Introduction

If Southeast Asian history were recast so that “women of prowess” received even a fraction of the attention accorded their male counterparts, the individual known as Ken Dedes would certainly assume greater prominence. A shadowy figure in modern textbooks, she is endowed in the Javanese Pararaton (Book of kings) with sexual powers that are both mysterious and formidable. The Pararaton recounts an episode in Java’s legendary past when Ken Dedes, a local governor’s wife, is out riding in her carriage. As her sarong falls aside, a gleam of light is visible between her thighs. This catches the attention of a young man named Ken Angrok (seemingly a low-born peasant but in reality the son of the god Brahma), who has taken service with her husband. A sage tells him that this “glowing secret part” marks Ken Dedes as ardhanarishwari, an embodiment of the perfect balance between male and female, and that the man who obtains her is destined to be king. Accordingly, Ken Angrok kills the governor, marries Ken Dedes, and succeeds as ruler. Already pregnant by the governor, Ken Dedes gives birth to a son, Anushapati, to whom she later reveals the story of his origins and his father’s fate. A vengeful Anushapati subsequently murders Ken Angrok and becomes king himself. Although he too is eventually killed, his son (and thus the grandson of Ken Dedes) goes on to establish a line of descent through which rulers of the kingdom of Majapahit (thirteenth–fifteenth centuries) claimed legitimacy. The quiet confidence suffusing the splendid fourteenth-century statue of Prajnaparamita, goddess of transcendental wisdom, may have encouraged the popular Javanese belief that it is actually a portrait of Ken Dedes, “the princess of the flaming womb.”

Suitably bowdlerized, the story of Ken Dedes—at once the victim of unbridled male ambition and the catalyst for the founding of a new dynasty—does occasionally appear in Western-style histories of Java. She is nonetheless an exception, since the standard accounts of Southeast Asia rarely permit females more than a minor historical role. This absence occurs despite a succession of commentators who, over many centuries and with varying degrees of censure or approbation, have remarked on the independence displayed by “Southeast Asian” women. In 1944, even as the concept of Southeast Asia was evolving, the French scholar George Coedès listed “the importance of the role conferred on women and of relationships in the maternal line” among various factors contributing to the cultural
unity of the region he termed “Farther India.” More than four decades later, historian Anthony Reid carried this line of thinking even further, proposing that women’s relative autonomy and prominence in marketing, agriculture, and ritual “represented one aspect of the social system in which a distinctive Southeast Asian pattern was especially evident.”

The idea that “female status” helps define a Southeast Asian culture area has met a more guarded response from other disciplines. Foremost among those reluctant to assert a regional pattern, anthropologists would prefer to see gender—the cultural system of practices and symbols by which male and female roles are historically produced—as subject to constant negotiation in specific environments. Whether focusing on female health in northern Thailand, the entrepreneurial skills of Javanese batik sellers, aging women in Singapore, prostitution in Bangkok, or factory workers in Malaysia, an array of finely honed studies has demonstrated that contextual particularities will always temper the applicability of translocal generalizations. Unlike their colleagues in history and political science, anthropologists rarely frame their research questions in terms of “Southeast Asia.” The contention that such an approach is unhelpful and even “distracting” implicitly challenges historians to reconsider the extent to which extrapolations from separate instances can support wider conclusions regarding “Southeast Asian women.”

Anthropologists have, however, been deeply involved in the generalizations and comparisons generated by development studies. Within this framework, research on women’s concerns in Southeast Asia has been primarily concerned with the effects of economic and cultural globalization. Yet whether investigations concern practical and applied issues or theoretical and symbolic meaning, the historical dimension is rarely emphasized. As a result, critiques that locate Southeast Asian women in a “world economy” lack the evolutionary roots necessary to reach an adequate explanation of contemporary gender relationships. The proliferation of “women and development” studies has simply accentuated the disjunction between our familiarity with the present and our lack of knowledge about the past. It is clear that the relentlessly globalizing forces of the contemporary world have had far-reaching effects on millions of Southeast Asian women, but any assessment of change and its ramifications demands a much stronger historical base than currently exists.

