Historical Writing on the Peoples of Asia

Historians of SOUTH EAST ASIA

Edited by D. G. E. Hall

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PREFACE

Between the years 1956 and 1958 the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, held a series of study conferences to survey and evaluate the course and character of historical writing on the peoples of Asia. The subject is large and to bring it down to manageable parts the method of analysis by region was adopted; and South Asia, South East Asia, the Near, Middle, and Far East were in turn examined. In historical depth the survey of each region extended from the period of the early empires and literatures, through the age of Western dominance and the freedom movements down to the present day. Writings in both Western and Asian literatures were analysed.

The conferences brought together the leading authorities in these studies from Asia and the West and had the effect of making them more keenly aware not only of the underlying assumptions, predilections and prejudices of past writers but also of their own standpoints as historians. These investigations, which are continuing, have an enhanced value because they are taking place at a time when historians are seeking to rewrite Asian history and the peoples of Asia and the West are adjusting their relationships.

In preparing for each conference the same methods were used. Seminar groups, including a judicious balance of mature scholars and younger historians in training from Asian and Western countries, were established to analyse in detail the papers which had been prepared according to an agreed, comprehensive plan by the prospective members of the forthcoming conference. The business of the conferences therefore consisted not in reading papers but in attempting to solve the problems thrown up by the seminars.

Believing that these conferences have made a contribution to 'the well-being of mankind' I wish to affirm my deep appreciation of the Rockefeller Foundation, which met the major part of the financial costs, and also of the farsightedness and support of its officers, who contributed substantially to the effectiveness of the work done.

In the view that the papers which were submitted to the conferences possess an intrinsic and comparative value the School of Oriental and African Studies has generously provided funds for their publication and, suitably edited and introduced, they will appear under the following editors:

Professor W. G. Beasley and Professor E. G. Pulleyblank: China and Japan.

Professor D. G. E. Hall: South East Asia.

Professor B. Lewis and Dr. P. M. Holt: the Near and Middle East.

Professor C. H. Philips: India, Pakistan, and Ceylon.

School of Oriental and African Studies

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

South East Asia is so far-flung, and contains so many peoples with their own historical traditions a: d literatures, that it was impossible to attempt an exhaustive survey of the whole field in the first Conference of its kind ever to be assembled. For notwithstanding the remarkable achievements that have been made, particularly during the present century, the gaps and deficiencies in the study of this field of history are too great, and the number of workers of adequate academic standing far too few, for adequate treatment of the subject. Thus in the present collection of papers nothing like enough attention is given either to the immense body of indigenous writings that is known to exist, or to the pioneer labours of scholars, both European and Asian, upon either the rich harvest of epigraphical remains so far yielded by our area, or the Chinese sources, which are of such vital importance to the elucidation of the problems of its earlier history.

Regarding the workers themselves the achievement of independence, particularly by Burma, Indonesia, and the states of the former French Indo-China, has naturally resulted in a marked decline in the recruitment of young European scholars to fill the places of the older generation which gained its inspiration and received its training in the service of one or other colonial power. A new generation of Asian scholars will one day take its place, but not for some time to come; for it has regretfully to be stated that at present far too few South East Asian scholars of academic distinction are at work in the field, notwithstanding the efforts that the new states are making to rewrite their own histories. For one thing the universities of South East Asia are nearly all of very recent foundation, the academic life of those in existence before World War II was completely disrupted by the Japanese occupation, and, with independence coming so soon afterwards, the main task of universities in the post-war period has been to provide the administrators, doctors, technicians, and teachers that are urgently needed by the new states. There have been no spare energies for research work, and little inducement for graduates of the highest intellectual equipment to undertake it, since other walks of life have offered greater attractions in the way of promotion, remuneration, and status. This helps also to explain the little progress so far made by the post-war states with their plans for producing new histories.

