

**Book Review:**  
*Empire of the Winds:*  
*The Global Role of Asia's Great Archipelago*

**Ryan Holroyd**

Assistant Professor, Department of History, National Chengchi University

*Empire of the Winds: The Global Role of Asia's Great Archipelago*,  
by Philip Bowring. London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, 317  
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Philip Bowring has given us a readable, engaging, and at times even exciting new history of the global region most of us know as maritime Southeast Asia, but which Bowring rechristens 'Nusantaria'. The book is a general history intended for non-specialists and the reading public, but nonetheless includes a useful bibliography as well as a generous number of maps and several pages of attractive colour and grey-scale plates. It is expansive and ambitious in both the breadth of the subjects it covers and its temporal scope. Bowring begins with the prehistoric formation of Southeast Asia's current geography after rising sea levels inundated a formerly connected landmass and created the present myriad of islands and peninsulas about 7000 to 11 000 years ago. From there he proceeds in measured steps through the millennia and then centuries, eventually introducing the reader to the challenges that the region, its peoples, and its nation states are now facing in the twenty-first century.

Bowring uses this sweeping historical narrative to make two basic arguments. The first, and more straightforward of the two, is a throwback to the thesis of J. C. van Leur (Leur, 1955; Smail, 1961).

Essentially, Bowring wants the reader to understand Nusantaria as not simply a meeting place or transitional area for travellers, traders, and imperialists from other parts of the world. Like Van Leur, he believes that the region was a creative place. It was a cradle of maritime skills and technology, and a producer of highly valued trade goods that were sought after by consumers in the farthest corners of the Earth. As well, at least until the triumph of European and American colonialism in the nineteenth century, the various states of the region were also sophisticated political and cultural adapters and innovators who borrowed ideas and ideals from other parts of the world to buttress their own independent institutions.

The second argument Bowring's book makes is more subtle and more tenuous. Perhaps with Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen's *Myth of Continents thesis* in the back of his mind, Bowring does not take the essential unity of Nusantaria for granted (Lewis and Wigen, 1997). He seeks to convince the reader that there is an intrinsic unity to the region that makes it more than just the collection of coastlines and islands that lie between China, India, and Australia. This is perhaps why he largely eschews the toponym 'Southeast Asia' in favour of Nusantaria (a name that he adapted from a thirteenth-century term used to describe the domain of the Java-centred Majapahit empire). His Nusantaria is an interconnected maritime zone within which people, goods, and ideas have flowed more freely and intensely than they have between the region and other parts of the world. The essentiality of this maritime interconnectedness means that for him Nusantaria excludes much of what is commonly called 'mainland Southeast Asia.' The subregions that are now parts of the states of Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos are therefore peripheral to Bowring's narrative. The other defining feature of Nusantaria is a shared Austronesian cultural and linguistic heritage, which means that despite being linked through trade or tributary politics, southern China and the Coromandel Coast of India

are similarly peripheral.

Like any regionalisation scheme, Nusantaria ends up with some ragged edges. Early in the book there is a fascinating chapter on the Austronesian colonisation of Madagascar, but this subject is not revisited. Likewise, Taiwan, before the beginning of its large-scale Chinese colonisation in the seventeenth century, receives a couple of sections thanks to the Austronesian heritage of its original population, and Vietnam gets honorary status as part of Nusantaria because of the pre-modern Austronesian Cham states that once occupied the southern half of its coastline. A stickier problem emerges in the final chapters of the book when the implicit question shifts from being 'where is Nusantaria?' to 'who is a Nusantarian?' As Bowring acknowledges, the core lands of Nusantaria (the Malay peninsula, the Indonesian islands, and the Philippines) are now home to millions of non-Austronesian people. If a shared ethnic and cultural heritage is an essential feature of the region, it seems as though these non-Austronesians must be seen as perpetual settlers, even though some of their families have lived among the indigenous populations on those coasts or islands for centuries.

Any regional study will encounter these sorts of difficult questions relating to boundaries and definitions, and Bowring deals with them more effectively and more forthrightly than many past writers. After establishing the effective limits of his study in the introduction and first few chapters, he is able to proceed with surprising nimbleness to weave together all of the big stories of maritime Southeast Asia's past into one larger narrative, giving a historical character to the region's development.