Although premodern specialists are beginning to address this conspicuous gap, the small body of publications on women’s history in Southeast Asia still concentrates on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Supported by an expanding corpus of sophisticated literature developed largely in relation to India, scholars have examined the way in which colonization redefined the place of women, whether indigenous, European, or “mestizo.” Yet because all Southeast Asia except Thailand came under colonial control, we find that, as in India, a preoccupation with the interaction of
gender and race has tended to strengthen the historiographical separation between “modern” and “premodern” history. In other words, by emphasizing the changes resulting from European domination, we risk underestimating the ways in which earlier developments had already affected women’s lives. The value of a diachronic approach is well illustrated in Jean Gelman Taylor’s pioneering examination of the social changes that occurred in Dutch-ruled Batavia as the creole element became less evident among the governing elite.7

Opportunities to employ the longitudinal view occur only rarely in Southeast Asian studies, because of the dearth of research on women prior to the nineteenth century. Given the continuing endorsement of “female status” as a distinctive regional feature, this neglect deserves some explanation. In some respects it is a simple matter of catch-up, since histories of women in other areas of the world have been produced only over the last thirty years or so. However, advances are unlikely to be rapid, because the investment required to master relevant languages and scripts means that the number of specialists working on pre-nineteenth-century Southeast Asia will always be small. Investigation of a female past has been further shackled by long-standing expectations that history will reconstruct the antecedents of modern nation-states and thus help justify contemporary political and territorial realities. Though these expectations are receding, it is not easy to find a place for women when a country’s metanarrative is anchored by the lives of individuals (usually men) to whom evolution or liberation from foreign control is attributed. Even in the hands of a sympathetic writer, the nature of “national history” almost inevitably means that efforts to incorporate women will become an uneasy exercise of insertion rather than integration. In the majority of cases, those who have earned a part in the nation’s drama have done so by demonstrating their success in “male-like” roles, notably in battle against the enemy. In this capacity several heroines have been incorporated into the patriotic pantheon, such as the Trung sisters, who led the Vietnamese against the Chinese in 43 CE; Thao Suranari, who repelled Lao forces advancing across northeast Thailand in 1827; and Cut Nyak Dhien, the Acehnese woman who joined her husband to fight the Dutch.

The hegemony of the national epic in Southeast Asian historiography has fueled demands that more attention be accorded previously marginalized or silenced groups, including women. Happily, this has coincided with an expanding interest in what has been conveniently termed the “early modern period,” roughly spanning the centuries between 1400 and 1800 and previously located uneasily between the “colonial” and the “classical.” In Southeast Asia the appropriateness of the term “early modern” (implying an inevitable impetus toward a European-style modernity) is the topic of continuing debates. Although historians generally agree that this period is distinguished by the increasing penetration of a global economy, the spread
of the world religions, the growth in the power of the state, and changing
notions of how “femaleness” and “maleness” should be constituted, peri-
odization across a region is problematic. Victor Lieberman, for example,
has contended that polities on the mainland developed rather differently
from those of most areas in island Southeast Asia. Urging a more global
approach, he has pressed for a larger framework that would look beyond
“area studies” borders and treat Eurasia as “an interactive, loosely synchro-
nized ecumene.” By contrast, Anthony Reid has argued that the long-term
effects of “early modern” economic, political, and religious changes justify
generalizations across Southeast Asia as a whole.8

The idea of a period characterized by change should place a historian
of women on immediate alert. Because outside ideas are so often appropri-
ated through new or modified formulations of gender, conjectures about
representations of femaleness and female response to change may be par-
ticularly useful. More than twenty years ago Joan Kelly posed the question,
“Did women have a Renaissance?” and more recently European historians
have interrogated the rationale for female participation in “early modern-
ity.”9 In Southeast Asia, recognition of new influences, both economic and
cultural, should similarly lead to questions about the effects on women,
and the extent to which these differed according to locality, ethnicity, and
socioeconomic status. Such questions can be answered only by evaluating
and measuring change in different contexts, itself a challenge in the South-
east Asian environment, where historical work has been characterized by
prudence rather than boldness. Because academics value language facility
so highly, most scholars are reluctant to move outside a linguistic and cul-
tural area they know well, with the result that a strong tradition of compar-
ative thinking in the classroom is not reflected in published research. It is
therefore ironic that claims of regional distinctiveness in regard to the posi-
tion of women have become so embedded in the literature.

