We live in a world populated not just by individuals but by figures—people who loom larger than life because they alternately express and challenge conventional understandings of social types. Such figures are important because they serve as anchors for local, national, and transnational discourses about contemporary social life and its futures. Like Raymond Williams’ analysis of keywords in modern social thinking, an analysis of the “key figures” of a given social formation can provide unique insights into ideological formations and their contestations.1

This book considers a wide range of figures that populate the social and cultural imaginaries of contemporary Southeast Asia—some familiar only in particular contexts, others recognizable across the region or even globally. We focus specifically on what we call figures of modernity, which we define quite simply as persons within a given social formation whom others recognize as symbolizing modern life. They are figures because they stand out against the ground of everyday life. They are “of modernity” not because they are tied to a particular historical epoch but because they encapsulate a modern ethos. This definition, as well as terms such as “figure,” “modern,” “modernity,” and the seemingly benign geographical placemaker “Southeast Asia,” all require further elaboration. We therefore begin by explaining what we mean by these terms and why we believe that the analysis of such figures of modernity offers a unique methodological window into contemporary Southeast Asia and opens up new vistas within a broader comparative perspective.2

Before dwelling on explanations, however, it is important to recognize that the figures we describe are all real people. The book thus deliberately
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Aims to bring life and humanity to historical processes and transformations that, in other academic contexts, are treated as abstractions. At the same time, all of the figures in this book have been chosen because they represent and give voice to something larger than themselves, offering a view into social life that is at once highly particular and general. They include such diverse figures as the NGO Worker in Indonesia, the Returning Urbanite in Malaysia, the Schoolteacher in Singapore, the Cham Modernizer in Cambodia, the Filipino Seaman, and the Vietnamese Transnational. These and other figures reveal subject positions that manifest and comment upon a particular historical moment in the complex articulation of large-scale processes that are shaping the countries of the region. With the engaging clarity of concrete human experiences, these figures reveal processes of commodification, class formation, globalization, religious change, and political conflict.

The book is organized through the nine major countries of the region: Burma (or Myanmar), Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Each section begins with an introductory essay by a country editor, followed by the individual contributions. The number of figures for each country is roughly proportionate to the population size of each country, with Indonesia having the most and Laos the fewest. In total, this book brings together more than eighty scholars from a range of academic disciplines. Each author has been asked to identify and describe a specific figure of modernity in a one-thousand-word essay that offers a vivid and intimate portrait set against the background of contemporary Southeast Asia. Importantly, the invited contributors are mainly early career scholars engaged in ongoing fieldwork, thus allowing us to create a volume that combines scholarly rigor with a vivid, up-to-date description of a region of the world undergoing rapid change. Ultimately, it is the authors themselves who have—through a combination of field research experience and personal understanding of the people they describe—identified the significance of the figures they have chosen. Their understanding may not always reflect what others within the relevant locale say or have said about these figures, but ideally the contextualization and analysis they provide should account for such insider perceptions.

The Figure

A figure, in its most basic sense, refers to “a person as an object of mental contemplation.” The term “figure” also refers variously to someone of rank, someone respected, or someone outlandish in some aspect. In short, a figure is someone whom others recognize as standing out and who encourages
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reflexive contemplation about the world in which the figure lives. Importantly, in explaining why a figure stands out as meaningful, we must pay attention to the grounds from which figures emerge and from which they are distinguished. As Gestalt psychologists have argued, the act of concentrating on a figure necessarily involves the establishment of a ground against which it can be perceived; it is through the totality of the figure/ground combination that meaning is constituted. The analysis of a figure is thus simultaneously an exercise in trying to vividly depict the key contemplative features of the figure’s form while also determining the relevant sociohistorical backgrounds that make the figure stand out in that given place and time.

We seek to make sense of the Southeast Asian figures that populate this book much like Walter Benjamin made sense of the flaneur against the ground of nineteenth-century Paris. Our aim is not to compare twenty-first-century Southeast Asia to nineteenth-century Paris but to focus on the emergence, persistence, or decline of particular social figures, which like the flaneur serve to evoke both underlying historical processes and the “structures of feeling” of a particular time and place. Like anthropologist Ara Wilson, we see figures as “personae that represent new modes of work and new styles of being that accompany economic modernity.” They are, Wilson adds, “embodied symbols of the promise and problems of new economic realities.”

