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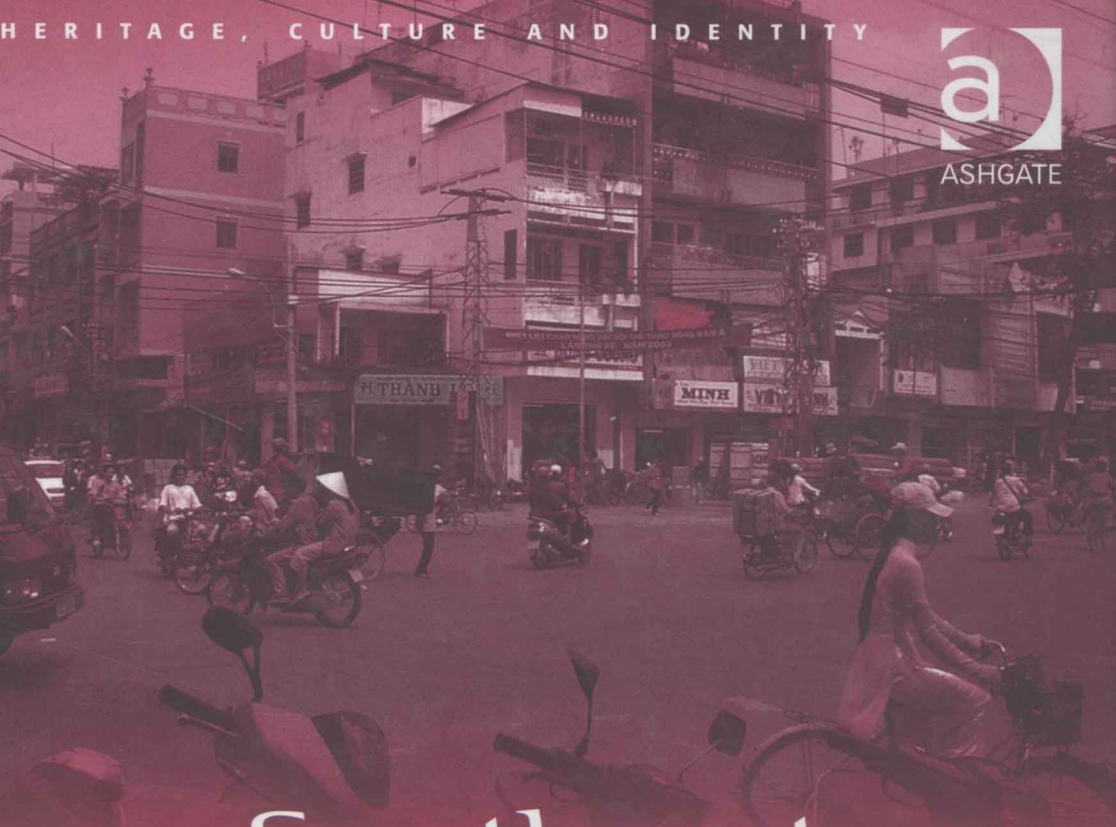

Southeast Asian Culture and Heritage in a Globalising World

Diverging Identities in a Dynamic Region

Edited by
RAHIL ISMAIL, BRIAN SHAW
and OOI GIOK LING

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Foreword

Southeast Asian Culture and Heritage in a Globalising World is a welcome scholarly addition to the ongoing conversation about global futures, especially as it pertains to Southeast Asia. This volume, in papers that look both backward and forward, is especially welcome in that the contributors are insiders and those with an intimate knowledge of the region. The voices are therefore authentic and the analysis both rigorous and sympathetic.

Southeast Asia's ancient and recent histories, its diversity and its mix of future and past in its urban, and still considerable rural habitats, are unique; it is the crossroad of metropolitan and regional cultures. Southeast Asia is simultaneously coming to terms with persistent tradition, modernity and post modernity. Its success and failures in managing wrenching change will offer valuable insights into how change processes involving the local, national, regional and global can be managed.

Of particular interest is the serious attention devoted in this volume to the ways in which traditional resources or heritage is used, deliberately and accidentally, worked and reworked to satisfy multiple audiences. 'Instant Asia' may be a catchy marketing slogan but it grossly undervalues enduring Asia. Several papers in this volume look at several aspects ranging from curriculum reform, ethnic enclaves, tourism islands, and commemorative spaces, using them as illustrative ethnoscapes to detail the ways in which change is being confronted and managed. One concern is the possibility that the new cultural geographies being created by change may not be sustainable or provide for equitable and sustainable development. That remains to be seen but I remain confident in the resilience of enduring values and ways of living.

Professors Ismail, Shaw and Ooi are to be congratulated on their efforts in turning conference papers into a well-edited and compelling volume. I am certain that it will be a major text in university courses and indeed read more widely amongst those who will want to better understand the region.

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Preface

The Southeast Asian Geography Association (SEAGA) is proud to have provided the platform upon which the ideas for this book of insightful essays on heritage and identity issues in the region have been developed. The association is an international network of scholars, academics, educators and professionals, who are working on, as well as in, the Southeast Asian region. This network has met biennially in different Southeast Asian locations since its 1990 inception in Brunei Darussalam. Its success is a tribute to the vision displayed by Professor Goh Kim Chuan, the early driving force behind the Association, and more latterly Professor Ooi Giok Ling who has presided over the last two SEAGA meetings from 2006.

