

The Militancy of Kinship, Intimacy, and Religion

New Approaches for the Study of Social Movements in Contemporary Southeast Asia

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Abstract What are the distinctive features of dissent in Southeast Asia? In this article, we examine the rise of social activism in contemporary Southeast Asia, drawing on examples of popular protest from countries as diverse as Myanmar, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia. Our analysis highlights the importance of examining situational power dynamics in specific locales, with particular focus on areas often considered apolitical in modern philosophy: intimacy, religion, and kinship. We argue that Southeast Asia is not merely a site for the reception of resistance theories, but a source of theoretical production in its own right.

Keywords Social movements. Southeast Asia. Alter-politics. Kinship. Religion. Intimacy.

Summary 1. Introduction. – 2. Theory on social movements and Southeast Asia. – 3. Resistance and the alter-politics of Southeast Asia. – 4. The contributions to this special issue. – 5. The militancy of intimacy. – 6. The militancy of kinship. – 7. The militancy of religion. – 8. Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

The post-1989 era has been dominated by neoliberalism. ‘Market democracy’ – the consolidated subordination of democratic principles to capitalist efficiency – has become the ideal standard of governance well beyond the global North (Postero, Elinoff 2019, 4). The emergence of transnational markets, production chains, digital technologies, and financial networks that transgress national boundaries, connecting world regions previously organized along Cold War blocs, has generated profound shifts in how development, societies, and humans are understood and governed. In many places, the ‘neoliberal consensus’ has replaced socialism, historical materialism, and class struggle analysis with quality-of-life politics, technocratic managerialism, and market-based reconciliation. At the same time, global democratization created conditions for marginalized individuals and communities worldwide to express their aspirations for respect of human rights, fairer work opportunities and greater political participation (5), engendering an ambivalent process in which the economization of public governance is increasingly contrasted by democratic resistance.

As neoliberalism has revealed its dark sides – from environmental destruction and the privatization of natural resources to the casualization of labor and the progressive demolition of the welfare state – communities, groups, and individuals who were formerly excluded from the political arena have thus made their voices increasingly heard. The Arab Spring and Occupy protests in 2011, the Me-Too movement in 2017, the FridaysForFuture initiatives in 2018, and the Black Lives Matter network in 2018 are just but a few powerful instances of this often transnational, resurgence of social activism, which has unsurprisingly become the subject of a prolific body of scholarship.¹

Comparatively, Southeast Asia has received little and discontinuous media coverage and scholarly attention, despite the impressive influence that marginalized groups (e.g. indigenous communities, women and children, LGBTQI+ organizations, religious actors, and the urban poor) have exerted over the re-definition of the commons, be they nations, digital spaces, or more-than-human cosmoses. This special issue offers one step forward in addressing this lacuna. It scrutinizes the remarkable florescence of social activism in contemporary Southeast Asia by bringing together case studies from contexts as diverse as Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia, as well as in transnational arenas where

¹ Bayat 2015; Taylor 2016; Chandra, Erlingsdóttir 2020; Svensson, Wahlström 2023.

political mobilization connects local struggles to globally relevant issues and forms of dissent.

Indeed, while democracy, gender equality, and human rights are policy objectives that seemingly unify the aspirations of activists in places as diverse as Bangkok, Yangon and Manila, their cultural articulations, social significations and manifestations in the political arena vary greatly. We argue that a context-sensitive approach to the study of such variations benefits from careful examination of situational arrangements of power in specific Southeast Asian locales, with particular attention to domains of feeling, thought and practice that are commonly deemed as apolitical in modern political philosophy, that is, intimacy, religion, and kinship.

2 Theory on Social Movements and Southeast Asia

Interrogating the role and the specificities of social activism in Southeast Asia demands attention to both local and global concerns and processes, as well as to the myriad cultural patterns, discursive repertoires, and socio-political forms that animate dissent in one of the world's most diverse regions (see Facal et al. 2024). In this respect, we follow the call for contextual analysis put forward by Michelle Ford in her intervention on the subject: *Social Activism in Southeast Asia* (2013). In this edited collection, which marks the first attempt to map this increasingly relevant field of inquiry within area studies scholarship, Ford poses two key questions: "How do the concerns of global social movements play out in the social and cultural contexts of the region and particular Southeast Asian states, and vice versa? To what extent are social movements forms and repertoires of action indigenous and to what extent are they products of 'globalization from below?'" These questions cannot be answered through an acritical – that is, de-historicized and de-contextualized – reading of social unrest. As Ford points out, the academic literature on social movements has been primarily developed by Western scholars and with reference to Euroamerican realities (4); as such, many of the available theoretical models reflect post-war Western Europe's secular preoccupations, identity politics, and universalist aspirations.

Notably, the wave of 'counterculture' that rocked North America and Europe in the 1960s and 1970s prompted the emergence of three identifiable scholarly approaches for the study of social movements, influential to this day. Positioning themselves in antithesis to the previous 'crowd psychology' model, these marked a shift away from the existing emphasis on the assumed irrationality of the masses (Barrows 1981) with scholars redirecting their attention toward people's anti-establishment concern with post-materialist issues (e.g. self-realization, individual freedom, and identity politics) that challenged

the modern construction (and gendering) of the public/private divide as postulated within classical liberal theory (Kurzman 2008).