Nevertheless, even allowing for deficiencies and shortcomings, the extent of the field actually surveyed in this volume is enormous, both in scope and in depth, and the impression to be gained from the papers collected here is of a rich legacy of writings from the past, as well as of the strong vitality

of South East Asian historical studies today, notwithstanding the revolutionary political changes that have taken place in the area. For we must not blind ourselves to the fact that the immense advances in both historical knowledge and interpretation, described and analysed in the present volume, are very largely the product of the West's contacts with South East Asia. Through these contacts western scholars became interested in South East Asian history, and South East Asians developed an awareness of their own history that they had never before experienced. It was a complex business. The western history teacher—usually through the medium of western history—gave to his Asian pupils not so much a new notion of history as indeed their first real notions of history. It is a significant fact that none of the languages of South East Asia possessed a word capable of expressing correctly the western concept of history. The western researcher showed how to handle materials scientifically, and in his writings on South East Asian history revealed much of it for the first time, rescuing from oblivion much that would otherwise have been irretrievably lost.

Incidentally, the discoveries and writings of western scholars have contributed to the growth of the national sentiment which has been an outstanding feature of South East Asian history during the present century. They have stimulated the nationalist's pride in the past of his people and his desire for respect in the eyes of the West. On the other hand the treatment of national myths and legends by western scholars has often offended nationalist susceptibilities, and provided weapons for those who claimed that it was part of the technique of western colonialism to teach people to despise their pre-colonial past. Naturally, therefore, the demand for political independence was accompanied by the efforts to rewrite history from a nationalist angle to which reference has been made above.

Thus under the stimulus of nationalism the peoples of South East Asia have become history-minded as never before. They have been reviving and popularizing the study of their old writings, previously the exclusive prerogative of small coteries of court or monastic scholars. They have also been striving to reassess their history during the time when they were under western dominance. Some want to take away from it the sting which hurts them. Others who have imbibed the best traditions of western scholarship want to treat it as their own history and not as mainly the record of European activities seen from a European angle.

What all this adds up to, therefore, is that there is now a more intense and widespread interest in South East Asian history than ever before; more intense among the peoples of the area because of their increasing consciousness of their own past; more widespread, because of the awakening of the world to the fact that South East Asia is, for various reasons, one of the world's most important areas. And though with the coming of independence to the old colonial territories some of the opportunities which

once existed for western researchers are no longer available, and, indeed, the number of French and Dutch scholars working in the particular fields in which in the past they have achieved such notable distinction seems to be dwindling, nevertheless the desire of the post-war South East Asian states to encourage their own scholars to take up the task, and the increasing signs that university history departments in many parts of the world, notably where English is used, are beginning to broaden the scope of their studies to include some South East Asian history, are matters of moment to all working in this field. For they pose many questions extremely difficult to answer, so difficult indeed that our conference was concerned rather to identify them than to attempt to answer them. Some could not be answered for lack of information, others because in the past there has been so little contact between scholars working upon different countries or periods, still others because of their newness: they have only recently begun to stir in the minds of historical students. But the mere asking of questions is at this stage of great significance, for they are questions with which every individual student or writer must wrestle, and whether or not he can find a satisfactory answer, upon his effort in trying to come to terms with them the future development of South East Asian historiography must inevitably depend. To many participants in the preliminary seminar discussions, as well as in those of the conference, the identification of the questions with which South East Asian historical scholarship is faced was one of the most fruitful and satisfying results of our meetings.

