borderlines of race, ‘culture’, and ethnicity were increasingly blurred by the more inclusive practices of incorporation and pluralism in a traditional Muslim social system. I maintained in *The Sulu Zone* that the Taosug, Iranun and Samal not only lived in an increasingly interdependent world, but that they also lived in an emergent multi-ethnic polity and society, the multicultural inhabitants of which came from many parts of Asia and elsewhere in the world. How are identities—single or multiple—foraged? What symbols, rituals and perceptions create a strong sense of collective identity? The traditional assumption of a ‘culture’ as enduring over time despite outward changes in people’s lives and value orientations is both ‘empirically misleading and deeply essentialist’.7

As Roger Keesing noted, there is no part of Eastern Asia where both the production and reproduction of ‘culture’ and cultural meaning can be characterised as unproblematic, without glossing over or disguising radical changes in relation to ethnicity, power and hierarchy that have differentially affected states like Sulu and marginal settings like the zone.8 In terms of questioning the ethnic boundedness and cultural homogeneity of an emergent way of life unfolding in the zone at the end of the eighteenth century, I gradually recognised the power of language, commodities and memory as key elements and symbols in the construction of new identities and communities. Filling a conspicuous gap in the literature, this aspect of the book’s ethnohistorical research explored the accomplishment, or re-invention, of ethnicity as a consequence of developing ties to world commerce and economic growth, and to the expanding world of Darul Islam. The questions of the conditions under which these new identities were formed and the ethnicity accomplished throughout the zone, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, have aroused considerable subsequent interest. I stressed in *The Sulu Zone* the inextricable relationship between slave raiding, displacement and forced migration on the one hand, and ‘homeland’ and identity on the other, as absolutely critical factors that led to the emergence of new communities and diasporas. This way of historically conceptualising the ‘ethnicity’ and ‘culture’ of maritime communities leads us to consider new ways of framing and representing a sense of kinship, group solidarity, common culture and conflict,
particularly political struggles, in the history of Southeast Asia. By stressing the problems of self-definition and the reconstruction of identities, and the meaning of homeland and lost places, that reveal social and psychological processes in their own right, *The Sulu Zone* challenged lineal notions of history with their origin in Western Europe and bounded static conceptions of ‘culture’ and ethnic groups that were imposed, imagined and maintained by Europeans both before and after colonisation.

This expedient reinvention of ethnicity resulting from the interconnected force of circumstance generated by the China trade compels us to think about related notions of society and ‘culture’ in more processual ways. Historians and ethnographers of the region need to locate the emergence, maintenance and abrogation of populations and the ‘cultures’ they encompass within the framework of a series of historically changing, imperfectly bounded, multiple and branching yet integrated set of local, regional, global social and economic alignments. Here, some of the questions posed about the birth and accomplishment of ethnicity and border identities in *The Sulu Zone* help us understand that both the recent and more distant past—especially on the margins of states and beyond the frontier(s) in Southeast Asia—are far-reaching, particularly if one considers the contemporary complex theoretical cultural implications of the nature of ‘ethnicity’ (often associated with economic and political conflict in developing societies) as key factors for unravelling the development and history of the terms ‘Indonesian’, ‘Malay’, ‘Thai’, ‘Burmese’ and ‘Vietnamese’. These labels have been successfully created as part of a national imaginary by modern states in the interest of forging national unity and to mythologise history. This case-based discussion of the concept of Asian ‘cultures’ and the creation of ‘imagined communities’ of nationalities as problematic, and recognition of the crucial factors which led, as part of one interconnected and interdependent process, to the accomplishment of ethnicity in the Sulu Zone, provides some of the basic building blocks for future comparative and theoretical analyses of the interpretation of culture.

**The Sulu Zone—In search of ‘evidence’**

The chronic problem facing ethnohistorians of Asia, Africa and Latin America is the uneven nature of the source material available for certain people, places and times. How can one provide a well-detailed historical reconstruction and measure change if the documents as ‘instruments of measurement’ are scarce, non-existent, or themselves changing? 'The effort has to be made to bring to bear as wide a range of evidence as possible, on critically specific points, to
emphasise the global interconnections and interdependencies of particular societies and regions, in order to frame a holistic or 'total' explanation of their mutual encounters, interactions and conflicts in a contemporary 'borderless world', a world that has a long history, created in part by an evolving world capitalist economy. Hence, it proved necessary, in researching and writing this book, to seek out as much evidence wherever it could be found, especially because of the accidental generation and destruction of historical records concerning the ethnohistory of the Sulu Zone. Consequently, I used an extremely varied, in fact eclectic, body of documentation from twenty-six different archives, libraries and repositories around the world, to resolve the problem of explaining the significance of the China trade in the transformation of Taosug society and culture of the late eighteenth century. I went in search of all forms of evidence—archaeological, anthropological, historical and oral testament—and not a page was meant to be left unturned along the way.

