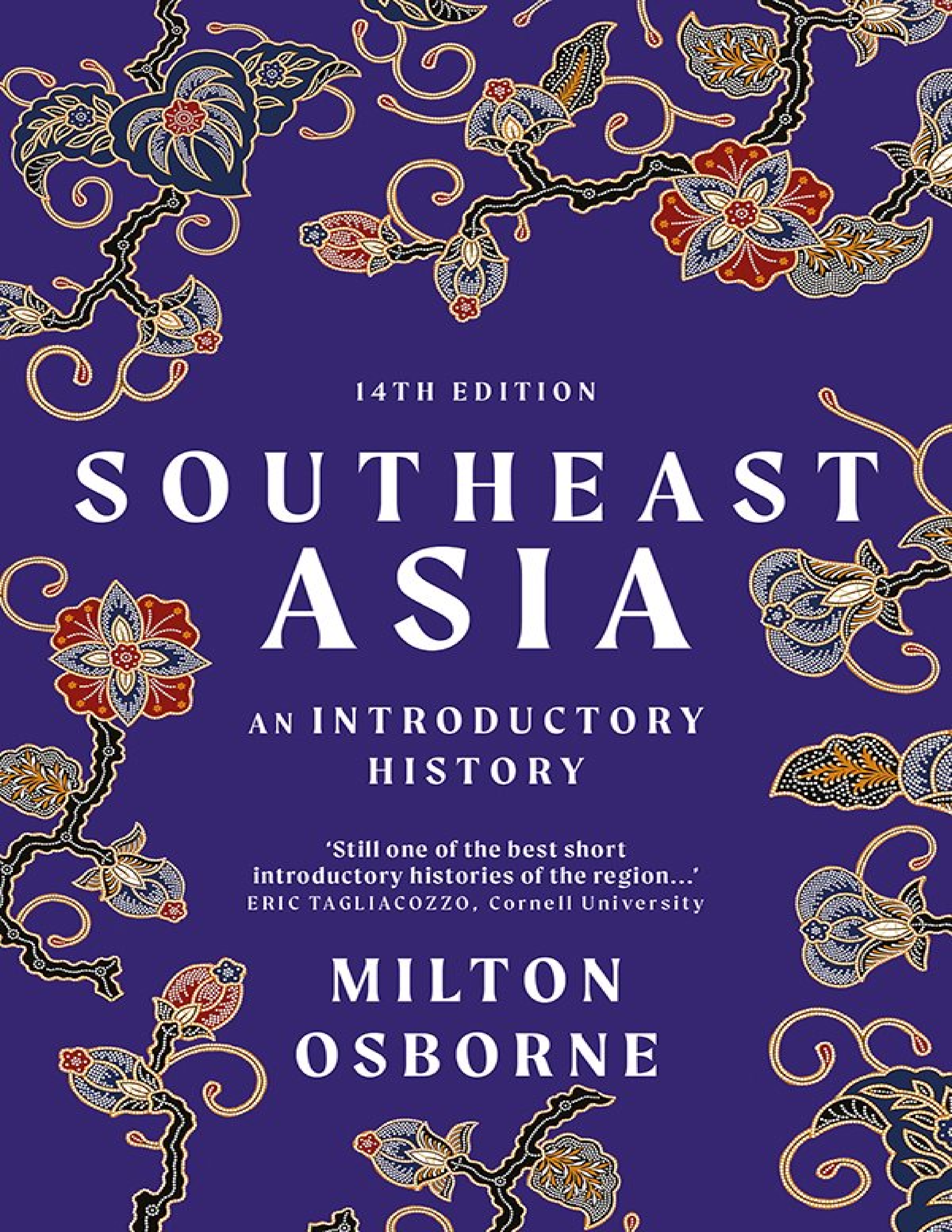

14TH EDITION

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*The Paramount Power: China and the Countries of Southeast Asia*, 2006
*The Mekong: River Under Threat*, 2009

Dr Milton Osborne is a writer and consultant on Asian issues and the author of many books, including *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*, *River Road to China*, *The Mekong: Turbulent Past, Uncertain Future* and *Exploring Southeast Asia: A Traveller's Guide to the Region*. He is a regular visitor to Southeast Asia and is a former Non-resident Fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy.

# SOUTHEAST ASIA

## AN INTRODUCTORY HISTORY

14th edition

MILTON OSBORNE

ALLEN&UNWIN
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# Contents

Maps, graphs and diagrams
Introduction

1 What is Southeast Asia?
2 The ‘classical’ background to modern Southeast Asian history
3 Courts, kings and peasants: Southeast Asia before the European impact
4 Minorities and slaves: the outsiders in Traditional Southeast Asia
5 The European advance and challenge
6 Economic transformation
7 The Asian immigrants in Southeast Asia
8 The years of illusion: Southeast Asia between the wars, 1918–41
9 The Second World War in Southeast Asia
10 Revolution and revolt: Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaya and the Philippines
11 Other paths to independence
12 An end to post-colonial settlements and beyond I: Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos
13 An end to post-colonial settlements and beyond II: Burma (Myanmar), Malaya, Singapore, the Philippines and the Thai exception
14 The challenges of independence in Southeast Asia
15 Past and present

Appendix: Discovering Southeast Asia through art and literature

Suggested readings
Timeline
Index

# Maps, graphs and diagrams

**Maps**

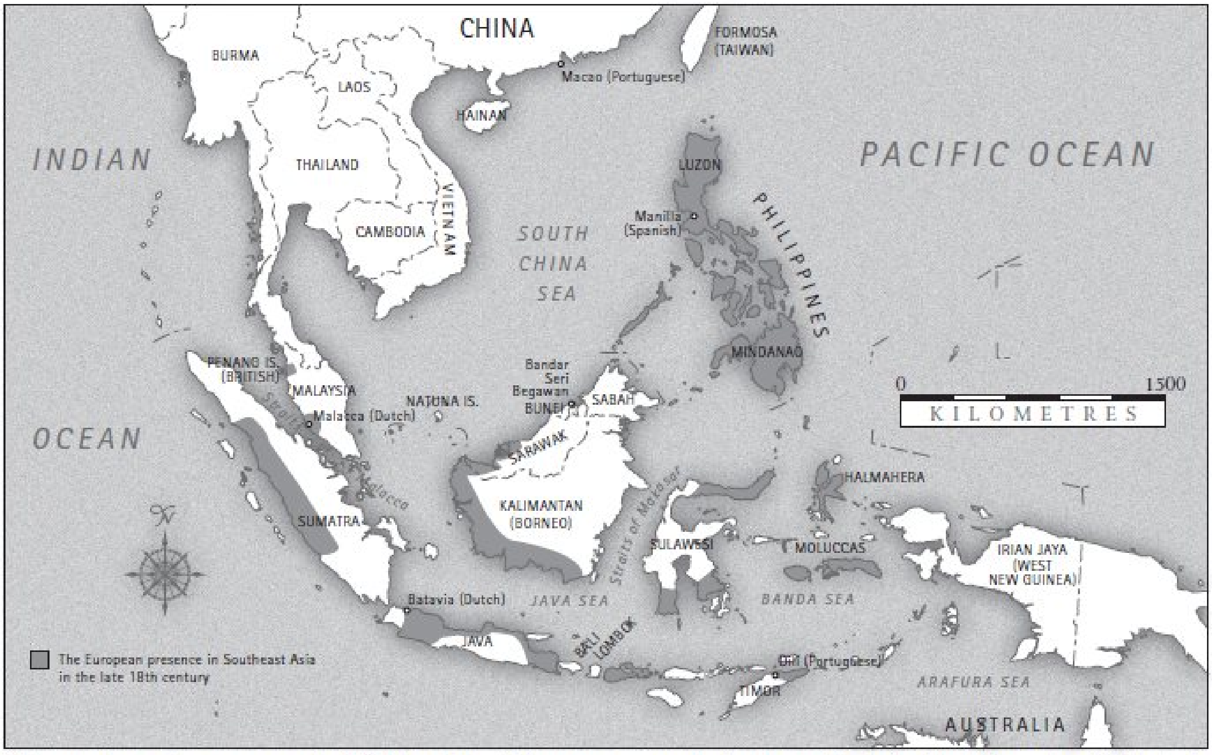
The European presence in Southeast Asia in the late 18th century
Modern Southeast Asia
Mainland Southeast Asia: Distribution of Tai-speaking peoples
The Angkorian empire at the height of its power in the twelfth century
The trading empire of Srivijaya
A simplified ethnolinguistic map of Burma
The making of modern peninsular Malaysia
Four key cities of the Indonesian revolution
Vietnam at the end of the First Indochina War

**Graphs**

Rapid urban growth in Southeast Asia
Population growth in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, 1800–2020

**Diagrams**

Schematic representation of the disposition of power in traditional Vietnamese society
Schematic representation of the disposition of power in the traditional Buddhist states of mainland Southeast Asia
A simplified family tree emphasising the change from being Chinese to becoming Cambodian


