

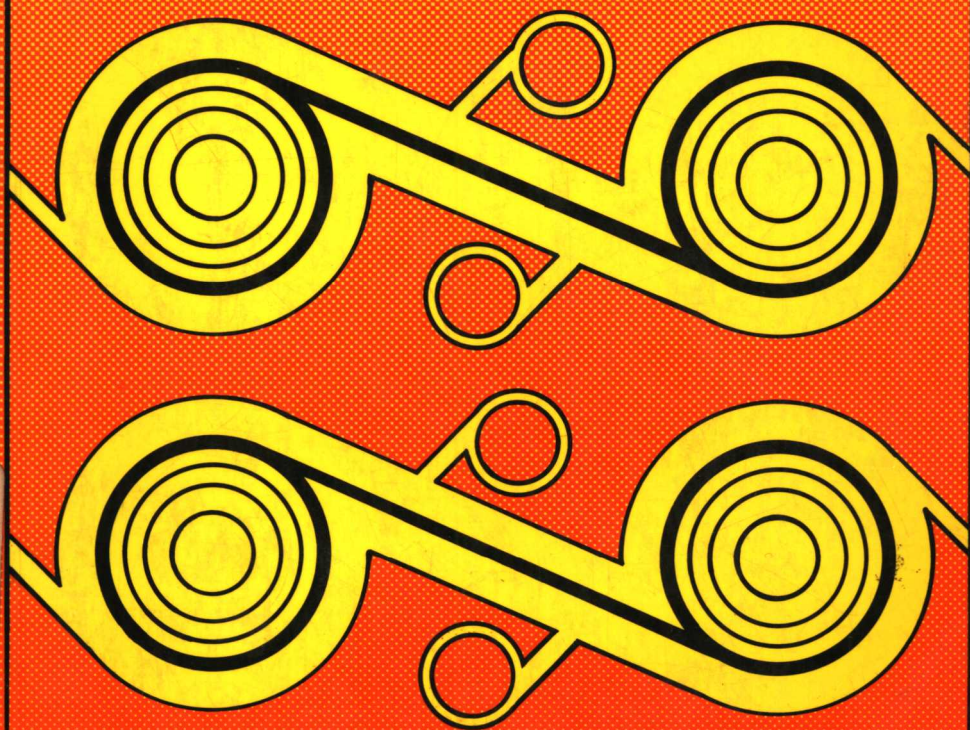
# **SOUTHEAST ASIA**

AN INTRODUCTORY HISTORY

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OSBORNE

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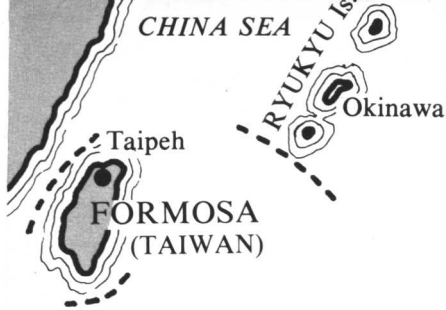
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# SOUTHEAST ASIA (An Introductory History)

MILTON OSBORNE

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# Contents

Introduction	7
1 What is Southeast Asia?	9
2 The 'Classical' Background to Modern Southeast Asian History	21
3 Courts, Kings, and Peasants: Southeast Asia Before the European Impact	36
4 Minorities and Slaves: The Outsiders in Traditional Southeast Asia	50
5 The European Advance and Challenge	57
6 Economic Transformation	73
7 The Asian Immigrants in Southeast Asia	88
8 The Years of Illusion: Southeast Asia Between the Wars, 1918-1941	102
9 The Second World War in Southeast Asia	122
10 Revolution and Revolt: Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaya, and the Philippines	138
11 Other Paths to Independence	157

12	Independent Southeast Asia	164
13	Southeast Asia's Modern History	178
	Suggested Readings	188
	Time Chart of Modern Southeast Asian History	197
	Index	199



# Introduction

Southeast Asian history is a vast subject and many of the books that deal with it seem to have been written with the intention of matching size to subject. In this book my aim is quite the opposite. As someone who has worked in Southeast Asia for long periods since 1959 and studied the region over a period of more than twenty years I am very much aware of the tremendous range of important scholarship that exists on individual countries and on the area as a whole. But I also vividly remember how intimidating this accumulated scholarship can be for a beginner.