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the population of Sulu was heterogeneous and changing—socially, economically and ethnically. This was a direct result of global trade. The importance of populating of the Sulu Zone by captives from the Philippines and various parts of the Malay world and their role in the redistributational economy centred at Jolo, the capital of the sultanate, should not be underestimated. The perennial problem confronting the historian has always been to achieve a balance in the historical record. Frequently this record is written by the empowered. As such, their observations are, naturally enough, laden with their own preconceptions, social bias and self-interest. Their accounts have often been employed to provide a 'contrast' and sometimes justification for a particular policy or historical attitude. However, in colonial and national archives sometimes there are misplaced or forgotten documents and neglected objects of material culture that have miraculously survived the passage of time to tell a different story: the deeds and even authentic speech of the captives of the Iranun and Balangingi recounting their stories of the middle passages; the letter of a Balangingi female prisoner of war asking to join her incarcerated husband on death row; the harrowing report of a Spaniard captured and sentenced to a Balangingi prahu as a galley slave; an artist's sketch here, a misplaced oil painting there—all awaiting rediscovery and analysis by a young ethnohistorian, searching after the fact(s) in order to understand various enigmatic processes in the Sulu Zone.

To understand the economic and social role played by slaves in the economy, previous historical studies of the sultanate depended largely on published colonial records and accounts rather than on records inadvertently produced by the slaves themselves. Slavery in Sulu was observed through the eyes and
preconceptions of European observers and writers who viewed Sulu as the centre of a world fundamentally hostile to their interests—a traditional Islamic world whose activities centred on piracy and slavery. A unique alternative to this Eurocentric perspective was presented to me by the discovery, and subsequent compilation, of the scattered statements of fugitive captives from the Sulu Sultanate. Carlo Ginsburg, a gifted Italian historian whose classic works have challenged us to retrieve social worlds that more conventional history does not record, describes particular types of legal-juridical documentation, as ‘written records of oral speech’. For example, according to Ginsburg’s way of thinking, the written proceedings and statements of the fugitive captives, which proved so essential to writing *The Sulu Zone*, could be considered comparable in certain respects to the notes or notebook of an ethnographer, who had studied a cultural system where slavery and ethnogenesis were a common occurrence. Consequently, following the logic of this line of thought, the handpicked naval commanders of various colonial powers struggling to rid Southeast Asia of Iranun–Balangingi raiding and the slave trade, momentarily transformed on the deck of a gunboat, as anthropologist and inquisitor, performing a deadly type of ‘fieldwork’ in the waters of the zone several centuries ago.

What the direct testimony of the fugitive captives contained was ‘life’: a freshness and wealth of small-scale detail that could be used to explore the mentalities and material world of several generations of slaves; an exceptionally rich source, containing singularly invaluable textured accounts around which to base, on a cultural level, a historical ethnography, case studies and a collective biography. I made extensive use of this neglected source of social history in the book to reconstruct the social organisation of Sulu slave raiding, slave life in the zone and to make slave voices speak. The macro-empirical trade data based on the shipping returns of the port of Manila (particularly the *estados* and the *almojarifazgo*) and the statements of the fugitive slaves complement one another, and together enabled me to resolve fundamental questions about the scope and magnitude of the Sulu Zone’s global–regional trade, its flourishing slave population, and how these changed over time as a consequence of the impact of the China trade and the machinations of the world capitalist economy. The methodological search for a way to link the experience of individuals and related events in their lives, to larger, impersonal systems, as described and analysed in *The Sulu Zone*, was most tenable at the intersection(s) bridging the ‘narrative space of ethnography’, the use of quantitative methods for the prosopographer, and the study in depth of the small scale. In this way, I adapted the methods of social anthropology and historical computing to do historical research and ethnography in the archives,
in order to understand the ‘otherness’ of a previous era, and place the Sulu Zone, or, as the French social historian, Robert Darnton, phrased it, to do ‘history in the ethnographic grain’.14

A key problem in focusing on the collective identity of particular social groups in the book—slaves and Iranun and Samal Balangingi raiders—was to choose a sample which represented the total regional and social population(s) of the zone. Spanish naval officers, specialists in ‘contemporary Sulu affairs’, interrogated the fugitive slave informants, and more than a century and a half later, I used both content and statistical analysis to create a multi-source, integrated database, as a prosopographer. The difficulties that attended an analysis of the social and ethnic complexity of the historical situation(s) of the slaves and their Taosug and Samal masters could only be depicted through a prosopography: a collective biography, resting on a scaffolding of empirically integrated fragments of life histories. The effort to recover their stories from abstruse sources for this book, the raw material for both history and anthropology, is based on the capacity of a creative imagination to evoke the everyday life of a ‘little people’—namely, captives and slaves—and the conviction that carefully accumulated detail or ‘thick description,’ emphasising both experience and explanation, is the best way to reconstruct a sense of their time and place.

The Sulu Zone—some conclusions: Slavery, transformations and rethinking globalisation

