



Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450–1680

Volume One: The Lands below the Winds

Anthony Reid

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Age of Commerce
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Yale University Press
New Haven and London

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A portion of chapter II previously appeared in *Death and Disease in Southeast Asia*, published by Oxford University Press, copyright © 1987 by the Asian Studies Association of Australia.

Designed by James J. Johnson and set in Trump Mediaeval Roman types by Keystone Typesetting Co., Orwigsburg, Pennsylvania.
Printed in the United States of America by Edwards Brothers, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Reid, Anthony, 1939—

Southeast Asia in the age of commerce, 1450–1680 / Anthony Reid.
p. cm.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

Contents: v. 1. The lands below the winds

ISBN 0-300-03921-2 (v. 1 : alk. paper)

1. Asia, Southeastern—History. I. Title.

DS526.4.R46 1988

959—dc19

87-20749

CIP

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce

1450–1680

for
Wang Gungwu

Preface

The history of man is a seamless web. No part of it can safely be treated in isolation, and certainly not a part as bound up with international commerce as the "lands below the winds." We who study this region have not found it easy, however, to recognise the interconnectedness without losing the Southeast Asians from the centre of their own historical stage. During the first half of this century colonial history reduced them to an undifferentiated backdrop for the great sweep of western expansion. Much nationalist history has extended the problem by treating Asians as powerless victims rather than actors, or trying to correct this by isolating the region of study from international forces and comparisons. It fell to orientalist scholarship to begin the heroic task of recovering and making accessible the written record of Southeast Asians themselves, though this erudite tradition offered little guidance on how court chronicles, religious exegesis, or lyrical poetry could be brought to bear on the world of production and exchange.

The omnivorous approach to theme and source material I have attempted in this book is not new. Before colonial history, orientalism, and ethnography created such unfortunate fragmentation of the field, Marsden, Sangermano, Raffles, Crawfurd, and Pallegoix, and even such pioneers as Galvão, La Loubère, and Valentijn, covered every aspect of the life of their subjects by using literature, language, travel accounts, trade statistics, and above all their own firsthand

knowledge. In that primitive era of scholarship it seemed possible to write the "total history" of a region or people. How can similar goals be pursued in our age of specialization, when no one person can hope to command the dozens of languages and other skills which have rightly come to be expected of professional researchers in this complex region?

The risks are certainly great that such a broad approach will lead to the superficial or the obvious. Yet to remain confined in the specialisms for which we have been trained also involves risks, and perhaps more serious ones, of excluding those dimensions of history most vital to most of the population. Modern geographers, anthropologists, demographers, and environmental scientists have been more successful than conventional historians in exploring many of the constraints under which the "little people" of the region lived. Making use of their findings offers one way for the historian to extend the limits imposed by the tales of travellers and the chronicles of kings. I am also convinced that treating Southeast Asia as a whole makes it possible to describe a number of areas of life which would otherwise remain in the shadows. For each separate cultural area the sources are frustratingly fragmentary. When we study them together, a coherent picture begins to emerge of the life-styles of the region as a whole. Even if enormously varied in language and culture, this region was subject to many of the same climatic, physical, and commercial pressures and thus developed a very similar set of material cultures.

Finally, Fernand Braudel's call for "historians who are ambitious" (Braudel 1966: 22) has been a great inspiration to me. His remarkable success in drawing on various disciplines, particularly geography, to show both the "collective destinies" of a broad region and its splendid variety provided me with the courage to believe that also in the lands below the winds such methods would yield worthwhile results. In Southeast Asia we have far less data and far fewer research monographs on which to base a study than does the Mediterranean world. On the other hand, the region was manifestly better integrated by the warm and placid waters of the South China Sea than were southern Europe, the Levant, and North Africa by the Mediterranean. Moreover, the interdisciplinary approach exemplified by Braudel and the *Annalistes* is especially rewarding in Southeast Asia because of the relative richness of its anthropology, orientalism, and even archeology, as compared with the poverty of the strictly historical sources.