The first among these three schools, which is known as Resource Mobilization Theory, focuses on the behind-the-scenes work that is needed to sustain resistance - ranging from the management of finances to the accumulation of a know-how as well as the devising of moral narratives and cultural repertoires of resistance (Oberschall 1973; McCarthy, Zald 1977; Zald, McCarthy 1987). The second approach, New Social Movements Theory, seeks to de-centralize the importance given by previous studies to class-based resistance, emphasizing instead the increased prevalence of collective actors that voice personal grievances such as those linked to sexual and gender identities, as well as global concerns such as appeals to world peace and climate justice.² The third, known as the Political Process or Political Opportunity Paradigm, investigates the dialectic relationship between social movements and state agents (or related power holders), observing how specific political contexts may facilitate rather than hinder meaningful structural change.

These three models, which should not be understood as mutually exclusive (see McAdam, McCarthy, Zald 1996), provide useful analytical tools for the study of social movements worldwide. At the same time, once appropriately historicized and contextualized, the same paradigms also clearly reflect the distinctive nature of the social worlds they originate from, leaving us only partially equipped for the study of the specific socio-historical contexts of regions such as contemporary Southeast Asia, which feature highly complex, varied and dynamic cultures of contestation. As Ford (2013, 16) points out: "it is not possible to simply take a Northern template [...] and apply it uncritically. It is only when [...] complemented by the kind of detailed local knowledge that underpins the contributions to this collection that the conceptual toolbox of social movement studies becomes truly useful in Southeast Asia or, indeed, elsewhere in the global South". Anthropological approaches to the study of social movements, often intertwined with scholars' own engagement in activism, sought - in various ways - to address concerns such as Ford's by making the contextual complexities of dissent a central focus of investigation (see Nash 2004).

The ideas that permeate this essay as well as the eight articles that follow began taking shape during a summer school on social movements in contemporary Southeast Asia which we organized in September 2022 at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. This unique one-week event gathered early-career scholars from around the world who are committed to the study of social movements in the region from a variety of perspectives. Many of them were born in Southeast

² Melucci 1996; Touraine 1981; Edelman 2001; Habermas 1981.

Asia, shared a background in political activism, and were close – in generational, ethno-linguistic and political terms – with the resisting protagonists of their essays. Their perspective provides this collection with rare epistemic depth, contextual sensitivity, fine-grained analysis, ethical commitment as well as an approach to research that is often explicitly reflexive toward the colonial legacy of knowledge production in academia.

3 Resistance and the Alter-politics of Southeast Asia

Between the 1960s and the 1980s, as the scholarship on social movements flourished in Euro-America, the socio-political outlook of many Southeast Asian countries was hardly comparable to that of their wealthier and more politically stable Northern counterparts. Western democracy, development, and middle-class lifestyles – all of which, to be sure, always came about with hidden histories of inequality, violence and exclusion – were dreamlike aspirations for many people in Southeast Asia, a region predominantly regarded as part of the ‘developing world’. Here, the irrepressible, carnally material urge to ‘fill the belly’ remained widespread.

The independence wars that put an end to the colonial period had left much of the region devastated. Mass movements grew, fueled by the hunger and the grievances of less privileged constituencies – mainly the peasantry and the urban poor, a disenfranchised and increasingly subversive majority advocating for greater social justice, land redistribution and labor rights. Until the 1990s, class equality made up the core of people’s motivations to revolt. Social tumult in Southeast Asia did not only draw upon socialist creeds, however, but also on existing cosmologies, ritual appraisals, and millenarian framings of political oppression, all of which anchor class-based struggle to specific worldviews and modes of expression.

During the Cold War, the establishment of (US-backed) repressive regimes (Sarit in Thailand, Suharto in Indonesia, Marcos in the Philippines) crushed militant socialism throughout much of the region – paradoxically at a time when Communist forces in Vietnam were getting the edge on American imperialism. The ensuing collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in a new era, which, by the 1990s, saw most Southeast Asian nations – including the communist strongholds of Vietnam and Laos – rehabilitated as full members of ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and embracing forms of capitalism. It also marked the global triumph of the neoliberal order. This turn of events in turn scaled up regional and national development, shaping Southeast Asian polities in ambivalent ways.

On one hand access to quality education, middle-class formation, technological advancement and NGO activism determined the

emergence of more liberal aspirations and demands for greater democracy. Previously invisible groups (e.g. children, women, LGBTQI+ people, ethnic and religious minorities) stepped out onto the political stage and invaded the cyberspace, joining a global call for human rights, gender equality, antimilitarism and ecological justice. On the other hand, elite-driven counter-movements sought legitimacy via claims to restore 'Asian values' and the old political order through whatever means - authoritarianism included. The 2016 Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs in the Philippines, the 2020 Thai military government's judicial persecution of youth activists, and the 2021 Myanmar's brutal military coup are among the most recent cases in point.

