Introduction:
De-institutionalizing Religion in Southeast Asia

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"Religion" is a controversial term in the contemporary academic world. In non-Western societies especially, the use of this translated term has been widely problematized because of its Western origin and modern Christian bias (cf. Asad 1993). Southeast Asia is no exception. These questions have paved the way for critical approaches to both the Asian appropriation of the Western concept of religion and the transformation of Asian religions under Western pressure. In contrast with the spontaneous rationalization and subsequent secularization in the history of Christianity, as repeatedly discussed by sociologists of religion (Weber 1985; Berger 1969), Asian societies are unique in that it has been the colonial regime or post-colonial modernizing state power that has enforced rationalization, standardization, and institutionalization (cf. Keyes *et al.* 1994).

In Southeast Asia, as Geertz (1973) clearly illustrates, the making of "religion" requires an "internal conversion" initiated (ironically enough) by the state. Indeed, Southeast Asian religions have had to be re-invented in the course of modernization and state-building. In other words, existing religious traditions, in accordance with state regulation based on Western standards of religion, have faced growing pressure to fashion themselves so as to fulfill the definition as "one of many religions" in the sense demanded by the field of comparative religion. So far, institutionalized religions as objects of study are the effects of such a transformation. An assumption that one religion stands for one society (state or ethnic group) on equal terms has enabled comparative studies of Southeast Asian religions. However, little attention has been paid to this assumption.

In this special issue, we try to question this assumption of institutionalized religions in Southeast Asia by focusing on their margins. Margins can mean those of state administrative frameworks, geographical peripheries, or ethnic minorities. All the contributors to this issue work with ethnic minorities, although other dimensions of marginality are, of course, taken into consideration. "Centering the margin" from a minority perspective is a challenge to rediscover what has been hidden or forgotten in national histories (Horstmann

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and Wadley 2006). In this sense, our objective is to recenter the margins of institution-alized religions by referring to ethnic minorities at the margins of the state.

A minority perspective is also useful when reconsidering conventional understand-ings of Southeast Asian religions as it also implicates the relationship between religion and ethnicity. Since "becoming Shan" and "entering Malay" have meant conversion to Buddhism and Islam respectively (Leach 1954; Kipp and Rodgers 1987), religious affili-ation has often been a synonym for ethnic identification in traditional Southeast Asia. More important, however, is how these customs have acted as the field of negotiation on the definition of religion ("the politics of *agama*") in modern state-building (Kipp and Rodgers 1987). In short, taking a minority perspective enables us to reconsider the concepts of both religion and ethnicity in Southeast Asia.

This special issue consists of five separate ethnographic accounts of different areas, religions, and ethnic groups in Southeast Asia. Murakami and Kojima discuss the cross-border migration of lay Shan Buddhist specialists and how they have been targeted by the state. Based on fieldwork in Thailand (Murakami) and China (Kojima), the authors present an alternative view to the existing Sangha-centered understanding of Theravada Buddhist studies of Southeast Asia. Ikeda's paper discusses the history of growing ethnic consciousness among the Buddhist Karen in twentieth-century Burma. This conscious-ness came into existence in the course of a redefinition of religion and Buddhism. The Buddhist narrative of an emerging "Karen-ness" revises the widespread stereotype of the Karen as Christian separatists. Kataoka's paper on Chinese temples in Thailand describes the margin of state regulation on religion. What is puzzling is that the follow-ers of the Chinese temples claim to be Buddhists in official statistics, yet the official status of their temples, with their very syncretic pantheons, is "non-religious." Chinese temples, which have been ignored by the state's administrators of religion, demonstrate the gap between the official definition of Buddhism and the religion itself. Yoshimoto's study of religious practices among the Cham in Vietnam also reveals a complex relation-ship between religion and ethnicity. Cham society is divided into polarized religious categories with "orthodox" Muslims on one side and the more traditional Cham Bani (they never regard themselves as Muslims) on the other, even though both are recog-nized by the government as Muslims. Here, there is a discrepancy between an officially defined religion and locally claimed religious identity. Ethno-religious relations are much more complex than we might expect, even when one ethnic group professes one faith, especially in the process of the redefinition of religion and modern state-building.

There is still much room for reconsidering and questioning Southeast Asian religions from minority and marginal perspectives. We hope this special issue opens the door to further inquiry on these relatively unquestioned but rich fields of study.

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