My understanding and discussion of global economic–cultural interconnections and interdependencies about the Sulu Zone and the China trade were based on the premise that these intersections were governed by particular economic systems and set in a specific era and locality. The Taosug lived in a singular time and time meant change. They also lived in a singular place and geography meant destiny. The zone was a place where borders were becoming ever more porous, less bounded, less fixed, stimulated in large measure by global–regional flows of commodities, people and ideas; a kind of powerful magnet whose force European and Chinese traders were drawn to because that was where a lot of the exotica for Chinese cuisine and medicine and other commodities for the Canton market were being collected and processed. What then is the importance of The Sulu Zone’s thesis about the China tea trade’s complicated place within its ‘borderless’ history? It has been a central argument of this book that we cannot think of societies and cultures in isolation, as self-maintaining, autonomous, enduring systems.15
In the pages of *The Sulu Zone* the world has changed through the intersections of the global trade economy centred on the Sulu and Celebes seas, as well as the Sultanate’s critical place within it. Here, ordinary Southeast Asian farmers and fishers were traumatically uprooted and forced to live in a distant economic region. This world was comprised of winners responding to new economic opportunities of ‘globalisation’, and losers who were those forced to live in ways unanticipated before that moment of capture and enslavement. Trade debts in Jolo were paid off by slaves serving Taosug masters in the fisheries and forests of the zone. The point is that tens of thousands of ordinary Southeast Asians lived among maritime peoples completely removed from those with whom they had been born and grown up. They found themselves abroad in the seascape of the zone. First, because advanced technologies and new social alignments made long-distance slave raiding relatively easy and second, because revolutionary economic historical developments forcefully landed them in an unintended place—the zone. European traders joined with Taosug *datus* to spark one of the largest population movements in recent Southeast Asia history, with hundreds of thousands of individuals sent into slavery across the zone. Turnover in Iranun–Samal slave trafficking was in excess of millions of dollars a year: human cargo and Chinese tea then were as profitable as drugs and guns. Hence, all these commodities became inextricably entangled with one another in a deadly global trade. One of the most intractable problems facing the Southeast Asian world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was connected with the huge number of captive people being taken to the Sulu Zone, never to return. However, displacement need not necessarily always be equated with social death.

Let us briefly contemplate here the force of circumstance and fate of the indigenous women of the Visayas and Luzon, who were unmercifully targeted by the Iranun and Balangingi slave raiders. Strand gatherers, these women were picked up from the beaches in the grey light of dawn as they fossicked along the shoreline. Their husbands were often slaughtered on the spot and the bodies left as a grim warning to others. In their time, these women of Luzon, the Visayas and other coastal stretches of Southeast Asia knew something of fear and real despair. For women around the region seized as captives, life in the middle passage could look like a valley of dry bones with no signs of hope of a new life. Yet out of such a tragic reality, the traditional Muslim social system could inspire new life, new beginnings and new hope—if captives were prepared to cross the line and renounce their previous ways of life and faith. The newly widowed women (sometimes with their children) were transported as slaves to the powerful sultanate(s) in the south of the archipelago where
they were expected to work on providing lucrative goods to be traded with the English, Chinese and Americans—or where they became concubines or secretaries (if they could read and write) of the already rich and powerful. By the start of the nineteenth century, slave identities in the zone were being shaped and changed by the forces of ‘globalisation’ as distinctions of ethnicity and culture blurred and were broken down; thousands of ‘outsiders’ were being incorporated into the lower reaches of a rapidly expanding Islamic trading society. Sulu provides an outstanding example of how a collective identity was established, made real, and how it assumed a particular cultural content.16

There are no statistics on the overall number of slaves imported into Jolo between 1768 and 1878, except the estimates of European observers and local informants. In The Sulu Zone, I have argued that slave imports to the Sulu Sultanate during the first sixty-five years probably averaged between 2,000 and 3,000 annually. The steepest rise in the estimated number of slaves annually brought to Sulu, between 3,000 and 4,000, occurred in the period 1836 to 1848, and slackened considerably in the next several decades, with imports ranging between 1,200 and 2,000 slaves a year until the external trade collapsed in the 1870s. The figures appeared to show that between 200,000 and 300,000 captives were transported in Iranun and Samal Balangingi vessels to become slaves in the Sulu Sultanate in the period from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century. However, now, earlier estimates of the scale of the slave traffic described and analysed in The Sulu Zone have to be revised further upward for the first half of the nineteenth century, especially as the trade with China reached its zenith between the 1820s and 1840s. In July 2004, I discovered a hitherto unknown confidential report on the number of slaving vessels entering the port of Jolo, with detailed data provided by a Spanish merchant captain on the numbers captured and brought to be sold there. The stunning findings of the confidential log or ‘census’ suggests that between 4,000 and 6,000 Visayans, expert divers and seafarers, alone were being enslaved on an annual basis by the Iranun and Balangingi by 1845.17

Certain lessons and examples from history about global economic–cultural interconnections and interdependencies in this book also tended to explain patterns and events that have been formally glossed over; for example, sugar ‘demanded’ slaves and the Atlantic slave trade. Similarly, tea, inextricably bound to sugar as product and fate, would also inadvertently ‘demand’ slaves in the Sulu Zone and thus lead to the advent of Iranun–Balangingi long-distance, maritime slave raiding. Since the Europeans and Americans primarily wanted
sea cucumber, shark's fin, pearls and bird's nests for the trade in China tea, the issue of the nature of productive relations in the Sulu Sultanate—slavery—suddenly became of primary importance. The soaring demand for certain local commodities in return for foreign imports affected the allocation and control of labour and the demand for fresh captives throughout the Sulu Zone. In this globalising context, tea was more than simply the crucial commodity in the development of trade between China and the West. In this history of the Sulu Zone, filled with so many deals and intrigues and such geographical scope, tea was also a plant that was instrumental in the stunning systematic development of commerce, power and population in the Sulu Zone which changed the regional face and history of insular Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, in a comparative diasporic context, the statistics on the explosion of displacement and production in *The Sulu Zone*, to satisfy the trajectory of a craving and taste, are small when compared to eleven million Africans who endured the middle passage to the New World during the three and half centuries of the Atlantic slave trade.

