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# IN SEARCH OF SOUTH-EAST ASIA A MODERN HISTORY

DAVID JOEL STEINBERG • DAVID K. WYATT  
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## A MODERN HISTORY

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# In Search of Southeast Asia

## NOTES ON THE AUTHORS

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## PREFACE

On the small island of Mactan in the Philippines there is a monument erected by the Spanish in the nineteenth century to glorify God, Spain, and Ferdinand Magellan. In 1941, during the American era, a historical marker inscribed "Ferdinand Magellan's Death" was erected nearby. It stated: "On this spot Ferdinand Magellan died on April 27, 1521, wounded in an encounter with the soldiers of Lapulapu, chief of Mactan Island. One of Magellan's ships, the *Victoria*, under the command of Juan Sebastian Elcano, sailed from Cebu on May 1, 1521 and anchored at San Lucar de Barrameda on September 6, 1522, thus completing the first circumnavigation of the earth." Exactly a decade later, the by then independent Republic of the Philippines erected a second marker, entitled "Lapulapu." It read: "Here, on 27 April 1521, Lapulapu and his men repulsed the Spanish invaders, killing their leader, Ferdinand Magellan. Thus, Lapulapu became the first Filipino to have repelled European aggression."

This example illustrates vividly the historian's predicament. In the wake of such wide variation of interpretation of what at first appears as fact, the attempt of the historian to impose order on the past may seem a dubious undertaking. This book rests upon the assumption that in the interaction and expertise of collective authorship greater coherence can be found in the welter of human events. Starting in the fall of 1966, we began exchanging outlines and debating assumptions; in the summer of 1969, we gathered in Ann Arbor for a working seminar on modern Southeast Asian history. Together we rewrote the outline, divided our responsibilities and criticized each other's work in the constant hope that we might produce a history that would examine the totality of modern Southeast Asia as well as its elements. There were handicaps, of course, including, for some of us, the inaccessibility of source material and, for all of us, limitations of time. None of us is an expert in Burmese history, and we probably have not been able to give that country the kind of treatment it deserves. We have come away from our joint effort convinced, however, that there is wisdom in studying Southeast Asia as a whole, not only because of the insights it offers for the comparative historian but also because, in the words of the motto of the Republic of Indonesia, there is unity in its diversity.



The depth and perspective we have gained by viewing the region as a whole has enhanced our understanding of its parts. This said, it has to be conceded that there were of course some occasions on which, even after debate and recrimination, we had to agree to bicker.

The list of people we wish to thank is at least six times longer than would have been the case if only one of us had been involved. Our debts range across the world. We want to acknowledge our particular gratitude to Professors Gayl Ness and John Broomfield, of the Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Michigan, for their support and enthusiasm at every stage of this project. Without Dr. David Pfanner, of the Ford Foundation, and Dr. William Bradley, of the Rockefeller Foundation, the book would not exist; we are deeply indebted to them personally and to the foundations they serve so ably. We also acknowledge with appreciation the financial support given to us by the National Endowment for the Humanities and by the Horace Rackham School at The University of Michigan. The maps have been prepared by Ronald Edgerton and the cartography was done by Karen Ewing. We all owe a debt to our students and would like especially to thank Stewart Gordon, Patricia Herbert, Theodore Grossman, and Norman Owen of the University of Michigan. Our sense of gratitude to Ronald Edgerton for his assistance, his accuracy, and his good cheer at every stage of this project is profound. Finally, we apologize to our five wives and eight children, who somehow endured while the summer, the autumn, and then the winter wore on.

*Ann Arbor, Michigan*  
*July, 1970*

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# In Search of Southeast Asia



## INTRODUCTION

Over the past two centuries, as a result of the human energies unleashed by the scientific, industrial, and nationalist revolutions, Southeast Asian societies have changed profoundly. This process of change, which continues unabated, can be dated from the middle of the eighteenth century, when Europeans in the region first had the power and inclination to impose on others their technical skills and new world view. The strong Western components of this process, however, have worked partially to obscure the nature of Southeast Asian history, because many historians have interested themselves primarily in external stimuli, to the detriment of the study of indigenous institutions. By thereby elevating foreigners beyond their position as actors on a common Southeast Asian stage, Southeast Asians have been reduced to roles as mere bit players, too weak to do more than reflect the brilliance of other civilizations. Southeast Asia faced similar challenges in earlier eras; indeed, it has perhaps interacted with a greater variety of external cultures for a longer period than has any other area of the world. From the vantage point of Southeast Asians, therefore, what is important in the history of the past two centuries is less the "modernization" or "westernization" others imposed on them than it is the process of acculturation through which their societies adjusted to their changing environment and circumstances.

Social change does not take place in the abstract. The evolution of values and the concomitant development of social institutions in a society are a complicated aggregate of individual human reactions and decisions. Change takes place in a community because people interact—sometimes consciously, sometimes not—with those around them. Occasionally, new ways are adopted because they seem attractive or promise some reward; at other times, people are forced to accept change as a result of coercion or more subtle forms of compulsion. The dissemination of ideas and the development of institutions are gradual processes, involving a few key people at first and then gradually spreading to the larger population. Since there is always a wide variety of attitudes, and since social patterns are always changing, one can never expect uniformity in whole societies. The designations "new" and "old," "traditional" and "modern," "alien" and "indigenous" can be no more than relative.