During the 2006 SEAGA International Conference held in Singapore, a number of the authors of the essays in this book met to deliberate the politics of heritage, culture and identity in the port cities as well as other coastal cities in Southeast Asia, conservation of ethnic neighbourhoods in fast growing world cities as well as the meanings of regional and local identities in a globalising world. These are themes that are important to the fast growing and changing region of Southeast Asia and its people. While material needs – food, housing, energy, infrastructure for health, transport and environment among others – remain important in shaping the cultural landscapes of the region, the turmoil that continues to challenge state and society in the Southeast Asian region appears to revolve around the nation-state and its meanings in relation to ethnicity, cultural heritage, place and belonging.

The essays in the book have noted that with global competition, governments in Southeast Asia have been responding in myriad ways in the bid to attract international investors, businesses and tourists. Contestation between local and global needs have emerged throughout the region as governments decide between investments in international airports and telecommunications infrastructure or basic housing, clean water supply and such more localised needs. The bid by national and city governments to integrate more closely with the global economy also implies rapid change that has led to social fragmentation and the exclusion of large segments of society from the benefits that globalisation purportedly brings.

In the process of change, the authors rightly point out that the state, market and institutions in society in the Southeast Asian region act as cultural and social gatekeepers. Much of the time, policy decisions and market developments will have impact and implications for the context in which identities are formed and shaped together with its attendant meanings. Although globalisation suggests that de-territorialisation will be a major outcome in processes that are changing the region, clearly trends point to the contrary as varying forms of civic engagement appear to be rallying around identities that are very much linked to nationalities,

ethnicity and common cultural backgrounds. These civic processes involving citizens demanding political reforms and attention to neglected social policies have been organised around places that have become icons of political reforms and change – Edsa in Manila in the Philippines and Independence Square in Bangkok, Thailand.

Southeast Asia has always been at the crossroads of cultural exchange and the meeting of varying cultures – east and west, Asian, Southeast and East Asian. Today it remains a region that is facing increasing cultural diversity with globalisation and the international migration of labour. The essays in this book therefore address issues that are at the heart of the development dilemmas faced by societies in the region. The questions that are posed and answered concern the choices that Southeast Asian societies must make now and in the future as they face the supposedly culturally homogenising forces of globalisation as well as the impact of rapid social and cultural change that economic growth has brought about in the region.

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Brian J. Shaw

Introduction

Writing on the modern history of the region, Nicholas Tarling begins with the statement that 'Southeast Asia is marked by ethnic diversity' (Tarling 2001, 3). This statement recognises the importance of Southeast Asia as a cultural crossroads, a quality that has given rise to high levels of ethnic pluralism, not only between countries, sub-regions and urban areas but also at the local levels of community and neighbourhood. The foundations for such diversity can be traced back to the earliest migrations of early *Homo* populations, which settled in the region some 1.5 million years ago, characterised today as 'Java Man' by virtue of extensive fossil finds at Sangiran, in present-day central Java. However, notwithstanding the region's claim to importance in human prehistory during the Pleistocene Epoch, it is the more recent migrations occurring during the present Holocene period, specifically between 12,000 and 5,000 years BP, which are now credited by archaeologists as laying the foundations of the region's current ethnolinguistic diversity (Bellwood and Glover 2004). By that time, the area now occupied by present day China was an 'ethnic mosaic' with no less than five language families, namely the Sino-Tibetan, Austroasiatic, Tai, Hmong-Mien and Austronesian, making up the earliest populations of agricultural villages based on the cultivation of foxtail and broomcorn millet in the north and rice in the south (Bellwood 2004; Bellwood and Glover 2004).

Subsequent migrations, through Vietnam and the Malay Peninsula and via Taiwan and the Philippines, expanded these populations throughout the region, and beyond. Most spectacularly, the Austronesian dispersals that occurred between 5,500 and 1,000 years BP took such peoples into Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia, and ultimately as far as Hawai'i and Easter Island (Bellwood 2004). It was however in the fertile flood plains of the Southeast Asian mainland that the great agrarian kingdoms developed, based on intensive wet-rice cultivation systems that were finely attuned to the cycle of the prevailing monsoon (Wolters 1999). Here the highest caloric output per land area was achieved for cultivated grain, sustaining the economy and culture of successive agrarian empires that fostered the development of urban centres with their military power, religious institutions and artistic and cultural elites. However, as Owen (2005, 9) points out,

> ... these kingdoms rarely managed to establish long-term political, economic, religious or linguistic control over the uplands that surrounded them ... hill peoples, often ethnically and linguistically different from those below ... would seek protection from the next adjoining kingdom, manipulating tribute relationships to try to sustain their security.

