

REVIEW

BOOK

**Regional Identities in Southeast Asia: Contemporary Challenges,  
Historical Fractures**

Edited by Jayeel Cornelio and Volker Grabowsky

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The book *Regional Identities in Southeast Asia: Contemporary Challenges, Historical Fractures* offers a timely and insightful examination of Southeast Asia as a region marked by layered historical legacies, ethnolinguistic diversity, and divergent political trajectories. This complexity makes it a fertile ground for interrogating the dynamics of regional identity formation. The volume presents a rich and multifaceted investigation into how regional identities are not merely inherited but are actively constructed, contested, and continuously redefined across shifting socio-political and historical landscapes. Central to the book's scholarly contribution is its relevance to wider academic conversations about identity politics, nationalism, and belonging within the Southeast Asian context.

This volume presents three interrelated thematic sections—"Generation," "Transnationalism," and "Violence"—each addressing a specific yet overlapping axis of identity formation. This structure allows for a comprehensive exploration of how identities are shaped across time and space, from generational change and memory-making to the influence of cross-border flows and the legacies of political conflict. The thematic coherence across chapters underscores the volume's core premise: that identity in Southeast Asia is neither fixed nor monolithic but is, instead, fluid, negotiated, and contingent upon broader historical and political processes. Central to the book's purpose, the volume advances the argument that regional identity is better understood as a dynamic and relational construct—emerging from intergenerational dialogues, diasporic movements, and contested histories rather than from singular, static cultural markers. In doing so, the volume not only challenges essentialist notions of identity but also provides a critical lens

with which to understand the multiple and often contradictory ways in which regional affiliations are articulated and experienced in contemporary Southeast Asia.

The first section, “Generation,” examines how identities are formed across different age cohorts and ethnic groups, emphasizing the role of historical experiences, evolving cultural practices, and socio-political changes. This section highlights the interplay between local autonomy, national integration, and global influences, demonstrating how generational shifts influence perceptions of regional belonging. For instance, younger generations, shaped by globalization, tend to engage with regional identity in ways that diverge from traditional frameworks, incorporating transnational influences and hybrid cultural expressions. It also explores how generational differences manifest in economic aspirations, political attitudes, and social affiliations, revealing the dynamic nature of identity formation. Furthermore, it discusses the transmission of cultural memory and historical narratives across generations, illustrating how identity is continually negotiated through intergenerational discourse, education, and lived experiences. These case studies collectively underscore the fluid and evolving nature of regional identities in Southeast Asia.

The second section, “Transnationalism,” explores the ways in which regional identity is shaped by cross-border interactions, emphasizing how globalization and mobility influence the construction and negotiation of belonging in Southeast Asia. It examines key factors such as labor migration, religious missionary movements, and transnational indigenism, each of which plays a crucial role in reshaping regional identities. One of the case studies discusses how local indigenous communities, often marginalized by dominant national narratives, use transnational alliances to amplify their voices, preserve their heritage, and challenge state-imposed definitions of identity. By incorporating diverse and localized case studies, this section effectively illustrates how transnationalism is experienced differently across various contexts, highlighting the ways in which local actors navigate and reinterpret cross-border influences.

The final section, “Violence,” examines the challenges faced by Southeast Asia in addressing criminality and violence. Historically, the region has exhibited a strong propensity for punitive measures as a primary deterrent against criminality. These emerging democracies frequently resort to draconian policies to instill fear and maintain political legitimacy. Rather than directly confronting systemic issues such as poverty, inequality, and inadequate social welfare systems, leaders in Southeast Asia often collaborate to construct a shared threat, such as the war on drugs initiatives of the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia, diverting attention from more pressing domestic challenges that remain unaddressed. Furthermore, the analysis extends beyond the mere perpetration of criminal acts to consider the broader socio-political and historical contexts that shape violence in the region. For

instance, the historical discontinuities of imagined communities in Arakan have fueled territorial disputes driven by forced displacements, overlapping narratives of ethnic cleansing, and contested notions of belonging. The complexity of violence in Southeast Asia is further compounded by enduring internal conflicts, including tensions between citizens, the presence of revolutionary forces, and interethnic or intertribal rivalries. This multifaceted perspective highlights the interplay of historical legacies, governance failures, and socio-political dynamics in shaping the region's contemporary challenges.

The book puts high emphasis on non-state actors in shaping regional identities. While many studies on regionalism focus on state-driven initiatives, this volume highlights the agency of individuals, communities, and transnational networks in constructing regional belonging. This approach broadens the scope of regional identity studies by incorporating voices that are often overlooked in conventional analyses. Furthermore, the book employs a narrative approach to historical and contemporary events, offering an understanding of the region's complexities. It sheds light on lesser-known cases that are absent from mainstream media and underrepresented in academic research, thereby enriching the discourse on Southeast Asia. In decolonizing knowledge production, the book's focus on regional experiences and its insistence on interpreting phenomena through a Southeast Asian lens, rather than imposing Western paradigms, represents a significant and timely intervention (Mignolo 2014), challenging the Eurocentric frameworks and fostering an inclusive and contextually grounded understanding of the region's socio-political landscape.

The interdisciplinary framework of the book integrates insights from different disciplines as it offers a holistic understanding of regional identity formation. The use of diverse methodological approaches—ranging from archival research, focus group discussions, and surveys, to ethnographic fieldwork—adds depth to the analysis and enhances its empirical rigor. This highlights how scholarly contributions require interdisciplinary exchange and collaboration to capture the complexities of identity formation. Bringing together perspectives from multiple fields, the book demonstrates that regional identities cannot be understood through a single lens but rather through a synthesis of cultural, historical, political, and sociological analyses. On a separate note, it is also distinguished by its accessibility and reader-centric approach as it engages readers by presenting narratives that are both approachable and intellectually stimulating. This ensures that it resonates not only with scholars and academics but also with a broader, non-specialist audience, effectively bridging the gap between academic rigor and public accessibility. Such an approach underscores the importance of democratizing knowledge—a process that seeks to dismantle barriers to intellectual engagement and empower individuals from diverse backgrounds to participate in scholarly conversations (Osborn 2021).

Finally, the book's integration of diverse narratives from various researchers across Southeast Asia into a unified volume significantly contributes to knowledge production and fosters intellectual linkages that advance ASEAN integration. By synthesizing these multifaceted perspectives, the book transcends the traditional focus on political and economic cooperation, emphasizing the critical role of intellectual and cultural connections in cultivating a shared regional identity. This not only enriches academic discourse but also strengthens the foundations of regional solidarity by promoting mutual understanding and collaboration among ASEAN member states. The book stands as a testament to the dedication and passion for generating knowledge that illuminates the complexities of Southeast Asia. It exemplifies a commitment to inclusive scholarship, bridging diverse voices and perspectives to create a more comprehensive understanding of the region's socio-political, historical, and cultural dynamics. The challenge towards simplistic dichotomies between nationalism and regionalism well conveyed in this book demonstrates that these identities are often mutually constitutive. Through an exploration of generational shifts, transnationalism, and violence, Cornelio and Grabowsky present a critical examination of regional belonging in Southeast Asia, while at the same time open an essential research direction for those seeking to understand the intricate ways in which regional identities are shaped by broader socio-political forces.

## References

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