CHINA
FORMOSA (TAIWAN)
BURMA
LAOS
Macao (Portuguese)
HAINAN
INDIAN
OCEAN
PACIFIC OCEAN
THAILAND
VIETNAM
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SOUTH CHINA SEA
LUZON
Manilla (Spanish)
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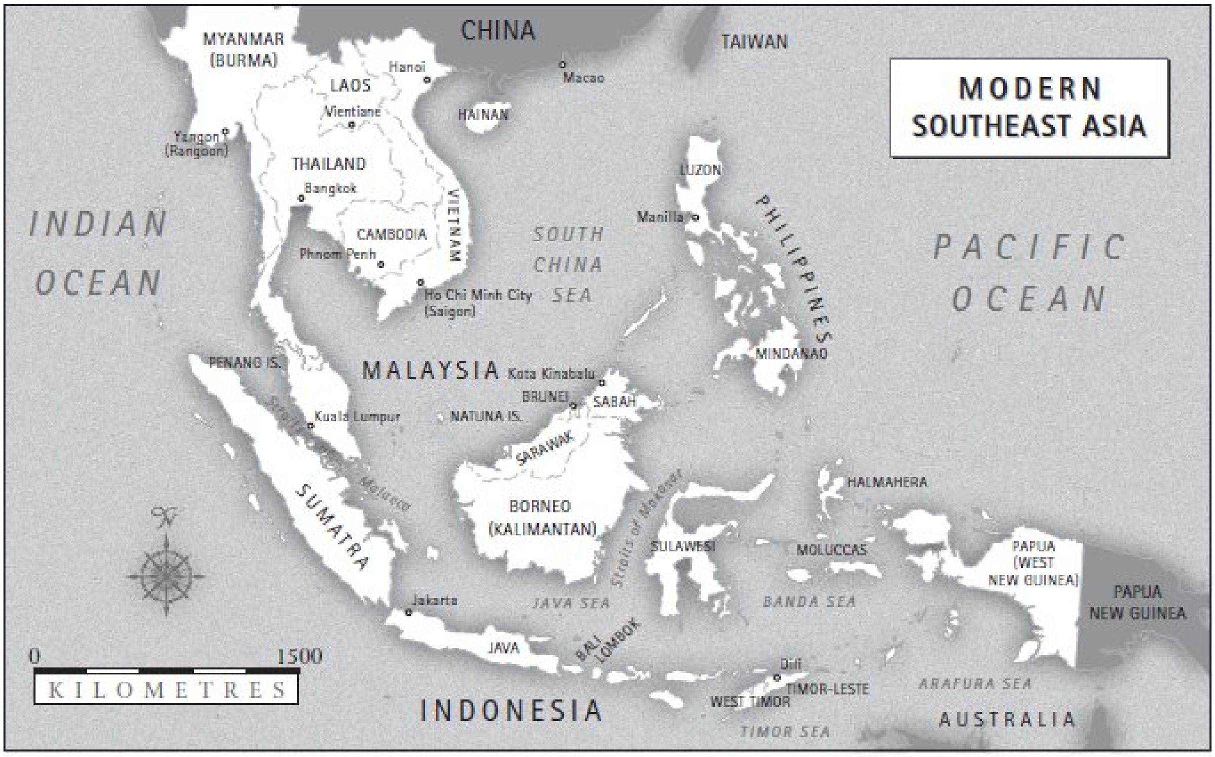
KILOMETRES
PENANG IS. (BRITISH)
MALAYSIA
Malacca (Dutch)
NATUNA IS.
Bandar Seri Begawan
BUNEI
SABAH
SARAWAK
Straits of Malacca
KALIMANTAN (BORNEO)
Straits of Makasar
SUMATRA
SULAWESI
HALMAHERA
MOLUCCAS
IRIAN JAYA (WEST NEW GUINEA)
Batavia (Dutch)
JAVA SEA
BANDA SEA
JAVA
BALI
LOMBOK
Dili (Portuguese)
TIMOR
ARAFURA SEA
AUSTRALIA
N
▨ The European presence in Southeast Asia in the late 18th century

This map shows, in a very generalised fashion, claimed European presence in Southeast Asia in the late 18th century. Points to be noted are: no European power held colonial positions on mainland Southeast Asia (the Malay Peninsula is considered part of maritime Southeast Asia); with the exception of Dutch Batavia (modern Jakarta) and Spanish Manila, European settlement in the maritime Southeast Asian world was very small in both numbers and power; the shading used should not be regarded as a reflection of regions, rather it should be taken as indicating a combination of claimed power and commercial political activity; boundaries and names shown are generally those used in the 20th century.


MODERN SOUTHEAST ASIA
MYANMAR (BURMA)
CHINA
TAIWAN
Hanoi
Macao
LAOS
Vientiane
HAINAN
Yangon (Rangoon)
THAILAND
Bangkok
LUZON
VIETNAM
INDIAN OCEAN
Manilla
PHILIPPINES
CAMBODIA
SOUTH CHINA SEA
Phnom Penh
PACIFIC OCEAN
Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon)
MINDANAO
PENANG IS.
MALAYSIA
Kota Kinabalu
BRUNEI
SABAH
Kuala Lumpur
NATUNA IS.
Straits of Malacca
SARAWAK
HALMAHERA
SUMATRA
BORNEO (KALIMANTAN)
Straits of Makasar
SULAWESI
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INDONESIA
AUSTRALIA
TIMOR SEA

# Introduction

In the Introduction to the first edition of this book I wrote that my aim was ‘to provide an outline of the most important events and developments in modern Southeast Asia—to explain why Southeast Asia is as it is today’. That remains my aim in a book that has increased in length to reflect the fact that much has changed in the region since the first edition was published: Indonesia has embraced democracy; a peaceful settlement was found to the ‘Cambodia problem’ following the tragedies of Pol Pot’s regime and Vietnam’s occupation of the country; Burma (now known as Myanmar) has swung through promises of a democratic future to the renewed imposition of savage military rule, to mention only three of the most prominent changes that have occurred. I also wrote that I hoped, and still hope, readers of this book will move on to read more detailed studies of a region that I continue to find endlessly fascinating.

I also made the point in previous editions of this book that many of the developments that have occurred in recent decades reflect the region’s dynamism and can often only be fully understood in terms of its past history. The economic resilience of the countries of Southeast Asia, despite the ravages of the Asian financial crisis at the end of the twentieth century, is a striking index of the region’s contemporary dynamism. On the other hand, and as an example of the relevance of the past to the present, the prolonged civil unrest in Thailand in the first decade of the present century involving Red and Yellow factions in Bangkok can only be properly understood if account is taken of demographic developments in Thailand in the nineteenth century, and even the early decades of the twentieth.

The same observation can be made about the contemporary separatist movements found in the south of both the Philippines and Thailand. Even with their very different histories there is a common thread in these movements, a deep sense of a differing *identity* on the part of the separatists because of their embrace of Islam in contrast to the Catholic faith of the majority of the Philippines' population and the Buddhist faith of the majority in Thailand. In both cases, a sense exists on the part of the separatists that their *history* is different from that of the majority of the population in both states.

Much of Southeast Asia's history may be viewed in terms of a pattern of challenge and response, with the most striking example of this pattern the region's experience and response to colonialism. But challenges of a different kind faced the rulers and communities before the onset of European colonial expansion: the shaping of societies in the face of environmental and physical challenge, as was the case for complex hydraulic-based society at Angkor, or the mastery of long-haul voyaging by the sailors and traders of Srivijaya as they steered their frail craft from Sumatra to China. What is striking is the extent to which the modern states of Southeast Asia must confront new challenges in societies that have been radically transformed over the past seventy years. The updated statistics in this new edition underline the extent to which Southeast Asian populations are now substantially larger than they were a decade ago, and dramatically larger than was the case at the end of the Second World War: the population of Indonesia's capital, Jakarta, in 1945 was less than a million; today Greater Jakarta has a population of about twenty-two million—by some reckoning and adding in nearby urban agglomerations the figure rises to over thirty million. This growth in urban populations, which has occurred throughout the region, means that past images of Southeast Asia as predominantly rural in character with a small number of primate cities are badly out of date. As more Southeast Asians live in cities and towns their life expectancy has increased and they are gaining greater opportunities for education, developments with strong political overtones, as well as challenges to governments in terms of the demands for services and the provision of employment for the ever-increasing numbers of educated youth.

In seeking to provide an understanding of the historical background to contemporary Southeast Asia and the challenges it confronts this book begins with an outline of early Southeast Asian history. It then concentrates on developments from the eighteenth century onwards as all of the countries in the region, with the exception of Thailand, came under colonial rule. The experience of colonial control, which varied in timing and in nature, exposed the region to a complex pattern of economic transformation. What seemed to some observers as the heyday of colonial control in the 1920s and 1930s was shattered by the Second World War and the subsequent demands for independence. The history of what happened in the post-independence period is then examined in detail. It is followed by a survey of Southeast Asian art in its many forms and of fictional and literary writing about the region in the Appendix.

In revising the book I have taken account of the latest advances in our knowledge of Southeast Asia's history. A notable example involves the discussion of early Cambodian history. It is a topic that has benefited from intense research over the past several decades with new information emerging as the result of technological advances, including the use of Lidar (light detection and ranging) laser beam imaging mentioned in Chapter Two. Overall, it is certainly the case that scholarship in relation to the whole of the region is becoming ever richer and deeper in character. Because this is the case, I have again revised the Suggested Readings in light of recent publications, although with an awareness that this is an *introductory* history so that readers may always look elsewhere for more detailed bibliographic guidance.

As with the three previous editions of my book, I have adopted the now common usage of recording dates as being in or before the 'Common Era' (CE). For simplicity I refer to 'Thailand' throughout the book, rather than to 'Siam', the name used to describe the country before the 1930s. How to refer to the country that has long been known as 'Burma' has proved a challenge, in part because some inhabitants of that country dispute the validity of a change to the new official name of 'Myanmar' for political reasons—the new title of 'The Union of Myanmar' was decreed in 1989. It is still the case that the use of the latter name has not been universally accepted in the English-speaking world. As a compromise: I have continued to refer to 'Burma' followed by the name 'Myanmar' in brackets, when the country is first mentioned in each chapter, until Chapter Fourteen. From that point on I simply refer to 'Myanmar'. The longer the new usage continues the more likely it is that references to 'Burma', at least in relation to the contemporary state, will eventually disappear—this is already the case among the countries that are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). With a high proportion of minorities in the population of Burma—about 30 per cent of the total—there seems no alternative for the moment than to use the term 'Burmese' to refer to all the inhabitants of the country and to record the ethnic majority population as ‘Burmans (Bamar people)’. I have also in the frequent references to the former great city in central Burma (Myanmar) used the spelling ‘Bagan’, rather than the older usage of ‘Pagan’. In the case of the city in Malaysia previously written as ‘Malacca’, I have now used the modern usage of ‘Melaka’, though I continue to refer to the Straits of Malacca. Throughout the book I have used the familiar name ‘East Timor’ and the relatively newly official designation of ‘Timor-Leste’ for that country interchangeably.

No book is the work of a single person and I again thank all of those who have helped me in various ways in writing about Southeast Asia over many years; their names are recorded in previous editions. In previous editions I singled out one name to be repeated and do so again, by paying tribute to the late Oliver Wolters. Without his guidance and inspiration when I was his student at Cornell I probably would never have ventured to write about Southeast Asia.

I again thank Allen & Unwin for their continuing support of this book. But, as always, I must emphasise that any shortcomings in the book are mine alone.