In short, figures are real people who also operate as “symbols” that embody the structures of feeling associated with larger, seemingly impersonal conditions of a particular time. As such, the concept of the figure differs in important ways from the sociological concept of the “social type” because figures are meant primarily neither to classify nor to define the “role” an individual plays; instead, they emphasize the symbolic work the individual performs within society. In analytical terms, the concept of the social type is primarily an instrument of classification, a description of a functional role-playing persona that fits into an ordered social typology. At best, social types can map the diverse landscape of individuals populating a society and reveal the classificatory concerns of specific moments in a society, or as in Max Weber’s concept of the ideal type, stress certain elements at the expense of others in order to facilitate comparison. At worst, social types can collapse into ideological stereotypes.

In everyday life, social types most commonly emerge from objectifying and power-laden discourses, as for instance James Siegel described criminal types appearing in tabloid newspapers during Indonesia’s New Order era. From this perspective, studying the emergence of a type draws attention to the capacity of discourse to constitute subject positions, particularly those of
marginalized or stigmatized persons (e.g., through stereotypes), while leading to an examination of how discourses circulate and are mediated to a broader public through various kinds of mass media. For instance, some social types may circulate primarily in discourses at a very local level, such as neighborhood gossip circuits. Others may circulate primarily in national discourses or in media circuits with a global reach. As Rosalind Morris has reminded us, social types almost invariably are conceived at points where the emergence of more disruptive forces might have occurred; again, as exemplified in Siegel’s analysis of the criminal type as an ideological device. In this process, the deployment of marginal social types in discourse helps to anchor and define the limits of a given social order.

Our approach to figures is not about making types but instead draws from ethnographic description and contextualization that attends to the lifeworlds of particular individuals. While many of the figures we discuss are shadowed by a discourse that typifies them, we are more interested in the tensions that the figures themselves feel—or that we observe through their experiences—as they struggle to define their own historical agency. This struggle tends to be particularly pronounced in cases where discourses on social types are buttressed by institutions of state power, as can be seen in cases such as the Prostitute in Vietnam, the Lawless Element in the Philippines, or the Person with HIV/AIDS in Indonesia. In such cases, a focus on figures does not preclude a consideration of the genealogy of discourses of related types, but it draws attention to how such typification is experienced and negotiated by particular individuals. An analysis of figures can offer a window into attitudes, subject positions, and worlds of meaning, while also shedding light on the specific backdrops that give them heightened significance at a given historical moment. Just as the flaneur makes sense only against the backdrop of emerging mass commodification in nineteenth-century Paris, so too do the figures in this volume make sense only once they have been set against particular backgrounds. For example, the Indonesian Street Kid appears only against the ground of a burgeoning but divided metropolis, Miss Beer Lao appears only against the ground of Laotian nationalism and the political economy of market-oriented socialism, and the Philippine Seaman appears only against the ground of globalizing trade and masculinist nationalism. In this volume, therefore, what emerges from the discussion of figures is a wide array of grounds—technological, economic, political, religious, social—that help to shed light on the ongoing figuration process in contemporary Southeast Asia.

If the social type is typically conceived of as a symptom of the times—fulfilling a role, or somehow “resulting” from the conditions particular to a social setting—figures, by contrast, may be more accurately conceived as
signs of the times. They operate both as semiotic signs that send a message to observers about key features of social life and as “vital signs” or “signs of life” that evoke the pulse of a particular social formation. Because they are real human beings who also express seemingly idealist conceptions, the figures mediate the often elusive and fleeting notion of philosophical idealism—the so-called zeitgeist—with the material conditions of lived life and experience. Because they have complex histories and variegated life courses, figures offer a way of reading into the ethos of a particular age without reducing it to singularities or depending on elusive philosophical notions of “spirit” or reductionist notions of cultural essence. More generally, in this process the figure becomes a device that allows us to find points of mediation between the functional and the symbolic, between contemporary lifeworlds and historical processes, and between the generalizing claims of positivist social sciences and the poetic modalities of ethnography and the humanistic social sciences.