The Origins of This Book

Debates regarding the legitimacy of the term “Southeast Asia,” the possi-
bility of constructing “autonomous” history, the acceptability of historical peri-
odization, the use of sources, and the perils of generalization have domi-
nated academic conversations ever since I entered graduate school in the
mid-1960s. Issues related to women, gender, and sexuality are a later entry,
especially among historians, but it is evident that their inclusion can imbue
even well-worn topics like nationalism and the revolutionary struggle with
a new relevance.

In 1993, against this background, I began to formulate plans for a new
research project. In accordance with my Cornell training, which had always
stressed the need for a “case study” approach, I initially thought of contin-
uing my earlier work and focusing on another little-known area of the

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Malay-speaking world. Such a project would allow me to use my knowledge of Dutch East India Company (VOC) and Malay sources to further explore the ways in which local societies were affected by the economic and political changes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Yet somehow the idea did not excite me, partly because I felt that in terms of methodology and research strategies I would be traveling paths I already knew reasonably well. It was at this point that I began to think seriously of entering the field of women’s history.

My interest was not, I hasten to add, a completely new development. Nobody working on premodern societies needs reminding about the critical role of family relationships (and, by extension, the place of women), but during my research on east Sumatra I had been particularly struck by the vigor with which the kinship theme emerged even in the VOC’s commercial records. In this case I had found the challenge of working across two hundred years exhausting but nonetheless rewarding. I also remembered the mixture of apprehension and excitement with which my husband, Leonard Andaya, and I had approached the prospect of writing a general history of Malaysia in the late 1970s. While this joint effort proved to be something akin to a mental triathlon, we enjoyed the intellectual venture of moving outside our own area of expertise and thinking about historical processes over many centuries.

As I looked ahead to the shape of my next book, my teaching and interaction with students, especially at the graduate level, also played a part. Like many of my colleagues, I have found contemporary critiques of the “area studies” concept unsettling, given our awareness of the role historians have played in the construction of Southeast Asian studies as a scholarly field. Again, like others, I have seen the heavy weight of national historiography as an impediment to research in this part of the world, limiting curiosity and discouraging inquiries beyond political borders. Increasingly, I came to believe that studying women in the premodern period might be a useful means of reaching outside the parameters academia has helped create. From the very inception of this project I therefore worked from a belief that “the human experience is sufficiently similar to make comparison possible,” and that by exploring both resemblance and divergence we can learn more about the histories of the cultures in question. Like my mentor, O. W. Wolters, I believed that “a gender-oriented study should do more than put women into history” and that “it should also throw light on the history—male as well as female—into which women are put.” While accepting that I risked overreaching my capabilities, I also hoped that my temerity might nudge the field ahead by provoking others to pursue or contradict my arguments. Indeed, I was encouraged in this belief by observing that in women’s history a pattern has been established whereby detailed analyses are often a response to conclusions presented in more general studies.

My inquiry began with what I initially thought was a rather straightfor-
ward question: to what extent did changes associated with “the early modern period” reshape the lives of “Southeast Asian women” and affect their relations with men? Although the implications soon proved daunting, I felt I could draw some support from the academic climate in the late twentieth century, sympathetic as never before to the historical study of women in non-European societies. In 1892—a century before I embarked on my research—the Pali scholar Mabel Bode read a paper entitled “Women Leaders of the Buddhist Reformation” to the Ninth International Congress of Orientalists in London. Yet though the movement for female suffrage was then gathering force, and the social and legal advances since that time have been considerable, the emergence of women’s history as an academic field is very much a product of the last thirty years. It is intriguing to recall that the initial conference of the National Organization of Women held in Washington, D.C., in October 1966, dedicated toward “true equality for all women in America, and a fully equal partnership of the sexes,” was convened only a month after I entered graduate school.

While positioning myself in this research, I have often felt intellectually and emotionally jostled by my personal engagement with the topic, my commitment to “Southeast Asia,” and my training as a historian. In this situation it was helpful to envisage the audience who I hoped would read (and enjoy) this book. I will of course be gratified if it proves useful to my fellow Southeast Asianists, but I will be even more pleased if it interests colleagues working on women’s history in other parts of the world.