Milton Osborne
Sydney, 2024

# ONE

# 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 is approaching 280 million may be well known. But how often is that fact recognised as meaning that Indonesia has the fourth largest population in the world? Only India, China and the United States have larger populations than Indonesia. And how many casual observers think of a now-united Vietnam as having a substantially larger population, at 101 million, than such countries as Spain (48 million), Poland (39 million), and Canada (40 million)? Vietnam's population is even larger than Turkey's (87 million), yet Vietnam is only one of four Southeast Asian states, in addition to Indonesia, whose populations are each in excess of 30 million: The Philippines, 114 million; Thailand, 70 million; Burma (Myanmar) 55 million. Figures can only be approximate where population is concerned, but of the world's population nearing the middle of the third decade of the twenty-first century Southeast Asia accounts for more than 8 per cent of the overall total. The significance of this percentage is made clear when the population of India is expressed as a percentage of the world's total. China, the world's most populous country, accounts for some 18 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 when its imperial control was most extensive, 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 consider: 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 in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the exploring Europeans and their successors, the administrators, missionaries, planters and men of commerce, had not the slightest doubt about their own superiority, however mistaken they may have been in this belief. 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 the Conqueror was crowned King of England 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 an image of London summoned up today. At the same time, in the then unknown land of Cambodia—unknown, that is, to the men and women of Europe—a population of upwards of 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 harvest of two or even three rice crops each year. This was the city of Angkor from whose ruins with their vital accompanying 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 general Western consciousness in the nineteenth century, and then only slowly.

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 those who have travelled widely, to find knowledge of the empire of Bagan (Pagan), a centre of Burmese power from the ninth to the thirteenth century 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 Bagan and Angkor. The same problem of a lack of immediate empathy is apparent when attention turns to another early Southeast Asian empire. It is easier for a Westerner to conjure up a picture, accurate or otherwise, of Christopher Columbus sailing to the Americas than it is to picture the heroic navigational feats of Malay sailors who voyaged to China and made the Sumatra-based empire of Srivijaya, which flourished between the fourth and eleventh centuries of the Common Era, such a powerful force in early Southeast Asian history.

The contrast between an awareness of Europe and unawareness of Southeast Asia, on the part of those who do not live in the region, 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 a truly deep 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. In the 1930s 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, but applied also to Sri Lanka and much of India, as well as areas of southern China, that 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 Brunei, 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. As for East Timor (now known officially as Timor-Leste), until that territory was invaded by Indonesia in 1975 it scarcely rated a mention in general surveys of Southeast Asian history. As the government of East Timor pursues its policy of seeking membership of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), future surveys of Southeast Asian affairs will increasingly come to include it as an integral part of the region—in this book its history is only examined very briefly.

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. Some of the most striking examples of such links are the ancient bronze drums that have been found throughout mainland and maritime Southeast Asia and which are thought to have originated in areas of contemporary northern Vietnam and southern China. In many cases the drums date from well before the Common Era.

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 after the Second World War.

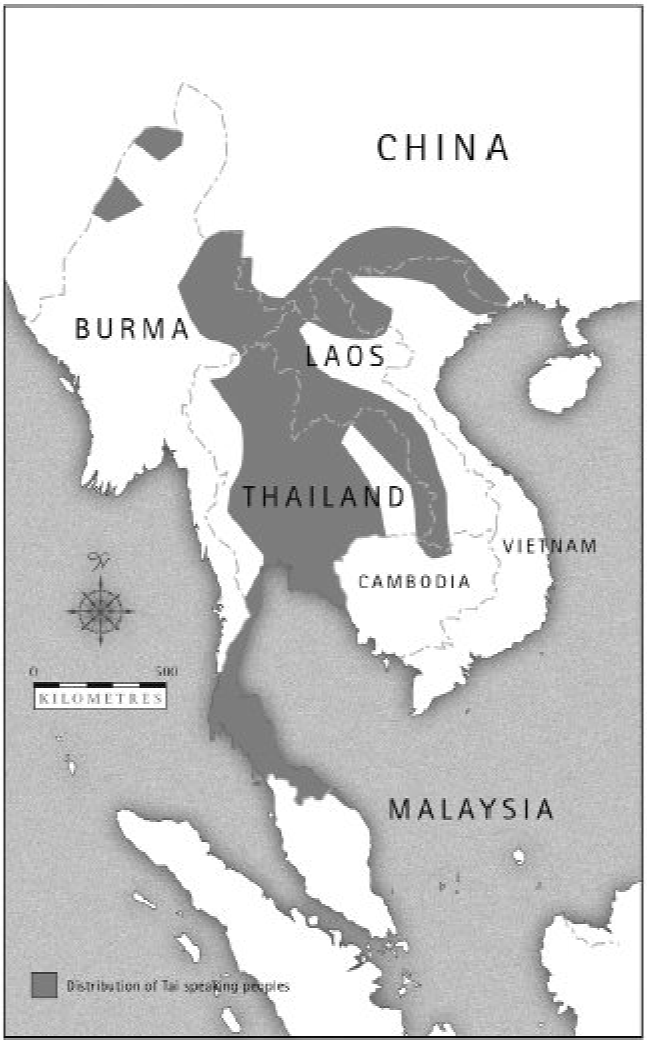
Probably most important was the recognition that the countries of Southeast Asia were neither ‘little Indias’ nor ‘little Chinas’. The impact of those two great countries on the region cannot be dismissed, though the degree and character of their influence is still debated, but the essential right of 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 rigid 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 Bagan, Angkor, and the temple complexes of Java stem from their own individual character, just as the exquisite Buddha images that were created in Thailand, and elsewhere in the region, 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 royal 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 over-emphasised 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. 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 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, not very long ago there were people who spoke and wrote as if the language of northern Vietnam was quite different from the language spoken in 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 fragmented 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 Vietnam, in the Shan states of Burma, in Laos, in both western and northeastern Cambodia, and, 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 resent control by the ethnic Burmans (Bamar people), who are their long-time rivals and speak a different language.

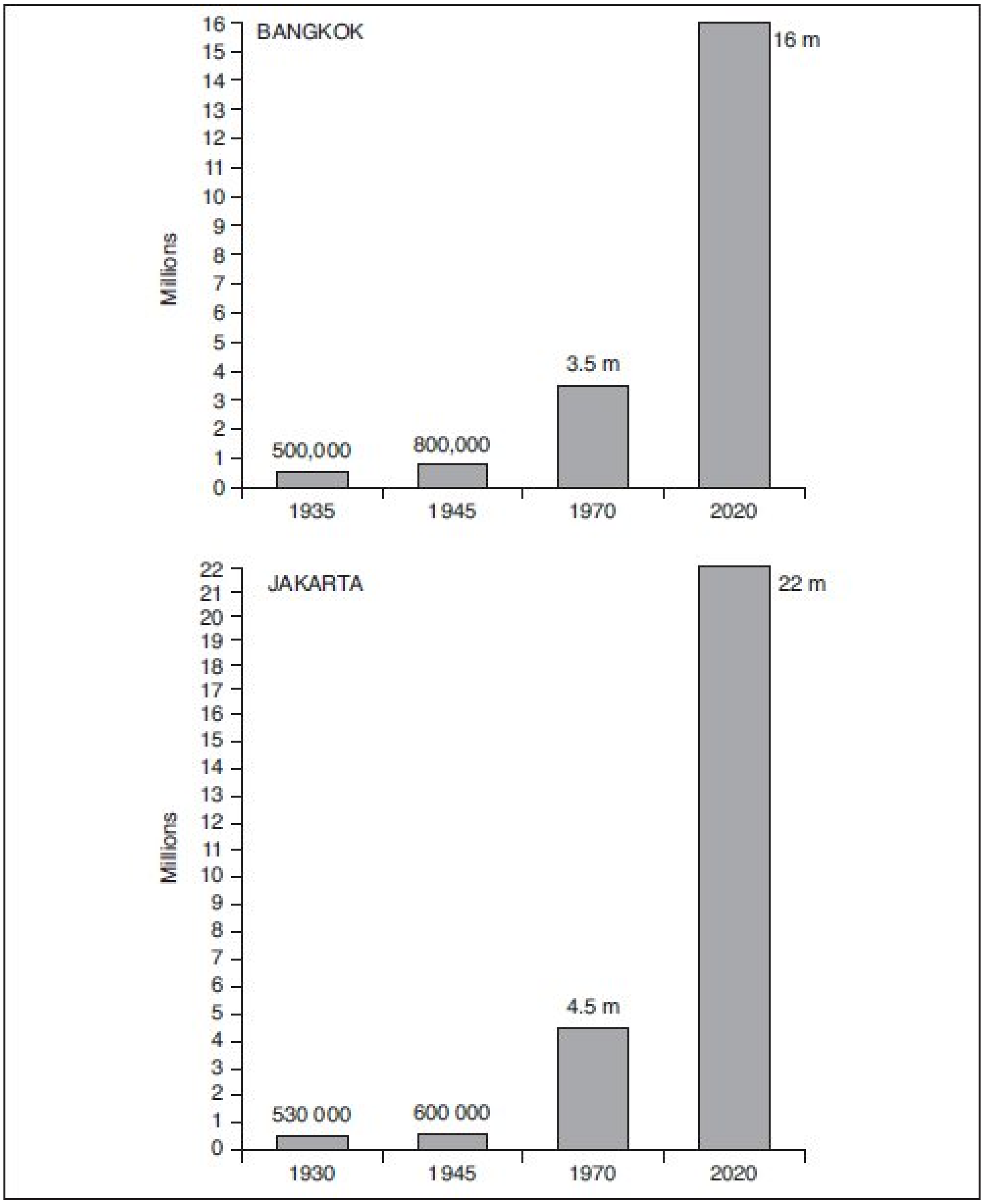
Another most important instance of linguistic unity is the broad spread of the Indonesian/Malay language, known among specialists as ‘Austronesian’. Here again the dialectical differences from region to region are considerable, but variants of this basic language are spoken throughout modern Brunei, East Timor, Indonesia and Malaysia, and in the 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 judgment 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?



**Mainland Southeast Asia: Distribution of Tai-speaking peoples**
The Tai language is not only the principal language of the population of Thailand. It is, in addition, spoken widely by the Shans of Burma, by the lowland population of Laos, and in the northern parts of Vietnam, Cambodia and Malaysia. Tai speakers are also to be found in the extreme south of China.

There can be no certain and agreed answer to any of these questions, for what is involved is judgment, whether individual or collective, and judgment will always be open to argument. Judgment 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 propositions. The study of Southeast Asia over the past eighty years has contributed greatly to the acceptance that this is a region deserving attention as a whole and as an entity separate from the cultures of South Asia and China. To think of Southeast Asia in this framework is very much a product of the post-Second World War years and contrasts considerably with the way that scholars approached the region in earlier periods. Now that the unities and similarities have been generally recognised, however, it remains important to give due attention to the differences that do set geographical region apart from geographical region, ethnic group apart from ethnic group, and which, for a traveller, so often make the physical transition from one area of Southeast Asia to another an easily and sharply perceived experience.