The use of figures to mark historical shifts is a method evident in many of the modern classics of Southeast Asian studies. In Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, the Philippine novelist José Rizal was described as a figure whose work signified a shift toward a new form of nationalist imaginary, as the experience of temporal simultaneity—a sense of the “meanwhile”—came to define the possibilities of imagining the nation. In James Siegel’s *Fetish, Recognition, Revolution*, figures such as Mas Marco Kartodikromo and Tan Malaka—and their engagement with the Indonesian lingua franca—came to stand in for broader transformations and historical paths not taken as the subject of Indonesia emerged over the decades prior to the Second World War. In James C. Scott’s *Weapons of the Weak*, rich and stingy Haji Broom and poor dishonest Razak were descriptions of real people who nonetheless functioned, within the modernizing village of Sedaka, as symbols, “social banners,” or “effective vehicles of propaganda” that embodied “a critique of things as they are as well as a vision of things as they should be.” In Rudolf Mrázek’s history of technology and nationalism, the Indonesian dandy was seen to be loosely equivalent to Benjamin’s flaneur, slowly losing his place as capitalism took shape and placed new demands on its subjects. In Fenella Cannell’s ethnography of the Christian Philippines, the *bakla*, or male transvestite, was shown to exemplify a widely admired capacity to effect self-transformation through mediation of global notions of glamor. And in Vicente Rafael’s work, the “persistent figularity” of the criminal helped to excite broad sociocultural effects, such as the production of a social geography of fear across the region. All of these earlier works serve as examples and inspiration for the method we employ here, while also serving as reference points for drawing historical comparisons to the contemporary figures that are our focus.
Southeast Asia

As a definable geographic region, Southeast Asia is largely a historical fiction that emerged as a relic of colonial demarcations of space, World War II military command structures, Cold War geopolitics, and the scholarly categories of academic area studies. Thus, apparently similar figures appearing in different Southeast Asian nations will not likely understand each others’ languages, know much about each others’ histories, or even know the names of each others’ national leaders. Nevertheless, all of the different countries in the region have experienced the rise of industrialization, the positive and negative effects of the agricultural green revolution, and the promise of economic growth, as well as the pains of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. The region is also rapidly becoming more urban, with the rise of mega-urban regions surrounding Manila, Jakarta, Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City, and Kuala Lumpur, the revival of once neglected capital cities such as Phnom Penh and Hanoi, and the rise of Singapore as a “global city.”

Linked by shared regional experiences, Southeast Asian nations are also separated by dramatic political, economic, religious, and cultural differences, mediated by diverse histories of Dutch, British, French, Spanish—and in the case of Thailand, the absence of—colonial rule. These variable trajectories have differentially framed their postcolonial nation-building efforts, as well as their relationship with electoral democracy, socialism, and the global market. In the middle of the twentieth century, the early postcolonial economies of Southeast Asia largely depended on producing raw materials with unskilled labor, a pattern that had helped fuel industrialism in Europe and the United States during the colonial era. But beginning in the 1960s, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore experienced agricultural and industrial revolutions that transformed their economic and social base. Singapore, for instance, grew to prominence with the global electronics boom in the 1970s—a time when Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were caught up in war or genocide—before transforming itself into a global business hub in the 1980s and 1990s. In the latter period, production moved offshore, with factories and industrial estates relocating to countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. Historic rates of economic growth were facilitated by new relationships with global corporations, new trade and zoning practices, and the control and regulation of populations in ways that favored foreign direct investment and the accumulation of capital among well-connected elites.