The aim of this study is to suggest how total history can bring important issues into focus in the two centuries before the establishment of a Dutch commercial hegemony in Southeast Asia. As far as

the sources allow, I have concentrated on those features and changes which most affected the population at large, rather than on the rulers and foreigners who play such a large part in the published record. These are frequently long-term changes discernable only by looking at a canvas which is broad in both space and time, with one eye always open for comparable developments in other parts of the world. These priorities determine that we should begin with the structures and constraints which made Southeast Asia a region, and then move to the changes which made what I have labelled the age of commerce so critical a period below the winds, as indeed in most other parts of the world. This volume is devoted to the physical, material, and social structures of Southeast Asia in this period; a second volume will address what the Annalists would call the *conjonctures* and *événements* which occurred within that context.

Even in this volume, however, the importance of change is everywhere apparent. As capitalism and the Renaissance were transforming Europe, extraordinary forces were also at work in Southeast Asia. The greatly increased tempo of trade magnified the size and role of cosmopolitan cities and their contacts with each other and with the world outside. Islam, Christianity, and (over a longer period) Theravada Buddhism established and strengthened their hold first in these trading cities. States formed and strengthened around the cities, and more secular forms of thought and culture flourished in them. Eventually, in the seventeenth century, European commercial penetration established an efficient monopoly, the effect of which was no longer to strengthen but to suppress indigenous urban and commercial life, so that many of the above processes went abruptly into reverse. Even in this volume, therefore, the reader is urged to shun stereotypes of an "unchanging east," still more of a declining one. The age of commerce brought as much change to Southeast Asia as to Europe, though by no means in the same directions.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have certain advantages in terms of sources. This is the earliest period for which there is a substantial body of surviving indigenous writing—either repeatedly copied because of its sacral character or picked up by early European visitors. This writing is crucial for an understanding of ideology, law, religion, and ceremonial. The chronicles were not, however, concerned with the "obvious daily things," as a Burmese historian has pointed out (Kaung 1963: 33). For the life of ordinary people we are especially reliant on the rich descriptions of the first generation of European visitors—Portuguese from 1509, Spanish from 1523, English from 1579, and Dutch from 1596. The accounts of Chinese, Arabs, and

other Asians are also useful, but as they were in much longer contact with Southeast Asia their writings do not always show the same astonished interest in the life-style of the people they encountered.

Having conceded that no scholar is equipped with all the languages and skills which a study of this breadth would ideally require, I should clarify my own limitations. Malay/Indonesian is the only Asian language I command sufficiently for scholarly purposes. For sources in other Asian languages I have depended on translations into one of the European languages (or occasionally into Indonesian). Where English or French translations of Spanish and Portuguese sources have been conveniently and reliably published, I have made use of these. I wish to declare here my gratitude to all those whose labours have made these sources more accessible. In citing the original author and date of composition of a source rather than the edition used, it is not my intention to minimize the contribution of the editors and translators without whom I could not have undertaken this task. My purpose is to keep references as concise and helpful as possible, banishing all publication details to the reference list. Manuscript sources from Dutch and English archives also give only the author and date in the text. This procedure should make clear to the reader which sources date from the period and which are later ethnographic or secondary works. In a further bid for economy, "cf." has been used in citations to mean "see also."

This book results from interactions with Southeast Asia during more than two decades. My considerable debts cannot be expressed by listing names. To those with whom I have worked most closely at the University of Malaya, Hasanuddin University, and the Australian National University, and to numerous other friends who have tried to explain to me something of their culture and history, I remain deeply indebted. The ANU has supported me generously in all my research. In the lengthy preparation of this manuscript I have been especially aided by Jennifer Brewster and Takeshi Ito, who provided or located valuable material; by Jennifer Brewster (again), Tony Diller, Robert Elson, Anthony Johns, Margaret Kartomi, Ann Kumar, Norman Owen, Lenore Manderson, David Marr, Robyn Maxwell, Anthony Milner, and Baas Terwiel, who commented on sections of the draft; by Lio Pancino and Keith Mitchell, who drew the maps; and by Dorothy McIntosh, who typed most of the text and introduced me to the mysteries of word processing. My wife, Helen, as always, made life both possible and agreeable despite the importunate claims of this book.

Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce
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Volume One
The Lands below the Winds

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I

Introduction: The Lands below the Winds

Most of "Below the Winds" enjoys a continual spring season. . . .

As is always the case in "Below the Winds," the posts which exist are not based on any power and authority. Everything is simply a show. . . . The natives reckon high rank and wealth by the quantity of slaves a person owns.

—Ibrahim 1688: 174–77

Southeast Asia as a Physical Unit

Few major areas of the world have been so spectacularly demarcated by nature as has Southeast Asia. Apparently formed by the pushing together of the Pacific and Indian ocean plates, its southern rim is a massive geological arc, or rather series of arcs, pushed up by the advancing Indian Ocean plate. Most obvious is the volcanic arc formed by the Sunda Islands of Sumatra, Java, Bali, Lombok, and Sumbawa; but outside these is another largely submerged arc, showing itself only in the chain west of Sumatra, with a characteristic deep trench beyond it. On the eastern perimeter another such spectacular arc of volcanic activity is formed by the Philippines, again with a deep trench lying outside it where the Pacific plate appears to be folding down as it expands. The northern boundary of Southeast Asia is formed by the almost impenetrable mountain complex of the eastern Himalayas, where the region's greatest rivers begin.

Within these boundaries lies what paleogeographers know as Sundaland, and marine geographers as the Sunda Shelf, the shallow waters from the Gulf of Siam to the Java Sea. As recently as fifteen thousand years ago water levels were two hundred metres lower and this whole shelf was a land mass uniting Sumatra, Java, Bali, and Borneo to the Asian mainland. The dominant flora and fauna of the region made their way to these larger islands prior to their separation from the

Mainland. Even now, when submerged, the Sunda Shelf plays a central role for the people of the region as one of the world's most abundant fishing grounds.

Water and forest are the dominant elements in the environment of Southeast Asia. Though very difficult of access by land, the region is everywhere penetrated by waterways. Thus on the one hand it has been relatively free from the mass migrations and invasions from Central Asia which affected India and China, while on the other it has always been open to seaborne traders, adventurers, and propagandists in more moderate numbers. Not only were the sea-lanes ubiquitous; they were also remarkably kind to seamen. Winds were moderate and predictable, with the monsoon blowing from the west or south in May–August and from the northwest or northeast in December–March. Except in the typhoon belt at the eastern periphery of the region, storms were not a major hazard to mariners, who on the whole had more to fear from swift currents in certain channels. Water temperature was uniform, with the result that vessels which could not survive a voyage to Europe or Japan could operate successfully for years in Southeast Asian waters. All of these factors made the mediterranean sea of Southeast Asia more hospitable and inviting a meeting place and thoroughfare than that deeper and stormier Mediterranean in the West. Add to this the abundance of wood at the water's edge, suitable for boat building, again in sharp contrast with the Mediterranean during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Braudel 1966: 140–43), and we have a region uniquely favourable to maritime activity. A boat was a normal part of household equipment.

The other element, forest, owes its dominance not to the soils, which share the relative poverty of most tropical regions, but to the reliably high temperatures and rainfalls. Southeast Asia benefits at once from average year-round temperatures as high as any in the world and from higher overall rainfall than any other region of comparable size (Fisher 1966: 41–42). Except at the southeastern and northern extremities of the region (the Lesser Sunda Islands and northern Indochina and Thailand), where there is a marked dry season, rainfall is dependable throughout the year, providing a luxuriant cover of evergreen rain forest. Although a large proportion of the trees are dipterocarps, the Southeast Asian forest present “an abundance and diversity of forms which are without parallel anywhere else in the world” (ibid.:43), including many economically valuable species. Even today, industrialization and a twentyfold increase in population have not succeeded in taming this forest as sixteenth-century Europe or China had done theirs. Four centuries ago the areas of permanent