This too short history of contemporary Southeast Asia suggests that the abovementioned theoretical models for the study of social movements are only partially suited to understand the nature of dissent in the region. Here, both progressive and conservative forces rely upon combinations of tradition and innovation as they articulate their agendas, charging categories such as 'democracy' or 'social order' with distinctive vernacular features.

We argue that Resource mobilization, New Social Movements, and Political Process theories subtend yet another epistemic limitation, as they tend to draw from a secular and largely Weberian understanding of politics that imagines the latter as a rational field of state-centered administration, policies, and juridical-institutional arrangements (Bolotta, Fountain, Feener 2020, 2). In Southeast Asia, modernities are in fact 'multiple' (Eisenstadt 2000), as supposedly universal notions such as sovereignty, democracy, and good governance, have been appropriated, re-elaborated, and contested by myriad state and non-state agents via varied processes of 'globalizations from below' (Portes 2000). Politics in Southeast Asia is not only construed as an affair of state. What modernity has artificially separated - public and private, state and religion, politics and kinship - re-emerges here as a complex amalgamation of motives that underpin diverse arrangements of power as much as its contestation. This, to be sure, actually happens everywhere, including in the so-called West, for - as Bruno Latour put it - "we have never been modern" (Latour 1993). The feminist slogan "the personal is political", which emerged in the 1960s in Euramerica, is an iconic attempt to awaken collective consciousness precisely about this. Differently than in Western Europe, however, Southeast Asia has been less interested in hiding this evidence.

In Thailand, for example, some young protesters have engaged creatively with divination, sorcery and other ritual technologies to predict and affect political change (Siani 2023), while others have appropriated traditional symbols of Buddhist kingship to signal their aspirations for sovereignty (Siani 2020). In Bangkok slums, single mothers draw on a Buddhist reformulation of children's rights discourses to claim their rights to housing (Bolotta 2017). In Myanmar,

pro-democracy citizens bang pots and pans, an old practice aimed at chasing away evil spirits, against the regime (Egreteau 2023). In Indonesia's 'pious neoliberalism', NGOs activism channels Muslim notions of giving and charity into humanitarian fund-raising and technocratic projects of poverty reduction (Atia 2013). The list could be endless.

Our main argument here is that the analysis of social struggles in Southeast Asia, and the attending processes of solidarity, antagonism, and dissent, requires careful consideration of the cultural worlds within which the project of modernity takes shape. These worlds rest on complex interactions with globally circulating formulations of the political that transgress the boundary between spheres of thought and action commonly deemed antithetical because ascribed, respectively, to either the private or public domain: intimacy, religion, and kinship on a one hand, public life, secular politics and the state on the other. The distinction between materialist and post-materialist concerns is similarly out of place in contemporary Southeast Asia, since issues of class, ethnicity, religion, gender, and age are often intersectionally entangled (rather than disjointed like distinct claims or fields of knowledge).

We argue that, in addition to social movements literature, the anthropological scholarship on the political (e.g. Bolotta, Fountain, Feener 2020; Postero, Elinoff 2019), postcolonial and feminist theory (e.g. Fraser 2022; Bohrer 2019), as well as the social scientific study of power ontologies in Southeast Asia (e.g. Scheer 2021) and, more broadly, in the global South (Blaser 2009; de la Cadena 2010), are necessary supplementary references to expand our understanding of social movements in the region. We also deem it essential to understand social movements as productive for emerging 'alter-politics', that is, reimaginings of the common good (Hage 2015). The latter are not necessarily constructed in opposition to dominant socio-political forms and cultural norms (that is, as a form of anti-politics), but rather set forth new, other, and alternative 'pluriversalist ontologies' for humanity, the future, and-or more-than-human worlds in a time of global transformation (Escobar 2017).

Postero and Elinoff's (2019) anthropological take on (social movements') politics as 'practices of world-making' appears particularly useful here. This intentionally broad and theoretically open definition allows us to expand the analytical focus on social movements so that it may encompass a greater variety of cultural arrangements of power, solidarity and dissent, transcending the restricted field of state-civil society exchange. In this sense, world-making efforts to produce social change can be found in multiple venues (e.g. a shrine, a private home, a concert, a forest), where they express alternative ways to think of the commons and imagine the future.

4 The Contributions to This Special Issue

The articles that make up this special issue investigate socially situated forms of dissent in different Southeast Asian nations, social groups and settings along these scholarly lines of inquiry. The case studies presented herein do not necessarily portray social conflict as a uniform process of struggle between clearly codified groups of actors with coherent visions of change. Rather, our contributors show that dissent entails creative and continuous negotiations between conflicting cultural worlds across multiple scales. Relatedly, readers will not only encounter Southeast Asian social movements – and the alter-politics brought about by their concerted aspirations – in the context of mass protest, nor will they see that their actions always translate into clear policy proposals, law amendments and public advocacy. In fact, more than often dissent finds expression via alternative world-making visions, solidarities, practices, sounds, and feelings that intertwine (and lead to) unexpected places and situations.