The Sulu Sultanate was an exceptional case for ethnohistorical investigation because the history of the zone demonstrated clearly the links between large economic and cultural systems and social mechanisms and institutions, on the one hand, and on the other, the making of collective worlds of more localised smaller communities. In short, as Kenneth Prewitt puts it, ‘The global-local notion is not a metaphor invented by social theorists.’ Rather, it was the lived experience of millions of people in the zone and on several continents, inextricably bound to one another as product and fate. Part of the challenge for me had been to identify and link broad patterns and variations in interactions of the global economy and macro-historical trends with the ‘autonomous-local history’ of a barely recognised economic region in Southeast Asia. The long-term changes that occurred in these patterns and trends, based on economic interconnections and imperatives of the world capitalist economy and colonialism, had to be explained and understood through their interdependent effects in the environment, on ideas, on events, on human nature, and on the social and cultural transformation of the world(s) of the ‘zone’.

The patterns revealed by the book threw up some unavoidable conclusions. The first is that the implications of the framing and analysis of the economy, culture and society of the Sulu Zone, perhaps could be applied in a wider framework not only to elucidate the development of states and the elaboration of ethnic diversity in insular Southeast Asia, but also to develop a comparative framework with mainland states and cultures, concerned namely with the impact of foreign trade; the rise and demise of populations; the rapid and expansive
circulation of commodities, ideas and genes; and colonial interventions. A second conclusion concerns an observation that can be made about the nature of researching and writing Southeast Asian modern history. Namely, it is the trans-historical, trans-cultural, trans-disciplinary, methodological approach linking detailed research of a local situation to wider global–regional economic systems and issues that underpins this book.

Finally, a third inescapable conclusion of *The Sulu Zone* entailed something more: the making of this ethnohistory not only involved an extension of the content and meaning of ethnicity and ‘culture’ in the pursuit of history, it also implied a revision of that content. What I suggested more than a quarter of a century ago, in *The Sulu Zone* and elsewhere, is that in a new history of insular Southeast Asia, the ‘little people’ (fishers, ‘raiders’, divers, traders, highlanders, forest-dwellers, ‘squatter’ agriculturalists, refugees, asylum-seekers and slaves, both men and women) should be prominent and visibly present, as part of the cultural landscape and complex geographical environment of a series of regional economic ‘zones’—areas that are often on the margins of states, enmeshed in the hemispheric framework of the larger changing contemporary globalised world of cultural flows and economic interactions, replete with their relentless painful accounts of intrigue, displacement, paradox and insights into the human condition about courage and the will to survive. This methodological approach is especially relevant today, in a world where globalisation has become critically important in the first decade of our new century. So much controversy has filled history, so much research and analytical storytelling skills are required. The fundamental problems of North–South intersections and interactions encountered in the everyday lives of peasants, maritime and tribal peoples—making their livings and losing them, entangled in globalising events beyond their own local geographic borders and worlds—is the work of future concerned historians of Asia.

**Singapore: Towards the making of a trilogy**

I also became increasingly preoccupied in the mid-1970s with the local viewpoints and local understandings of ordinary Southeast Asians, past and present. Often, like the Samal Bajau Laut, they were at the edge of history—dispossessed and abandoned. Much of this population—cooler and peasant—was seemingly inarticulate and had left less in the way of historical records than the more prominent few. I wanted somehow to resurrect their views, concerns and desire to make their choices a reality. But how does one manage to write a People’s History? Are there new sources to be tapped, or new ways of using the
more traditional ones? Whereas historians of the past found their images of the Southeast Asian world in the fates of governors, generals, aristocrats and literati, I sought its images in the daily life of ordinary urban and rural-dwellers, in the experience of rickshaw coolies and prostitutes, the working sons and daughters of impoverished Chinese and Japanese peasant farmers. What I wanted to create was a personal history of their times—an inner history—closely based on lived experience, while, at the same time, paying careful attention to the larger historical influences—the institutions, processes and interactions—which determined their fates.

My study of the rickshaw coolies and prostitutes of Singapore in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been an individual project nearly thirty years in the making. It emerged from a somewhat different historical and political context from The Sulu Zone. The books were based on my experience and vocation as a teacher of non-Western history in a post-colonial world. A passion for a forgotten past of people who have stood outside history and recovery of a whole set of social relations have been central preoccupations running through all my work. This is especially so in the case of Rickshaw Coolie and Ah Ku and Karayuki-san. The books insist on seeing things relationally using concepts and techniques from sociology and anthropology. The lessons in both of these disciplines for the study of history suggest how to create a total set of social relations—a socio-cultural system—in a historical past. This sociological–historical approach, which also entails elements of an ethnohistorical research strategy, is something I have stressed in my teaching, and tried to put into practice in my writing.

The underside of Singapore Chinese society and the city’s development, as a commercial centre and entrepôt port from 1870 to 1940, have been the setting for much of my work for the past two decades. Both Rickshaw Coolie and Ah Ku and Karayuki-san, the two recent social histories in an envisaged trilogy, deal with the same part of Southeast Asia—turn-of-the-century Singapore, wedged between British Malaya and the Netherlands Indies—with its own startling tough ‘history from below’ and idiosyncrasies as a Chinese city outside China. These books examine the social conditions that spawned the rickshaw and prostitution industries and the way the rickshaw pullers and prostitutes lived the meaning of their lives in conjunction with the big changes taking place in the development of colonial Singapore and Asia. Mass migration, rural unrest and change, industrialisation in Japan, high finance and the Depression (the dark side of urbanisation in Singapore)—these topics all received their due in both works, albeit with somewhat different emphases, given my particular historiographical and thematic concerns in the respective volumes.
Discovery—1978

