

System and Process in Southeast Asia

The Evolution of a Region

Donald G.
McCloud



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Preface

The thoughts and ideas presented in this book have evolved over a long period of time. The process began in the late 1960s during my graduate training and has continued ever since, paralleling the general pattern of thought among other Southeast Asian scholars. The project required such a long period for completion partly because of the slow developments in the field and partly because duties prevented me from focusing fully on research and writing. My approach to the subject was greatly influenced by Richard L. Walker and Donald E. Weatherbee. The intellectual debt that I carry from them and others at the University of South Carolina is enormous and one that I feel I seldom repay. Don Weatherbee also provided valuable criticisms for balancing the material and substance of this work.

The opportunity to participate in the Department of Political Science of The Ohio State University and the encouragement from its members, particularly R. William Liddle and Charles F. Hermann, stimulated my desire to undertake the project. For those resources not available in the libraries at Ohio State, the Southeast Asian Collection at Ohio University proved invaluable and its staff knowledgeable and supportive. The editorial staff at Westview Press has also been extremely supportive and helpful, even at times when it appeared that the manuscript might never be completed.

My deepest appreciation goes to the Midwest Universities Consortium for International Activities (MUCIA), not only for providing for my livelihood but also for giving me the opportunity to travel frequently to Southeast Asia and to become intimately involved in development work there. The demands of program

development and maintenance at MUCIA were often consuming but so too was the insistence of the executive director, William L. Flinn, that the book be finished. Without his friendship and support, as well as that of the consortium's Board of Directors and staff, this task would ultimately have been impossible. Within the executive office of the consortium, Jayne Allison worked tirelessly preparing the early drafts, revisions, and versions using different formats; Mark Simpson assisted greatly with documentation and citations; John Biefeldt carefully edited the first complete version of the manuscript; and Donald R. Walker and Dorothy Shanfeld rescued the entire project when, at the last minute, all of the manuscript had to be retyped into a new word-processing system. Their efforts are sincerely appreciated.

The actual preparation of the manuscript began in 1982, and since that time my family has endured with a husband and father who appeared to be working at two full-time positions. The patience of Carol, Laura, and Grant in listening to the phrase "I'm writing" has kept family life somewhere near normal.

Despite the kindness and efforts of so many on my behalf, clearly the errors and shortcomings of this work are my responsibility.

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Southeast Asia in Regional and Global Contexts

Different people think of Southeast Asia in different ways. Mention of Thailand, Indonesia, or the Philippines, for example, often brings to mind an exotic tropical paradise of palm trees, beautiful ocean beaches, and costumed dancers. Monkeys, temples, volcanoes, and terraced rice fields are sometimes added to this travel-poster image, but names other than Bali, Manila, or perhaps Bangkok are difficult to recall. However, this image is not current. Many contrasts--for example, between the airplanes that deliver visitors to Southeast Asia and the plodding water buffalo that travelers see there--exist and confound the mind. The idealized (if not romanticized) view of traditional societies, evoking images of peace, harmony, and quiet stability based on communal village life and mutual social welfare, is now contradicted by intruding Western values of individualism, consumerism, nationalism, and other trappings of the modern world. The stereotypical travel-poster image belies a region that is rich in historical and cultural traditions, complex social structures, vigorous political, economic, and cultural growth, and increasingly confident in its prominent place in global politics.

Other perceptions of Southeast Asia have also obscured the realities of the region. The British, French, Dutch, and other Europeans retain images of a bygone era of white-jacketed colonial administrators and great shaded verandas, too often symbolizing the "white man's burden" among indolent natives. However, this sense of moral obligation, a hallmark of the colonial era, stood side by side with the phenomenal exploitation by the colonial powers of the region's physical and material wealth. The colonial period had been evaluated in great detail from

many perspectives,¹ but the prevalent view today has shifted the focus of Southeast Asian history away from indigenous cultures and politics and toward European and American involvement, thus perpetuating the view that little of political or economic importance transpired in Southeast Asia before the arrival of the Europeans. Histories of Southeast Asia from 1500 to 1940 have been largely a record of colonial conquests, governors, policies, and economic developments, with the "natives" depicted as recipients of colonial largesse in the form of occasional educational, health, or other reforms. The result, for the Western world, has been deeply ingrained perceptions that the Southeast Asians were incapable of defining or managing their own affairs.²