The article penned by Yèn Mai, highlights the importance of identifying social movements outside the context of street politics and mass mobilization, as she takes readers to youth training and development programs in the context of one-party Vietnam. Here, young individuals, who are normally construed as passive recipients of state-driven education, display their political agency in subtle ways as active meaning-makers of social transformation. Mai's micro-sociological approach illuminates the intimate backstage of youth-led social change, as well as Vietnamese young people's complex appropriation/reformulation of cultural toolkits, including human rights and environmental sustainability, as a form of civic engagement in formally apolitical spaces.

Moving on to the context of Myanmar/Burma after the coup d'état of 2021, Johanna M. Götz explores how protest art and activist sisterhood seek to contrast military dictatorship's patriarchal constructions of women's subordination. The latter, as she shows, rests on Burmese religious formulations of female impurity, which form the basis of entangled structures of (male) authoritarianism. Drawing from the intersectional tradition, Götz argues that, in this context, highly heterogeneous pro-democracy movements – such as advocates for LGBTQI+ and ethnic minority rights – learn to cooperate as they build a vernacular repertoire of protest symbols through which to cultivate gendered and kin re-imaginings of a federal democratic Burma.

Rizky Sasono pushes for an understanding of post-reform Indonesia's social movements that considers political meaning through 'musicking', that is, how sounds and performances serve as a vehicle for expressing collective concerns. Engaging with the framework of audiopolitics, he shows that the indie music scene in Indonesia

voices popular dissent against the government's authoritarian policies while simultaneously reflecting, in its commercial and industrialized arrangements, the neoliberal reconfiguration of political sounds. Through emotional song lyrics, musicians' performances, as well as listeners' collective intimacy, the meaning of Indonesian society is acoustically reworked as distinctive alter-politics of the common good are composed.

Marielle Y. Marcaida delves into how Filipina women – especially mothers – respond to the extra-judicial killings that accompanied former-President Rodrigo Duterte's infamous 'war on drugs' via the implementation of initiatives of mutual support that include legal assistance, psychological rehabilitation and livelihood programs. The political deployment of kinship is key here. She argues that these women engage in innovative ways with local, Christianity-infused notions of motherly care as they coalesce to set up and offer a range of communal services.

J Francis Cerretani explores the transnational underbelly of Rohingya dissent. Grounding the narrative in an ethnography of Ireland-based Rohingya activists, the author shows that engagements with online platforms and other multimodal technologies enable diaspora Rohingyas to form kin affinities with distant fellows, share knowledge and create shared identities that resist the modernist and inherently essentialist categories invoked by the Burmese junta in support of its hegemonic project. Cerretani's research, mostly conducted in the home of a Rohingya refugee family, underscores how affective intimacy and the warmth of kin ties – normatively construed as private realities – can actually function as key motivational forces in forging political commitments.

Also in the context of transnational dissent, Tuwanont Phatthathanasut examines the coming into being of the so-called Milk Tea Alliance – an important network through which young activists across Asia, and mainly in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Thailand – share symbols from pop culture and digital strategies to support democratic transition in their respective countries. Grounding his contribution in social network theory, he challenges assumptions that see communication technology as the sole catalyzer of transnational activism. While social media provide young people with an important platform to voice their dissent, Tuwanont brings to light the equally crucial role played by intimate (as opposed to digital) connections. In tracing the Milk Tea Alliance's genealogy, he reveals longstanding histories of cooperation and grassroots interconnectedness between prominent activists of different nationalities. These interpersonal linkages – which normally pass unnoticed as 'private relationships' – form the intimate basis of today's digital organization.

In yet another culturally sensitive approach to the study of social movements, Amara Thiha draws attention to unexpected

intersections between dissent and religion in post-2021 coup Burma/Myanmar. Challenging conventional applications of resource mobilization theory, he shows that groups of Burmese dissenters consider not only finances and protest strategies as resources for dissent but also ritual knowledge. Acting in both private and public contexts, these activists deploy astrology and black magic in a battle, at once political and cosmological, for different visions of the country's socio-political order.

Also in the realm of religion, Roberto Rizzo details the emergence of *Pemuda Buddhis*, literally 'Buddhist Youth', an organization that is actively engaged with the creative revival of Buddhism in the highlands of Central Java, Indonesia. He demonstrates that members of the movement draw from local and global discourses - revivalist stances, influences from nearby Theravada countries, Javanese and local identity tropes, and even entrepreneurial pushes - as they fight for the promotion and recognition of their faith, ultimately shaping up a form of Buddhist practice that displays distinct features.

We argue that a critical reading of these essays brings to the forefront three important dimensions of resistance in which contemporary Southeast Asian social movements thrive, displaying distinctive alter-politics. Specifically, we wish to highlight the intersectional ways in which dissenters in the region routinely mobilize intimacy, kinship and religion as key sites, forms and instruments of gendered, ethnic and class militancy in the public domain. An appreciation of the role played by these three interrelated axes in Southeast Asian cultures of dissent entails a radical reformulation of politics and the common good with respect to the modernist models that emerged in the wake of late colonialism and that continue to be sustained by today's (Western as Eastern) neoliberal order.