What I have tried to do in this book is to provide an outline of the most important events and developments in the history of modern Southeast Asia—to explain why Southeast Asia is as it is today. Compressing Southeast Asia's modern history into 75,000 words has led to many omissions. The choice of what is important and what is not, of what is discussed at length or merely noted, is only partly personal since whatever the disagreements among scholars concerning details there is much general agreement as to what are the broadly important themes in Southeast Asia's history.

Above all, I have written the following pages as an introduction, with the assumption that my readers are interested in Southeast Asia but have little formal knowledge of the region. As an introductory history this book is meant to be followed by other more detailed studies; I make clear my debt to these in the Suggested Readings at the end of this book. If I am able to bring my readers to the point where they want to read more deeply about a subject that I find constantly fascinating then this book will have served its purpose.

*Milton Osborne*



## What is Southeast Asia?

There is no better place to start than with a discussion of size and scale. For a newcomer to Southeast Asian history the past is more confusing than the jumbled present. Yet even when considering the present an outsider has the greatest difficulty in visualising just how large an area Southeast Asia occupies in geographical terms, and how substantial is the size of its population. The fact that Indonesia's population exceeds one hundred and forty million may be well known. But how often is this fact recognised as meaning that Indonesia has the *fifth* largest population in the world? Only China, India, the Soviet Union, and the United States outstrip Indonesia in terms of population. And how many casual observers think of a now united Vietnam of fifty-five million persons as having a substantially larger population than such countries as Spain (thirty-six million), Egypt (thirty-eight million), Poland (thirty-four million), or Canada (twenty-three million)? Yet Vietnam is only one of four Southeast Asian states, in addition to Indonesia, whose populations are each in excess of thirty million. Figures can only be approximate where population is concerned, but of the world's population in the mid-1970s Southeast Asia accounted for no less than 8 per cent. The significance of this percentage is made clear when the population of China is expressed as a percentage of the world's total. China, the world's most populous country, accounts for between 20 and 25 per cent of the total. Against this yardstick alone, therefore, the population of the Southeast Asian region is substantial indeed.

Size by itself does not mean power, and this is as true for contemporary Southeast Asia as it was for other countries and regions in the past. Whatever the power that an individual Southeast Asian state can exert within its own borders, or outside them, none of the countries in the region has yet developed the global power that was

once exerted by some European powers, such as Britain in its imperial heyday, or by the superpowers of the last quarter of the twentieth century. Here, right away, is a major question for historians of Southeast Asia to answer: Why has the Southeast Asian region, despite its size, played so small a part in the shifts of global power over the past two thousand years?

The answer, or more correctly answers, to this question will need to take account of many factors, not all of them agreed among those who make it their business to study the Southeast Asian region. To a great extent, moreover, the answers will point to the need to think about Southeast Asia in terms that will often seem surprising for those whose cultural background has been strongly influenced by Europe. Here is where scale as well as size deserves attention.

When dealing with the unknown or little-known there is a strong tendency to think of cities, countries, or groups of people as being in some way smaller in size and importance than is the case for better-known areas and peoples. In the same fashion there is a familiar readiness to discount the achievements of unfamiliar civilisations by comparison with the presumed importance of our own society and cultural traditions. This may be less of a feature of life today than it was a hundred years ago when the exploring European and his successors, the administrators, missionaries, planters and men of commerce had not the slightest doubt about their own superiority. Nonetheless, the problem remains today as Southeast Asia is still an unfamiliar area to most who live outside its boundaries.

