

Communications to the Editor

James F. Warren has written as follows about a review of his *At the Edge of Southeast Asian History* in *JAS* 48, no. 3 (August 1989): 690–91, by Alfred W. McCoy:

I have nothing but respect for my critic. However, the overall tone of Professor McCoy's review is misleading. I have not attempted to usurp "van Leur's crown"! On the contrary, his work has profoundly influenced my own. There is neither a "triumphal credo" nor "proclamations" in what I have written; rather, my introduction attempts to explain clearly how and why I have taken up the topics found in the essays. It is a statement about my purposes as a practicing historian, about my work, its aims, subject matter, and methods.

The question of objectivity, subjectivity, and the close "identity" I assume with the experience of my subjects is a real issue for me, and a central methodological question for other historians. Empathy in approach and analysis do not necessarily lead to "expropriation" of the past experience from the historian's subject. The attempt to locate sources in which ordinary Southeast Asians speak for themselves, either on their own terms, or from the perspective of their experience is, on the contrary, an effort to resist expropriation of the past. Social history attempts to analyze both intentions and outcomes, and to grasp a sense of the singular complexity of the "texture of experience." My work is a small part of a historiographical movement which is attempting to build a bridge with anthropology in the study of the modern historical record of Southeast Asia. A fuller explication of the "factual" basis for the method of social history I am trying to develop, and the direct "experience" I am attempting to write about through retrieving the past lives of others, is found in my books *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore, 1880–1940* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986), and *The Sulu Zone, 1768–1898* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1981).

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