5 The Militancy of Intimacy

In a recent anthropological study on political dissent, Amarasuriya et al. (2020) draw attention to the previously overlooked role played by intimacy, understood as encompassing the complex and dynamic set of one's personal relations. The authors argue that

(d)issenters are not simply lone individuals with abstract ideals; they are also caught up in other, sometimes contradictory aspirations and relationships and forms of responsibility. (...) Acts of dissent can therefore involve the making and breaking of specific intimate attachments of kinship, friendship and solidarity, just as much as commitments to high principles. (3-4)

The realm of politics, in other words, encompasses lived realities that are not reducible to law proposals and electoral campaigns. People's motivations to engage in political struggles, join social movements, or participate in public demonstrations also originate in the purportedly apolitical, private space of affects. Foregrounding intimacy makes it possible to reveal the parochial quality of liberal notions of dissent, recognizing instead that would-be protesters are not necessarily recruited via the top-down deployment of totalizing visions of socio-political change. In fact, especially in authoritarian contexts, where there is little or no public space for the legal expression of dissent, the sentimental intimate – as a protected, less controlled dimension of social life – offers otherwise unthinkable opportunities to form solidarities of dissent. These same may scale up in open political demands and distinct alter-politics in the public realm.

Counterintuitively perhaps, intimacy in these contexts often includes more individuals than those who strictly belong to one's kin and circles of friends (4). In Herzfeld's (1997; 2004) usage of the term, intimacy designates people who share the same nationality, usually in contexts in which citizens profess a collective identity that sets them apart from (if not in opposition to) foreigners. Herzfeld argues that, especially but not uniquely in postcolonial societies, citizens discuss whatever 'open secret' risks corrupting their national image, but only among themselves or within their 'cultural intimacy', simultaneously concealing or denying them in front of strangers. Usefully, in this formulation, the term 'intimacy' extends to an assembly of individuals, membership to which requires belonging to the same imagined community (Anderson 1983).

Specific strands of social movements studies have analogously (if episodically) sought to deconstruct the modernist divide between intimate and public domains of action. As mentioned, New Social Movement Theory, especially when in dialogue with (second-wave) feminist scholarship, underscored that individuals' most private matters – including one's very sexual preferences – are a key locus of (biopolitical) governance in the modern nation-state (Melucci 1996, 102-4). In this special issue, we pursue and further this analytical approach as particularly apt to capture expressions of social unrest in Southeast Asia. As we explore the significance of intimacy in Southeast Asian movements, we indeed find it especially fruitful to look at its interplay with the public domain.

In the region, which is characterized by a well-documented tradition of state ceremonies, spectacular rituals and excessive pageantry (Geertz 1980), the state's management and control of public images plays a crucial role in expressing and reinforcing hegemonic power structures. Numerous scholars point out that contemporary Southeast Asian states ranging from Laos (Singh 2012; Mayes 2009; 2019) to Myanmar (Cheesman 2015), as well as the transnational body of ASEAN

(Nair 2019), put great effort in promoting an extraordinarily polished self-image, further compelling their citizens not to disrupt it. Jackson (2004), who examines the working of this culturally specific mode of power with reference to Thailand, writes about an “intense concern to monitor and police surface effects, images, public behaviours and representations combined with a relative disinterest in controlling the private domain of life” (181). It follows that any individual behavior deemed problematic (as much as individuals’ grievances with the state) must be relegated to the private, intimate sphere.

Given the political emphasis placed by many regimes of Southeast Asia on public images, protest in the region transgresses one among the most normative codes of behavior, enabling private grievances to spill into the streets and become visible. When discontents toward the existing, and aspirations for an alternative socio-political order, succeed in breaking state-imposed barriers, moving from the private into the public sphere, they disrupt the veneer of perfection of state-controlled images, acquiring distinctively radical connotations. As a final insult, social movements might even go so far as to take over the state’s (supposed) monopoly over image by creating (alter-)spectacles of disobedience. They sometimes do so via symbols and slogans taken from international pop culture – the three-finger salute of *The Hunger Game* saga, the Guy Fawkes masks, the *liberté, égalité, fraternité* motto – signaling at once their belonging to a transnational community of dissenters. When their intimacy becomes public, it transforms into a clear threat to the existing political order. This is an extraordinarily powerful kind of symbolic militancy.

Acting in this fashion, the article by Rizky Sansono shows that militant intimacies are formed and put on display via the powerful medium of music. Exploding in the public domain with spectacles of dissent, Indonesian independent musicians put on shows replete with protest songs and theatrics that have the power to enrage and move to tears attendees. These contribute to a sense of *communitas* by evoking, for example, the joys and pains of common struggles and historical traumas. Creating a place where emotions and political affinity meet, music forges alliances that are even capable of obliterating state-defined boundaries as they generate destabilizing alter-politics of sound. The intimate here fully escapes the private sphere, giving shape to performances of grievance and aspiration.