The ten-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) now represents all of the major nation-states in the region as a powerful economic
trade bloc, giving some political substance to an otherwise imagined carto-
graphic shorthand. But it remains important not to overstate the historical
depth or validity of the designation “Southeast Asia,” which is home to dra-
matic economic and political differences. In economic terms, Singapore
is one of the richest countries in the world, while largely rural Laos is ge-
erally considered one of the poorest. In political terms, an even more va-
riegated mosaic of ideologically disparate forms of governance covers the
region. A military junta rules in Burma, while more open, yet still politically
firm communist parties rule via “market-oriented socialism” in Vietnam and
Laos. Cambodia, Malaysia, and Thailand are all constitutional monarchies. In
Cambodia, a multiparty (but not quite participatory) parliamentary democracy
is developing in fits and starts after years of restructuring. In Thailand, reli-
gion, king, and state combine through Theravada Buddhism, while Malaysia
is dominated by ethnic Malay and Islamic interests that are often posed in op-
position to the Chinese, who make up more than a quarter of the population.
Finally, formal secular democracies negotiate with various entrenched power
interests in the “controlled democratic” parliamentary republic of Singapore,
the post-Suharto Republic of Indonesia, and the Philippines, where bossism,
family politics, and election violence color a state ostensibly governed by ex-
cutive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. If ASEAN serves
as a bloc for negotiating mutual economic interests, it is also notoriously weak
if not wholly uninterested in enforcing any semblance of universal ideals, as
evidenced by its hands-off policy toward political abuses in Burma and the
proliferation of legal loopholes that mark its statements about human rights.
Officially presenting itself as the unitary voice of the region, ASEAN cannot
enforce its ideals across Southeast Asia because the region itself lacks under-
lying coherence.

Despite the political and cultural diversity of the region, however, there
are important cross-cutting features. The various figures in this book are all
animated by the advent of industrial modernity in the context of authoritarian
and interventionist states and the ensuing boom-and-bust cycles of the “Asian
tiger economies.” While Southeast Asian states increasingly promote neo-
liberal business-friendly policies couched in the rhetorical language of free
markets and good governance, governance on the ground is often illiberal,
and well-connected and powerful actors often enjoy exceptions to laissez-
faire policies. The effects of neoliberalism across the region thus have been
uneven. In Thailand, the collapse of the banking sector during the 1997 crisis
and subsequent reforms and cutbacks have led to an unstable political land-
scape characterized by populism. In Indonesia, the fall of the dictator Suharto
in 1998 led to the disbanding of monopolies under the watching eye of the
International Monetary Fund and to ensuing political decentralization. In Vietnam, _đổi mới_, or “renovation,” policies allowed for an opening up to foreign capital, officially dubbed “market-oriented socialism,” and in Cambodia a postconflict donor industry and foreign investment have led to massive landgrabs characteristic of primitive forms of accumulation. Neoliberal reforms have also created the conditions for individuals to imagine themselves and interact with state institutions in new ways. Domestic and regional politics have been affected by sometimes violent forms of populism, separatism, and radical Islam (most notably in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand). At the same time, nongovernmental organizations have become ever more pervasive, and struggles in the name of “people power,” democratic reform, and individual rights and freedoms have reshaped several political landscapes.

At the height of the “Asian economic miracle,” young female factory workers emerged as iconic figures of modernity across the region. The entry of these women into the public sphere should not be understood only in terms of their role in industrial production but also for the way they created a new group of mass consumers, disturbed patriarchal hierarchies, and became focal points for broader anxieties about female sexuality. In this book, a similar ambivalence toward working women is expressed through figures such as the Filipina Call Center Agent, the Vietnamese female Petty Trader (tiếu thương), and the Indonesian Career Woman (wanita karir). Economic growth and liberalization have also created prosperity and given rise to both a middle class and a class of new rich across Southeast Asia. Although ethnic Chinese minorities continue to dominate the region’s economies, wealth has increasingly spread across ethnic divides. This has, however, also intensified inequalities, as markers of class and variegated levels of development are played out visibly on the streets and in city spaces. While the poorest residents live in squatter housing plagued by recurrent flooding and dengue fever epidemics, ever-increasing numbers of middle- and upper-class residents live in gated communities. While the great majority of Southeast Asians move about their cities on foot, by bicycle, motorbike, bus, jeepney, or minivan, the wealthiest residents are driven through the streets by personal chauffeurs in luxury automobiles.