Scholars have characterised such territorial arrangements as akin to the concept of the *mandala*, a Sanskrit term, which used in this way symbolises the waxing and waning of territories and group allegiances in the absence of firm boundaries and declared identities (Higham 1989). In a region where land was plentiful and population density still relatively low, rulers were more interested in the number of potential slaves that might be captured by a conquering army, rather than in the control of land *per se* (Jerndal and Rigg 1998).

Inevitably the history of the region has revolved around the stories of these 'kingdoms and super-kingdoms' such as the Mon-Khmer kingdom of Funan established at least two thousand years ago, the Khmer civilisation at Angkor, Champa in present day Vietnam, Pagan in Burma, Ayudhaya in today's southern Thailand, and the more recently documented sea-borne empire of Srivijaya (Tarling 2001, 10–15) (see Figure 1.1). Such predisposition has tended to downplay the fortunes of people living in highland areas, those who for the most part lived without written records. Moreover, lowlander prejudice towards these highland groups has defined their interrelationship in a classic 'hill-valley' dualism. Geography and ethnicity combined to produce minority groups in places such as present day Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam, while in Burma the Shans, Karens and other minorities belied the concept of the nation-state. Yet, Milton Osborne (2000, 53) makes the point that hill peoples, while outsiders, 'played an important if highly varied role throughout the region. They could supply, or be a source of slaves, trade in forest products, or offer special skills such as the training of elephants.' However, while the highland ethnic minorities may have enhanced the glory of kings this most probably was not in conditions of their own choosing. As the Chinese emissary to Angkor, Zhou Daguan, saw fit to observe in the late thirteenth century,

> Wild men from the hills can be bught (sic) to serve as slaves. Families of wealth may own more than one hundred; those of lesser means content themselves with ten or twenty; only the very poor have none (Freeman and Jacques 2006, 37).

The extent to which the emergence of the 'god-king' (*deva-raja*) endowed with mystical power and exalted status derives from the transfer of Indian culture and religion has been the subject of intense debate. Certainly the establishment of both overland and maritime trade connections between the sub-continent and the lands of 'Further India' immediately to the east fostered acculturation, but the prevailing wisdom now favours a process of 'localisation' whereby Southeast Asian societies adapted elements of both Indic and Sinic culture to meet their

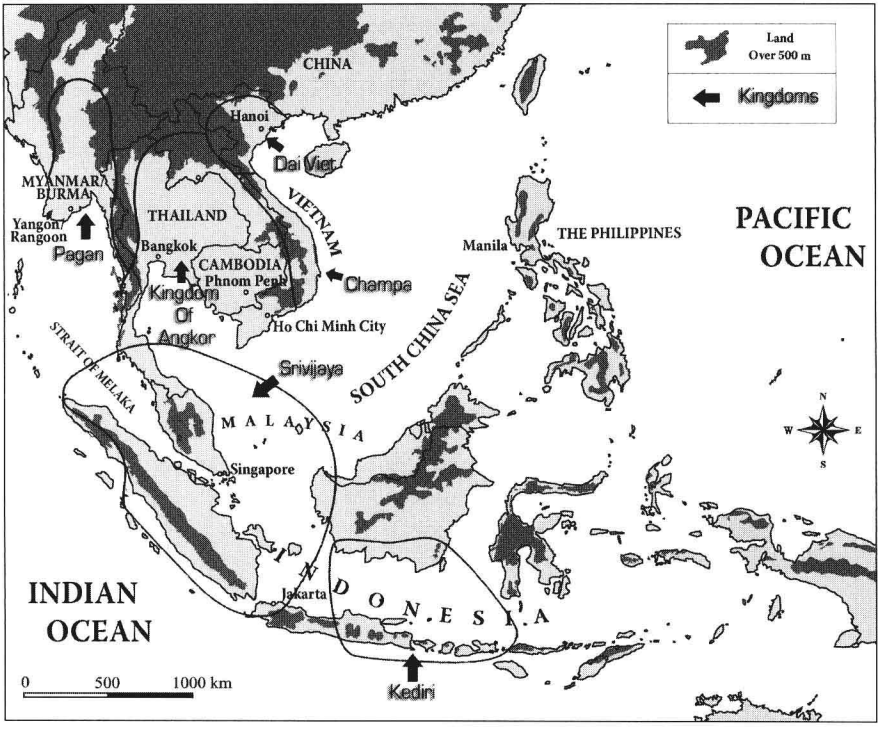

Figure 1.1 Southeast Asia

Source: Map by Bernard Shaw.

own needs (Hill 2002; Bellina and Glover 2004). Osborne (2000, 5–6) makes the point that the countries of Southeast Asia were neither 'little Indias' nor 'little Chinas', arguing the case for broad similarities across a wide area, through the adoption of the nuclear or individual family and the existence of linguistic unity particularly enhanced through the wide usage of Tai and Indonesian/Malay languages. But Osborne (2000, 8) then argues against his own thesis stressing 'the profound differences that do exist from place to place and between one ethnic group and another'. This apparent *volte-face* underlines the fundamental impasse that pervades the contents of this volume; to what extent should we celebrate the continuities that have formed this region's separate identity, or alternatively, stress the fragmentary nature of group and national identity and the challenges these pose for longer-term economic, political and social sustainability?