Aside from affecting Southeast Asia’s politics of representation, intimacy provides the emotional compost for processes of subjectivation, self-formation and solidarity. In this regard, brotherhood, sisterhood, comradeship, and friendship offer the grounds and affective labor necessary for (alter-)political action (Amarasuriya et al. 2020, 13). As McAdam reminds us, one of the greatest predictors of whether one person will participate in an act of dissent is whether they know someone who is already involved (1988). Yên Mai’s essay on trainings programs

in Vietnam is a powerful demonstration of this. The author argues that such programs provide activists with opportunities to cultivate a spirit of resistance by learning and experimenting with ethical practices aimed at addressing important social causes. Here, dissent comes across as being fostered in the milieu of an intimate communion of likeminded individuals, who meet and influence each other along the way to a common goal of greater awareness and conscious practice. Yên Mai's insistence of the constructive work needed by each activist for prompting meaningful change in society demonstrates that the intimate can offer a safe space where dissent grows undisturbed, only to eventually move on to affect the broader collective.

Similarly, in Johanna M. Götz's analysis of forming gendered solidarities among apparently unrelated constituencies in the Burmese pro-democracy movement, personal ties – whether pre-existing or forged by newly discovered political affinities – become increasingly visible in the public political arena. Here, displays of gendered intimacy between distinct militant groups give rise to a visual aesthetics of resistance that subverts the patriarchal strategies of the military junta. In fact, as relationships (horizontal and vertical) between different activists express themselves in the realms of protest art, they themselves come to represent the image and the embodiment of a more just society. In this context, politically engaged intimacy arises in virtual spaces that connect physically distant, but emotionally related, netizens, further blurring the lines between public and private.

6 The Militancy of Kinship

Turning to a theme that is strongly related – and that indeed overlaps with – intimacy, we now address how both vernacular and transnational ideas of family and relatedness affect and shape politics and dissent in Southeast Asia. Scholars have long deconstructed notions of kinship that are based on biological understandings of consanguineous ties – that is, the sharing of blood via filial relatedness – by showing how these, rather than universal, are imputable to the culturally specific project of Western modernity (Sahlins 2013). The anthropology of Southeast Asia has played a major role in the debate, shedding light for instance on the existence of local constructions of kinship according to which relatedness is achieved via individuals' co-residence and the sharing of food. A pioneer in this field, Carsten (1997) argues that, in Indonesia, kinship relies on the idea that consanguinity originates from the consumption of rice cooked on the hearth of the same household, entailing the continuous formation of new family ties in the context of convivial meals and feasts. Also writing with reference to Indonesia, Retsikas (2012, 70) explores the idea of siblinghood. He explains that the linguistic category of 'sibling'

may designate individuals who share the same parents, who breast-feed from the same woman as well as neighbors who share food and even newlyweds before the arrival of their first child.

Although Eurocentric paradigms of twentieth century scholarship have distinguished kinship from politics, these notions of kin are clearly not devoid of political implications (Alber, Thelen 2022). Retsikas further argues that siblingship is “a differentiating relation as it points at once to similitude and hierarchy. As similitude it connects persons through highlighting the things they have in common. These might be blood, property, food or dwelling. At the same time, it connects persons through establishing distinctions as siblings are always hierarchically related to each other by means of birth order” (Retsikas 2012, 70). With these hierarchic connotations, non-biological kinship offers plentiful opportunities for political mobilization.

As is well known, authoritarian regimes throughout Southeast Asia have presented male leaders as benevolent paternal figures (and thus embodiments) of the nations they ruled. Notable examples include Marcos in the Philippines (Espiritu 2017, 105), Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam (Dror 2018, 191-2), King Bhumibol (Bolotta 2021) and some Cold War military leaders in Thailand (Thak 2007). As Bolotta (2024) shows with reference to Thailand, citizens are in turn often construed as the ‘nation’s children’, who have filial duties (as opposed to rights) towards ‘state parents’.

Authoritarian states have made ample use of kin-based concepts of nationhood as a mean to instill (or at least demand) respect and gratitude from the populace toward the patriarchs and matriarchs of the day. At the same time, however, activists have also exploited the same notions in support of resistance. It is significant, in this regard, that many pro-democracy protesters in the region self-identify (or are identified) as belonging to a ‘new generation’, committed to undermining the rigid political narratives of an unconnected gerontocracy as well as the cultural tropes that sustain ‘age-patriarchy’ in local social hierarchies – whether respect for teachers, gratitude to elder siblings, devotion to monks, or mandatory filial piety. Traditionally expected to act as ‘obedient children’ (Bolotta 2023), they can disregard longstanding traditions of showing reverence to elders, thereby showing their ability to understand the multiple entanglements between the languages of power and kinship, parenthood and childhood, that substantiate the symbolic-affective grounds of politics.

In Myanmar, many Burman dissidents refer to Aung San Suu Kyi as ‘mother’, creating a kin-based community that is implicitly more moral than the one led by the military generals (Seekins 2023, 44-7). In 2010 Thailand, members of the pro-democracy movement known informally as ‘red shirts’ merged kinship and magic as they organized a ritual aimed to curse then-PM Abhisit Vejjajiva, a royalist opposition politician who made it to the office in spite of having no

popular consent. The activists gathered large quantities of their own blood – symbolic of a brotherhood/sisterhood of commoners, and thus deemed to be cosmologically potent – and poured it on the gates of the premier’s party and House of Government (Cohen 2012, 217; Elinoff 2020, 72-8). In the 2020-21, young Thai protesters who rallied against the government of former-General Prayuth Chan-ocha publicly appealed to friendship-related status equality to extricate themselves (and the entire Thai citizenry) from their positions as ‘elder and junior siblings’, to disarticulate Thailand’s normative kin-based hierarchy, and – ultimately – bring about full democracy in their country (Bolotta 2024).

