

Southeast Asia in World History

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Introduction

This brief essay will introduce a number of points at which the largely ignored region of Southeast Asia can be usefully integrated into a standard world history curriculum. Every semester I teach at least one section of modern world history; a required course for my university's 18,000 undergraduate students. As anyone who has taught such a one semester course will understand, there simply isn't time to delve deeply into the history of any country or region. Instead, we attempt to develop unifying themes that enable undergraduates to connect otherwise dispersed narratives and weave them into a coherent whole. This is a difficult job for both teachers and students. So, how can Southeast Asia be integrated into instruction to assist students and teachers create that coherent whole?

While Southeast Asia may seem peripheral in global events, and even to developments between Asia's major civilizations, the region possesses an important characteristic that lends itself to world history. Southeast Asia has always been a regional crossroads that accepts religious, cultural and philosophical infusions from outside and syncretically integrates them into its own preexisting cultural sensibilities. The eleven countries of the region (the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, East Timor, Singapore, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Burma/Myanmar) comprise a mosaic the complexity of which is greater than any other part of the world. Southeast Asia has incorporated Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Islam, and Christianity, even as it continues to maintain a healthy indigenous base of animistic belief in the power of a large pantheon of spirits and natural forces. The island states are part of the larger Malay-Polynesian family of languages while the mainland states speak a variety of tonal languages such as Thai-Lao and Vietnamese as well as the Mon-Khmer family of languages, Burmese, and a variety of lesser languages. At various times, the influence of India, China, and Europe have seemed to overwhelm Southeast Asia only to recede, leaving behind trace reminders of their presence even as aspects of their cultures have been thoroughly integrated into the larger whole of the region. At the same time, Southeast Asia has often been a key player in the global economy and has reflected a variety of political developments while offering variations that are useful for a world history curriculum.

All too frequently, world history texts do not use Southeast Asia as a counterpoint to other nations of the region nor to exemplify global trends. While the purpose of this essay is not to critique college level world history textbooks, I should note that for my classes I have adopted *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart* by Robert Tignor, et al. I decided on this textbook for two major reasons the first is its chronological and thematic approach. Most textbooks break their narrative into individual country or region chapters thereby forcing students to make connections between a series of seemingly discrete information blocks that chapters represent. The Tignor volume, on the other hand, encompasses an entire global analysis within each chapter organized by blocks of time rather than geographic areas. This chronological approach makes the comparative task and

thematic analysis easier for both students and teachers. As an Asianist, I also appreciated its substantial narrative devoted to Asia.

Still, even this comprehensive textbook only makes scant reference to Southeast Asia. Volume two covers the modern era and in this opening chapter (number 10) that reviews the major contents of the first volume; Southeast Asia is given a very competent general analysis. The remainder of the volume, however, says surprisingly little about the region preferring to limit its analysis merely to the colonial Dutch in Indonesia (in chapters 13 and 17) and, more recently, the French and American wars in Vietnam (in chapter 20). In one other instance a third Southeast Asian nation is mentioned, but the text is incorrect. Chapter 17 claims (pp. 748-749) that turn of the century Filipinos were bitter with the United States at the time of the Spanish-American war because the Americans did not keep their promise to make the islands independent if they joined the US war against Spain. The authors also claim that Filipinos launched a war for independence against the United States. In fact, Filipinos rose against Spain in 1896, two years before the Spanish-American war began. As well, Commodore John Dewey did promise American assistance in gaining independence which reignited the rebellion, but when fighting broke out between the two allies, Filipinos had already declared independence, formed a government, and adopted a constitution. Instead, it was US forces who attacked the Filipinos – just the day before the critical and uncertain vote on the peace treaty ending the war with Spain. The vote went the administration's way as news of the "Filipino treachery" reached the legislators en route to the Senate chamber. The full implication of this imperialist era manipulation offers obvious opportunities for interesting classroom discussions that might make use of numerous current parallels in world affairs.

So, if the 1899-1902 American war on the independent Filipino government could be used in the teaching of world history, what other lessons might we draw from the region and its history?

Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era

While many world history courses covering the "modern era to the present" start around 1500, it is not uncommon for instructors to give some critical background that often includes the Mongol conquests of the 1200s that so fundamentally reshaped much of the world. Mention is often made of the failed Mongol invasions of Japan especially in regard to the myth of the protective god of the wind or "kami kazi" that saved that island nation. However, little mention is made of two failed Mongol invasions of Vietnam. The first invasion came in 1257 after the Mongol ambassador was imprisoned by the Vietnamese king. In this instance, the Mongol force sent to punish the upstart kingdom was too small and was repulsed. Later in 1285, Kublai Khan dispatched a force of 500,000 men under the command of his son Prince Toghani and General Sogetu against Vietnam and the state of Champa, located in the central region of today's Vietnam. Both kings fled their capitals but led guerrilla resistance movements that resulted in heavy Mongol casualties including the death of General Sogetu and the humiliation of Prince Toghani. This historical example from Southeast Asia could be used to illustrate the limits of Mongol power, perhaps better than the freakish event of a fortuitous storm that saved Japan from invasion. The Vietnam/Champa example also illustrates the futility that even a strong nation is likely to encounter if it attempts to subject its will on a united people. Like Ho Chi Minh, the

royal guerrilla resistance leader of the late 1200s, Prince Tran Quoc Taon, is still venerated and treated as a deity.

In addition to the Vietnamese/Champa case, the Mongols were also indirectly responsible for the emergence of the Thai peoples in Southeast Asia. In 1253 Mongol armies conquered the Thai state of Nan Chao located in today's southwestern Chinese province of Yunnan which drove the Thai people to migrate en masse into Southeast Asia. This population movement was further facilitated by the Mongols who destroyed the Burmese kingdom of Pagan in 1287 thereby keeping a dangerous rival at bay until the Thais had the opportunity to establish themselves. In this manner, the Southeast Asian example parallels the rise of both the Turkish Ottoman Empire and the Saffavid Empire in what is now the modern state of Iran. In these other cases, Mongol conquests had sufficiently weakened Arab regimes and allowed other peoples to emerge. Here, again, Southeast Asia provides an example to further highlight the themes of a world history analysis.

A pre-1500 discussion of the role of Southeast Asia in a world history curriculum should also include mention of another Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1407 under the Ming dynasty. Since the Ming was founded after the collapse of Mongol rule in 1368, this dynasty is frequently stereotyped as reacting against foreign rule by turning inward in fear of the hostile non-Chinese world. Whatever validity this stereotype may or may not have, the rule of the dynasty's third emperor, the Youngle Emperor, was a brilliant exception. This was the era when the emperor sent Admiral Zheng He on seven massive naval expeditions to explore the world and Chinese sailors visited lands as far away as east Africa. The expeditions also intervened in local affairs wherever they went, extending China's influence far beyond its borders.

A concurrent invasion of Vietnam, however, turned out to be as much a disaster for the invading Ming as had the earlier Mongol incursions. Faced with a Chinese occupation plus a policy of enforced Sinicization, the Vietnamese took to the jungles once more. This time the resistance army was led by an aristocrat landowner Le Loi whose fighters finally expelled the Chinese in 1428. After achieving victory Le Loi founded a dynasty that adopted Chinese administrative structures and Confucian philosophy to strengthen Vietnam against future invasions. Though seemingly ironic, the Vietnamese strategy is not unusual. Many East Asians, including the peoples of Korea, Japan, and Manchuria, also assiduously borrowed from the Chinese model to strengthen their regimes. Nor is the borrowing of political institutions unheard of in world history. More recently, the peoples colonized by eighteenth and nineteenth century European imperialists grafted western institutions on to indigenous political patterns as a necessary step to strengthen themselves and regaining independence.

Southeast Asia as a Religious Crossroads

In the pre-modern era, Southeast Asia had been a fertile ground for Hinduism and Buddhism although both religions became infused with substantial amounts of Southeast Asian mysticism. Both religions were introduced by Indian merchants, but the former also owed much to religious scholars and missionaries for its acceptance by early Southeast Asian rulers who were particularly drawn to the Hindu conception of role of the king and his relationship to the source of heavenly power. Later, most of Southeast Asia accepted Theravada Buddhism which, like

Hinduism, emphasizes the sullen nature of this world and the need for release from the cycle of rebirth by improving one's karma. In Theravada, the priestly monks hold a position of strong social prominence. They are active in their local communities where the temple serves as a center of numerous civil as well as religious activities. Especially prominent monks can exercise important levels of political prominence as advisors to the rulers. Today, Theravada Buddhism is found throughout mainland Southeast Asia (Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia) except for Vietnam which adopted Mahayana, the other major branch of Buddhism that was introduced by the Chinese.