But, let me pause for a moment here, in order to travel back in time, to consider, briefly, the ‘context of discovery’ of the most important source for attempting to write this trilogy, as a social history from below—the Coroner’s Records for Colonial Singapore, 1883–1940. It is late January 1978 in Singapore; I am stymied. I was fast running out of government repositories and libraries in a desperate search for documents that would provide insight into the singular identity and sociability of ordinary Chinese men and women. Since completing The Sulu Zone two years earlier, I had been thinking seriously of writing a historical survey about labour, migration and social transformation in a colonial city like Singapore. Perhaps, I asked, in a race against time, does the elderly court clerk know of the whereabouts of records which would help me place the lives of his parents’ and grandparents’ generation in a meaningful historical context. The old Chinese man did not think he could be of any real assistance but said that he still remembered the location of ‘some old things’ in the huge modern Court building. The two of us arranged to visit the Subordinate Court storeroom just two floors above the following morning. When the door was unlocked for me, after several months of fruitless searching, to a still largely empty storeroom in the new Subordinate Courts building, I gained entry to a collection of several hundred unclassified quarto size volumes stacked high against a wall, to a height of over one metre. The floor itself in several spots was also covered with piles of unsorted Certificate of Coroner’s Views and miscellaneous documents into which everything had been dumped, higgledy-piggledy—a horizontal load filling an area more than twice the size of my office!

I can still remember my surprise when the mindful clerk standing in the open door pointed across the large room towards the mass of documents. Not sure where to start without a checklist or guide of some sort, I began to rummage among the stacks closest to me. I started to dig in and there was just about everything—Coroner’s Inquests, Coroner’s Views, suicide notes, drafts of letters, even recipes and household bills! The first two hours or so were both thrilling and somewhat confusing. Without stopping for a rest over the entire day, I was introduced to the beginning of an absolutely enormous cast of ordinary men and women whose life experiences were situated at a point in time in a ‘visitable past’—rickshaw pullers, construction workers, the homeless, parents, addicts, prostitutes, petty criminals and many others—and I immediately wondered how their stories all might fit together. Sensing the historiographical possibilities these documents offered for the study of ordinary Chinese men and women, and the fact that their experiences all
might fit together, as I gradually learned, was one of the major turning points towards envisaging the trilogy. Initially, I randomly picked up, and with great excitement read the Coroner's view of the suicide of the *karayuki-san*, Oichi.\(^{21}\) This was my first encounter with this extraordinary source. I shall never forget it. In a very real sense, Oichi's way of dying was the thread I pulled to begin to untangle the whole fabric of the changes occurring in the underside of Singapore society. As I dug deeper, solitarily standing in the storeroom where an elderly clerk had inadvertently revealed this treasure trove, and read the first inquest statements of rickshaw pullers and their kin and of prostitutes and their clients, finding expressions of their personal grief, of pain and frustration, of the misery that colonial rule and the Depression had inflicted upon them, of an extreme structural poverty reflected in the incidence of suicide, and of life's small pleasures like a special meal of chicken, rice wine and noodles shared with friends, I shelved the idea of merely surveying the ‘inner history’ of the city in a single volume.

Nonetheless, as I explored the documents another sort of reality bore down on me. As with the statements of the fugitive slave accounts of the Sulu Sultanate, I learned there was no substitute for seeing the literal evidence of a life and material circumstance—the carefully penned note, of a forlorn *karayuki-san*, a midday account of a ritual meal with the recipe still extant as if ready to prepare or pointing eerily in the direction of the vanished cook, or an ironic mention of an old rickshaw wheel, stored above a beam across the top of a latrine, which a rickshaw puller used to commit suicide. The search for this past reality was my real purpose for having come to Singapore—to resurrect events and images that would fill out and revise the story in the history books, to mark and memorialise this city as the rickshaw men and prostitutes knew it, and to waken the ghosts of Victoria Street and Duxton Road, and Malay and Smith Streets, in order breathe life into the past and to make dead people live again.

The material I found was breathtakingly exciting, not only for the light it threw on Singapore’s prewar society and economy, but for the way it illuminated in sharp detail the dramatic changes that occurred in Singapore Chinese culture and history, yet within the memory of a visitable generation, still close enough to be grasped, especially the period from the early 1900s to the late 1930s. I set to work, travelling back and forth for several years, between a tiny corner of the Subordinate Court’s library in Singapore and my own university office, reading, analysing and getting the material in order. The contents of this repository would yield up with skill and patience, the living testimony of Chinese people who did not know how to express themselves in print and who did not have direct access to people in power. Obviously, there was a great deal to learn from
this trove of inquests and inquiries. ‘It was when life was framed in death that the picture was really hung up,’ observed Henry James.22

**Giving voice**

I wanted to write a history of the Chinese in Singapore full of ‘imaginative drama and narrative sweep’,23 one that would be primarily about ordinary individuals and the incalculability of their lives. The stories emerge from the texts of the inquests and inquiries complete with deeply impressive dialogue. The Coroner’s work is stunning, and thoroughly purposeful. It seemed to me writing about these cases of death from the point of view of anthropological history was a way of framing and re-presenting what had actually happened in life to rickshaw coolies and prostitutes, and for giving voice—preferably their own voice or voices of family and friends, and enemies or strangers in association with them—to passengers, clients, lovers, samaritans or assailants.