Kinship, thus understood not only in biological terms but rather as a more inclusive, politically and emotionally connoted iteration of relatedness (Bolotta 2024), features in several among the case studies presented in this special issue. It does so, most explicitly, in the article that opens this section, by Marielle Y. Marcaida. Here, the author proposes to see the category of motherhood, which is charged with moral connotations, as a ‘catalyst for political resistance’ among Filipino communities affected by the war on drugs. She argues that, in the context of these women’s engagement in society, the notion of motherhood is transformed, ultimately resulting in the expansion of their motherly duties, which, while remaining largely shaped by ‘traditional’, so to speak, expectations, outgrow the notion of kin as confined to the domestic sphere.

Even if less explicitly, J Francis Cerretani also draws attention to the constant work required to maintain and create kin in circumstances of political difficulty. Part of the author’s work on diaspora Rohingyas is preoccupied with showing how uprooted communities seek to bridge the geographic distance between them and their relatives by making use of the internet and related technologies. The author also looks at how Ireland-based Rohingyas continuously forge new non-consanguineous kin ties by setting up ‘communities of care’, in which they share gardening labor, household-grown food as well as space for recreation. Cerretani also tactfully describes the author’s own inclusion in the community as a resident ethnographer in a manner that evokes kin relations.

In his investigation of the development of the Milk Tea Alliance, Tuwanont also walks a fine line between intimacy and kinship. He writes that in April 2020, the Chinese government expressed its concern toward an altercation between Thai and Chinese netizens by invoking supposed longstanding familial ties between China and Thailand. The author describes this episode as pivotal for the emergence of the Milk Tea Alliance, since the concept of ‘milk tea’ was devised precisely as a means to counter the Chinese government’s appropriation of the language of kinship. Young activists replaced the hegemonic idea of consanguineous relatedness with the suggestion that

milk tea creates far more profound and politically meaningful relationships. “Milk Tea is Thicker than Blood”, a popular hashtag among activists recites. It would be difficult to think a more powerful reiteration of the notion that kin and political relatedness can be constituted via the sharing of food.

7 The Militancy of Religion

In the more repressive regimes of Southeast Asia, resistance may not be unilaterally considered as sacrosanct. When expressed, however, it often makes ample use of symbols, cosmologies and practices that are associated to the sacred. This section aims to challenge the usefulness of the modernist dichotomy that would depict politics and religion apart as two separate spheres of life for the study of power, alter-politics and social movements in the region. As shown by an expanding body of literature on the subject, the political - including in ostensibly ‘secular’ contexts - continues in fact to look up (literally) at the transcendental, with abstract ‘principles’ (e.g. development or democracy) having historically replaced the divine as the ultimate source of significance and morality. As articulated by Wydra (2015, 5),

(m)uch as in pre-modern societies, citizens in contemporary states require a sacred canopy, a web of symbols and meanings by which they can identify markers of certainty, be they social, ethnic, national, or ideological, in order to overcome voids of meaning. Paradigms such as the national interest, popular sovereignty, or human rights concern the priority of the sacred before the profane.

It follows that, if Catholic popes and, by extension, kings used to present themselves as worldly vicars of the Almighty in Christian Europe, contemporary heads of state in purportedly secular contexts seek legitimacy by means of invoking their embodiment of abstract principles such as Crown, Justice and Nation (Kantorowicz 1997). The religious and the transcendental, even if often disguised, continue to permeate and shape political life, in Western and Asian context alike (Bolotta, Fountain, Feener 2020).

Thanks to the global reach of ideas of development and modernity, secularization, understood as a hegemonic discourse that identifies the nexus between religion and power as a distinctive feature of a supposedly outmoded pre-modern worldview, also informs political practices throughout Southeast Asia. The persistent tendency of local governments to draw legitimacy explicitly from religious mythology, however, suggests that states here have been less interested in formally decoupling the political from the divine than their Western counterparts. Islam-majority nations such as Malaysia and Brunei uphold formulations

of Sharia-inspired laws. Countries such as Thailand and Indonesia cite, respectively, 'religion' and 'God' among the ideals that provide for the foundation of society in nationalist discourse (Thailand's 'Three Pillars') or national state philosophy (Indonesia's 'Pancasila'). Throughout Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia - socialist Laos included (Ladwig 2015) - monarchs, military men, prime ministers and party cadres are celebrated as champions of good karma or as 'good men'.