In the first half of the book, he describes how Nusantaria originally developed as a pivotal maritime region linked to China, the Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean through trade and travel from the first millennia BC until the late Middle Ages. Through those links to other parts of the world, it gradually absorbed modified forms of Hinduism,

Buddhism, and eventually Islam. The book also introduces the major states and societies that rose and fell in the region during this period, including Srivijaya, Champa, and Majapahit, deftly moving between different parts of the region while adhering to a roughly chronological progression from chapter to chapter. The book's length only allows for a thumbnail sketch of each polity, but Bowring writes succinctly and manages to get the most out of each chapter. There will be little new for pre-modern Southeast Asian specialists of course, but for a student or non-specialist reader the book will offer very useful introductions to these early states.

Within the first part of the book, Bowring also discusses Nusantara's early relationships with other parts of the globe. His focus is chiefly how the region influenced other places, particularly as an exporter of goods and people, rather than external influences on the region. He devotes a chapter to the Sri Lankan Chola invasion of Sumatra in the eleventh century, but concludes that its impact was limited to Sumatra alone and short-lived in the overall history of the region. Similarly, he shows that despite the spectacular voyages of the Ming admiral Zheng He to the region in the early fifteenth century, China's influence prior to the sixteenth century remained primarily economic rather than political or cultural.

In the second half of the book, the narrative turns to the subject of Nusantara's encounter with European colonialism. Essentially, up until about the end of the fifteenth century, Bowring sees the Nusantarians as masters of their own destiny. However, around the turn of the sixteenth century the region was 'holed near the waterline' (to repeat one of Bowring's best metaphors). The Portuguese took Melaka in 1511, and this began about four and a half centuries of creeping colonisation during which various groups of Nusantarians struggled to maintain their independence but gradually lost ground to European imperialists and Chinese settlers, and later to American and

Japanese ones as well.

The book ends on a hopeful note though. The twentieth century's decolonisation of the region was propelled by rediscoveries of identity, which were often pan-Malay or pan-Southeast Asian, even if the resulting nation states ended up more or less reproducing the colonial-era divisions of the region. Bowring looks on the emergence of these pan-regional identities approvingly, arguing that the people's awareness of their shared cultural and historical heritage is key to reclaiming the region's importance and perhaps dominance in the world economy. He also emphasises that this newfound (or newly re-found) unity will be critical in seeing off threats from outside the region, particularly China's recent aggressive 'sea grab' in the so-called South China Sea.

One of the strongest aspects of the book's structure is the attention it devotes to groups who have traditionally been seen as relatively small players during the early modern period, such as the Bugis and the Sulu raiders. Bowring makes use of the best studies of these groups and shows the importance of the roles they played as the European powers proceeded with their uneven colonisation of the region. He shows that although the independence of these groups ultimately did not survive colonialism's final stage in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, prior to this time they were able to adapt and prosper in their changing world.

However, the one criticism that could be levelled at the book is that Bowring is a bit too committed to championing an autonomous Austronesian history of the region, and consequently occasionally too rigorous in keeping his narrative centred on the activities of Austronesian groups and polities alone. The other groups, the Europeans, South Asians, Arabs, and Chinese, sometimes come off in the narrative more as antagonists than participants or contributors in the story of the region's development. In particular, the book would

benefit from a more thorough examination of the Dutch Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie's activity and evolution, and this would in turn help the reader more fully appreciate the challenges that the Austronesian Nusantaraians were facing, particularly in the crucial seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

But this is a minor quibble, especially considering the vast scope of the book. How appealing the arguments and the structure of its narrative will be depends on how the reader understands the importance of regionalism, ethnicity, and culture, both historically and in modern geopolitics. Regardless, however much the reader agrees or disagrees with Bowring's claims, it is impossible to deny his skill as a writer. *Empire of the Winds* is ambitious, erudite, and entertaining. It makes its claims clearly and tells its stories well.

## Reference

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