All the fundamentally great themes of power and innocence, friendship and loyalty, goodness and evil, love and betrayal in all its forms and fathomless complexities were found in the Coroner’s cases about the lives of these very ordinary, sometimes dangerous, often inarticulate men and women. Until that moment of ‘discovery’ there was no knowledge of such vanished feelings and ‘events’ to speak of whatsoever. And I think that was very important because, when I was working on *Rickshaw Coolie* and *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san*, I tried to recreate such emotions and moments through the complex voices with which the Coroner and others spoke of the dead, and by travelling back in time in my imagination, not just along the busy thoroughfares lined with rickshaws, but into the *kongsi* foyers and on to the brothel verandas and beyond. Both volumes were an attempt to understand the character of a tidewater colonial city and important relationships and experiences in the lives of coolies and prostitutes, linking behavioural codes, cultural attitudes and work that left many fumbling for a livelihood and unsure of their emotional ground in the face of grief, loss of employment, or resentment over the failure of relationships.

I have not mentioned the necessity of a strong stomach in researching and writing this social history, as I was seriously interested in addressing the great themes of life, work, love and death. The business of life and death in the history of Singapore Chinese society and culture had to be faced. It was one of the weightiest things in the existence of the city—very heavy. Of course, a wide angle, deeply focused reconstruction of the mental, emotional and material life of previously unknown worlds is hardly novel territory for social history over
the past several decades. But I think conflict was still the essence of the social drama of it all, no matter how I attenuated or conceptualised these themes. Winning and losing, as cases about the rickshaw and prostitution industries demonstrated, were still endings that people—coolies and prostitutes—passionately cared about, but the ‘events’ or ‘knots’ that triggered an ending were not always part of a sensible life, and last-minute winnings and losses of power, face, innocence, trust and wellbeing were often the most dramatic and ironic of all. Reversals of expectations about the nature of particular coolies’ and prostitutes’ lives and their choices were not foolproof. The repercussions of their decisions often put them on a well-trodden path that generally ended dangerously, as the ‘events’ in the Coroner’s Inquests repeatedly proved to me. However, even stories that divulged a calculated manipulation implicit in such unexpected reversals, could also disclose, on closer examination, a path of great courage.24

To discover the links between the experience of the rickshaw pullers and prostitutes and the larger events in their lives, I have depended on different branches of social inquiry. Micro-sociology and ethnohistory have been critical in showing how empirical research can be shaped and changed. This approach to the history of rickshaw pulling and prostitution has necessarily combined the broader concerns of social and economic transformation with tracing the experiences of these men and women’s lives. By expanding the temporal reach of analysis it was possible to provide an account of the typical career pattern of a rickshaw puller or an ah ku and how they lived the ‘big changes’ in Singapore at the turn of the century. An obvious result of this approach has been to clarify the process of moving the boundaries in historical methodology and thought, as the questions asked of Singapore history in these volumes changed, and new expectations of the craft were imposed.

The difficulties that attended an analysis of the emotional complexity of the historical situations of the rickshaw pullers and of the ah ku and karayuki-san, and the contradictions inherent in their lives—the exact combination of motives, pressures, values and feelings—perhaps, could only be depicted in these volumes through a prosopography or collective biography. This technique compelled me to pay close attention to the disparate experiences, values and motives of a relatively small group of coolies and prostitutes in diverse contexts and sequences of action, in order to piece together in a convincing manner the pattern and meaning of their lives for the majority of rickshaw pullers and ah ku.

Grounded in solid archival research, blending anthropological–historical techniques with literary imagery, both books, in the end, are about the
experience of trying to maintain personal and cultural dignity in the face of overwhelming historical assault. It is the story of Chinese men and women and Japanese girls tearing up their roots to work offshore on the streets and in the brothels of colonial Singapore; social histories that relate their life experiences, their instincts for survival and what they knew, or did not know, and their courage and weakness in a world that often denied them freedom and love, which made many of them very complex characters. The excruciatingly personal records of the rickshaw pullers and prostitutes’ lives speak to us, as individuals in the twenty-first century, about the traditional virtues of humility and endurance, of poverty, work and family, of sexual inequality and social repression, of pain, grief and (com)passion, and of loneliness and death.

**Singapore return: Broken Birds**

In March 1994, while sitting under the stars with Singapore’s old Fort Canning Centre as a backdrop, I was treated to a two-hour multimedia extravaganza about young Japanese prostitutes broken by the harsh lives they were forced to lead abroad. A century ago, Japan had only a limited number of major exports—silk, coal and women. In my book, *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san*, young women were either abducted or lured from the villages of Japan to Singapore with promises of abundant wealth. *Broken Birds: An Epic Longing*, inspired by my book, also tells the story of the Japanese women forced by circumstances to work as prostitutes in Singapore from the 1870s until the 1920s.

*Broken Birds* was a visual spectacle and a different theatrical event from the usual cloistered indoor experience. It was ironic that this avant-garde production about Japanese women of the Meiji–Taisho eras should be re-enacted in Singapore’s oldest cemetery, along Percival Road. The dramatic presentation and the extraordinarily beautiful singing voices set against the backdrop of such an unusual venue were mesmerising. The outdoor opera-type production in seven parts with a cast of twenty-four, was played out in dance, drama and music. The action unfolded through evocative one-line statements from my book based on actual oral accounts and Coroners’ reports, because many of the women and girls died violent deaths. There is no attempt to build up proper characters. Ong Keng Sen, one of Singapore’s most creative directors, hoped to have audiences understand intuitively and emotionally what these lives signified. The play was not about characters; it was a collection of voices—a collage that had been fused and reconstructed in time—theirs and ours. Ong felt that the power of these anonymous voices, instead of just having specific characters speaking, could not be underestimated. Lines like ‘I don’t think it’s
wrong to sell our daughters who we raised ourselves’ are startling, and that is why Ong allowed the words to speak for themselves.