Inequality not only characterizes intracity forms of mobility, it also shapes patterns and qualities of flows of people between cities, between rural and urban areas, and across national boundaries. The porous borderlands between Burma and Thailand have helped to sustain informal transnational economies, but they have also given rise to more or less permanent refugee camps. In Singapore and Malaysia—the region’s largest importer of migrant labor—
deportation regimes and border controls have strengthened in the wake of the economic crisis and amidst anxieties about terrorism following the 9/11 attacks and the Bali bombings. Both Indonesia and the Philippines are now among the world’s main exporters of migrant labor, supplying not only the most successful Asian economies but also wealthy Middle Eastern oil countries. For many observers, the female domestic servant has come to replace the female factory worker as iconic of the international division of gendered labor. These new mobilities are linked not only to shifts in the organization of work but also to changing patterns of consumption and leisure. The deregulation of the airline industry and the massive success of the Malaysian-based budget carrier Air Asia have made air travel increasingly affordable. Low-cost airlines not only facilitate migrant travel but also contribute to rising intraregional tourism. Importantly, however, the experience of immobility develops together with mobility, as the majority of Southeast Asians remain in their home villages throughout their life cycle, even as they are increasingly affected by the circulation of capital, individuals, goods, and images that touch upon every part of the region.

As in other parts of the world, the dramatic rise of information technologies is having a profound impact across Southeast Asia. As of June 2011, Indonesia had the second-largest number of Facebook users in the world after the United States, the Philippines ranked seventh globally, and Singapore, one of the smallest countries in the region, had close to one million Twitter users out of a population of just five million. While it is not surprising that Singapore has such a media-savvy population, it is perhaps more unexpected that developing countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia have taken new Internet platforms to heart, largely bypassing the personal computer and moving straight to the smartphone. These new technologies undoubtedly help to constitute new forms of subjectivity and are deeply symptomatic of emergent concerns with self-cultivation and self-fashioning.

If neoliberalism is a form of rule that leads the individual to cultivate and govern the self in accordance with liberal ideals, then nowhere are its effects more conspicuous than in the rise of market-based solutions to higher education. Even as education continues to serve as an important means of class differentiation, it has become increasingly internationalized and has acquired critical importance as a marketplace for neoliberal self-fashioning. Dramatic improvements in literacy rates and the institutionalization of primary and secondary education have been followed by the ascent of English, computer, design, and business schools, which dot cities and provincial towns across the region. Nevertheless, the high cost of tuition at colleges and universities continues to act as a barrier to the vast majority of people. Even those who can
afford to pay face an uncertain future, since the labor market for skilled workers remains limited. The Vietnamese Aspiring Overseas Student described in this volume typifies the many Southeast Asians who hope to study abroad in Australia, Europe, or the United States. Yet it is also the case that universities in those countries increasingly see places such as Singapore and Malaysia as crucial nodes in their own internationalization efforts, as the globalization of higher education is just beginning.

The lives of the figures described in this book are all entwined with global production systems in various ways: Some work in sleek new downtown offices, others in special economic zones, and still others work in rural spaces that sometimes seem remote but are more often than not directly connected to global networks. Even seemingly noneconomic spiritual life is transformed by the economic and spatial regimes of the modern economy, as evidenced by the Lao Mobile Phone Monk, the corporate Spiritual Trainer in Indonesia, or the shift from place-based to person-based cults epitomized by the figure of the Spirit Medium in Thailand. The figures in this book live in the variegated spaces of contemporary modernity and participate in modern, outward-oriented economic activities, such as the struggle to attract foreign investments, the commercialization and industrialization of agriculture, the mass extraction of natural resources, the movement of rural people to cities and overseas, and the never-ending attempt to gain elite (and often foreign) educations. Some of the figures are members of the “New Rich,” others of a rising consumer-oriented middle class, and yet others constitute a burgeoning proletariat working in industrial parks, call centers, and agro-industry. They are investors, cadres, village chiefs, or athletes; they work as domestic helpers, flight attendants, engage in sex work, or fight for workers rights as community organizers.

While scholars have long understood Southeast Asia as a dynamic space of cross-cultural encounters and hybridity, the region today is even more intensely marked by transnational connections and flows, all of which impact and guide contemporary national transformations. Writing of the great waterways and tradewinds that circulate throughout the region, historian Oliver Wolters perceptively noted that, unlike the Mediterranean, the sea has never bound Southeast Asia into a unified region characterized by cultural similarities but rather functions as a sea “in common” that has facilitated exchanges of trade goods and ideas, sometimes leading to borrowings, never leading to homogenization, and always resulting in “localization.” Wolters ascribes to Southeast Asia “a propensity for modernity that came from an outward-looking disposition encouraged by easy maritime communications.” We believe these insights also apply to the current period and that the figures in this book, despite all their differences, have “modernity in common.”
Modernity