Even after World War II, despite Allied rhetoric of self-determination and independence,³ the primary goal for British, French, and Dutch leaders was apparently to reestablish their colonial administrations in Southeast Asia, perhaps under an evolutionary program leading toward some type of semi-independence or commonwealth status.⁴ The British plan for Burma, for example, was to help Burma attain, "as fully and completely as may be possible," the "high position of Dominion status--a position to which [the British] would not lightly admit outside people without full consideration of the character of their Government."⁵ At the time (1941), British newspapers carried letters suggesting that the Burmese were unfit for early self-rule.⁶ This vision of postwar Southeast Asia demonstrates the Europeans' failure to measure accurately the vigor of anticolonialism, growing nationalism, and other radical sentiments in these countries.

For Americans, proud of their role in the Philippines where U.S. colonial policies had led to independence and democracy following the acquisition of the Philippines from the Spanish, there has also been an alter-image of the tropical paradise of Southeast Asia--the jungle foliage of Vietnam, with its bamboo spikes, tiger cages, and death for young U.S. soldiers. Nevertheless, since the late 1970s Southeast Asia has receded from daily headlines and (despite the ubiquity of Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees, continuing concerns about American MIAs, or the growing turmoil in the Philippines) again has become for most Americans a faraway, and exotic, if somewhat tarnished, tropical paradise. Certainly the Vietnam war did little to educate the American people to the realities of Vietnam or Southeast Asia. For Americans, who think of themselves as mentors of freedom

and nationalism, the traumatic experience of Vietnam may have been analogous to the rejection felt by the colonial powers. Vietnam became the site of the collapse of the U.S. policy of containing communism in Asia,⁷ but most Americans were unable to grasp sufficiently the political implications of this conflict and were thus unable to judge whether the United States should have intervened in the first place or withdrawn when it did. Ultimately, Americans will remember the Vietnam war for its impact on domestic politics, not because it altered the course of U.S. foreign policy in Asia.

Stereotypes of Southeast Asia sustain the perceptions that Southeast Asia cannot be a competent part of the global political system. In the years since World War II, the former colonial powers have supported policies ranging from vigorous attempts to reestablish colonial control through military means, to benign neglect of former colonies, to the establishment of special commercial, defense, or cultural relations based on and seemingly strengthened by the intense relationships of the colonial past. Facile perceptions of the region have also left policymakers vulnerable to the argument that the threat of global Communist expansion is a legitimizing argument for involvement in Southeast Asia. The domino theory, when applied to Southeast Asia, has magnified that threat. The lack of sensitivity to the social and political environment of Southeast Asia has left the governments of Western Europe and the United States without adequate knowledge to formulate policies that would strengthen local political dynamics. Just as the moral certitude of the "white man's burden" proved insufficient for the reassertion of colonialism, so the moral verve and simplicity of saving people from communism collapsed in the face of the complexities of the Vietnamese revolution. Time and history have made further questions of colonial policy as well as U.S. policy in Vietnam moot; yet they have also made it clear that an understanding of the dynamics of the region is essential for the adequate development of contemporary and future policies.

For the region, many questions remain. Is there a rationale for superpower involvement in Southeast Asia? Where? in Thailand? in Indonesia? What type of involvement? supplies and war material? economic aid? moral support? soldiers? Why should these be provided (or why not)? to stop communism? to protect national interests? to aid "free" people? to legitimate governments? Should special relationships be maintained

with former colonies? Have animosities from both sides diminished enough to allow this? At what cost are special relationships maintained, and who bears these costs?