The sheer size of the geographical region making up Southeast Asia, stretching over more than thirty-five degrees of latitude and nearly fifty degrees of longitude, prepares us for its immensely varied geographical character. If population has traditionally been concentrated in lowland settlements, along the sea coasts and by rivers and lakes, this only tells part of the story of geography and settlement patterns. The demands of high-density settlement in northern Vietnam, for instance, have led to a very different approach to agriculture along the Red River from that followed by the much less concentrated Vietnamese population in the Mekong River delta. Yet even along the lower Mekong River a modern traveller can still see dramatic evidence of the difference that exists between the physical landscape of Cambodia and southern Vietnam, as the result of differing population pressures in those neighbouring regions and of differing values about the aims to be pursued by an agricultural population. To drive from Phnom Penh to Ho Chi Minh City (the former Saigon) is to pass, sharply, from one landscape to another. On the Cambodian side of the frontier there is untilled land, while the land that is under cultivation is cropped once a year. Scattered clumps of sugar palms give a sense of scale to the landscape and emphasise that not all other vegetation has not been sacrificed to the growing of rice. Once over the frontier, however, the scene changes immediately. Even to a casual observer it is apparent that a very different pattern of agriculture is followed, one that seemingly leaves no land untilled and grows its two rice crops each year on land from which the sugar palms have been removed so that the landscape stretching away to the horizon is unmarked by any vertical features.



**Rapid urban growth in Southeast Asia**

*A tale of two cities: Bangkok and Jakarta*

Rapid urban growth has been a striking feature of Southeast Asia's modern history, particularly since the Second World War. Developments in Bangkok and Jakarta exemplify this situation. At the end of the Second World War both these cities had populations of less than a million. Nearly eighty years later, the population of greater Bangkok was over twenty times larger, while greater Jakarta's had grown by more than thirty-seven times its 1945 figure.

The continuing growth of Southeast Asia's primate cities places tremendous strains on governments faced with the need to provide services for their populations and to find work for those seeking employment.

The contrasts between the physical appearance of the Mekong delta region of Cambodia and Vietnam are essentially those resulting from differing agricultural practices. Even more striking are the contrasts that stem directly from basic geography, from the difference between hill and valley and between those areas favoured by climate and those where rainfall is uncertain and infrequent. Almost all of Southeast Asia lies in the tropical zone, yet this does not mean that tropical abundance is universal. For those hill peoples who live in areas of the upland regions of Thailand, Burma and Laos, the pattern of life dictated by their physical environment has little reminiscent of the agricultural lushness that, on occasion, may be typical of existence in more favoured regions.

The whole concept of Southeast Asia as an area of lushness, growth and fecundity needs qualification. It can be all of these things, but only if such factors as population pressure do not intrude and when the land is fertile and cultivable. Nothing is more deceptive than the endless green of ripening crops on the island of Java, where an ever-increasing population, now totalling nearly 180 million at the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century, is jammed into an area little different in size from England, where a population of about a third of Indonesia’s benefits from the economic diversification of a developed society. Equally deceptive are the rolling hills covered with rainforest of peninsular Malaysia. Seen from an aircraft the forests of West Malaysia run away to the horizon, unbroken by roads or settlement. There is timber wealth here, but little promise of easy rewards for an increasingly urbanised and growing population, even when forests are levelled to be re-planted with palm oil trees.

From the dry zone of Burma to the snow-covered mountains found in the eastern area of the Indonesian province of Papua, and from the rolling pastoral grasslands of northwestern Vietnam to the steep terraced rice lands of the Philippine Islands, Southeast Asia is a conglomerate of geographical and agricultural contrasts.

Southeast Asia is an area of many other contrasts. One of the most obvious for a modern traveller in the region is that between city and country. The growth of Southeast Asia’s cities has been one of the most striking features of developments in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, particularly since the Second World War. A few examples make clear how dramatic the changes have been. Metropolitan Bangkok has a population of more than 16 million. Just over a century ago the *total* population of Thailand was only 6 million persons. As recently as 1960 the estimated population of Bangkok was less than 1.5 million. The example of Bangkok has its parallels elsewhere in the rapid growth in the size of Jakarta, of Phnom Penh in the 1990s, after peace returned to Cambodia, of Ho Chi Minh City, and of many provincial urban centres. These fast-growing Asian cities are magnets for the rural dwellers who flock out of the country, where they often see little hope of change and virtually no prospect of prosperity. For them the urban centres, however miserable conditions may be, appear to offer some hope of personal advancement. Such hopes often cruelly evaporate in the face of unemployment, overcrowding, and an inadequate system of city services. Yet nothing could better illustrate the contrast between city and country in modern Southeast Asia than the continuing migration of rural inhabitants into the urban areas. For this migration is, in considerable part, a reaction against the life offered in the countryside with its limited horizons, its frequent drudgery and, in the eyes of many young men and women, the limitations of tradition-bound existence. The disadvantages of life far from the cities has, for the rural and provincial population of Southeast Asia, been made all the clearer by the communications revolution. This has placed a transistor radio in almost every household’s dwelling, and then provided access to a TV screen even in remote villages. Most dramatic of all has been the advent of the internet and the widespread use of mobile phones. All these developments have accompanied the greater availability of transport that has made visits from one area of a country to another so much more readily possible.

Richness and poverty, development and a lack of development—these and many other social contrasts stand out more clearly in Southeast Asia than in those areas of the world that benefited from the great industrial changes of the nineteenth century. If Southeast Asia is also an area that has been marked by a notable degree of political instability, this is scarcely to be wondered at in terms of the broad range of problems—in almost every aspect of life—that have confronted those who govern, and those who wish to govern, since the countries of the region attained independence after the Second World War. The one exception to this observation, Thailand, was never under European colonial rule. In terms of the problems Thailand has faced and faces, however, its historical experience has many parallels with the former colonial territories. Here, to return for a moment to similarities present among the countries of Southeast Asia, is another important reason for thinking about the region as a whole rather than solely in terms of individual countries. With the exception of Thailand, just noted, all the other countries of Southeast Asia sustained varying periods of colonial rule. What were the similarities and differences to be found in this common experience? Did it matter whether the alien colonial power was Britain, or France, or the Netherlands, or Portugal, or the United States? And why did some colonial regimes leave peacefully while others fought bitter wars to try and remain?

To refer to the colonial period in Southeast Asia is to raise another much-debated historical problem: how much attention should be given to the colonial element in Southeast Asian history? The answer will vary from person to person and from period to period. The realisation that too often in the past Southeast Asians were excluded from their own history by the non-Southeast Asians who wrote about the region has had a healthy effect. So, today, most historians are aware of the importance of essentially Southeast Asian developments and the role played by Southeast Asians in them, even if they continue to see some value in discussing the part played by Europeans and others who came to seek power and fortune in the area. For while the period of full-scale colonial control over the countries of Southeast Asia lasted less than a century, there is no doubting the importance of that period and the part it played in shaping the Southeast Asian world today.

What will be examined in this book, then, is an immensely varied region marked by some notable unities and containing great diversity. An attempt will be made to discover the factors that have been important in determining why Southeast Asia has its present character and why it is that such sharply differing political developments have occurred in countries that at first glance seem to possess similar historical backgrounds. The region that is the setting for the events and developments we consider will sometimes stagger us by the richness of its diversity. To take one further example underlining this point, the Southeast Asian area continues to be most diverse in its religious character. Islam is strong in the maritime regions and Theravada Buddhism is the predominant religion of Thailand, Burma and Laos, as it is in Cambodia once again. Some sections of the area are strongly Christian, most notably the Philippines, but in other areas a basic animism is the most fundamental of the population’s religious beliefs. Even having mentioned these religions is to give a most incomplete catalogue. There are followers of Hinduism, not only the descendants of Indian immigrants but, notably, the indigenous populations of Bali and, to a lesser extent, Lombok in Indonesia. Communism is the secular religion of Vietnam, but it is not hard to sense the continuing presence of some Confucian values in Vietnamese society, as well as a widespread devotion to Buddhism. Elements of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, as well as Christianity, are apparent in the Cao Dai religion that has many adherents in southern Vietnam and lists Joan of Arc and Victor Hugo among other spiritually important guides to personal conduct.

For all the diversity we encounter we will still find that there are important common themes in the historical experience of the countries making up the region. Most particularly as we approach the modern period of Southeast Asian history we will find that the problems faced by peoples seeking independence, and then by governments seeking to operate within independent states, often involve great similarities, even if the attempted solutions to these problems are greatly different in their character.

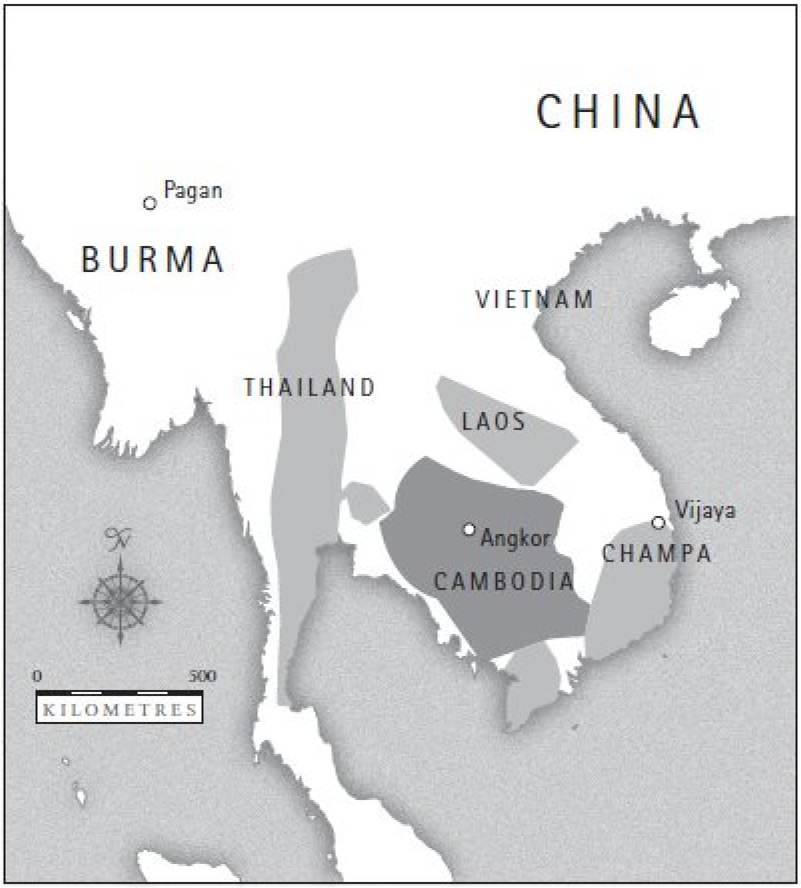
With its rich past and sometimes turbulent present Southeast Asia is a region full of interest for a casual observer as well as to those who have made its study their lifetime task. An awareness of Southeast Asia’s history will not provide any certain guide to future developments in the region, for that can never be history’s task. But a review of the area’s history will illuminate the present, making clear why the politics of one country are so different from those of another, or why the region as a whole has, in so many ways and over such a long period, been subject to strong external influence. Above all, an awareness of Southeast Asia’s history provides an insight into the life and beliefs of a large and fascinating segment of the world’s population, which in cultural achievement, quite apart from contemporary political interest, deserves a much greater degree of attention than it has yet received. In the recent past it has been possible to see the tragic results of a lack of knowledge of the political and cultural background to developments in more than one Southeast Asian country. This fact provides an even greater incentive to learn something of the broad lines of historical development that have made Southeast Asia what it is today.

