

Doctoral Dissertation

**States and Stones: War Memorialization and Nation-Building
in Twentieth-Century Southeast Asia**

(SUMMARY)

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This dissertation, titled *States and Stones: War Memorialization and Nation-Building in Twentieth-Century Southeast Asia*, investigates the war memories of three Southeast Asian countries: the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, through their numerous state-sponsored monuments and memorials. It mainly asks: Why and how did Southeast Asia use war memorialization to aid nation-building? Through a production context analysis and a multimodal critical discourse analysis of the visual semiotic resources emanating from war monuments and memorials, the dissertation finds that war memorialization served the aims of the state to mythicize the nation, shape national identity, legitimize state rule, and rally citizen unity. These aims were necessary for the region's countries since after the Pacific War, and for much of the twentieth century, they were all consolidating the foundations of the state as many severed their ties with their European metropolises while still contending with the local and foreign specificities and of the great power divide of the Cold War.

The study is significant since Southeast Asia has remained on the fringes of war commemoration literature. Much of the studies on war memory abound in the Western or East Asian contexts, and it has been deemed that the Southeast Asian war experience has been largely forgotten. The study's novelty lies in the use of war monuments and memorials as main data sources, and this use of material pasts contributes to the advancing of temporality in the study of peace and conflict.

The three cases studied aimed to showcase the variety of memorialization practices in the region and how they corresponded to the aims of the state to distill a usable past from the country's historical narrative. In the Philippine case study, it was argued that war memories played a central role in the development of the Filipino national identity, but there were external forces (the United States) and internal actors (the political elite) that dictated the memorial terrain. In particular, the emphasis on the Philippine Revolution and the Pacific War led to the official forgetting of the Philippine-American War. In the Thailand case study, it was explained how, in the attempt to omit the problematic and embarrassing memory of Thailand during the war, the military state opted to focus on artificially elevating the image of the monarchy. Thailand's constrained war commemoration was because the narrative did not fit the state's intentions. The third case study on Singapore asserted that because the birth of the city-state was not predicated on war, the state was not keen on using its war past to rally the citizenry. It was only later, when there was a threat to the political elite's dominion over the state, that war memories were showcased to rationalize the power and legitimacy of the state.

Drawing from these three disparate experiences, the dissertation explained the challenges of a top-down, elite-driven memorialization. Instead of realizing the

potential of war memorialization to provide genuine justice to war victims, the discourses that the numerous monuments and memorials put forward instead focused on rationalizing war, transforming death as a sacrifice, and justifying the need to rally behind the state and its leaders. Within the context of Southeast Asia at the time of the Cold War, it was apparent that the many newly independent states were banking on the internal fortification of the foundations that the state was built in light of the realities of the international political climate and the insecurity and uncertainty of the period. Thus, a state's memory politics rationalizes itself internally while allowing it also to pursue foreign policy objectives externally.

Finally, the dissertation highlighted that there is a necessity to fully understand the war memorialization practices of other Southeast Asian nations. Although it could be surmised from the study the similar polemic and dynamics and the spirit of the times in the twentieth century, there are national particularities that deserve space and attention. Southeast Asia seemed to have been left behind as the rest of the world has moved on from heroic memorialization to a focus on victimhood narratives. Future studies need to unpack the reasons behind this and the many ways by which memory cultures and social remembering occur in society beyond the ambit of state power. The dissertation argues that understanding how memorialization could potentially support healing and reconciliation enables more vigorous calls against wars in the present and the future.