*Broken Birds* provided gripping viewing; it raised profound issues about the human condition, especially when read together with *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san*. Both the production and the book, inadequacies notwithstanding, set the mind to spinning around several of the central questions of our human condition. One of the most important issues, so old, yet so current, is the relationship between good and evil. Ong and I confront the viewer and reader with the complexity of the relationship between good and evil, the difficulty of defining either, and the way in which all of us embrace at least some of both. Evil, for Ong and me, exists. But it cannot be defined simply. As much as its causes lie in the human heart, they also lie in economic and political systems. Ong was deeply affected by the film, *Schindler’s List*, in which he saw the sweep of humanity, and the horror of the Holocaust that swept away my mother’s family in Lithuania. In the same way, events like the traffic in *karayuki-san* that happened in the name of economic and political gain would not be repeated in time if we listened to history more carefully, stated Ong soberly. ‘The genocide in Cambodia; Bosnia would not carry with it the echoes of the Jewish extermination—the collective memories and tears of humanity. More voices must be heard.’

For a theatre production that was both sometimes quasi-operatic but more a concert piece, for which a semi-staged production was necessary, there was one element in *Broken Birds* that no audience could miss—the music. It was haunting. *Broken Birds* elevated the importance of music in productions that are neither musicals nor operas. It elevated the importance of music from being incidental to crucial. *Broken Birds* also bridged another gap: that between history and the performing arts. Such a venture certainly makes history far more accessible. While historical facts—for example, details from a suicide note—can be overlooked easily in a book like my own, it becomes much more immediate when it is performed with music and movement. Here history has given material about Japanese women abroad for theatre, and theatre has given a wider audience for history. I have learned, because of the immediacy of theatre and its wider reach, that historians should consider collaborating with theatre practitioners as another means to communicate the results of their dialogue with the past.

There is also the question of audience, too. There are additional audiences to be addressed, and academically trained historians owe it to themselves as well as to the public at large to address these larger audiences. We need to speak not only to our colleagues, but also to special interest groups, historical societies, community and civic organisations, and to young people. If we fail to
engage the broader audience while talking only to ourselves, then journalists, filmmakers and public relation specialists will deliver history to the public and influence the way people create historical memory and meaning.

**The future**

I have had further thoughts about *The Sulu Zone* since the ideas associated with the book first came to me in the years between 1970 and 1975. In the 1990s I was given the opportunity to ‘pass over’ twice into Japanese society and culture at the behest of colleagues, former students and friends in Japan. In 1996, on the occasion of my second visit for one year, the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, asked me to write a small book that would explore various aspects of my thinking about the framing and writing of *The Sulu Zone*. After a hiatus of more than fifteen years, while I worked on other major projects in Singapore and the Philippines, I returned to the broad canvas of the Sulu Zone to begin exploring the ethnohistory of the Iranun and Balangingi anew, and also to inquire into the global struggles and misunderstandings that linked patterns of consumption and ‘frontiers of desire’ in Europe, China and Southeast Asia with particular entangled commodities, maritime spaces and cultural geographies. Apart from the remaining volume in the envisaged trilogy about suicide in Singapore Chinese society and culture, and the longstanding project about the impact of the typhoon on Philippine society and history, the aim of my recent book, *Iranun and Balangingi*, was to explore ethnic, cultural and material changes in the transformative history of oceans and seas, commodities and populations, mariners and ships, and raiders and refugees in Southeast Asia, with particular reference to the Sulu–Mindanao region, or the Sulu Zone: the oceans and seas of Asia. East by south, from Canton to Makassar, and from Singapore to the Bird’s Head coast of New Guinea, crossed by Iranun and Balangingi raiding and slaving ships, Southeast Asian merchant vessels and colonial warships have been the sites of extraordinary conflicts and changes often associated with the formation of ethnic groups and boundaries, political struggles and national histories. Examining the profound changes that were taking place in the Sulu–Mindanao region and elsewhere, this book, the companion volume to *The Sulu Zone*, charts an ethnohistorical framework for understanding the emerging interconnected patterns of global commerce, long-distance maritime raiding, and the formation and maintenance of ethnic identity. I begin by tracing the evolution of Iranun maritime raiding from its late-eighteenth-century origins to support the English supplies of tea from China, into the nineteenth century’s systematic, regional-based slaving and
marauding activity. I then draw out the implications of that evolution for colonial systems of domination, development and discourse in the context of trans-oceanic trade, cross-cultural exchange and empire building.