## TWO

# The ‘classical’ background to modern Southeast Asian history

One of the most obvious problems encountered by Southeast Asian historians is that of vocabulary. How should an historian describe, using words or phrases that have been developed for a Western context, a very different historical experience? There is no easy solution to this problem and scholars continue to debate the proper way to describe particular periods in Southeast Asian history and, just as importantly, what these periods are. So, while such terms as ‘classical’ or ‘medieval’ have generally acceptable meanings for those whose preoccupation is European history, there is no such agreement among Southeast Asian historians.

One solution is to use words without particular cultural or historical value; to write and speak of ‘early’ Southeast Asian history, or of the ‘traditional’ Southeast Asian world. Yet even here there are problems, for different historians will assign different dates to these periods. Because of these difficulties the term ‘classical’ applied to Southeast Asian history must be recognised as a less than fully satisfactory description. Its value stems from the suggestion it carries with it of there having been a period in Southeast Asian history that was marked by a series of major achievements in art and architecture and in the development of the state, as in ancient Greek and Roman history, before there was a period of general decline, by the end of the fifteenth century. This decline was then followed by the emergence of newly powerful kingdoms. But if we use the term ‘classical’ we should recognise it for what it is: a useful but highly qualified historical metaphor.



**The Angkorian empire at the height of its power in the twelfth century**
The Angkorian empire reached the height of its power in the twelfth century during the reigns of Suryavarman II (1113–50) and Jayavarman VII (1181–circa 1219). During these reigns Cambodia was in control of the modern territory of Cambodia, much of southern Vietnam and southern Laos, and had vassal states in central Thailand and in the Kra Isthmus to the south. The exercise of central power over these far-flung territories was not uniform and the more distant a region was, the less direct the involvement of the Angkorian ruler.

As a metaphor suggesting the greatness of Greece and Rome the idea of there having once been a classical Southeast Asia is indeed helpful since it alerts a newcomer to the weight of Southeast Asia’s cultural traditions that might not always be obvious when considering more recent historical periods. This was very much a problem during the nineteenth century. The first Westerners to have a sustained contact with the court of the King of Cambodia in the late 1850s and early 1860s, Frenchmen as it happened, found it small and lacking in artistic distinction. They took a similar view of the Cambodian ruler of the day, King Norodom, and they could not believe that he, and those whom he ruled, were the descendants of the population that had once lived beside the mighty temples of Angkor. Partly because they could not believe this was so—though it was indeed the case—these same Frenchmen had the greatest difficulty in understanding that King Norodom saw himself as the defender of his country's traditions and as a descendant, in terms of kingly majesty, of Angkorian kings whose names might be forgotten but whose glory was seen as essentially Cambodian. It was not by chance that King Ang Duang, the last Cambodian king to rule free of French control, should have chosen a depiction of Angkor Wat on the coins he ordered to be minted in the 1840s.

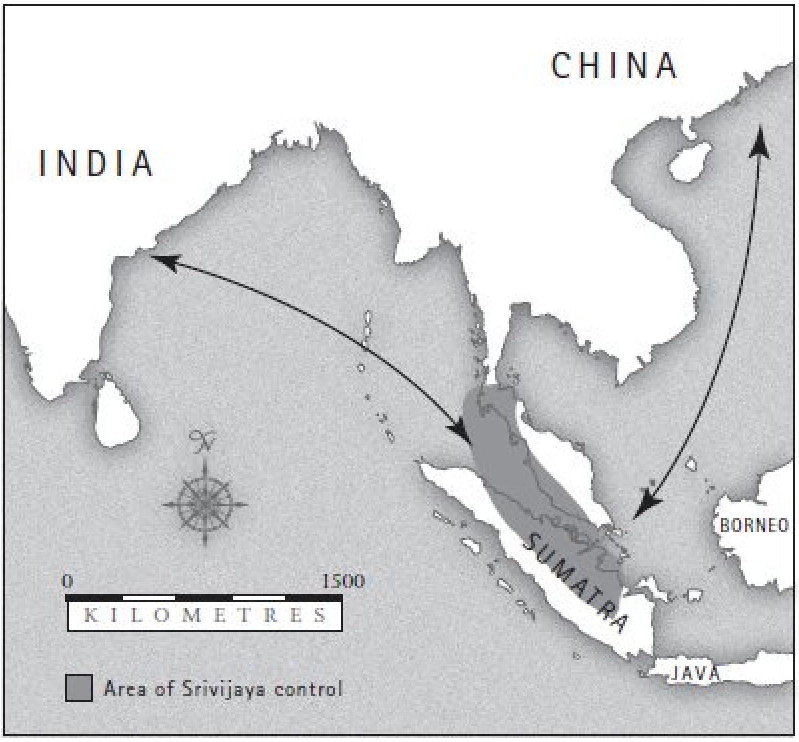
Here is one immediately important instance of the significance attaching to the classical period. Southeast Asian individuals and Southeast Asian governments have cherished the past glories of their countries, though the manner in which these glories are remembered may be very different to the Western concept of history. Burmese remember the glory of the temples of Bagan, built between the ninth and twelfth centuries, and Indonesians have continued to see significance in the empires claimed for Javanese rulers of earlier historical periods and the legacy enshrined in temples such as the Borobudur dating from those earlier times. Sharp argument might sometimes be joined over the extent to which the memories that are preserved are accurate. And it would be misleading to suggest that there are not considerable variations from person to person, social grouping to social grouping, and country to country in the nature and importance that is attached to the so-called classical past. It would be a very rash person indeed, however, who was ready to discount this importance altogether.

There are further reasons for giving some attention to the classical period in Southeast Asia, since the rise and fall of the kingdoms tells us much about the factors that were to shape the more familiar course of the modern historical period. If, for the moment, we consider mainland Southeast Asia, then it becomes necessary to ask why it should be that the mightiest of the classical mainland states, Angkorian Cambodia, should ultimately have been one of history's failures, despite the technological achievements, in the control and use of water, and the architectural glories that were such a feature of its years of greatness? Why, to continue asking questions with a rather negative character, did the maritime empire of Srivijaya come to lose its dominant position controlling the great east–west trade between India and China during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, after enjoying notable commercial success during preceding centuries? Or why, to move to a more positive vein, was Java to remain the geographical location for successive states that aspired not only to rule over that island but also to a seldom-achieved suzerainty over other islands in the Indonesian Archipelago?

It may not be possible to give completely satisfactory answers to all these questions, particularly not in a chapter that is meant to provide background to a later period. But it will be possible to sketch with broad strokes some of the important characteristics of classical Southeast Asia, to give some account of the factors that led to the rise and fall of states and empires, and the nature of their achievements in fields as diverse as architecture and navigation. To do this it is necessary to try and provide a brief picture of the patterns of states that had emerged in Southeast Asia by the ninth century CE. There is much of Southeast Asia at that time that we simply cannot describe either in terms of the location of states or in terms of populations living away from the centres of kingly power. Most of the Philippines remains outside our knowledge at that period, as do other sections of the Southeast Asian maritime world. But once our gaze shifts to the west of the Indonesian Archipelago the forms are easier to discern. Recognisable kingdoms or states had already emerged in Java by the ninth century and these states had demonstrated considerable artistic capacity in the temples and shrines they erected and in the forms they chose to decorate them. The most notable are the great Buddhist stupa, Borobudur, and the Prambanan Hindu temple complex, both located not far from the modern city of Yogyakarta in central Java.

Moving further west and north to the island of Sumatra, we know of the existence of a trading empire, Srivijaya, that had risen to power in the sixth and seventh centuries CE and, despite setbacks along the way, continued to dominate trade between the West (India) and the East (China), as well as more local trade in the Archipelago itself for hundreds of years. Although there was protracted scholarly argument concerning the exact location of Srivijaya, recent archaeological research leaves little doubt that for much of its existence the capital of this great maritime empire was in southern Sumatra, on and around the site of modern Palembang during the eighth and ninth centuries CE. If we risk a broad summary of the situation in the maritime Southeast Asian world of the ninth century, it might be in the following terms: whatever the petty states that existed elsewhere, the truly significant centres of power that had emerged were linked to coastal

Sumatra and inland Java. These centres of power were to remain important in the following centuries, until the end of the classical period.



**The trading empire of Srivijaya**
Scholars argue over the exact location of Srivijaya, the great trading empire that dominated maritime trade through Southeast Asia and between India and China during the seventh to thirteenth centuries. Srivijaya probably had a number of capitals, with the most important in southern Sumatra, adjoining modern Palembang. As indicated in this map, Srivijaya maintained its power by controlling the ports and waters of the Malacca Straits. The shaded areas represent the control exercised by Srivijaya.

The situation on the mainland is rather clearer, if still full of difficulties and a rich subject for controversy. During the ninth century there was still no independent Vietnamese state since Imperial China occupied the Red River delta region and administered it as one of the most remote Chinese provinces. Stretched along the modern Vietnamese coast was the state of Champa, populated by the Chams, a people linguistically linked with the inhabitants of Indonesia. To the west was the growing state of Cambodia, which was just beginning its rise to greatness and dominance over much of mainland Southeast Asia. Although we know today that greatness lay ahead for Cambodia, this was far from clearly the case in the ninth century. The first Cambodian (Khmer) kings to rule in the Angkor region had already begun to develop techniques for mastering the environment that were, eventually, to provide the economic base for agricultural production, military expansion and a program of great temple-building. In the ninth century, however, they were only a little more clearly masters of their quite limited world—a region that had been settled for some centuries—than were the petty rulers scattered through the lowland regions of modern Thailand and along the great river valleys of modern Burma (Myanmar).