Chinese culture could not abide the idea of abstinence from such earthly pleasures as sex (how else can one maintain a large family lineage), food, and prosperity and so syncretically reinterpreted Buddhism to create Mahayana. Nor could the Chinese accept Theravada's strong devotional demands that only the privileged can fulfill in order to break the cycle of rebirth. In fact, Mahayana is often called the "greater vehicle" which denotes how it is more democratic and less demanding than Theravada. Importantly, too, in the ninth century the Chinese broke a connection between religion and political power by initiating strong anti-Buddhist purges. By following the Chinese religious model of government control of religious institutions, Vietnamese rulers insured that their grasp on power would not be threatened by any religious institution. This Chinese political ethic that mistrusts and seeks to control religious institutions helps to explain why both of today's governments do not accept western notions of "religious freedom."

Islam first appeared as early as 1,000, but was not generally accepted in Southeast Asia until the thirteenth century. Three factors seem to have been critical to Islam's eventual success. The first was the conversion of Indian merchants from Gujarat and the Coromandel Coast who brought their religion with them on trading visits. A second factor was the work of Sufi mystic missionaries. It was this quality of mysticism that helped assure Islam's acceptance since Sufism's beliefs seemed compatible with indigenous religiosity. And finally, the founding of the port city of Malacca by a prince from the adjacent island of Sumatra in 1402 and his conversion gave Islam a firm base. Malacca soon became an economic success as Southeast Asia's primary port controlling much of the valuable spice trade.

Islam spread rapidly throughout the Indonesian archipelago along the route of merchants active in the spice trade. Somewhat later, the conversion of Mataram in central and eastern Java in 1525 gave Islam the added support of a state wealthy from a substantial rice economy as well as merchant activity. Mataram became a bastion both for Islam and resistance to Dutch colonial intrusions until it was finally subdued in the 1770s. When Spaniards entered Manila Bay in 1570, their native rival was a nominal Muslim named Rajah Soliman who they had to subdue in battle. The Spanish experience shows that by the time Europeans arrived, Islam had already established itself across Southeast Asia and may only have lost ground subsequently in the Philippines where the religion was still very new.

Much has been made of the very relaxed practice of Islam in Southeast Asia. In fact, the region's Muslims did not at first seem to practice their religion with great rigor. The religion's relative newness, the influence of Sufi mysticism, and the lack of religion teachers resulted in a

practice of Islam that varied greatly from its Middle Eastern roots. Ironically, however, Christian Europeans may have unintentionally increased island Southeast Asia's commitment to their new religious identity.

Early Portuguese merchants and, especially, Spanish colonizers brought a strong measure of religious intolerance stemming from centuries of struggle against the "Moors" who occupied the Iberian Peninsula. In Spain the bitter struggle was known as the "Reconquista" and Philippine Muslims were dismissively referred to as "Moros" by Spanish officials who sent numerous expeditions to the southern islands in futile efforts to subdue the resistive population. Meanwhile, fleets of Muslim raiders regularly pillaged Christian areas gathering loot and taking hostages to sell on the international slave market. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century and the introduction of steam powered patrol boats that outran the Muslim *vintas* that Spain gained a clear advantage in its struggle for control. But, hundreds of years had left their mark. For Philippine Muslims the term "slave" became synonymous with Christian Filipinos, while Muslims were characterized as "pirates."

For the rest of Islamic Southeast Asia, the merchant activity that spread the religion similarly motivated Portuguese explorers to make their way to the region where their aggressive actions soon elicited enmity. In 1511, Alfonso de Albuquerque took the port of Malacca from the "Moors" not just to strengthen Portugal, but also to weaken Cairo and Mecca by breaking their hold on the spice trade. The Portuguese then established a number of trading outposts throughout the Spice Islands to dominate the trade. Still, neither the Portuguese nor later the Dutch directly challenged the religious beliefs of the local population; their primary interest was in trade not religion.

It was only in the Philippines where Spanish colonizers impose religious uniformity that Christianity took firm root. In addition to Spain's fierce religiosity, the link of church and state was transferred from the Iberian Peninsula to its Southeast Asian possession. In 1565, the original colonizing expedition was led by two men, Captain-General Miguel López de Legazpi and his navigator Fr. Andrés de Urdaneta. This symbolic linkage of church and state characterized Spanish colonialism. Throughout the colony's long Spanish occupation, most Spaniards remained in Manila while the hinterlands were controlled by missionary priests, or friars, who administered the archipelago's towns in exchange for an annual royal subsidy that supported their religious work. Spain needed the archipelago as a buffer to protect Manila which became extremely valuable in a global trade circuit that enriched the empire. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Protestantism arrived in Southeast Asia, but was largely limited to minority groups such as the Shan and Karen in Burma and some of the immigrant Chinese population of Malaysia. For most of the colonial era European colonizers had other agendas rather than proselytizing their religious beliefs.