The figures in this book speak to something more recent than the postcolonial moment and more enduring than the contemporary. We call them figures of modernity. We might have called them figures of “postmodernity,” “alternative modernities,” “late modernity,” “second modernity,” “radicalized modernity,” “high modernity,” or even “the contemporary,” to cite but a few of the terms social theorists have coined to describe the current era. Discussions concerning the nature of modernity—at the heart of the social sciences since the industrial revolution—are notoriously complex and contentious. While these debates are important, we are primarily interested in how the figures in this book all speak to more generalizable features associated with the expansion of capitalism, the waxing and waning influence of the nation-state, the development of and challenge to particular forms of rationality associated with the rise of science and technology, and the transformation of the self—all features commonly understood as falling under the rubric of modernity. Even in cases when the figures in this book appear to dramatically extend, undermine, or otherwise transform the forces of modernity, they are nonetheless entangled in these very processes. At the same time, many of the figures highlight novel aspects of social life that appear to be transcending classic elements of modernity. They embody the increased (yet often explicitly semi-permeable) porosity of national borders, the development of transnationalism and flexible citizenship, the advent of instantaneous technology, and the critique of universalisms in the face of increasing global connections.

For many scholars, “modernity” refers to the forms of life and organization that emerged in Europe from the seventeenth century and that subsequently came to spread around the world. Since the 1990s, however, scholars working in countries outside of North America and Europe have challenged the notion that modernity diffuses from a Western origin or strictly reproduces Western models. In this book we are not ultimately concerned with reading backwards into questions of origins, but we do value and see this book as contributing to recent conceptualizations of cosmopolitan, alternative, and multiple modernities. Such work shows that the relationship between homogenizing and heterogenizing forces has become increasingly difficult to conceptualize in terms of a single telos, or end point. Despite the critique of area studies or the danger of methodological nationalism that comes through a focus on particular countries, the concern with non-Western life experiences that animate this book gives empirical basis to increasingly common assertions that modernity must be understood as emerging in particular contexts.

Our approach to the study of modernity is explicitly ethnographic and
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grounded in lived experience. In particular, we understand the figure as a key mediator and methodological vantage point from which it is possible to engage empirically and analytically with key themes of modernity. This approach is by no means unique in disciplines such as anthropology. Indeed, it has arguably become a norm in the ongoing struggle to describe relationships between local and global processes. By depicting more than eighty different figures, however, we have dramatically expanded the scope of the ethnographic project and created a veritable panorama of the landscape of Southeast Asian modernity. Rather than attempting to categorize this landscape through the identification of a series of ideal types, we continue to work in the Geertzian tradition of “thick description,” even as we disavow any reductionist attempt to compartmentalize different cultures. Instead, the possibility of comparison emerges from the constraints that have been placed on the individual essays in terms of a strict word count and general format.

While modernity has many aspects, the one that most interests us is its ethos. This ethos is characterized by a reflexive engagement with and embrace of a broader world that at least temporarily leads away from the identities, practices, languages, and ways of knowing that are assumed to be relatively timeless and enduring (i.e., the realm of tradition), as well as an engagement with the kinds of self-fashioning that pertain to the advent of neoliberalism. As Ong and Zhang have noted, this ethos becomes an ethic of “how one should live.”

Anderson’s work on the origins of nationalism provides a vivid illustration of such an ethos and its emergence during the colonial era. According to Anderson, the spread of print capitalism—particularly in the form of the newspaper and the novel—was a critical technological development that enabled people who had never before met one another to imagine themselves belonging to the same spatially demarcated and sovereign nation. In his book on radicalism in Java during the early twentieth century, Takashi Shiraishi captures the power of this moment by referring to it as “an age in motion” in which people strike out from their usual patterns of life to establish new modes of political organization and new forms of sociality, which in turn leads them to think differently about the lives they left behind. Clearly, the ethos that informs this kind of movement was not particular to the epoch that saw the rise of nationalism. Indeed, as shown by figures in this book—such as the Aspiring Overseas Student in Vietnam, the Thai Airways Flight Attendant, the Call Center Agent in the Philippines, or the World Musician in Cambodia—it is an ethos that one also finds alive and well in the first decades of this century.