Because we know that London and Paris are major cities today, and that these are the modern successors of settlements dating back to Roman times, our tendency is to think of their always having been large and important. *Londinium* was important in Roman times, possibly more so than the settlement of *Lutetia*, which was to change its name to Paris in the fourth century. But because of our familiarity with the name London it is hard, perhaps, to visualise just how small this centre was in Roman times and through to the period of the Norman Conquest. When William of Normandy was crowned in Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day 1066 London still did not enjoy the status of being England's royal city. No more than 35,000 persons lived in the ill-kept streets of this medieval city; yet this is scarcely the image London summons up.

At the same time, in the then unknown land of Cambodia—unknown that is to the men and women of Europe—a population of more than a million grouped around and supported a city that could rival and surpass any then existing in Europe for its architectural achievement, its sophisticated water engineering, and its capacity to produce a regular harvest of three rice crops each year. This was the city of

Angkor from whose ruins with their accompanying rich stock of inscriptions we have come to know of a civilisation of remarkable achievement and high technological complexity. But whereas the wonders of Europe, of Rome and Venice, of Paris and London, and a dozen other major cities, have preoccupied scholars and interested observers for hundreds of years, the great Cambodian city of Angkor, the centre of a powerful empire for nearly six centuries, only became part of Western consciousness in the nineteenth century, and then only slowly. Hard though it may be to believe nowadays, the first European visitor to Angkor in the mid-nineteenth century, a missionary priest named Father Bouillevaux, was unimpressed by what he saw.

The point may be made over and over again. Athens, Thebes, and Sparta were tiny states, nevertheless they live in the minds of those who study European history for the contributions that they made to the development of European culture, in that term's broadest sense. By contrast, it is still rare outside either specialist circles, or among the ranks of the exceedingly well travelled, to find any awareness of the empire of Pagan, a centre of Burmese power during the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries and the site of a temple complex that some believe rivals the buildings of Angkor. Those who are the inheritors of the Western tradition are not immediately receptive to the religious and cultural underpinnings of the societies that built Pagan and Angkor. The same problem of a lack of immediate sympathy is apparent when attention turns to other early empires of Southeast Asia. It is easier to conjure up a picture, accurate or otherwise, of Crusaders travelling to the Holy Land than it is to picture the heroic navigational feats of Malay sailors who voyaged to China and made the Sumatra-based empire of Srivijaya such a powerful force in early Southeast Asian history.

The contrast between our awareness of Europe and unawareness of Southeast Asia should not be stressed beyond reason. There are a great many good reasons why it is easier to understand segments of European history and why real and continuing difficulties stand in the way of acquiring a similar background awareness of the historical process in Southeast Asia. To gain more than a superficial knowledge of early Southeast Asian history requires time, dedication, and a readiness to learn a surprisingly large range of languages. All this is required for the study of problems that may often seem lacking in general interest. Generations of scholars have laboured in some cases to leave little more than fragments for incorporation in the overall fabric of the region's history. For the general student there is, fortunately, some middle ground between a broad lack of knowledge and scholarly devotion to detail that is, however admirable, the preserve of the specialist.

So far in this introductory chapter the term Southeast Asia has been used in a general, undifferentiated fashion. Fifty years ago this would have caused surprise, for only a few persons at that time thought and spoke about 'Southeast Asia'. Some writers used the term 'Further India' to describe sections of Southeast Asia, as if all that was to be found beyond the Bay of Bengal was the Indian subcontinent on a smaller scale. It is only necessary to think of the influence that China has had over the formation of Vietnamese cultural life, or of the extent to which the Philippines has acquired a very special character because of the long-term Spanish influence in those islands, to realise how inappropriate the term 'Further India' is. Another general description that was used before the Second World War was 'Asia of the Monsoons', a term deriving from the monsoon weather pattern that is important in almost all of Southeast Asia. This term, used by geographers most particularly, did not relate merely to the area that modern scholars have termed Southeast Asia, for Ceylon and parts of India, as well as areas of southern China, might equally well be described as monsoon lands.