Southeast Asia in the Global Economy

From the first Portuguese explorers through the early decades of the nineteenth century, Southeast Asia played a critical role in Europe's economic rise. The Portuguese dominated spice trade, which fell to the militarily stronger Dutch in 1641, brought great wealth to the merchants who controlled the traffic. European control of the spice trade also led to a reversal of economic

fortunes vis-à-vis the Ottoman Empire. But it was the Spaniards who created a truly global economy using Manila as their base. Thanks to a Ming dynasty decree of 1430, all taxes in that country were to be paid in silver. At first, silver was imported from neighboring Japan, but that source could not meet China's huge demand. Once Spain established itself in the "New World," she began extensive mining operations to extract gold for export to Europe. But, mines in the Americas yielded far more than gold. Many mines in Mexico, Bolivia, and Peru were also rich in the silver that the Chinese so desperately wanted. Now, Europe had an item for exchange with China.

In 1571, only one year after the founding of Manila, the first galleon loaded with silver made its way to Spain's Asian outpost. Silver was off loaded and Chinese junks took the precious metal in exchange for rich silks, pottery, perfumed woods, and many other products that were then shipped to Mexico and onward to Europe. This galleon trade brought one ship per year from Acapulco and back. That one voyage subsidized the Spanish community in Manila and made the colony a profitable venture. The galleon trade also created a complete circuit connecting Europe, the Americas and Asia in a true circular world economic exchange.

From these early times until the early decades of the nineteenth century, Southeast Asia remained a profitable venue for exotic spices and Chinese luxury items, but the rise of free trade and modern capitalism was destined to remake the region as it would the rest of the globe. With the publication of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776 (a truly revolutionary year) the mercantilist royal companies that dominated Asia's ports and exports were faced with declining fortunes and abolition. By the 1820s Spain's galleon trade had ended. British and Dutch royal companies were phased out and a new more economically intrusive form of colonialism began.

As was also true in Africa and India, the colonies of Southeast Asia increasingly lost their political autonomy to colonial officers who oversaw the economic exploitation of the country. Whether it was tobacco, hemp, and sugar in the Philippines, rubber and tin in Malaya, coffee, sugar, and rubber in Indonesia, or rubber and rice in Vietnam, the region was transformed into a producer of raw materials for the new industrial economy. In a few short years, formerly self-sufficient villages were reduced to production centers for agricultural export crops. This agricultural monoculture left villagers exposed and vulnerable to market fluctuations and devastating plant diseases and insects. Concurrently, sizeable immigrant populations were introduced from China and India while internal population shifts further disrupted lives. In the new economy, European usually owned the largest operations while immigrant Chinese filled a secondary role in the colonial economy and the natives either labored in the fields tending the export crops or grew foodstuffs that fed the agricultural laborers.

Political Change and Nationalism

Although the native population had been subordinated economically and politically in most of Southeast Asia, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries two countries, the Philippines and Vietnam, offered spirited resistance to colonial rule and sparked the rise of modern nationalism. The Philippines was the first to start a modern nationalist movement and revolution. The advantage this colony enjoyed was the economic role played by Chinese mestizos who took the lead in developing the hinterlands for the new capitalist free market

economy. Manila's Spanish population evidenced no desire to leave the comfort of their sumptuous homes safely tucked inside the protective walls of Fort Santiago. Instead, it was the Chinese mixed bloods who had been long confined to a Manila ghetto called the Parian, who ventured forth to develop the country. Having been raised by their Filipina mothers, this group had an understanding of the local culture that they put to good use when dealing with the farmers in the countryside. While there were some Spaniards who created haciendas and agricultural enterprises, the new wealthy were the mestizos.

As the mestizo group became wealthy, they sent their sons to universities in Manila and, especially, Europe. Soon, a new generation of mestizos, along with the sons of a few native elite families, were reading the philosophers of the French Enlightenment and learning to live in a European society that did not discriminate against them as did the colonials back home. Much of their agitation was led by a young medical doctor Jose Rizal whose talents extended to writing deeply sarcastic prose. His 1886 novel *Noli Me Tangere* (variously translated from the Latin as either *The Social Cancer* or *Touch Me Not*) held the Spaniards up to unrelenting ridicule and dissected the pernicious nature of colonial domination.