Wherever recognisable states existed in this uncertainly defined Southeast Asian region of the ninth century, the rulers and their courts were followers of imported religions, of Hinduism and Buddhism. These Indian religions were one of the most important features of a development that took place in the Southeast Asian region over many centuries, beginning early in the Common Era. The development has been given the name 'Indianisation', though once again there is continuing disagreement among scholars as to just what the term means. Broad agreement does exist, however, about certain features of the Indianisation process, and it is these features that are now described.

For some time in the first century of the Common Era and increasingly occurring in the second and third centuries CE, there was a slow expansion of Indian cultural contacts with the Southeast Asian region. It was an uneven process, with some areas receiving Indian influence much later than others, and with the degree of cultural impact varying from century to century. In the case of the Vietnamese, who were in this early period living under Chinese rule, the process of Indianisation never took place. For a different reason—distant geographical location—neither did the Philippines participate in this process. Indianisation did *not* mean there was a mass migration of Indian population into Southeast Asia. Rather, a relatively limited number of traders and priest-scholars brought Indian culture in its various forms to Southeast Asia where much, but not all, of this culture was absorbed, particularly by the elite members of the local population, and joined to their existing cultural patterns. This has been the generally accepted view, but some historians now argue that Indian concepts may well have been brought back to Southeast Asia by Southeast Asians who had themselves travelled to India. Both developments probably took place.

Several cautionary remarks are immediately necessary. Because Indian culture 'came' to Southeast Asia, one must not think that Southeast Asians lacked a culture of their own. Indeed, the most generally accepted view is that Indian culture made such an impact on Southeast Asia because it fitted easily with the existing cultural patterns and religious beliefs of populations that had already moved a considerable distance along the path of a culturally complex civilisation. Just because this was the case, the process of Indianisation should not be seen as simply involving a Southeast Asian acceptance of Indian cultural values. Indian culture was absorbed in much of Southeast Asia, and Indian religions, art forms, and theories of government came to be of the greatest importance. But these various cultural gifts from India became Southeast Asian and in doing so changed their character. In some cases, moreover, quite fundamental features of Indian culture and society were not adopted. The caste system of India did not, for instance, accompany the practice of Hinduism in Southeast Asia, however much early Southeast Asian kings might have felt that they were modelling themselves on Indian rulers and made use of caste terminology to describe themselves and their courts. Southeast Asian art drew upon Indian artistic models, but then developed its own forms. Indian languages were used in government and religion. Yet while the inscriptions written in Sanskrit remain one of our most important sources for early Southeast Asian history, the use of this language ultimately lapsed as Southeast Asians came to use Indian scripts to render their own languages.

Southeast Asians, to summarise the point, borrowed but they also adapted. In some very important cases they did not need to borrow at all. The techniques of wet rice cultivation seem to have been indigenous to Southeast Asia and not a technological import from another area. In addition, if there was borrowing and adaptation that justifies the term Indianisation, one must realise that our view of this process tends to be shaped by the evidence with which historians must work. We know infinitely more about the world of kings, courts and priests than we do about the world of the peasantry. The anonymous workers in the rice fields were much less affected by Indianisation. The complex theological features of Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism—the form of Buddhism that first had an impact in Southeast Asia—were the concerns of their masters, while they retained their fear and respect for the spirits that they believed were associated with both the animate and inanimate beings and objects that surrounded them—trees and rocks, snakes and birds.

How might we explain the attraction that Indian ideas had for the rulers and men of religion? A partial answer would seem to be that Indian culture provided an organised and developed pattern of doctrine and knowledge for Southeast Asians who were ready to grasp at new ideas promising greater religious and secular power. The legends that tell of the arrival in Southeast Asia of Brahmin priests from India often have a highly practical twist to them. The Brahmans of the legends bring wisdom and advice to Southeast Asian rulers, instructing them in statecraft as well as in religion. The Brahmans were scholars as well as priests. They could advise on the proper ways to conduct relations with a ruler's neighbouring states. They were astronomers as well as astrologers, and architects who shaped their temples not only in accordance with the demands of building technology but also in terms of religious symbolism and astronomical observation. Men such as these were invaluable advisers and it is not surprising that the Cambodian national birth legend, to take only one example, sees the legendary marriage of a Brahman with a local princess as the beginning of Cambodia's rise to greatness that culminated in the Angkorian period.

In the Indianised Southeast Asia of the ninth century, two states existed that have probably attracted more historical attention than any others. These states, the inland state based at Angkor in Cambodia and the maritime state of Srivijaya with its main base in southern Sumatra, are seen as typifying the two very different kinds of states that can be identified in the early or classical period. They were also, in contrast to a number of other examples, states that preserved their existence over a long historical period. As such, an examination of their history can suggest some of the reasons that led to the success and development of kingdoms and empires in the early history of Southeast Asia, and finally some of the factors that brought decay and collapse.

Angkor rose to a dominating position in much of mainland Southeast Asia as a result of a notable combination of human genius, religious belief and geographical location. In order to survive and then to develop more than a bare subsistence civilisation in Cambodia, it was and is necessary to master the problem of water, or rather the lack of it. Despite the torrential rains of Cambodia's wet season, the land dries rapidly once the rains cease and nearly six months of rainless weather follows. Settlement is possible along the banks of the rivers, but the further one moves away from these sources of water the more acute the problem becomes. On the basis of the evidence provided by early inscriptions, the population of pre-Angkorian Cambodia coped with this situation on a local basis; that is, there seem not to have been any major irrigation works comparable to those that were built and elaborated in the development of urban complexes in the Angkor region from the beginning of the ninth century CE.

What happened from the ninth century onwards, as the Angkorian state grew in power, has been an issue of considerable controversy which is still not fully resolved. Nevertheless, in the light of intensive recent field research in the Angkor region, using the most up-to-date technology, the balance of opinion has shifted substantially towards a view that the vast hydraulic works that can still be seen today—the moats and canals linked to the temples, and the great *baray* or reservoirs—were part of a system that was both practical and symbolic in character. Fed by water from the Kulen hills to the north of the main temple complex, the moats surrounding individual temples served as symbolic representations of the ‘seas’ of the Hindu universe. And, in addition, water fed canals that were used for irrigation and for transport, and to fill the great reservoirs from which water could be drawn for both domestic and agricultural purposes. This sophisticated pattern of hydraulic engineering could also be combined with the use of flood-retreat irrigation to exploit the rise and fall of the waters of the nearby Great Lake, which also provided an inexhaustible source of fish. With their mastery of water the Angkorian population was able to produce two, and at times three, rice crops each year.

Angkor’s agricultural base enabled it to maintain a population that built the great temples that remain as a striking reminder of Khmer achievements in the past. Angkorian Cambodia’s wealth was in its people and agricultural capacity. Without the combination of these two assets there could not have been an Angkor Wat, the most famous of the great temples and the largest single religious building in the world. Wealth, it is true, came into the city in the form of captured booty and prisoners of war who were put to work as slaves. But in the broadest sense Angkorian Cambodia was not a state that depended on trade for its existence. The temples built by Angkor’s rulers, and on occasion by their great officials, enshrined the religious ideals of the state. The wealth needed to build and maintain them and to feed and clothe the priestly communities associated with them came not only from the productive rice fields close to or even within the temples, but also from villages located away from the city at the centre of Angkorian power.

For anyone who is privileged to visit the Angkor region, the size of the Cambodian achievement during the years between the ninth and fifteenth centuries is vividly apparent. Temples great and small are spread over many hundreds of square kilometres. Scholars are still discovering new and important facts about the society that could bring these magnificent buildings into being. And only very recently, in 2013, through the use of ‘Lidar’ technology—the use of concentrated lasers beamed from above the site under investigation—has it been possible to delineate the size of the city complex of Mahendraparvata in the Kulen hills to the north of Angkor Wat. That such a city existed, and that it was where the founder of the Angkor dynasty, Jayavarman II, took an oath to become a ‘universal ruler’ in 802 CE, has long been known. But this recent research has made clear that the size of this ‘lost city’ is much greater than had previously been realised. Five previously unknown temples were revealed as well as a major network of roads and dykes.

Another fairly recent discovery that has fascinated historians is the possibility that the great temple of Angkor Wat was built in such a way as to aid astronomical observations. The investigations that have led to this suggestion have shown that the architects and builders who worked on the temple were able to achieve building feats of a quite remarkable character. Accuracy in construction was so great that variations from a theoretically exact line in the height or direction of walls built over great distances was less than 0.1 per cent.

This evidence of such technological capacity underlines the existence during Angkorian times of a highly developed society. Its achievements in aesthetic terms matched its capacities in technology. The statues, the carvings in both high and low relief, the architectural forms that were increasingly refined over the centuries of the Angkorian empire’s existence, all give eloquent testimony to the richness of Cambodian culture during the classical period of Southeast Asian history. There is other evidence to emphasise the richness of the culture. Even though his visit came at a time when the Khmers of Angkor were losing their grip on the empire they had built up over four centuries, the Chinese envoy, Zhou Daguan (Chou Ta-kuan in earlier transcriptions), who saw Angkor in 1296, was convinced that the city was the richest in Southeast Asia. He wrote of the grand processions in which the ruler rode on an elephant holding a golden sword in his hand and of firework displays with firecrackers that shook the city when they exploded. Despite his Chinese reserve towards the culture and customs of a non-Chinese society, Zhou Daguan was clearly impressed by the wealth of the Angkorian ruler, by the dimensions of the city in which he spent nearly a year and the power of its ruler. It was, he wrote, understandable that other visitors had described Cambodia as ‘rich and noble’.