The Argument

Chapter 1 approaches the problematic issue of “Southeast Asia” by considering the ways in which topography helped mark off a geocultural zone and contributed to a claimed regional distinctiveness in gender constructions. Although the political boundaries that demarcate Southeast Asia were largely nonexistent until modern times, the highlands that reach from Vietnam across Laos, northern Thailand, and Burma did act as a buffer against control from centers in India and China. This often inaccessible terrain meant upland populations were less susceptible to domination by lowland cultures informed by political-religious assumptions about female subordination. To the distant east and to the far south, I argue, the seas created “borderlike” zones of a somewhat different kind, so that sustained interaction between “Southeast Asia” and “Oceania” did not extend beyond the eastern Indonesian archipelago and the coasts of western New Guinea. Notwithstanding similarities that connect Polynesian societies with their Southeast Asian kin, Oceania also throws up some striking differences, notably in the sexual antagonism so often described in Melanesian cultures.

With some qualification, chapter 1 concludes that there is a “Southeast Asia” where the history of women can legitimately be investigated. Chapter
2 moves on to consider the historiographical considerations I confronted because of the nature of the project, my own limitations, and the variety of sources I was using. Although I believed that approaching even very familiar material with new questions was potentially fruitful, I fully understood that the pitfalls involved in writing any regional history would be exacerbated by the diversity of Southeast Asia’s cultures and the vast range of languages of which I had no knowledge. I was always aware that I would be highly dependent on other specialists, particularly in tapping indigenous material beyond the Malay world, my own area of expertise. I was conscious, too, of other historiographical problems. The phrase “reading against the grain” may be a cliché, but it encapsulates a necessary approach when written evidence privileges elite men. Like other historians of premodern times, I had to decide when a lack of information justified reading backwards from more recent data. Although offering potentially invaluable insights, a retrospective methodology must always be used judiciously. Burmese land surveys from the eighteenth century, for example, demonstrate that women could sometimes hold the position of village head, but in 1953 upper Burmese villagers told one investigator that they considered such an idea ridiculous.12

In essence, then, chapter 2 reiterates the message that although the history of women in Southeast Asia must remain at best partial, a cautious yet creative approach to the sources may produce surprising results. In chapter 3, I place myself directly in the line of fire by turning to consider the vexed question of the degree to which the world religions have been instrumental in (re)constructing conceptions of gender. This issue is especially pertinent to Southeast Asian societies because in many areas women and sexually ambiguous individuals played a leading role in indigenous ritual and in communication with the spirit world. From the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the advance of Islam and Christianity in island Southeast Asia introduced new articulations of messages stressing female spiritual and intellectual weakness—the same messages that Theravada Buddhism and Confucianism had so vehemently promoted on the mainland. Across the region it is possible to track the slippage from “sacral danger” to female impurity, and to document the ways in which women were excluded from the most prestigious areas of religious praxis. Nevertheless, though their field of operation was more circumscribed, the sources suggest that women could still acquire a reputation for spiritual authority, whether as the pious donor of a Buddhist monastery or as a gifted healer who could summon supernatural forces to her assistance.

In any society, economic change is almost always a catalyst for social change, and this is particularly applicable to early modern Southeast Asia. Chapter 4 explores the ways in which the regional position of women was affected by the expansion of long-distance trade, the incorporation of the region into a global trading network, the beginnings of cash cropping and
wage labor, and the massive increase in slavery. Growing numbers of Chinese and European traders helped confirm a dual economy where women continued to dominate local markets, but where overseas-oriented commerce was the domain of men. As mediators in the transcultural exchanges underlying the early phases of commercial globalization, the role of women deserves particular historical attention, but as always there is a bleaker underside. In the new urbanized ports, where thousands of manumitted slaves without kin eked out a living, the growing visibility of prostitution signaled a grim trend toward the feminization of poverty.