Historically, modernity involved not only a radically new form of consciousness and community but also a shift in political cosmology. In Southeast
Asia, this shift was characterized by a move away from a political cosmology defined by divine kingship, “exemplary centres,” and unclear territorial boundaries to one composed of homogeneous space carved up into a limited number of discrete, bounded nation-states. As Thongchai Winichakul has shown, it was a shift that required more than just the technologies of the novel and the newspaper; it also required the advent and deployment of mapping technologies, which allowed for the unambiguous delineation and representation of political boundaries. In some ways, these trends continue through the most banal, everyday forms of popular culture. In other ways, however, our figures describe a world that is not seamlessly organized around the nation—neither in terms of consciousness nor technology. As Faisal Devji has argued in *Landscapes of the Jihad*, in the contemporary world the breakdown of modern (as well as traditional) forms of authority has led to an increasingly self-conscious and fragmented concern with ethics that opens up the possibility of new forms of imagining through technologies such as the Internet. Devji’s account thus points toward various forms of rupture in the nation-state to a crisis of authority—but also to a crisis of authenticity.

Every Southeast Asian national language has a relatively straightforward equivalent for the idea of being “modern,” which is not the case for academic terms such as “postmodernity” or even “high modernity.” As Mary Beth Mills has noted about Thailand, “Discourses on modernity permeate much of everyday life.” This is not to say that what counts as modern is at all universal throughout the region—or even within different countries. For example, while every Thai has an idea of what *tan samai* means, there will of course be great differences of opinion about what kinds of persons might rightfully be recognized as being up-to-date. While every Vietnamese knows what *hiện đại* means, there remains great contest over who might be considered modern. The terms are not fixed and are subject to both popular and academic debate. In mid-twentieth-century Java, for example, Clifford Geertz famously described a split between *modèren* and *kolot* (modern and conservative) Islam, yet recent scholarship has noted how the so-called return to doctrinaire text-based Islam is itself a modern phenomenon. In such cases, the idea of modernity remains salient, though always contested and transformed.

We are thus not concerned primarily with problems of terminology but rather more specifically with empirical problems of listening to these discourses of modernity. They speak about the loss of grand narratives, an opening to the foreign, a blurring of old status and class distinctions, an embracing and intensification of capitalism and mass media, and a reworking of the politics of connection. In making concrete the contemporary, these various figures help us to sort out exactly what is at stake across Southeast Asia today.
In other words, we conceptualize figures as ethnographic sites that mediate a wide range of processes and structures that are themselves often in flux. For this reason, the term “modernity” in our title should be read not as a reference to the moment that so fascinated Benjamin but as a temporary placeholder for the constellation of forces that define the contemporary moment in at least one region of the world. As will be clear, this moment is characterized by the pervasive effects of capitalism and commodification, the refashioning of relations between the state and the self along neoliberal lines, a deep ambivalence about older figures of authority, the emergence of new claims to authority grounded in new media, and the continuing objectification of various marginalized people across the social field. By making modernity our leitmotif, we have chosen a theme that is expansive and encompassing, providing us with a way to focus our conversations without overly constraining them. It is a theme that draws attention to the contemporary moment, while also throwing aspects of history and tradition into relief. By examining modernity through the lives of particular figures, we are able to explore how people across Southeast Asia position themselves in relation to global configurations of modernity and to create a panoramic snapshot of a region in motion.

Method

Whereas Benjamin’s project was fragmented in its form and his flaneur stood as an isolated figure in the Parisian urban swirl, the figures that are described in the coming pages often overlap and intersect with one another. These intersections were not planned. Each of the contributing authors was asked to choose a figure that she or he had encountered during ongoing fieldwork. The figure chosen might be an individual, but it should also be someone who is recognizable as representing modern life. What emerged was a series of figures that symbolize broader transformations across the Southeast Asian region. The initially fragmentary nature of the project was thus transformed into a revealing composite form.