South East Asian historiography had never before been surveyed as a whole by a conference. Hence one very important object of our gathering was to take stock, and the contributors of papers tended to be as much concerned with the provision of bibliographical information as with the discussion of tendencies, outlooks, and values. For it must be borne in mind that not only are the peoples of our area very ignorant of each other's history, but European scholars themselves—particularly the Dutch—have tended to concentrate upon their own national responsibilities, the French upon Indo-China, the Dutch upon Indonesia, the Americans until recently upon the Philippines, and the British upon Burmese or Malay history. It is only in quite recent times that some effort to break down these walls of isolation and ignorance has been made. One of the biggest factors in the situation has always been the language barrier. The indigenous writings of South East Asia were written in the vernacular languages, i.e. Burmese, Mon, Thai, Malay, Khmer, Javanese, Balinese, Buginese, and Vietnamese, to name only the more important. And, to add a further complication, the modern writings about the area are in a variety of European languages, chiefly Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French, and English. Thus the linguistic equipment required for the study of the historical literature relating to only one subdivision of our area, is formidable. Moreover,

through the 'colonial' relationship, which grew up between the various indigenous peoples and their western rulers, the European-educated ones would normally be able to use only the particular European language in which they had received their education in addition to their own vernacular, together with (in most, but not all, cases) a relevant classical language, e.g. Sanskrit, Pali, Chinese, or Arabic. Hence, at the conference, by pooling information and ideas provided by history specialists of each region, our hope was that a modest step would be taken towards spreading a common awareness of the whole range of South East Asian historical studies.

In opening the discussion on the older indigenous writings Professor C. C. Berg stressed the need for a comparative study of the ideas of history in the earlier indigenous literatures, and posed a number of fundamental questions. Excluding Vietnamese writings, he divided the historiographies under review into two groups, 'though not very sharply': those pertaining to the area of Indian civilization and those reflecting the influence of Islam. In this connection, he thought, Java should be regarded as a part of the Indian area, since its historiography, though reflecting in a way its conversion to Islam, retained its pre-Muslim character. In the first group, he thought, the cases of the Mons and Javanese appeared to be similar since the theme of their historiographers was to explain the divine qualities and functions of the king by establishing the line of his descent and his identity with some heavenly ruler. He wondered whether the Mon picture of the past represented facts, or, as in the Javanese case, 'optatives'. The Burmese Chronicles, on U Tin Ohn's showing, differed from the Javanese in that their compilers seemed to have had a critical attitude: they made extensive use of libraries and archives, and discussed the results of this investigation. It was noteworthy, he suggested, that the Burmese annals had been adopted by Mon historiographers after the expiration of the *rājāwan* tradition, dealt with by Mr. Shorto, and that the transplantation did not seem to have changed the Mon substratum.

The relation between the historical writings of Java and those of Macassar provided in his opinion another telling example of the need for comparative study. Once more in this case there was the difference between a functional, pseudo-historical literary activity and the recording of facts, but at the same time, he suggested, the possibility that Macassar 'learnt historiography' from Java. For instance, *palontara*, the word for annalist in Macassar, was of Javanese origin. And the fact that between 1512 and 1515 Tomé Pires was able to gather information about Javanese history at Malacca is evidence that the contents of Javanese books of history were discussed outside Java. It might well be that having learnt about the *Nāgarakrtāgama* and the *Pararaton* the Macassarese desired to imitate 'this element of a superior culture'. On the other hand it was noteworthy that they never learnt the Javanese art of chronology. Their own system of

dating was cyclic before 1500, and was replaced by a rectilinear system as a result of their learning first Muslim and, later, European chronology from foreigners visiting Macassar. On this last point of international contacts he strongly supported Sir Richard Winstedt's view that the Malay chronicles reflected them to a greater extent than any of the other historical literatures of South East Asia; indeed, the *Sějarah Mělayu* was unique in that it emanated from a commercial society and was written by a man of mixed origin. Thus, together with the later *Misa Mělayu* and the still later *Salasilah Mělayu dan Bugis*, it pictured other aspects of life than the Javanese *Babad Tanah Jawi* and was more realistic.

Professor Berg ended his survey by asking two general questions. In the first place why was it that historiography began to play a part in different areas of South East Asia at about the same time? 'I see', he commented, 'one possible answer, namely that it is one of the repercussions of the great change in India, which was caused by the penetration of Islam, and which may have made the peoples of South East Asia more culture-conscious and, therefore, may have paved the way for interest in the past. But I do not pretend to know the answer to my question.'