Yet if Angkor could impress even a sceptical Chinese civil servant, its economic foundations were highly fragile. Cambodian power had extended from its base in Angkor to incorporate within its empire large sections of modern Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. This was not a trading empire, though some exchange of goods took place. The really important unifying feature for the Angkorian empire was something quite different from commerce. It was the acceptance by many lesser rulers and governors that the king at Angkor was their supreme lord, their suzerain, to use a European term once again. When some of these lesser rulers, in what is today Thailand, no longer accepted this situation and chose to fight for their independence from the Angkorian ruler, they shattered the political relationship. In addition they threatened and eventually damaged the agricultural system upon which Angkor’s very existence depended. But it was not only the growing power of the Thai states to the west that led to the weakening of Angkor’s power. Other factors played their part, including a period of dramatically adverse climate change during the fourteenth century when devastating droughts were followed by much greater than usual monsoons. And, just possibly, the spread of malaria played a part in Angkor’s decline. Moreover, very recent research suggests that well before the last century of Angkor’s greatness the city’s rulers were facing problems in maintaining the complex system of canals and reservoirs so essential to the state’s prosperity. The decision of the Cambodian king and his court to leave Angkor some time in the fifteenth century was an event of the deepest importance for mainland Southeast Asia, though quite unknown in Europe. A great empire had come to an end and with its end other states began their rise to greatness. The increasingly powerful Thai states played their part in bringing Angkor down and their history from that time onwards was marked by a slow but sure progress towards the achievement of control over the territories that comprise modern Thailand, although this process was not finally completed until the twentieth century.

The state of Vietnam, which had gained independence from China in 939 CE, did not contribute directly to Angkor's fall. Nevertheless, in the longer-term historical perspective we can see that the collapse of Cambodian power was vital for Vietnam's subsequent expansion into areas of modern southern Vietnam that once had been part of the Angkorian empire. In the west of mainland Southeast Asia, events in Cambodia had had little direct importance for the early Burmese state. A great Burmese city had been built at Bagan between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, only to be sacked in 1287 by the invading Mongols who at that time ruled China. While these events and efforts made by later Burmese leaders to found a stable state had no direct links with the decline of Cambodia, once again the end of Bagan forms part of a broader pattern in which, by the fifteenth century, we can discern the emergence of a new pattern of states and power in the mainland region.

To think in terms of a changing pattern rather than simply in terms of decline and fall is a more rewarding approach. Angkor collapsed, finally, because its economic structure could not be maintained. But Angkorian culture did not disappear. The newly powerful Thais absorbed much from those who had once been their rulers. Thai architecture, the written form of the Thai language, concepts of administration, possibly even dance forms, owe much to Khmer inspiration. Moreover, if Angkor and Bagan fell, new states arose and other existing states increased their power so that an approach that concentrates on the decline of the most successful of the states in the early or classical period is historically one-sided.

So far, the concern of much of this chapter has been with the mainland and more particularly with the Angkorian empire. As important in its own fashion but cast in a very different mould was the sea-borne empire of Srivijaya. Just as Angkor enshrined the achievements of a land-based, non-trading Southeast Asian state during the classical period, so did Srivijaya represent the greatest achievement among maritime trading powers during this early phase of the Southeast Asian region's history.

Srivijaya's rise to power depended upon trade and upon China's sponsorship. Put in a rather simplified form, the international trade pattern that was of greatest importance in the early period of Southeast Asian history was the east–west trade between China and the region including India but stretching further west to Persia and beyond. Precious Western goods, including forest products believed to have medicinal qualities, were exchanged in China for silks and porcelain, lacquers and other manufactured items. By the seventh century control of much of this trade, at least of the trade passing backwards and forwards between the Indonesian islands, was in the hands of Malays whose chief centre of power was in southern Sumatra, on the eastern coast of that island.

How this came about is still uncertain, as, too, is the explanation as to how the sailors who crewed the ships that carried the trade goods to China came to master the navigational difficulties of a long voyage with few intermediate landfalls. But some aspects of these historical developments are fairly clear and these throw much light on the emergence of a state that was very different in character to the land-based kingdoms of both the mainland and the maritime Southeast Asian world. One of the most clearly important factors in Srivijaya's rise to power was its political relationship with China. In briefly surveying this relationship the whole question of China's role in Southeast Asia is broached, so that some general observations are necessary.

Whether strong or weak, the successive rulers of China regarded their country as the central world state—the 'Middle Kingdom' of popular usage. This did not mean that away from China's land borders its emperors thought in terms of the existence of a Chinese empire, certainly not in any very normal use of that term. The Chinese view of the relationship with Southeast Asia was both more subtle and more complex, and for a maritime trading state such as Srivijaya vitally important.

For China, over a long historical period, the area described today as Southeast Asia was the *Nanyang* region, the region of the 'southern seas'. Only Vietnam was ever directly ruled by China—once Vietnam had gained its independence from China in 939 CE—when the Ming dynasty occupied the country between 1407 and 1427 of the Common Era. And only during one dynasty, the foreign Mongol or Yuan dynasty that ruled China from 1280 to 1368 CE, did Chinese emperors seek to impose their will on Southeast Asian countries other than Vietnam by force. The countries of the southern seas were, in Chinese eyes, lacking in discipline and order, and sadly without the proper Confucian state apparatus that permitted the

Chinese state and Chinese culture to survive and progress despite foreign threat and internal political upheaval.

Such a region, in the Chinese view, could only function in a satisfactory fashion if the various Southeast Asian states were in a proper tributary relationship with China. Here is yet another instance in which the limits of vocabulary impede easy understanding. To be a tributary state of China did not mean that an individual Southeast Asian kingdom was ruled by the Chinese as part of some ill-defined Chinese empire. Rather, the tributary relationship was one that involved a considerable degree of give and take. The fact of being a tributary certainly involved agreement not to act contrary to Chinese interests, but the relationship also implied that China would protect its tributary's interests against those who might challenge them. Most importantly for a trading state such as Srivijaya, the recognition that went with being granted tributary status was linked to the right to trade with China. Once China had granted this status to Srivijaya, the maritime trading states that were its rivals were at a severe disadvantage.

With Chinese recognition given to it, Srivijaya's own capacities brought it to the forefront of Southeast Asian maritime power. Much of what is written about Srivijaya can only be supposition, but it is supposition based on evidence that leaves little doubt as to how this maritime state developed. Strategically placed on the Malacca Straits, Srivijaya came to exert control over all significant trade on the seas in the western section of the Indonesian Archipelago, and between that region of the Archipelago and southern China. Although it is now generally agreed that Palembang was Srivijaya's capital, it is possible that the centre of power of this state may have shifted among other locations along the Malacca Straits during Srivijaya's long existence. The capital, additionally, may have been only slightly more important than the other port cities and trading settlements that went to make up this trading empire. For any state or settlement that tried to challenge the Srivijayan monopoly we may suppose that retribution by the various groups of the empire, united in common purpose, was swift. But equally we may suppose that whatever power existed at the centre of Srivijaya, its exercise was tempered by a readiness to allow the component parts of the empire a very considerable measure of political freedom, provided always that the basic trading arrangements were not infringed.

Srivijaya, like Angkor, was adapted to its environment. For the Indonesian–Malay state of Srivijaya the open frontier of the sea made up for the lack of a readily cultivatable hinterland along the swampy southeastern coast of Sumatra and what is today the western coast of peninsular Malaysia. The very sharpness of the contrast between these two states of the classical period is what makes them such good examples of the two broadly differing patterns of historical development that were followed by Southeast Asian states as late as the nineteenth century. It was only in the nineteenth century that major changes came to most of the land-based and largely self-sufficient states of Southeast Asia. As for the role played by Srivijaya as a maritime power between the seventh and fourteenth centuries, this was to pass to others, to Melaka and ultimately, it could be argued, to Singapore in the nineteenth century. But whichever later state held the role of regional entrepôt and was the focus of trade in the western maritime areas of Southeast Asia, Srivijaya was the first to show how vital the control of the seas could be. Few of the Portuguese, Dutch or British traders and strategists who fought and manoeuvred to gain ascendancy in the Southeast Asian maritime world realised that they were the successors of earlier maritime empires and none knew of the Srivijayan state, but in a very real sense they were only the latest to follow a very old pattern.

Yet if Srivijaya was adapted to the politico-environment that existed in its heyday, like Angkor it too was unable to survive once that environment changed radically. A vital change for Srivijaya was the development in the thirteenth century of a Chinese maritime trade with Southeast Asia in which the Chinese themselves now sailed in their own trading junks to sell and buy goods in the region. This development upset the balance that Srivijaya had so long maintained, if sometimes in the face of considerable challenge and difficulty. The expansion of Chinese shipping activity was made more dangerous to Srivijaya’s interests by the fact that it came at a time when other Indonesian powers were striving to extend a local suzerainty beyond their immediate power centres. The Javanese land-based states had come to cherish imperial ambitions and saw Srivijaya’s weakened condition as an opportunity to undermine its role. And by the late fourteenth century Srivijaya’s long history of maritime dominance had come to an end.

A valid complaint about the kind of history that has just been sketched so superficially in these limited accounts of Angkor and Srivijaya is that so little place is accorded to ordinary people. We are dealing with courts and kings, with great battles and developments in trade that are linked to regional or even global considerations. The difficulty about this reasonable complaint is that there are few ways to redress the balance. Even when we deal with kings in the classical period of Southeast Asian history it is seldom that a real insight into a personality is provided. There are partial exceptions. The seventh century Khmer king who had his court scribes boast in an inscription that women felt it would be worth rape by the enemy to enjoy the rewards of his smile might be seen as a prototype of the believer in male dominance. Yet even here it is not clear whether one is reading what was at the time a routine compliment, however offensive in modern terms, or something that was truly linked to the individual King Isanavarman for whom the inscription was recorded. We can also sense something of the proclaimed personal values of a later Cambodian king, Jayavarman VII (late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries), in both his inscriptions relating to the role he assigned to himself in relation to the state and his inscriptions mourning the death of a wife.

No rounded picture of a personality emerges for these rulers (however removed) any more than it does for the various kings of Javanese kingdoms in the classical period. The names of rulers such as King Airlangga (late tenth century) and Kertanagara (late thirteenth century), or of great officials such as Gadjah Mada (fourteenth century), are remembered more for the events associated with their names than for any real sense of their personality. And if difficulty is attached to knowing more of such men, there are even greater problems when it comes to any attempt to discuss the peasantry, the artisans and the other groups that did not hold power but yet were vital for the survival of the state.

This problem of history being concerned with rulers, court ritual and great battles remains with students of Southeast Asian history into the twentieth century. Only in rare instances are we able to see the life of the ‘ordinary man’ or ‘ordinary woman’. There are, for the classical period, some glimpses of that life to be found in the carvings on the Bayon temple at Angkor that show scenes from everyday life in the Cambodia of the twelfth century. While the scenes of cockfights, of ploughing, of women in childbirth, and of gamblers may be typical, the carvings tell us little of the details of life for those who lived at the village level. In the case of Java the great epic poem, the *Nagarakertagama*, dating from the fourteenth century, gives much interesting information about the relationships that existed between the Javanese court of Singasari in East Java and the rural villages.

