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Comments on Victor Lieberman's *Strange Parallels*

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In this historical tour- de-force Victor Lieberman moves beyond the traditional area studies boundaries to examine common patterns in another configuration, Eurasia. He argues that island and mainland Southeast Asia, Japan, Russia, France, China, and South Asia experienced parallel developments in territorial consolidation, administrative centralization, and cultural integration that strengthened lowland polities at the expense of outlying areas. What made it all possible was the convergence of a number of factors: the expansion of material resources, new cultural currents, intense interstate competition, and state interventions. Lieberman nonetheless acknowledges that there were "major discrepancies" in geography, population, and social and cultural models among the polities that he examined (Lieberman II: 50–1). For island Southeast Asia, these "major discrepancies" constituted a fundamental impediment to the "territorial consolidation, administrative centralization, and cultural integration" by which Lieberman characterizes Eurasia

The first "discrepancy," the geography of island Southeast Asia, is a crucial reason for the absence of territorial consolidation and administrative centralization. One of the axioms in the island world is that the lands divide and the seas unite. While this is generally true, there are other geographic and environmental factors that counteract any effort to unite the shores under one economic or political regime. The seas in Southeast Asia are not a Mediterranean, though a few scholars have drawn some parallels between the Mediterranean and the South China Sea. Island Southeast Asia is composed of numerous islands and archipelagoes extending from the Malay Peninsula to the Birdshead Peninsula in New Guinea. The volcanic mountains that constitute the Burma-Java Arcs stretch from Lower Burma eastward through the islands, then curve northward from Timor to join the Pacific Arcs before proceeding further northward through Halmahera and the Philippines. This line of mountains is an area of great instability and volcanic activity, hence its description "Ring of Fire." Many of the larger islands are characterized by high interior mountain chains and tropical rainforests, which make land travel a formidable undertaking. In addition, the numerous small islands that dot the island world are subject to strong seasonal monsoon

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winds and local ocean currents in a number of places, making inter-island communication difficult except for specific times of the year.

A second major discrepancy mentioned by Lieberman is population. The geography of island Southeast Asia and its limited arable land were a factor in its relatively low population, with the prime exception being the rich wet rice (sawah)-growing areas of central and east Java. Although one can find pockets of suitable sawah areas in the central Minangkabau highlands, southwestern Sulawesi, the Central Luzon Plain and in a few of the other islands outside of Java, they have not led to the rice surpluses that characterize the three main river corridors in mainland Southeast. It was these surpluses that enabled the lowland societies in these corridors to sustain a concentration of large populations that could provide the taxes, labor, and armies to achieve territorial consolidation, administrative centralization, and cultural integration. But in island world Southeast Asia, these goals were secondary to the more crucial aim of creating and maintaining exchange networks for international trade. Even remote islands could be a source of exotic products, and so the primary concern of ambitious entrepots was to assure that these islands continued to participate voluntarily in a trading network that they regarded as being mutually beneficial.

The small populations and the dispersal of many of the communities in the island world, again with the exception of central and east Java, made it counterproductive to attempt to introduce administrative centralization. In 1714 the major Malay kingdom of Johor could only field an armed force of 6500 men. The numerous tiny islands of eastern Indonesia supported even smaller populations, and often they were forced to move to safer islands due to natural disaster or warfare. There were also pockets of small communities in Java, particularly in the highlands, that were never under direct control of the major central or eastern Javanese kingdoms. In this regard they were similar to many of the highland groups that inhabited the mountainous regions of mainland Southeast Asia. These small and scattered populations retained their independent existence and entered into economic and political arrangements that eschewed incorporation and direct administrative control by a central polity. Powerful and ambitious rulers sought through various forms of alliances to maintain an extensive network of communities, but often with very little change in the administrative or territorial structure.

An explanation for this difference with lowland mainland Southeast Asian and other Eurasian polities should be sought in the third "major discrepancy"—social and cultural models. As Lieberman acknowledged, the island world experienced far greater international trade than mainland Southeast Asia. Wealth from international trade among the Malays and many other maritime societies in the early modern era was primarily in the hands of the ruler, who then dispersed it as beneficences in the form of prestige goods, cloth, and titles to his subjects for their service and loyalty. The ruler also pursued a policy of developing real and fictive familial relationships through marriage,

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lactic siblings, and adoption with the chiefly families scattered throughout the realm. These policies were not dissimilar to those found in the centralizing polities on mainland Southeast Asia. The crucial difference between the two areas, however, was due to the exigencies of geography and the environment. For many island rulers, it was far easier to maintain strong economic ties and nominal political ones rather than attempting to impose control over small and mobile populations located in heavily forested or mountainous interiors, or in distant and barely accessible islands. Even the powerful Javanese armies could never maintain their conquests long enough to introduce any form of territorial consolidation or administrative centralization.

Yet there was indeed some cultural integration in the island world, but it was not a product of centralizing polities as in mainland Southeast Asia. Instead, the impetus toward cultural integration was a result of the desire of many smaller courts or chiefly households to emulate some aspects of the powerful and increasingly wealthy courts that benefited from international trade. There evolved cultural zones associated with certain dominant courts: the Malay kingdoms on the Peninsula; the Javanese in east and central Java, the Bugis and Makassar kingdoms in south Sulawesi, Ternate and Tidore in north Maluku; and Sulu and Magindanao in the southern Philippines. The language, customs, fashion, and religion (Islam) of the leading court centers were eagerly emulated because these smaller courts and their subjects wished to participate in everything that was "up to date" (Wolters 1999: 114). The center rarely employed force nor initiated the adoption of its own culture, which marked a major departure from the situation of the centralizing polities of mainland Southeast Asia.

There are many similarities between both the mainland and island areas of Southeast Asia arising from a shared cultural and historical development. Perhaps applying a different approach from Lieberman's may have demonstrated this "family resemblance." (O'Connor 1986: 8–10) But as I have argued above, the early modern history of island Southeast Asia on the whole does not conform to the historical framework suggested by Lieberman in his stimulating, well-researched and ambitious study of Eurasian parallels.

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