For the most part, however, neither the foreigners who worked in Southeast Asia before the Second World War, whether as scholars or otherwise, nor the indigenous inhabitants of the countries of Southeast Asia, thought about the region in general terms. The general tendency to do so came with the Second World War when, as a result of military circumstances, the concept of a Southeast Asian region began to take hold. From a strategic military point of view it was apparent that an area existed that was not India, nor China, nor part of the Pacific. Instead, a sense began to grow that Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia—to use modern names rather than those different ones which, in some cases, were current in the early 1940s—formed some kind of geographical unit. The omission of the Philippines is deliberate, at this stage, for the question of whether or not the Philippines formed part of Southeast Asia was to remain a matter of scholarly uncertainty as late as the 1960s.

The sense of Southeast Asia being a geographical and cultural unit did not, of course, depend solely upon strategic thinking. Already, in the 1920s and 1930s, anthropologists and historians had begun to take account of the similarities that could be found between one region of what we now call Southeast Asia and another. Similarities in the rituals used by the various royal courts throughout mainland Southeast Asia were recognised as an indication of a common inheritance or tradition. Basic similarities in family structure were found to exist over a wide area. And for all of the evidence that was accumulating of the importance of foreign ideas, and of foreigners, throughout Southeast Asia's long history, historians had begun assembling the evidence

that showed a regional pattern of international relations within Southeast Asia from its earliest historical periods. Southeast Asia was not, in other words, merely a region that sustained the impact of its greater neighbours, China and India. Empires within the region waxed and waned and at various times links were established between the mainland and the islands of the Indonesian Archipelago involving both politics and trade.

With the end of the Second World War the tendency to think of Southeast Asia as a whole gained even greater currency as there was a sharp increase in the amount of scholarly attention given to the region. Now, more than ever before, the underlying similarities to be found throughout a wide range of the region were stressed by historians, anthropologists, political scientists, and linguists, to mention only the prominent academic disciplines. To sense why these scholars found their work so exciting, and to emphasise the way in which the picture of Southeast Asia as a unit deserving of study in its own right emerged, it is useful to review briefly some of the features of the region that are now taken for granted but which only gained general recognition in the post-war period.

Probably most important was the recognition that the countries of Southeast Asia were neither 'little Indias' nor 'little Chinas'. The impact of those two great countries on the Southeast Asian region cannot be dismissed, though the degree and character of their influence is still debated, but the essential right of Southeast Asian countries to be considered culturally independent units was generally established. To put the matter in another fashion, if the tendency in the past had been to think of Southeast Asia as an area shaped by external cultural values, most particularly those of India and China, scholars now paid just as much attention to the strength and importance of indigenous cultural traditions. Where Indian or Chinese influence did play a major part in the development of Southeast Asian art, or religion, or political theory, stress began to be placed on the extent to which Burmese, Cambodians, Indonesians, and others adapted these foreign ideas to suit their own needs and values. The importance of Indian religious concepts, for instance, must be recognised for a broad area of Southeast Asia. But one of the most essential features of Hinduism, the caste system, was never adopted in the countries outside India. Indian artistic and architectural concepts played an important part in the development of Southeast Asian art. Yet the glories of Pagan, Angkor, and the temple complexes of Java stem from their own individual character, just as the exquisite Buddha images that were created in Thailand are quite different from the images to be found in India. Even in Vietnam, where dependence upon an external, Chinese cultural tradition has clearly been more significant than



elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the strength of non-Chinese cultural life, particularly below the level of the court, belies any picture of that country as a mere receiver of ideas, unable to offer traditions of its own.