These questions illustrate the need for a better understanding of Southeast Asia. The travel-poster image of the region must be replaced with real knowledge of the Southeast Asian role in the global political and economic systems. The lack of comprehension throughout the Western world may be part of a larger inability to grasp the contemporary realities of global interrelationships; what transpires in Malaysia (or Botswana or Chile, for that matter) has little obvious impact on day-to-day life in Europe or the United States. Their countries' longer histories of involvement in world politics may offer to Europeans a greater sense of world history than that achieved by many Americans, but the average citizen, whether in Great Britain or the United States or France, is not cognizant of the economic realities of a highly integrated global economy. Other issues pervade Western consciousness: For the United States, there is the omnipresence of the Soviet Union; for the British and French, there are struggles in the European Common Market and the distractions of that generally incomprehensible ally across the Atlantic, the United States. In the coming decade, however, Asia in general and Southeast Asia in particular will probably have the greatest prospects for growth of any region in the world. A parallel expansion in Western understanding of Southeast Asia must take place if conflict is to be minimized and relations expanded usefully.

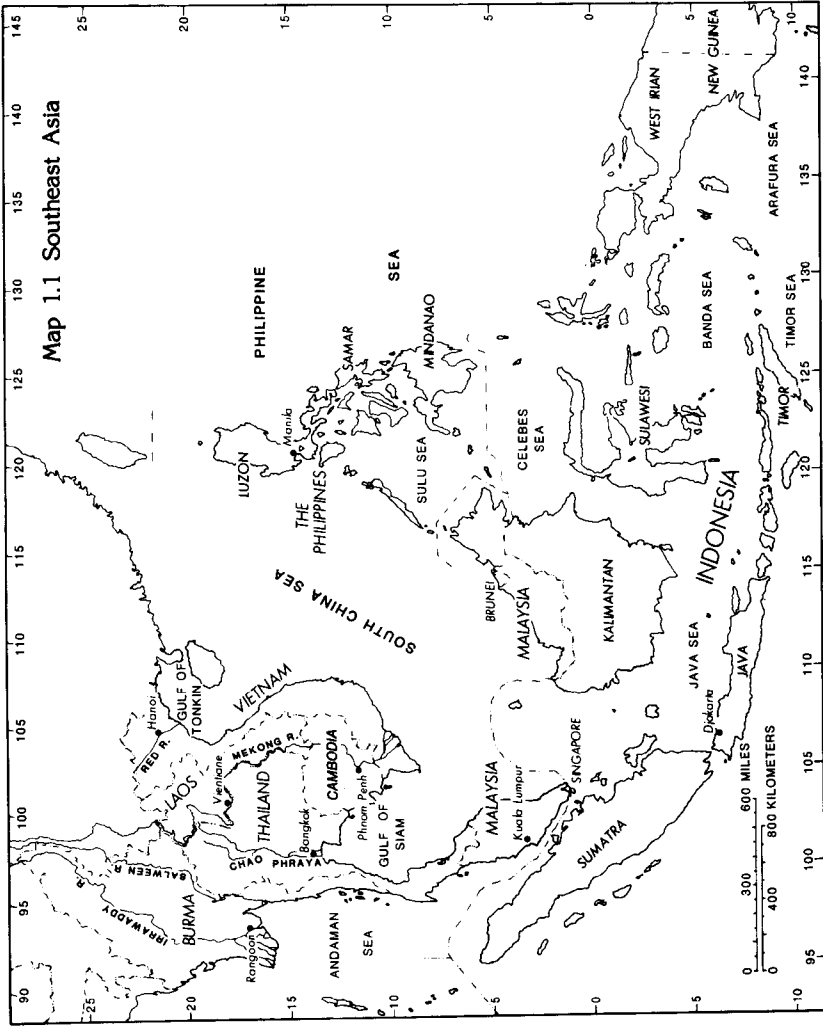
REGION OF DIVISIONS

The boundaries of Southeast Asia are relatively easy to delineate. The region can be outlined by extending a line from the western tip of China to the northern coast of Australia, from there to the southern tip of India, and finally from India back to the first point in China. The area within this triangle--the Indo-Pacific Peninsula, the Indonesian archipelago and the Philippine archipelago--roughly corresponds to Southeast Asia.⁸ There are, however, exclusions within this triangle. For example, Hainan Island is usually included as part of China. Papua, New Guinea, under Australian control for many years, also is not generally considered part of Southeast Asia; however, since attaining independence it