Chapter 5 draws its inspiration from recent work that stresses the need for historical contextualization of interactions between women and “the state.” Despite a lack of agreement as to what constituted a “state” in Southeast Asia, most historians would accept that the obligations and responsibilities embedded in kinship relations provided the template for indigenous governance. Because enforcement of any overarching authority so often relied on the metaphor of family hierarchies, ruling elites became committed to gender regimes that both reflected and influenced the wider social order. Regardless of a state’s military or territorial strength, the regulation of appropriate roles for men and women was subsumed in the dynamics of population control. In the sixteenth century the relationship between “state” and “subject” became more complicated with the arrival of Europeans, especially in the island world. Whether in the Philippines, where Spanish imperial ambition laid the basis for a full-blown colony, or in the port cities controlled by the Dutch East India Company, European officials elaborated indigenous ideas of the state as a guardian of moral values. Like their local counterparts, they became deeply implicated in the maintenance of a political order where the superior position of men was persistently affirmed.

Chapter 6 expands on this idea by considering how gender constructs in elite households were inflected by class priorities. The manner in which upper-class women behaved and the lifestyle they adopted became an index of high status not only for females themselves but for their menfolk and families too. Whether in Vietnam or Burma or Java, wellborn women were subject to a battery of representations, ranging from art and literature to moralistic texts, all of which extolled remarkably similar hierarchies in female-male relations. In arguing against the imposition of “Southeast Asian” boundaries, Sanjay Subrahmanyam has pointed to similarities between court life in seventeenth-century Arakan and Bengal and to their mutual difference from Vietnam. Nevertheless, as in western Europe, the exchange of high-ranking women in marriage was fundamental to regional diplomacy. The perceived ability of a Cham princess to adapt to life in a Vietnamese court, or a Khmer lady to adjust to Siamese protocol, suggests that status values were often an effective mediator of cultural or linguistic differences. In specific contexts it is certainly possible to provide instances
of wellborn women who rejected or negotiated the gender hierarchies associated with their class. On the other hand, they were still far more exposed to state-promoted didactics than were their lower-ranking sisters. Representations of the ideal might be contested, but it would be unrealistic to ignore their consistency and ubiquity or to assume that these representations were without effect. Because elite women were so closely associated with the world of power and influence, they stood as the village’s distant “other,” setting standards for female behavior that were variously emulated, navigated, or repudiated.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century we have long passed the point where “women” are depicted as an undifferentiated category. Chapter 7 responds by arguing that a core of shared experiences does come about simply by virtue of occupying a female body and living with the ambivalences that menstruation, marriage, childbirth, menopause, and aging can provoke. Inextricably tied to a woman’s reproductive capacity, regardless of ethnicity and class, these experiences provide a site for comparative discussions of “being female” where ambiguity becomes a leitmotif. Despite the received wisdom that asserts a relatively high status for Southeast Asian women, fears of uncontrolled female sexuality thread through the record from very early times. Though male-female interaction remained typically complementary, state structures and religious teachings endorsed gender inequalities. The knowledge of senior women was respected, but malign magic was often associated with female intrigues and there is a disturbing trend toward widow dependency.

The conclusion should be regarded not simply as an overview of my general argument but as an invitation to others to continue the conversation. The evidence has persuaded me that one can approach Southeast Asia as a region where attitudes toward gender, though subject to constant renegotiation, were historically favorable to women. However, I also believe that differences and similarities in women’s comparative position stem primarily from socioeconomic environments rather than some “traditional culture.” I carry no brief for regional uniqueness, since cross-cultural comparisons commonly associate female independence with communities where women’s work is valued, where due attention is accorded maternal descent and inheritance does not exclude daughters, or where the influence of world religions and state ideologies is weak or nonexistent. Despite this disclaimer, in the course of my research I have repeatedly felt myself bumping into manifestations of “Southeast Asia”—amorphous, porous, ill-defined, but somehow persistently there.

Over the last decade, as I have worked on this book, I have been made constantly aware that the process of research and writing forms part of a personal journey. It comes as something of a shock to hear myself called a “senior scholar,” for I often feel I have only just started on that journey. Although I remain at once a committed area specialist and a historian with
a historian’s curiosity, I realize that the current project has also been shaped by the simple fact that I am a woman. More particularly, I am writing at a time when questions about women’s history have become legitimate and relevant in a way that they were not when I was a graduate student. Despite my initial misgivings, I have found this coalescence of professional and personal interests emotionally engrossing and intellectually rewarding. I hope that something of my engagement will come through in the text that follows.