In fact, early scholarship on Southeast Asian proposed that the region's societies hold notions of power that have more to do with religious cosmology than with what a Western audience might consider as political philosophy. Such studies focused on how these ideas - which ranged to notions of power as a cosmic life force to the very Buddhist concept of karma - often resulted in rather distinctive dynamics in the concrete realm of politics, including the ways in which leaders display their charismatic appeal as well as the very models of sovereignty and designs of the polity.³ While some of these theoretical models have been correctly and appropriately critiqued (Howe 1991; Reynolds 1995), more recent approaches continue to engage with them, convinced of their value for the study of *realpolitik* in the region. As they do so, they seek to bridge the gap between such classical theories and the most cutting-edge approaches in the social sciences (Aragon 2022; Jonsson 2022; Tannenbaum 2022).

Amara Thiha's and Roberto Rizzo's articles demonstrate that collectives from 'below' - not only state agents - conceive of the religious realm as a key site for alter-political visions of the common good and as an arena that is rich of opportunities for militancy. Thiha's essay shows that, in the fraught politics of junta-ruled Burma/Myanmar, it is not only the military who make recourse to religion as means to gain or retain power. Young protesters do, too. Thus, while the generals seek to restore their legitimacy (and replenish their good karmic power) by consolidating longstanding relations with Buddhist monastics, some activists employ ritual strategies associated to astrology and sorcery to harm them, and further the cause of the people. The tension between the two opposing camps is also reflected by a battle between Buddhist orthodoxy, as represented by the rituals privileged by the military, and a spiritualized set of alter-politics, locally codified as unorthodoxy (the adjacent realm of Buddhist magic), that equips dissenters with instruments to resist oppression.

In a different context, Rizzo's article looks at the religious revivalist efforts of a Buddhist man in a rural village of majority-Muslim Java, portraying it as a commonly unnoticed instance of social movement. As the protagonist of this ethnography transforms his household and family into the fulcrum of an emerging local Buddhist

3 Hanks 1962; Anderson 1972; Tambiah 1976; Geertz 1980.

community, housing a library of Buddhist books and hosting religious discussions for sympathetic villagers, the practice and promotion of one's religion double as acts of dissent in their own rights.

8 Conclusion

Whether in more usual contexts for militancy such as street politics, or in more surprising venues such as the secluded realm of development programs and kin-based communities, online spaces and networks, or concerts and religious rituals, resistance in Southeast Asia is not only alive, but also in a perennial state of flux, able as it is to incorporate an ever-expanding repertoire of symbols and practices of dissent. Simultaneously local and transnational, resistance in the region voices domestic grievances such as calls for democratic reform in specific countries, as much as it embraces transcultural struggles such as that for greater human rights and the acceptance of individuals of non-normative genders and sexualities. Those who protest likewise make use of an impressive array of symbols and languages, drawing from a repertoire of dissent that is at once cosmopolitan and vernacular, and where international pop culture, liberal theory, religion and kinship may indeed coexist.

Approaches for the study of social movements like Resource Mobilization Theory, New Social Movement Theory, and the Political Process or Opportunity Paradigm, offer useful tools for the analysis of resistance in Southeast Asia. Crucially, they reorient the attention of scholars towards the cultural know-how and symbolism of protests, the perceived increased prevalence of identity-related issues and global concerns in social activism, and the ever-evolving relationship between civil society and state agents. At the same time, the same paradigms, which were originally developed in and with reference to the specific social realities of the Western world, naturally reflect the concerns and peculiarities of those cultural contexts. As such, they tend to reinforce a series of dichotomies that, even if often appropriately problematized, continue to influence dominant modernist views of the political. They require, we argue, some additional toolkits and adjustments were we to make sense of dissent as exemplified in the eight articles of this special issue.

Resistance in a region that is as diverse as dynamic as contemporary Southeast Asia may be approached from infinite perspectives. In this essay, we have chosen to focus on the spheres of intimacy, kinship, and religion. While by no means mutually exclusive or self-bounded wholes, these three domains, if explored carefully, reveal striking characteristics of militancy in the region, while simultaneously drawing us into the world-making aspirations or the alter-politics put forward by those who resist. With intimacy, we highlight the

role of personal relations in forging political affinities and that of politics in forming community. When such politically charged affects become visible in public, they disrupt the spectacles of national unity privileged by state agents, doubling as powerful expressions of dissent and alternative visions of the future. With kin, we designate an arena of activism where political commitment blurs into biological and non-biological relatedness, the latter being a longstanding feature of Southeast Asian societies. Ideas of parenthood, deployed by governments to demand submission to fatherly (and motherly) heads of state, are appropriated by protesters, who respond by creating politically engaged kins such as siblinghood from below. Finally, with religion, we stress the role played by belief in a world area where the secularization of politics is not as blatant as in (post-)Christian Western societies, both in the realm of state power and its contestations. Resistance in Southeast Asia routinely expresses itself via creative engagements with existing cosmologies, doctrines and rituals, revealing that religion, far from being outdated or to constitute a discreet analytical category, continues to prove useful to imagine a different future, create compelling narratives, and develop ritual techniques for furthering one's political interests.

We believe that the insights presented in this special issue, once again if appropriately contextualized, may enrich comparative analyses of social movements. Our aspiration, ultimately, is to treat contemporary Southeast Asia, with its vibrant practices and cultures of social activism, as a site for the production, rather than the mere reception, of new theories of resistance.

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