In the daily reality of living, people naturally adjust to their environment by making the best use they can of the ideas and institutions that envelop

them. They rarely note the inconsistencies that seem so obvious to outsiders. To the devout Muslim from elsewhere, who defined Islamic "orthodoxy" by his own practice and custom, the Malay Muslim may have seemed lax. The Malay, however, commonly saw no problem in the way he expressed his faith or reconciled it with other social and cultural needs. Perspective, therefore, shapes perception. The Indian, Arab, or Chinese, who saw the culture of Southeast Asia as an extension of his own civilization, interpreted indigenous modifications as perversions of his own value system. Similarly, observers from the West, looking for what was familiar to them, have for many years seen Southeast Asia in ethnocentric terms. The task of the historian is made the more difficult by deeply ingrained value judgments and subconscious biases of this sort. This book strives to treat each society in Southeast Asia as a separate species and the region as a distinct genus.

There is natural and spontaneous change in all culture contact. In the process of transmission and translation, terms, values, and institutions are altered. Local context reshapes the contours of abstract concepts and specific structures. Whatever the meaning of a word or institution in its original environment, it changes as it takes its place with other forces in the new setting. The term "guided democracy," for example, can be understood only after one appreciates Sukarno and the Indonesian social matrix in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as the concept of democracy in the West. "Buddhist socialism," a term once used in Burma and Cambodia, is a similar example. From the Southeast Asian point of view, the origin of the concept is far less important than its meaning within the local environment. Similarly, it is often only marginally relevant whether a man's place of origin is Hong Kong, Calcutta, or Amsterdam, if he is acting in a Southeast Asian milieu. This does not deny his distinct identity or alien ways; it simply fits him properly into the indigenous scene. While a Singapore Chinese merchant might have had ties to a Canton business firm, and a French naval administrator in Vietnam was part of an imperial enterprise with headquarters in Paris, they must first be seen as participants in the history of Southeast Asia.

Acculturation is not a simple linear development; human interaction generates too many variables. The displacement of established tradition by new patterns of behavior is rarely easy. Accepted values are finely interwoven into the social fabric and usually have staunch defenders. The rate and character of change are determined by such things as the strength of existing institutions; the receptivity of the society to new ideas; the physical, intellectual, and moral power of the new concepts and of the people who transmit them; and the compatibility of the new values with the old. Some institutions seem to develop along a single line and then suddenly fragment; others appear to retrogress or to remain motionless. Some established values crumble upon the first encounter with competition; others continue to develop as if no challenge existed. Often the institutions and values that seem strongest prove to be the most vulnerable.

These observations concerning society and change supply one important



dimension to Southeast Asian history. A second dimension stems from the physical and climatic environment. The relationship of land to people, the general ecological balance, and the margin of surplus have ordered many of the priorities by which Southeast Asians live their lives. Unlike China and India, most Southeast Asian societies were not troubled by overpopulation in the past. The history of China and India has been, in part, the constant struggle to establish social organisms that can maximize yields to minimize starvation. Except, perhaps, on the island of Java and in northern Vietnam, Southeast Asia has been spared this awesome constriction, at least until very recent times.

Southeast Asia may be defined as the area south of China and east of India. Known to the Chinese and Japanese as the South Seas (*Nanyang* or *Nampō*), the region has only recently been called Southeast Asia by most people. During World War II, the term was used to designate the theater of war commanded by Lord Louis Mountbatten, and it gained wide currency during the Vietnam War of the 1960s and 1970s. It includes the present political units of the Union of Burma; the Kingdom of Thailand; the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos); the People's Republic of Kampuchea (Cambodia); the Socialist Republic of Vietnam; the Federation of Malaysia; the Sultanate of Brunei; and the Republics of Indonesia, Singapore, and the Philippines. While there are arguments for expanding the definition to include certain other territories for religious, ethnographic, linguistic, or topographical reasons—Taiwan, Hainan, or Sri Lanka, for example—or contracting it for similar reasons, the general consensus accepts current usage. As defined, Southeast Asia has a population of approximately one-third of a billion people living in a total land area of just over one and one-half million square miles (a little smaller than the Indian subcontinent). Slightly more than half of the territory is on the Asian mainland, and the rest is unevenly fragmented into the ten thousand islands that make up the archipelagos of Indonesia and the Philippines. More than half the population, however, lives on the islands.

A traveler who journeyed from one end of Southeast Asia to the other would note a similarity of flora and fauna, climate, and human cultivation. While the languages and architecture would change, he would be struck by the repeating patterns of wet-rice and slash-and-burn agriculture, found from Burma to Bali. Traveling on the mainland, east or west, he would move from delta to coastal mountain ridge to river valley and then across a series of river valleys and mountain ridges, until he finally reached the next delta on the other side. He would note that the mountain ridges frequently determined political boundaries and that the river valleys were fertile zones of civilization. Where water was plentiful he would find wet-rice farming; where it was scarce he would find fewer established communities and less intensive cultivation. Similar patterns would be evident through the island world. Moreover, wherever he went he would observe the importance of the monsoon in the seasonal lives of the people.

Southeast Asia lies within the tropical belt on either side of the equator. All too often the tropics are conceived of as exotic and endlessly fertile by