

University of Wisconsin – Madison
Fall 2025

History 755: Proseminar in Southeast Asian History
New Directions in Southeast Asian History

Tuesdays, 2:25-5:25 PM
Van Vleck B215
In-person
3 credits
50% graduate coursework

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OH: Wednesdays 1-3 PM
and by appointment

Our seminar will examine the state of the field of Southeast Asian studies through a selection of monographs which have won the Harry Benda Prize—awarded by the Association for Asian Studies to the best first book on the region. We will explore major contemporary themes, as well as turns and trends in the historical scholarship of Southeast Asia, so as to prepare graduate students studying the region to make sense of the state of the field, to identify and productively engage with current scholarly conversations, and to articulate their own future interventions and contributions to our analysis of the region. We shall read and analyze these monographs with three goals in mind: to think of these prize-winning books structurally as models of writing and scholarship; to think with the arguments of the books to understand how their methods, theories, or archival sources represent new directions or a refinement of classic concerns in the scholarship of Southeast Asia; and to think about how our own work could fit into, or perhaps even productively challenge, the intellectual conceptualization of the region.

Learning Outcomes

Graduate students enrolled in the course, through their close engagement with the texts and with each other in the seminar, will:

Analyze monographs which have defined new directions in the field of Southeast Asian studies, both for their argument and structure and historiographic interventions;

Contextualize these works within the broader scholarly and interdisciplinary conversations that these books participate in, reframe, or reject in order to position the students' own developing work within this same field;

Apply in their own work the useful structures, archival methods, and writing techniques from these prize-winning books;

Deepen interdisciplinary knowledge and methods in Southeast Asian studies beyond students' own disciplinary background.

Format and Credit Hours

Our seminar meets in person, once a week, for 180-minute sessions.

The credit standard for this 3-credit course is met by an expectation of a total of 135 hours of student engagement with the course's learning activities (at least 45 hours per credit, or 9 hours per week). This includes regularly scheduled meeting times, reading, writing, group work, individual consultations with the instructor, and other student work as described in the syllabus.

Participation

The goal of an advanced seminar like ours is to have a conversation with everybody in the room, not just between the instructor and individual participants. You are expected to come to the seminar with your own questions about the assigned texts, and to contribute to the discussion. Listening carefully and attentively to your colleagues, and approaching and responding to the discussion with a spirit of critical generosity is crucial not only to the seminar, but to further education itself.

You will lead—with two other students—the first hour and a half of the discussion for each of our weekly texts—not by making an argument about what the text is about, or necessarily to provide an analysis of the text, but to guide the seminar to arrive at such a collective analysis.

Since we meet only once a week, missing a seminar session will have an adverse impact on the final grade.

Grading and Coursework

This course is graded on an unweighted points basis, with a total of 1000 points possible throughout the semester, which is functionally equivalent to a 100% scale.

A	AB	B	BC	C	D	F
92.5 – 100	87.5 – 92.49	82.5 – 87.49	77.5 – 82.49	70 – 77.49	60 – 69.99	below 60

Points	Task
75	Response to <i>Critical Asian Studies</i> blog post (750-1000 words)
150	Discussion leadership I
150	Discussion leadership II
150	Structural analysis essay* (1500 words)
100	Participation
25	Final project proposal
350	Final project*

**Structural Analysis Essay (Due 12 October)*

Using any book from weeks 3-6, and in a 1,500-word essay, analyze its structure. (E.g., and by no means an extensive list of things to think about: How do the authors structure the introduction, chapters, and conclusion? Do they do anything structurally in the book that you found effective, or perhaps less so? How do they use their sources? How do they deal with transitions between chapters? How does the author frame their intervention into the field? With whom are they in conversation, and how does that influence their use of sources?)

**Final Project (Due 15 December)*

You will have three options for the final project, depending on what would be most useful for you at this point during your graduate training:

Option A: Research paper (journal-length, approximately 10,000 words)

Option B: Undergraduate syllabus (15-week course, including an overall reflection on course design, justification for each week's readings and topical sequence, and assigned coursework)

Option C: Review essay (6,000 words, focusing on no fewer than 3 books relevant to your discipline or subfield)

To prepare for the final project, you are required to meet with the instructor by the end of Week 7 (19 October) to discuss your initial thoughts, and to submit by the end of Week 9 (2 November) a brief (500-750 word) project proposal. This proposal entails, for:

Option A: Research Paper — The topic, tentative arguments, statement of relevance, and sources;

Option B: Undergraduate syllabus — An extended draft of the course description and possible learning outcomes;

Option C: Review essay — An annotated bibliography of the 3 books, as well as a brief analysis of what will connect the three books in your review essay

Required texts for the course are available as e-books through the UW Libraries. You are not required to purchase these books, though you may if you desire.

All submissions shall be made through the course Canvas page.

Statements of Principles and Policies

The Fundamental Principles

We will always treat each other with respect and courtesy. We will offer arguments in good faith. We will approach ideas offered by others with the intellectual generosity and openness that makes for good scholarly and professional and civic conduct. We will provide feedback and criticism—and accept these—without transgressing boundaries of respect. We will approach the interpretation of the past with the humility of the present, with the growing understanding that our judgment of the past reflects the concerns of our present, which will then, inevitably, be revised by those who come after us.