In the second place he asked why did some communities in South East Asia have ideas of history and not others? This question had already been raised in a seminar discussion on Vietnamese historical writings in which attention was drawn to the contrast between writings of the Javanese type and the Vietnamese imperial annals, which showed strong Chinese influence. How far, it was asked, did China's historical traditions spread beyond her own borders. Was, for instance, the careful chronological treatment of events in the Burmese chronicles a sign of Chinese influence? Against this it was pointed out that in Nanchao, a country much more under Chinese influence than Burma, Chinese traditions of historical writing had apparently failed to make any impression, and the conclusion was reached that despite strong Chinese cultural influence on South East Asia in some respects, certain elements of Chinese civilization, being ingrained in the Chinese character, were not suitable for export, and their historical traditions might have been in this category. The Vietnamese, it must be remembered, were in a special category, for before attaining independence in 939, they had been for over a thousand years under Chinese domination, and not only was their early culture strongly influenced by China, but from the time of the Emperor Wu Ti (140–87 B.C.) onwards they had been subjected to intense Chinese cultural pressure.

The South East Asia section of the Conference submitted Professor Berg's challenging exposition of the unhistorical nature of the old Javanese chronicles to close scrutiny.

On one point, namely the importance of indigenous chronicles in general, the members of the section expressed unanimous agreement, and

the attitude of mind which, in simple terms, condemned chronicles as unreliable and upheld inscriptions as reliable, came in for strong criticism. What, it was asked, did we expect of historiography? If, indeed, as Professor Berg suggested, not much historiography in a European sense was to be found in older Indonesian literature, what is found was of no less value, particularly for the student of cultural history. If we wanted to learn what man did, how and why he acted as he did, and what sort of a person he was, the materials for this kind of study, though far from abundant, were adequate. The number of students working on them, however, was far from adequate, and appeared to be rapidly diminishing.

In the discussion on modern historical writing by indigenous scholars the idea was mooted that a development pattern might be discerned. Thus from the writing of annals and court-histories, which, for example, was in full swing in Burma until well after the middle of the nineteenth century, the next step was to the production of idealized histories for use in the nationalist struggle, with a further progression to the present concerted efforts in each of the newly independent countries to rewrite their histories. The later stages in this process, it was contended, were the inevitable product of the European impact, for not only the scientific approach, but nationalist history writing also, was a European importation. Indeed, the mere fact of writing 'history', it was argued, implied positive European influence, even when the 'history' itself represented a reaction against an alleged Europe-centric approach.

The question which attracted most discussion was that of the attitude of indigenous writers towards the colonial period. In Indonesia in particular, it was claimed, the colonial period, which was far longer there than in any other part of South East Asia, was regarded as a 'dark age', chiefly useful for providing propaganda points for the nationalist movement. Several, however, thought that a change of attitude was beginning to show itself, in that Indonesians were being taught to think of the colonial period as an 'international' period, in which their history had to be studied against the background of international developments. The Indonesian member of the conference said it was important to see this period as a time when new values were transferred from the West and integrated with Asian traditions. Hence, in dealing with it the co-operation of European and indigenous historians was now recognized to be essential, and, as he put it, indigenous writers need not be concerned only with the oppression, nor western writers embarrassed by a sense of guilt, when writing about the colonial period.

On the subject of Western writings about ancient and medieval South East Asia, very warm tribute was paid to the outstanding contributions to knowledge made by the French and the Dutch in particular, and also by the great body of 'amateurs' belonging to all the colonial powers, who,

though engaged in full-time administrative, educational, or commercial occupations, had devoted their spare time to the discovery, preservation, and interpretation of the antiquities of the countries in which they had served. Nevertheless, while fully conscious of the fine achievements of Westerners in this field, and of the great service they had thereby performed to the peoples of South East Asia, the members of the discussion group were concerned to examine the weak spots in the Western approach.

