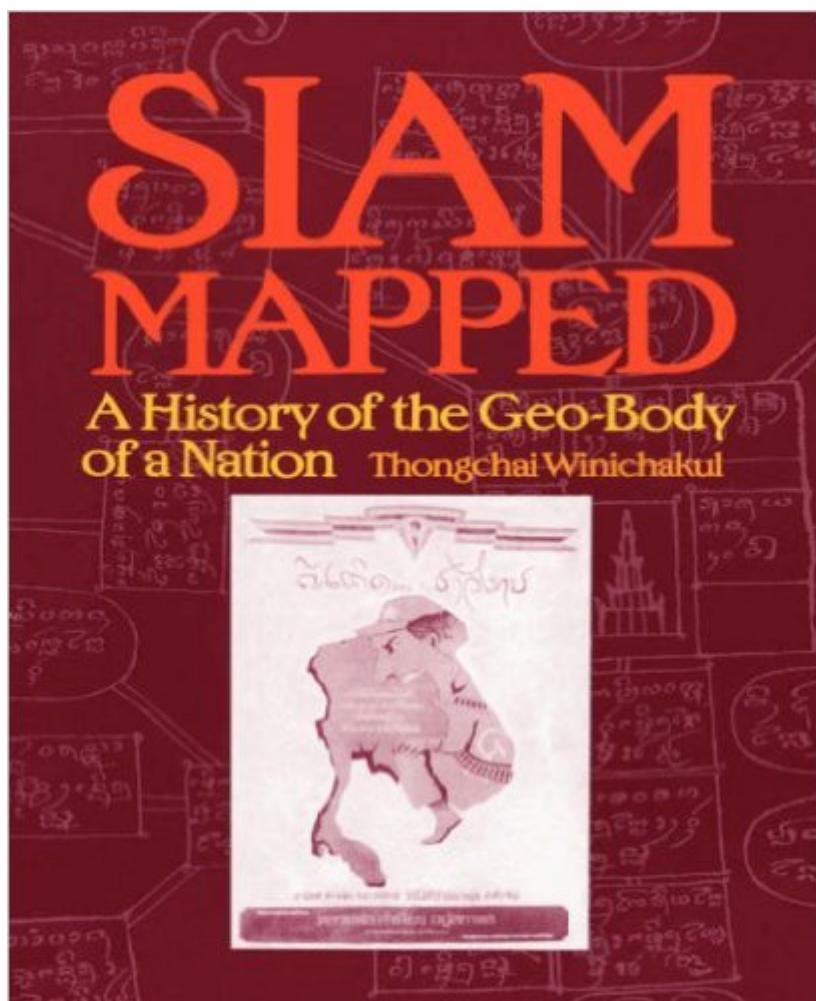


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Thongchai: Siam Mapped Paper



Synopsis

This unusual and intriguing study of nationhood explores the nineteenth-century confrontation of ideas that transformed the kingdom of Siam into the modern conception of a nation. Fundamental to the author's analysis is the assumption that notions of national identity are discursively constructed and therefore are subject to change. Here, modern Thailand is viewed as its territory and related values and practices, or what the author terms its "geo-body." Thongchai Winichakul's compelling narrative explores the emergence of this new territorial entity by examining the influence of modern mapping techniques on Thai conceptions of nationhood. Before the late nineteenth century the Siamese understanding of the territory of a state precluded the delineation of boundaries in the modern sense. Overlapping or multiple sovereignties were common, whereby a small state might pay tribute to two or more sovereign overlords and still remain sovereign itself. Areas where no country claimed sovereignty also existed, creating a sort of buffer corridor. As Europeans moved into the region in the nineteenth century, bringing with them the new geography and technology of mapping, the confrontation between modern and indigenous conceptions of boundary and sovereignty caused misunderstandings in the conduct of diplomatic relations, confusion in surveying and boundary demarcations, and armed military clashes. The Europeans, and later the Siamese rulers, desired a country defined by the new technology of mapping. Ultimately the mapped geo-body replaced the indigenous territory, and a nation emerged. *Siam Mapped* challenges much that has been written on Thai history because it demonstrates convincingly that the physical and political definition of Thailand on which other works are based is anachronistic. The work is an important contribution to the study of Thai history, to the study of Southeast Asia - and indeed much of the world - in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and t

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Customer Reviews

Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul's account of a critical period in Thai history pairs an original approach with thorough academic research. As the subtitle 'a History of the Geo-Body of a Nation' already suggests, the book deals with the crucial episode of the formation of Thailand as a nation-state. Inspired by Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson's seminal work on nationalism, the author explains in his introduction that he intends to focus his analysis on a by historians much neglected aspect of the spatio-temporal category: geography. Taking the traditional Buddhist worldview as a starting point, he describes how 19th Century Siam, as Thailand was then called, had to come to terms with the many alien concepts considered commonplace in the science of modern geography. Many of these concepts were to have important political implications. Deriving its political system from the Buddhist 'Mandala model', the Siamese initially had great difficulties coping with the elementary aspects of political geography. Boundaries and more in particular border demarcations were, if not unknown altogether, considered of minor or no importance in the political view of the traditional ruling class. The Siamese were perfectly at ease in dealing with often illdefined and fluid spheres of influence, frontiers and the 'thick lines' of the boundary regions separating the indigenous political entities of Southeast Asia. Likewise they saw no contradiction in the double sovereignty under which the territories at the 'margins' of the regional kingdoms often fell. But the Siamese proved to be fast learners and Thongchai quickly dispels the myth that the Siamese were mere victims of or only innocent bystanders at the high political game that was played by the colonial powers in 19th Century Asia.

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