Returning to the Philippines, Rizal attempted to establish a reform society but was arrested the following day and sent into exile. This example led one of the reform society members, Andres Bonifacio, to found a revolutionary society, the Katipunan, dedicated to gathering weapons for an uprising that would expel the Spanish colonizers. The discovery of the existence of the Katipunan precipitated the 1896 revolution mentioned earlier in this essay. American military power eventually overwhelmed the fragile Philippine Republic and a conscious American colonial policy of attraction soon won over all but the most intransigent nationalists. Nevertheless, the early revolt lived on the Filipino consciousness and independence was sought throughout the American colonial period.

For their part, the Vietnamese had a long tradition of resisting Chinese invaders and the French were confronted with a series of movements that spanned the entirety of their colonial rule. The series began in 1884 with a Royalist revolt loyal to the Vietnamese imperial line and a near simultaneous peasant rebellion led by the colorful leader De Tham, the "Tiger of Yen-The." While these were eventually squelched, an underground party that patterned itself on China's Nationalist Party of Sun Yat-sen emerged in the 1920s. That movement was also suppressed by the French secret police, but was soon replaced by a communist party founded by Nguyen Ai Quoc, a young idealist who had tried to petition the delegates of the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference to grant his country independence based on Woodrow Wilson's 14 Points. The young man and his petition were dismissed and he turned to socialism. After training in Moscow he returned to Asia where he spent much of his time in China. At the end of World War II that same young man, now two decades older, changed his name to Ho Chi Minh and continued to lead his country's fight against the French and then the United States until his death in 1969.

The other colonized countries of Southeast Asia later reflected the Philippine and Vietnamese struggles and their nationalist development followed paths that adopted strategies from each. Indonesia, for example, combined the nationalist agitation of the Philippine example

with the armed resistance of determined Vietnam guerrilla forces when the Dutch attempted to re-impose its colonial rule after World War II.

In Southeast Asia only Thailand avoided colonial rule which makes it an especially valuable addition to a world history curriculum. In the Thai case, the country was fortunate to have two factors that allowed the country to maintain its independence; its geographic position between two European rivals and the wise diplomatic and modernizing policies of two of its kings, Mongkut and Chulalongkron. Located between British dominated Burma to the west and British Malay to the south and French Indochina to the east, Thailand was able to play one European power off against the other. For their parts, the British and French came to a mutual understanding that neither country would interfere with the Thai kingdom so that a costly colonial war could be avoided. At the same time, the kings initiated a series of internal reforms designed to strengthen the country. Their modernizing policies, like the Japanese under the Meiji, sought to bring the country up to contemporary standards that would therefore be instrumental in minimizing conditions that might otherwise invite intervention. Advisors from the two rival European countries, and nationals of still other European countries, were contracted to oversee the reforms thereby giving a number of countries an interest in maintaining the status quo. In all cases, however, the reforms were top-down edicts promulgated in a manner that was not dissimilar to Japanese reforms, and no political reforms were allowed that might challenge the position of the Chakri dynasty. The Thai example was unique in Southeast Asia and can be used to illustrate the complex manner by which the colonial enterprise manifested itself on a global scale.

For all of Southeast Asia, World War II was a watershed. Nationalist movements were accelerated even as the colonizers were shown to be vulnerable to the Japanese war machine. By 1945 an exhausted Europe was no longer in a position to exert its will upon formerly subject peoples. Both the Dutch and French attempted to reassert themselves but failed. The non-communist Indonesian leader Sukarno was assisted by the United States that pressured The Netherlands to abandon its effort to subdue its former imperial possession. On the other hand, the tragedy of the Vietnamese revolution was its communist leadership under Ho Chi Minh that earned the enmity of US president Harry S. Truman who extended American support to the ultimately disastrous French war.

Southeast Asia Today

With the legacy of colonialism behind them, the contemporary nations of Southeast Asia are all members of the global community. Their common regional body the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a leader in regional affairs and is the host of the annual Asia-Pacific Regional Forum that expands to include India, China, Japan, Korea, the European Union, and the United States. The region went through a severe economic shock in 1997 that brought leadership changes to the governments of Thailand and Indonesia, but Southeast Asia has rebounded and is again a region of economic mini-dragons. With the exception of Burma, renamed Myanmar, the region is also an area of democratic reform and educational progress that bodes well for the new century.

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