The culminating point of the discussion was reached when the question was posed whether it was possible to write a real history of South East Asia before the coming of the European. The difficulties were recognized to be enormous. Many peoples, for instance, had left no historical material of any sort, while of the available material not all was amenable to scientific treatment. Obviously, however, it was of the highest importance to investigate the available material, which was vast, but the question arose: would the result justify the application of the term 'history'? There appeared to be a feeling that we could not hope to write the sort of history that had been written about ancient Greece and Rome, though we could obviously learn a good deal about the past of South East Asia and its peoples. Several speakers, on the other hand, thought that this was taking too gloomy a view. For instance, in reply to one speaker who contended that we knew practically nothing of the economic life of the peoples of this period, it was pointed out that the inscriptions were a very rich source of historical materials, especially on economic affairs, but that as yet they had been inadequately explored. Research into them, however, was extremely difficult, both because of the terminology found in them and because our knowledge of the older languages used in them was far from adequate. Again it was asked whether the difference in the knowledge of the past of early Europe and of early South East Asia was as great as had been suggested, or whether the real trouble lay in the shortage of scholars in the field. Obviously an enormous amount of work remained to be done before a satisfactory answer could be given to the question, and for this reason the historical works so far produced on the subject must be regarded rather as interim reports challenging further investigation.

In considering the writings of Western historians questions of bias naturally assumed big proportions. There was on the one hand the general question of Europe-centricity, which has occasioned so much agonized reappraisal since World War II, and the special question of the bias in the writings of those belonging to particular groups labelled 'imperialists' (e.g. British, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, French), 'anti-colonialists' (e.g. Americans), and 'neutrals' (e.g. Danes), or classified according to religion as Protestants or Catholics, with the former consisting mainly of traders and seamen and the latter of missionaries and fighting men. Dr. Hugh Tinker, in introducing the discussion on the European interpretation of

colonial history confined himself to a survey of the second question. He pointed out that almost as soon as colonial rule was established an 'imperialist' school of writing arose, fostered by officials and other empire-builders. Almost equally early an 'anti-imperialist' school arose, typified by the Manchester men, the French Radicals and anti-clericals, the Dutch humanitarians, etc. He claimed that these two forces were woven into colonial historical writing, with imperialism in the ascendant in the late nineteenth century, overtaken thereafter by anti-colonialism. With this latter school were associated radical politicians, disillusioned officials, and humanitarians. The American evolution, he declared, was in reverse: it was overwhelmingly anti-colonial up to 1900, thereafter moving to a new evaluation, which emerged *circa* 1950. The Christian missionaries, he noted, were always accused of writing propaganda, but clearly all the classes of writers he had mentioned had their bias and their logs to roll.

He then asked whether any dispassionate, uncommitted school of colonial history had arisen in the universities of the West. In the Netherlands, he said, South East Asian studies had been closely linked with training for the Netherlands East Indies administration. At Oxford and Cambridge the links had been less systematic, but there were close associations with the Indian Civil Service and the Colonial Service, and similar conditions prevailed in France. The United States had produced virtually no academic studies on Asian colonial history before 1900 except for some marginal missionary inquiry. The result was that South East Asian colonial history consisted very largely in studies of colonial administration. There was little work in the fields of social and economic history and in the history of ideas. In looking for a colonial history *genre* he suggested that the Portuguese provided something of the kind in the form of a national epic of Asian dominance, but was it merely an extension of the crusading epics? The other European writers failed to develop new concepts of history, though the Dutch had built up a solid corpus of knowledge through research. He summed up by declaring that colonial history remained either a study of administration (usually constructive and enlightened) by and for administrators, or a study of colonial repression by and for those in revolt. These were basic differences, which continued to divide East and West today.