Southeast Asian and foreign scholars alike came to recognise that Indian and Chinese influence had been overemphasised in the past and that insufficient attention had been paid to fundamental similarities existing in the societies making up the region. While uniformity most certainly is not present throughout the societies of Southeast Asia, certain broad similarities spread across a wide area are striking. The importance of the nuclear or individual family in much of Southeast Asia, as opposed to the importance placed on the extended family in India, was one of these broad similarities found over much of the region. So, too, the generally important place allotted women in the peasant society of traditional Southeast Asia reflected both a widespread value and a contrast with both Indian and Chinese societies.

Another factor leading to interest in the Southeast Asian region as a whole was the recognition of how much linguistic unity there was from area to area, cutting right across the boundaries set, in many cases, by colonial powers. There are still ill-informed people who have not shed the illusions fostered by the former colonial powers which sought to emphasise disunity rather than to recognise broad similarities. So, at the level of a single country, there are some who still speak and write as if the Vietnamese of northern Vietnam speak a different language than the Vietnamese of the southern regions of that country. The reality is that Vietnam, like almost any other country, has dialectical variations from region to region. But, if linguistic unity is taken as a significant factor indicating basic broader social unities, then Vietnam despite its political history is unified indeed. The difference between the Vietnamese spoken in the north of that country and the Vietnamese to be heard in the south is certainly no greater than the difference between 'educated southern English' and broad Scots. And the difference is a great deal less than that to be found between the dialects of northern and southern Italy.

When looking at areas larger than a single country such as Vietnam, the presence of broad linguistic unity is more striking. Some of this unity is apparent only to the most skilled scholars. This is the case with the quite recent suggestion that modern Vietnamese and Khmer (or Cambodian) have a common, if very distant, linguistic ancestor. For the non-specialist this is difficult to comprehend, in part because of the fact that of these languages Vietnamese is tonal, while Khmer is non-tonal. But a non-specialist can respond to the striking fact that the Tai language, admittedly with considerable dialectical variations, is spoken not only in Thailand, but in parts of southern China, in

the Shan states of Burma, in Laos, in both western and northeastern Cambodia, and even, though this is less and less the case today, in the extreme north of peninsular Malaysia. Here is a situation full of interest and importance. That the Tai language has such a broad distribution alerts us to the often artificial character of the border lines drawn on maps, for if a common language were taken as a basis for establishing a state then to divide the lowland areas of Laos from Thailand seems hard to justify. At the same time, an awareness of the presence of Tai-speaking persons over such a wide area of Southeast Asia brings a recognition of the extent to which many of the states of modern Southeast Asia are troubled by disunity resulting from the presence within their frontiers of minority groups. Their interests, including their linguistic interest, are not shared by the majority or dominant and governing group. Many Tai-speaking Shans in Burma, to take only one example, continue in modern times as in the past to resist control by the Burmans who are their long-time rivals, speaking a different language.

Another most important instance of linguistic unity is the broad spread of the Indonesian/Malay language. Here again the dialectical differences from region to region are considerable but variants of this basic language are spoken throughout modern Indonesia and Malaysia, and in the southern Philippines, as well as along the southern coastal regions of Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam where there are long-established Indonesian/Malay-speaking settlements.

Yet just as the national motto of Indonesia is 'Unity in Diversity', the similarities and unities that have just been described should not blind a student of Southeast Asia to the profound differences that do exist from place to place and between one ethnic group and another. Indeed, a study of the history of Southeast Asia raises some of the most difficult issues of judgement in this regard. What should be emphasised for a region or for a period, the unities or the differences? And to what extent should we concentrate on the continuities that so often seem a feature of Southeast Asian history rather than paying attention to the discontinuities, to the breaks with the past and the changes that disturb any suggestion that we are dealing with an area in which traditional patterns are still dominant and little affected by the modern world?

There can be no certain and agreed answer to any of these questions, for what is involved is judgement, whether individual or collective, and judgement will always be open to argument. Judgement will also always be subject to fashion and there is no doubt that historical and anthropological fashions, to mention only two scholarly disciplines, are as changeable, if not quite as frequently, as fashions in clothes. Yet there might be some sort of general agreement about the following