Although this book describes a specific cast of key figures that pertain to contemporary Southeast Asia, we have broader methodological goals. We believe that a focus on figures—or “key figures,” as Raymond Williams might have phrased it—can provide the basis for an illuminating comparative ethnographic method that could span regions and times. Many of the most enduring concepts in social theory began as social types but then went on to acquire greater significance as figures capable of illuminating larger ideas. For example, Georg Simmel’s analysis of the “stranger”—the “man who comes today and stays tomorrow”—has proven productive in analyzing...
critical processes of modernity, most notably Zygmunt Bauman’s study of the Holocaust. Max Weber’s ideal type of the charismatic leader has provided ways to conceptualize and compare forms of leadership across cultures, for instance through Benedict Anderson’s analysis of power in Java. These examples are more than types; they are figures. Similarly, we argue that figures like the Street Kid and the Schoolteacher can provide ways of thinking both about the generality and the specificity of contemporary social formations around the world.

There are at least three reasons that the figures approach offers such great potential. First, the figure comes into focus both in terms of its own history—the shifts in meaning and in inflection over time—and in terms of its relation to other key figures. These two modes of exploring a discursive field are associated with two different kinds of reading; one that is linear and another that involves tunneling between keywords in a manner that is similar to reading hypertext. In our focus on figures, we likewise want to use them as access points to broader cultural formations.

Second, a focus on figures does not depend on drawing an artificial line between scholarly discourse and the forms of discourse we encounter among our interlocutors in the field. A study of figures involves participating in a kind of folk sociology, where social imaginaries are populated by certain recognizable social types. It is against the backdrop of these types that particular figures acquire their significance and their force.

Third, a study of figures allows for a focus on cultural and historical particularities—something that both anthropology and area studies do well—without trapping us in these particularities. Instead, it allows for an opening out into a broader comparative conversation. Indeed, what we have found over the time that we have been engaged in this project is that a discussion of a figure tends to provoke people to think about related figures in other places or times. By following through these chains of associations, we gain access to other places and other social worlds. Imagining one figure leads one to conjure up others, to populate a world of ethnographically rich, sociologically varied, interconnected figures. The prologue and epilogue of this volume are examples of how generative this notion of figures can be.

How to Read the Book

As processes of globalization have come to reshape Southeast Asia in recent decades, academic debates have intensified with regard to the withering away of the nation-state and the problematic legacy of area studies. Organizing this volume according to the region’s major nation-states arguably marginalizes
not only smaller countries such as East Timor or Brunei but also nonstate figures such as “insurgents” in Burma and Laos. In response to these broader issues, some influential observers have even imagined an alternative region dubbed Zomia—the massif that cuts through the region from India to China and is populated by highland groups that have largely remained outside of the control of the nation-state. Yet for the great majority of the region’s inhabitants, the nation-state remains the dominant organizational form of everyday life. Rather than positioning ourselves “outside” of this form, we thus attempt to map the contemporary landscape of modernity through a series of figures that primarily identify in terms of nationality rather than, for instance, ethnicity or religion. This does not mean that we take the nation-state as a given. Rather, we understand it to be a widely contested way for organizing societies and establishing collective identifications. Indeed, our hope is that our focus on key figures will open up new ways of thinking comparatively, both across the region and beyond it. We therefore encourage readers to find alternative itineraries through the volume that open up new vistas for regional understanding.

Our ambition is for this book to be used in a number of different ways. On the one hand, it can certainly be read straight through by students and a broader lay audience as a somewhat idiosyncratic introduction to contemporary Southeast Asia. On the other hand, we would also encourage our readers to find alternative ways through the book that would highlight other themes beyond a strict focus on nation-states. For instance, readers with an interest in themes such as gender, technology, and social marginality could read a grouping of essays on each of these themes. To facilitate this kind of reading, we have provided an index in which we identify a wide range of themes, each of which runs through several essays in the book. But we trust that readers will discover new itineraries inspired less by our modes of thinking than by the figures of modernity themselves. Indeed, it is precisely the idiosyncratic and disparate nature of the volume that we find so exciting. By asking so many individual authors to write about a figure of their own choosing, we have opened up the possibility that our readers might identify emergent themes in Southeast Asian studies. Our hope is that it is the cacophony of voices, the diversity of stories, and the limitless connections between these figures of modernity that ultimately serve to organize this book.