The discussion concerned itself largely with the bias resulting from centrical approaches, and particularly with the criticism of Europe-centricity levelled by students today against writers of the pre-World War II generation. It was generally conceded that this was a result of the revolutionary political changes that had taken place during and after World War II, which had caused Western students of South East Asian history to see the subject in a new light and in a different perspective. At the same time, however, members of the discussion group were concerned to point out

that Europe-centricity was only one facet of the problem. For instance, a large body of modern Indian writings dealing with Indian influence upon the development of South-East Asian civilization showed a clearly India-centric approach to the subject. It was also claimed that the deplorable limitation of the denotation of the epithet 'colonialism' to the domination over Asian and African peoples by certain Western powers was an indication of a further kind of centrical approach. And in any case, if the matter was to be seen in its proper proportions, one must not lose sight of the fact that the interest in the scientific study of the history of the peoples of South East Asia had its source in Europe, and hence all writings, whether by European or indigenous writers, tended to have an implicit Europe-centricity.

Finally the question that arose in everybody's mind was: what did all this awareness of centrical approaches and colonial-mindedness in past writers amount to? Did it indicate a 'new enlightenment' in the present approach of Western scholars to the study of South East Asian history? There certainly did seem to be many signs of a new outlook. One discerned them in the attempts to look at South East Asia as an entity and its history from a South East Asian centre rather than from outside; in the search for an appropriate nomenclature and a periodization free from colonial implications; in an urge to break away from the Procrustean bed of political and administrative history and give more attention to social and economic history; in a recognition of the claims of the minority peoples without written traditions, and, strikingly, in Professor Berg's approach to old Javanese historical writings. Could it be defined or explained? This was another question which the conference posed without answering.

One is, however, tempted to ask whether part of the explanation is that while in the past Western historiography was produced exclusively for Western readers, nowadays writers of South East Asian history are becoming aware for the first time of their potential Asian, and, in particular, South East Asian readers. This would mean that an attempt is now being made to arrive at a real world-history sense of values.

What did the conference achieve? In the first place the valuable series of papers collected together in this volume and their detailed discussion at weekly meetings of the South East Asia History Seminar during the two terms preceding the main gathering. The stocktaking represented by all this activity resulted among other things in a sober recognition of needs, and in particular the urgent need felt by scholars in South East Asian countries for better access to information. One strongly felt need was for ways and means of overcoming language barriers, and in this connection two desiderata were specially mentioned: the translation into English of important historical works in other languages along the lines of the new series of Selected Studies on Indonesia by Dutch Scholars now being

produced by W. F. Wertheim's committee,[1] and the provision of English editions of older indigenous historical texts of South East Asia. The practical difficulties involved in the latter were recognized to be vast, but with specialists in so many of the languages of the area available in the Department of South East Asia at the School there seemed to be a unique opportunity for doing something of this sort, which might ultimately open the door for much more comparative study than is at present possible.

Another need equally strongly felt was for effective measures to be taken to collect and organize research materials in the different countries of South East Asia, involving such things as the microfilming of manuscripts, the photographing of rare books, and a host of other operations, all costing more money than the newly-independent states were prepared to spend upon such things. In the same connection members of the conference deplored the fact that in all these countries archaeological survey work, so vitally important to the historian, was languishing—if indeed, that is a strong enough word to describe the situation—through inadequate provision of funds and the failure to recruit and train indigenous scholars capable of succeeding their European predecessors.

And lastly, the conference as an international gathering provided a welcome opportunity for contacts, not only between workers in the South East Asian field, but also between them and workers in the fields of South Asia and the Far East.

The discussions were remarkable for the degree of understanding and goodwill between Eastern and Western scholars; there was the feeling of being fellow-workers in a joint enterprise, and the efforts made to arrive at a common sense of values must surely have their effect upon future writings.

Editor's note. In view of the variety of systems of romanization of the languages of the area in current use, it has been impossible to prescribe a common system for the purposes of this volume. Papers 16, 17, and 23 are translations of the originals as submitted by their authors.

[1] Published for the Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, by W. van Hoeve Ltd. (The Hague and Bandung).