The Iranun dramatic expansion west across Southeast Asia and south to the fabled Spice Islands in the 1780s is still poorly understood. What made the Iranun leave their homeland in south-western Mindanao? How did they so successfully navigate the length and breadth of Southeast Asia, and beyond? When and why were the Iranun settlements in the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia established and why did the majority of them eventually disappear? Answers to these questions were found in many places: fragile, long-forgotten objects in museum collections in Singapore, Spain, London and the United States. Archaeological sites and place names in the Philippines, Borneo and east Sumatra were also used to track the Iranun’s western and southern expansion at the end of the eighteenth century. Manuscripts in the Philippine National Archive, Arsip Nasional, Algemeene Rijksarchief, the Archive of the Indies, the Museo Naval and the British Library, preserving the deeds and even the words of the Iranun and Balangingi tell their own part of the story. There are also rare illustrations from the pre-camera era—images on paper and canvas reminding us about new dimensions of worlds seemingly lost. The use by the Spanish of *kapal api* (‘fire ships’ or steam gunboats) against the palisaded fort at Balangingi in 1848 was the start of a new era of conflict—an era that was to bring about the end of the Iranun Age and the long-distance maritime raiding that characterised it. I discovered an oil painting of this battle in a naval archive in Spain. However, this painting does not capture the terror of the Balangingi women and children as they sheltered in makeshift bunkers below the main fort while Spanish soldiers and marines attacked; nor does it depict the traumatic deaths of some of the women and children—killed by Balangingi warriors—to prevent their being seized and becoming spoils of war for the Spaniards. But my words attempt to evoke the near total horror of the situation when their world and entire way of life was shattered forever in that defining moment of the trauma of conquest.

The broader issues of economic integration and identity formation that underpin this book also provided an apt backdrop to the current Muslim contestations and state and ethnic politics in the Philippines. Few other ethnic groups in Southeast Asia have developed such a notorious legacy of ‘piracy’ as the Iranun and Balangingi. This book throws light on the principal fact that these maritime Muslim groups in the Sulu Archipelago and south-western Mindanao have always been very autonomous and led a free-roaming existence in Southeast Asian waters. These vikings of Asia laid claim to being the true
lords of the eastern seas in the age of sail. But it all came to an abrupt end in the mid-nineteenth century with the advent of steam gunboats. The Dutch, the British and the Spanish, in a rare instance of cooperation, banded together and put steamboats, armed with massive firepower, in the major channels and straits across the region. Soon, the hunters became the hunted. They tried to defend the frontiers of their world(s) against the West, but in vain. The concerted powerful Western response started in 1848; after only twenty years, the *musim lanun* or season of the Iranun was over. It was the end of a way of life of a people who dominated the seas for hundreds of years. *Iranun and Balangeri* clearly demonstrated the economic motivation, geographical realities, cultural nexus and religious impetus to ‘piracy’ in the area. Without that insight, it would be difficult to fully understand why Muslim autonomy remains such a burning issue in the Sulu Archipelago and south-western Mindanao today. While this ethnohistory deals with the historical legacy of ‘piracy’, the book was also a pertinent reminder of how cultures and ethnic identities are embedded in seafaring lifestyles and political processes that have not, in certain aspects, changed dramatically over the last two centuries. Today, there are some 149,000 who still identify themselves as Iranun in the coastal areas about Polloc Harbour and Illana Bay east of Zamboanga, and a small group still called Illanun of over 4,000 people on the western coastal plains of Sabah (North Borneo); remnants of their culture are still evident in their blacksmithing, their dances and songs, and their weavings. The end of their maritime rule meant that they had to adapt as best they could to the changing times, and with the influx of Christian migrant ‘newcomers’ to the ‘final frontier’ that was Mindanao, the Iranun became a minority. The adjustment was even more traumatic for the Balangeri: the Spanish had them deported in the hundreds, and they never regained anything approaching their old status, even in the Muslim world. It was the end of an era. The Iranun and Balangeri remain marginalised from the Filipino nation state and their intractable cause has only emboldened them to fight for ethnic identity, progress and autonomous statehood.

This ethnohistory comprised the second volume in a newly envisaged series. The first book, *The Sulu Zone*, was published in 1981; the second was *Iranun and Balangeri*, while the final volume will deal with slavery and collective biography in the Sulu world. The continuing impetus for this project stems from some ideas developed in the essay written in Japan in 1996 and subsequently published as a small book in the Netherlands, entitled *The Sulu Zone, the World Capitalist Economy and the Historical Imagination*.

At the beginning of the first decade of the new millennium, I temporarily ‘passed over’ from the School of Asian Studies, Murdoch University—my
intellectual ‘home’ for the past quarter of a century—to the newly established Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. The Asia Research Institute is committed to negotiating the disciplinary fault lines between the Social Sciences and Humanities, pioneering thematic, collaborative, trans-disciplinary research about Southeast Asia. Manning Clark tells us that the historian has to possess a vision that can allow the individual to research, write and teach about the things that really matter. I have attempted in the course of my life to research and write history with a belief in the possibility that my vision will stir up a response in my students and audience. I also hope that I have used my time ‘in the field’ well, passing over the abyss or chasm and coming back, in order to write and teach about Southeast Asian Modern History from the perspective of the edge. I have been committed to teaching and context-sensitive research—with a strong cultural–ecological orientation for over three decades. A trans-historical, trans-cultural and trans-disciplinary approach is essential to the study of Southeast Asia. It is especially critical in opening up new horizons, developing theoretically informed historical analyses, and nurturing empathy for other peoples and places, and to understand their pasts and futures. Finally, to paraphrase Joseph Campbell, brilliant scholar, teacher and interpreter of some of our most sacred traditions, on the challenge of living, in the field and in the world, a closing reflection. As you attempt to live the meaning of your life and follow the way of the historian you will most certainly encounter John Dunne’s abyss or chasm.

Leap.
Pass over.
It is not nearly as wide as you might think.