Generative AI Policy

We, as a learning community in our class, need to think critically and deeply about the advantages and risks of using generative AI as an aid to our learning and teaching. We may, of course, consult these models about class material as we might have used Wikipedia in the past, in full knowledge that these generative AI models are not citable authorities. The tendency for these models, likewise, to hallucinate and provide false data is a necessary consideration when using generative AI services. We may not pass off text generated by AI as our own writing, and submitting these texts for class assignments is plagiarism.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

The University of Wisconsin-Madison supports the right of all enrolled students to a full and equal educational opportunity. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Wisconsin State Statute (36.12), and UW-Madison policy ([UW-855](#)) require the university to provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities to access and participate in its academic programs and educational services. We share responsibility in the accommodation process. Students are expected to inform their instructors of their need for instructional accommodations during the beginning of the semester, or as soon as possible after being approved for accommodations. The instructors will work either directly with you or in coordination with the McBurney Center to provide reasonable instructional and course-related accommodations. Disability information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student's educational record, is confidential and protected under FERPA. (See: [McBurney Disability Resource Center](#))

Academic Integrity

“[We] are expected to uphold the core values of academic integrity which include honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. These core values, combined with finding one's purpose and passion and applying them in and out of classroom learning, produce students who become extraordinary citizens. This unique path of opportunities, created by each student, is commonly known as the Wisconsin Experience and impacts our campus community and beyond in significant and positive ways. The value of a University of Wisconsin-Madison degree depends on the commitment of our academic community to

promote high levels of personal honesty and respect for the intellectual property of others.”
(From the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards)

Diversity

Diversity is a source of strength, creativity, and innovation for UW-Madison. We value the contributions of each person and respect the profound ways their identity, culture, background, experience, status, abilities, and opinion enrich the university community. We commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, outreach, and diversity as inextricably linked goals. The University of Wisconsin-Madison fulfills its public mission by creating a welcoming and inclusive community for people from every background – people who as students, faculty, and staff serve Wisconsin and the world.

Attendance and Participation

Attending class is crucial to the social contract of any course at the university. We all (students and instructor) will attend all sessions prepared, having done the readings, open and willing to contribute to discussion, and ready to participate in in-class writing exercises. That is, of course, the ideal scenario; there will be times that we cannot live up to those expectations. That is fine; shit happens sometimes. In those rare cases, even just showing up ready to listen is sufficient. Let's not make a habit of it, though.

Exceptions will be made for reasonable accommodations defined elsewhere in this document.

Religious Observances

Students are responsible for notifying instructors within the first two weeks of classes about any need for flexibility due to religious observances. Reasonable accommodation shall be provided by the instructor.

Semester Schedule

Week 1 (3-7 September): — Class does not meet —

Week 2 (8-14 September):

Smail – “Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia”

Benda – “The Structure of Southeast Asian History”

Hau – “For Whom are Southeast Asian Studies?”

DUE: 14 September

Response to: Wong Tian An, “Should Southeast Asian Studies Exist?”

Week 3 (15-21 September):

Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders*

Week 4 (22-28 September):

Gaynor, *Intertidal History in Island Southeast Asia*

Week 5 (29 September – 5 October):

Sevea, *Miracles and Material Life*

Week 6 (6-12 October):

Zakaria, *The Camphor Tree and the Elephant*

DUE: 12 October
Structural Analysis

Week 7 (13-19 October):

Beban, *Unwritten Rule*

MEET WITH INSTRUCTOR BEFORE 19 OCTOBER

Week 8 (20-26 October):

Callahan, *Making Enemies*

Week 9 (27 October – 2 November):

Lentz, *Contested Territory*

DUE: 2 November
Final Project Proposal

Week 10 (3-9 November):

McDaniel, *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words*

Week 11 (10-16 November):

Leow, *Taming Babel*

Week 12 (17-23 November):

Seng, *Strangers in the Family*

Week 13 (24-30 November): Thanksgiving Recess — No Class —

Week 14 (1-7 December):

Hoang, *Dealing in Desire*

Week 15 (8-10 December):

de Leon, *Bundok*

DUE: 15 December
Final Project

Bibliography of Required Texts

- Beban, Alice. *Unwritten Rule: State-Making through Land Reform in Cambodia*. Cornell University Press, 2021.
- Benda, Harry J. "The Structure of Southeast Asian History: Some Preliminary Observations." *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 3, no. 1 (1962): 106–38.
- Callahan, Mary P. *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*. Cornell University Press, 2003.
- Gaynor, Jennifer L. *Intertidal History in Island Southeast Asia: Submerged Genealogy and the Legacy of Coastal Capture*. Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2016.
- Hau, Caroline. "For Whom Are Southeast Asian Studies?" *Asian Studies* 56, no. 2 (2020): 59–98.
- Hoang, Kimberly Kay. *Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work*. University of California Press, 2015.
- Lentz, Christian C. *Contested Territory: Điện Biên Phủ and the Making of Northwest Vietnam*. Yale University Press, 2019.
- Leon, Adrian de. *Bundok: A Hinterland History of Filipino America*. University of North Carolina Press, 2023.
- Leow, Rachel. *Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- McDaniel, Justin. *Gathering Leaves & Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand*. University of Washington Press, 2008.
- Seng, Guo-Quan. *Strangers in the Family: Gender, Patriline, and the Chinese in Colonial Indonesia*. Cornell University Press, 2023.
- Sevea, Teren. *Miracles and Material Life: Rice, Ore, Traps and Guns in Islamic Malaya*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- Smail, John R. W. "On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia." *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, no. 2 (1961): 72–102.
- Tagliacozzo, Eric. *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States along a Southeast Asian Frontier*. Yale University Press, 2005.
- Zakaria, Faizah. *The Camphor Tree and the Elephant: Religion and Ecological Change in Maritime Southeast Asia*. University of Washington Press, 2023.