has increasingly developed an Asian focus for its foreign policy.⁹ Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and to a lesser extent, Bangladesh, although geographically close to and economically and politically similar to Southeast Asia, are generally linked to South Asia because of their cultural and geographic proximity to India. Even the inclusion of the Philippines as a part of Southeast Asia is sometimes challenged because, despite geographic and ethnic similarities to the region, the intensive Spanish and U.S. colonial impacts on the Philippines have diluted its cultural affinities with the region.

The countries¹⁰ of the region, then, include Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei. (See Map 1.1, following.) In addition to being in geographic proximity, these countries are similar, though not identical, in tropical monsoon ecology. They are also similar in that, with the exception of Singapore, they are all economically underdeveloped but culturally extremely sophisticated. Independent governments reemerged in Southeast Asia only following World War II (except Thailand, which had avoided direct colonial control and thus never lost its independence). Before the colonial period, Southeast Asia was part of a world trading system that linked China to the Middle East and Europe, and as a crossroads in this system, experienced various forms of cultural/religious penetration from Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity.¹¹ As these commonalities mask diverse and complex political, cultural, and economic patterns, an understanding of Southeast Asia must begin with the balancing of these often divergent and overlapping characteristics.

Much of the diversity of Southeast Asia is rooted in its geographic fragmentation. Not only is the area encompassing Southeast Asia quite large, but there is a natural division between the area attached to the Asian landmass (called mainland Southeast Asia) and the insular portion of Southeast Asia. The countries of Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam are located on the Indo-Pacific Peninsula, which extends directly southward from China. The archipelagic countries include Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, and Malaysia. Although the inclusion of Malaysia can be disputed because it is attached to the mainland, Malaysia's historical, cultural, ethnic, religious, economic, and political links to Sumatra and the other islands of the archipelago



From Ashok K. Dutt, *Southeast Asia: Realm of Contrasts*, 3d rev. ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), p. 3. Used by permission.

suggest that Malaysia fits more precisely with that group.¹²

This geographic division within Southeast Asia is repeated in its religious base. Most of the mainland countries are Buddhist, although there are resident enclaves of Hindu, Muslim, and Christian minorities, as well as various Chinese religions, such as Taoism and Confucianism. Archipelagic Southeast Asia, by contrast, is predominantly Muslim in Malaysia and Indonesia, with a substantial Muslim minority in the south of the predominantly Christian Philippines. There are exceptions to these generalizations, including the Hindu population on the island of Bali in Indonesia, the Buddhists in Singapore, and the Buddhists and Hindu Indians in Malaysia. Further complicating the religious context is the plethora of animistic, mystical, and other traditional belief systems, which, in intertwining with the major religions, have given a syncretic religious disposition to the region. Although such religions as Islam have large numbers of devout and doctrinally correct adherents, many of the Muslims in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, also continue to practice a wide range of mystic and other non-Islamic rituals and beliefs.

Ethnic subdivisions of Southeast Asia reflect the geographic and religious subdivisions of the region. The Islamic archipelago is largely inhabited by Malayo-Polynesian peoples commonly known as Malays. Their common ethnic background, however, has not prevented the growth of great cultural and linguistic diversity among various Malay subgroups throughout the archipelago. In Indonesia alone, there are some 25 major languages and 250 or more dialects.¹³ On the mainland there are four major ethnic groups--the Sino-Tibetan group, which includes the Burmese and Karens as well as Chinese; the Austroasiatic group, including the Vietnamese and the Khmer; the Thai, including also the Laos and the Shans; and the Malayo-Polynesians, including mostly Chams. These four major population groups have provided the nucleus for the contemporary countries but there are numerous subdivisions within these groups, some of which are ethnically related (e.g., the Anamese of Indochina and the Mon-Khmer of Thailand). There are more than 150 distinct ethnic groups in the mainland of Southeast Asia.¹⁴ Throughout much of Southeast Asia are found mountain peoples and other small ethnic groupings, many of whom inhabited the region before the arrival of the principal ethnic groups of today but were pushed into the more

remote regions as the present inhabitants moved into Southeast Asia. Inhabiting the northern part of mainland Southeast Asia, in particular, are mountain peoples, such as the Meos, who are relative newcomers to the region. The size of these groups has substantially declined as they have been absorbed into the dominant group. There remains much debate concerning the migration patterns and movements of peoples into Southeast Asia, which the great historian D.G.E. Hall has described as a veritable "chaos of races and languages."¹⁵

Non-ethnic factors also divide the peoples of Southeast Asia. The intersections of these factors with the ethnic and geographic patterns already noted have created a mosaic of inlaid and overlaid loyalties, belief systems, and communications patterns. For example, the people in the region can be divided in terms of domicile and agricultural practices into upland and lowland groups. The upland peoples generally practice dryland agriculture, and the lowland peoples generally practice irrigated cultivation. Wet-rice cultivation, which requires a sophisticated system of water management and regulation and returns a significantly higher volume product from each unit of land, was closely tied to the evolution of many of the great land-based kingdoms of traditional Southeast Asia. During various historical periods, the lowland peoples have been divided into agricultural and commercial or agricultural and seafaring populations. The seafaring groups, historically dependent on the regional and world trading systems, monopolized the Southeast Asia segment of that system and were able to amass great wealth and establish strong political units based on control of this trading subsystem. These economic divisions provided the basis for the development of several strikingly different types of political units in Southeast Asia.¹⁶

SOUTHEAST ASIA AS A REGIONAL UNIT

Although the region has been recognized for centuries in political and geographic terms by kings, writers, merchants, and travelers, the term Southeast Asia (also South East Asia and South-East Asia) is relatively new in Western political thought. Occasionally used by European, especially German, writers in the late nineteenth century, it was first brought to general prominence with the establishment of a Southeast Asia military command by the

British during World War II--one of the first attempts to bring together the previously fragmented colonial perspectives of the British, Dutch, French, and Americans.¹⁷

The ethnocentric views of Southeast Asia as well as the political and economic divisions, established during the colonial era and perpetuated ever since, have made it very difficult for Westerners to perceive or accept Southeast Asia as a viable global unit. The acceptance of the concept of a regional unit has been made more difficult by the social and cultural complexities of the region and by the paucity of available data for historical analysis. In recent years the regional concept has been further obscured by Western scholars, particularly international relations theorists bent on applying culturally biased models and theories of regional systems models to their analyses of the contemporary realities of Southeast Asia.¹⁸ One concerned scholar has been prompted to note that "Southeast Asia, as a conventional term, has become increasing the property of university area specialists," thus possibly limiting and obscuring intellectual "horizons through an over-obsession with a geographical convention."¹⁹

Yet prior to the colonial period, the region was historically recognized with some clarity by Chinese, Arabic, Egyptian, and even Greek and Roman writers. Such clearly functional recognition was based primarily on the role played by Southeast Asian states in the international trading systems. The Chinese provided for Southeast Asians, as for other barbarians in the theoretical world view of the Middle Kingdom, by dividing the outlying regions according to the points of the compass and in terms of distance. They used the generic terms Nanyang to refer to the region of the Southern Seas and, by the third century B.C., employed the term K'un lun as a referent for islands or states in the Southern Seas. The latter term designated volcanic lands "endowed with marvelous and potent powers" and also denoted ocean-going peoples engaged in international trade.²⁰ The Chinese later divided the region into Burma, Laos, and Annam while maintaining a "separate and distinct set of relationships" for the rest of Southeast Asia.²¹ The Japanese, using a term with a similar meaning, referred to Southeast Asia as Nan yo.²² The early Arabic term gumr, used as a reference for Southeast Asia, was later replaced by Waq-Waq,²³ which evolved to mean all of the little-known area from Madagascar to Japan.²⁴ The term Zabag was