We gain, however, little real sense of the villagers themselves from the account. Our sources limit our understanding so that we are forced back to the broader issues, to the problems of Indianisation, to the rise and fall of great kingdoms, and to a subject largely omitted in this chapter so far, the cultural and political developments in the one Southeast Asian state that was ‘Sinicised’ rather than ‘Indianised’, the state of Vietnam.

Throughout our study of Southeast Asian history Vietnam will remain a state apart, a very different component of the region. So extensive was Vietnamese cultural and political borrowing from its former colonial master, China, that it is sometimes difficult, certainly at first glance, to see the Southeast Asian elements in Vietnamese history and society. Yet those elements were and are present, and throughout Vietnamese history there has been a significant tension between the claims of the non-Chinese elements in Vietnamese life and the claims of the Chinese elements, which were associated particularly with the emperor, his court, and his officials. The place accorded women in Vietnamese non-official society, the distinctively non-Chinese language of Vietnam, despite its multiple borrowings from China, and the Vietnamese peasants’ migratory urge, are only some of the features of that country’s history that seem to link it with Southeast Asia rather than China.

At the official level, however, there can be no denying the force of Chinese ideas. China was a model for Vietnamese official life, an armoury from which cultural weapons could be drawn to combat new problems and challenges as these arose. So much was this the case that an argument could be developed for the greater impact of China on Vietnam than, for example, the impact of India on Cambodia. Like most other arguments over degree, particularly in relation to Southeast Asian history, scholars adopt differing viewpoints on this matter. They would be in general agreement, however, about the profound importance of China and Chinese ideas for the development of the Vietnamese state.

Equally, moreover, general agreement would also emerge in any scholarly discussion for the proposition that Vietnam, with its accession to independence from Chinese rule achieved in 939 CE, continued over the succeeding centuries to work to maintain that independence, if necessary by fighting for it against China. Once again, an understanding of Vietnam’s relationship with China has been confusing for some observers since Vietnam was, most clearly, one of China’s tributary states. This tributary status, despite the strong cultural links between the two countries, did not mean that Vietnam was ready to accept political interference by China in its internal affairs. Tributary status *did* mean that Vietnam could not readily act outside its borders in a manner likely to offend its great northern neighbour and suzerain.

If Vietnam was a very special Southeast Asian state, by comparison with those other areas that experienced cultural importation from India, its rise to power and emergence as one of the stronger states of the mainland by the end of the classical period in the fifteenth century further emphasises the major changes that were taking place throughout the region as a whole. For Vietnam’s rise to power was at the expense of its southern neighbour, Champa. This Indianised state had, on occasion, been able to challenge the mighty Angkorian empire. As late as the twelfth century the Chams were able to sack a temporarily weakened Angkorian state in a successful water-borne attack on the city after their great war canoes had travelled up the Mekong and Tonle Sap Rivers. By the beginning of the fourteenth century, in contrast, Champa’s former strength had greatly decayed and the Vietnamese were already involved in a process of annexation and long-term attrition that was to lead, eventually, to the obliteration of the Cham kingdom.

Because so many important changes took place in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, historians have asked whether there might be an identifiable event or series of events that would provide an explanation for the downfall of the great states of classical times and the emergence of the states that were to play more prominent roles in the later history of the region. Notable among the suggestions of such an essential event or series of events is that of the role played by the Mongols of the Yuan dynasty in China. By bringing about the downfall of Bagan in Burma, by interfering in developments in the Indonesian Archipelago, and in Vietnam, Champa and Cambodia, the Mongols, the suggestion runs, created a turbulent situation favourable to change. Other commentators give a different emphasis, pointing to the changes a little later that resulted from the arrival of Theravada Buddhism in the mainland of Southeast Asia and of Islam in the maritime regions.

There seems every reason to give some weight to all of these suggestions, so long as no single cause is seen as having been sufficient by itself to alter the political map of Southeast Asia from the late thirteenth century onwards. The importance of the Mongol destruction of the state based at Bagan cannot be overstated. But the role of the Mongols in bringing change to Angkor is much less clear. Islam was to have great significance as a unifying factor among the coastal populations of the Indonesian islands. The extent to which its arrival in northern Java and northern Sumatra had any quick, political effect in speeding the decay of the older pattern of state relationships in the archipelago is more difficult to determine.

Briefly, it is easier to argue that a series of important changes took place and to note that these political changes often ran parallel, or nearly so, with developments in the fields of culture and religion than to argue for general political change as the result of a single major factor in the history of the Southeast Asian region. The case of Cambodia is instructive in this respect. Since the beginning of the twentieth century there have been a number of attempts to account for the decline of this mighty state in terms of a single, major cause. Some of the earliest of these explanations placed the greatest importance on the arrival of Theravada Buddhism, a more ‘democratic’ religion, it was argued, than Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism. Later arguments suggested that a possible reason for the decline of the Angkorian state might have been the spread of malaria as Thai invasions of the Angkor region damaged the system of reservoirs and canals in and around the city and so provided stagnant ponds in which mosquitoes could breed. Nowadays such single-cause explanations are treated with reserve, and scholars are, as has already been noted in this chapter, inclined to accept that a range of factors were involved. The acceptance of Theravada Buddhism by Cambodian rulers might well have been an attempt to shore up the power of the state rather than an effort to make religion more ‘democratic’. The invasions by the Thais undoubtedly were of very great importance, playing a part in the deterioration of the city’s complex system of canals and reservoirs so vital to its functioning. Probably the most important factors leading to the decline of the Angkorian state were the dramatic climate variations that we now know took place in the fourteenth century and which were noted earlier in this chapter. By causing major damage to the state’s complex hydraulic system—both clogging and overloading vital water distribution canals—these climatic factors sharply affected crop yields. As for malaria, it is now seen, at most, to have been a minor factor undermining Angkorian power.

Major changes took place in Southeast Asia over a period of more than two centuries as old states were no longer capable of adapting to changed circumstances and as new states proved more attuned to the changed world. To search for causes other than in the broadest range of factors that govern the capacity of individuals and kingdoms to survive or to fail is to court disappointment. Moreover, to place the major historical emphasis on the fall of the old states and the disappearance of certain cultural characteristic, such as the use of Sanskrit, is to minimise the extent to which old values lived on in the new states that were the successors to the powerful kingdoms and empires of the classical period.

In short, the Southeast Asian world that emerged following the end of the classical period owed a very great historical debt to earlier times. Students of modern Southeast Asia may not always be aware of the more complex details of that debt, but they cannot disregard its importance or remain ignorant of the broad lines of development without severely limiting their understanding of more recent issues, of the underlying cultural factors that influence historical developments, and of the basically important fact that Southeast Asia possesses a past no less full of interest and deserving of attention than other areas of the world.

## THREE

# Courts, kings and peasants: Southeast Asia before the European impact

Looking back over the long span of history there is a great temptation to search out ‘watersheds’, sharp breaks with the past, periods that can be described as the beginning or end of an era. Such an approach is both understandable and on occasion justifiable. The danger, however, is that such an approach carries with it a very great risk of distortion. Because formerly great empires were overthrown or collapsed in both mainland and maritime Southeast Asia we should not think of those empires as having been completely forgotten by the descendants of the men and women who had once lived at Bagan in Burma (Myanmar), at Angkor in Cambodia, or near the great monuments of central Java such as the Borobudur. Nor should we assume that the kings who ruled over the states of Southeast Asia that emerged in the centuries following the end of the ‘classical’ period saw themselves as less important, less royal, or even less powerful than their predecessors. To put the matter briefly, the bulk of the states making up Southeast Asia in the eighteenth century—the last century when the region was *largely* free of European influence—were not only still essentially traditional in character, they were, just as importantly, states in which the rulers reigned with a clear conviction of the permanence, if not the stability, of the traditional world. Indeed, some scholars would now argue that the eighteenth century was a period of increasing confidence for many of the states of Southeast Asia. Quite certainly, most of the kings and officials of eighteenth-century Southeast Asia had no sense of their position being threatened by men from Europe.

This final fact explains why so much attention is given to the eighteenth century in any general survey of Southeast Asia’s history. Although change, when it did come in the nineteenth century as the result of a growing European role in the politics of Southeast Asia, was often much slower and less dramatic than some commentators once suggested, the search for ‘watersheds’ does appear partly justified in relation to the eighteenth century. This century witnessed a significant historical shift from a situation in which most Southeast Asian states maintained a traditional existence, essentially untouched by the influence of Europe, to a new situation in which, at the political level at least, Europeans began to exert an increasing influence over developments in the region. The eighteenth century was, therefore, the last century in which the traditional world of Southeast Asia was dominant, if not universal.

The difficulties associated with the use of metaphors such as ‘watershed’ are immediately apparent, however, when one looks ahead from the eighteenth century to the changes of the nineteenth century that have just been mentioned. The question is then raised as to whether or not there were a whole series of ‘watersheds’ as colonial powers became more and more important in the Southeast Asian region: an ‘eighteenth-century watershed’, a ‘nineteenth-century political watershed’, and a ‘late nineteenth to early twentieth-century economic watershed’. Clearly the excessive use of any metaphor robs it of its force and suggestion. Possibly the most helpful way to think of the ‘watershed’ metaphor is in terms of a series of linked developments in which over a period of perhaps two centuries Southeast Asia was transformed economically, politically and socially. Viewed from this perspective, the period of the eighteenth century is *part* of the ‘watershed’ that was represented by the combined political and economic changes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and ended with the Second World War.

A political map of eighteenth-century Southeast Asia on which the cartographer tried to indicate the boundaries of the various states by use of different colours would appear as an extraordinary mosaic. It is a difficult task even to count how many colours there would have to be on this map. Instead of the ten states that make up twenty-first-century Southeast Asia—or eleven if we now include East Timor (Timor-Leste)—a cartographer attempting this task for the eighteenth century could not think in terms of less than forty states—kingdoms, principalities and sultanates—that required delineation. Many of these states were of minor importance. Both on the mainland of Southeast Asia and in the maritime world one would have to find some way of distinguishing between the states of real importance and those which existed at the pleasure of their suzerains or overlords. But however the calculations are made any political map of eighteenth-century Southeast Asia would be notably more complex than a political map of the contemporary region. Moreover, the political map of eighteenth-century Southeast Asia, in contrast to a map of the succeeding century, would have one very distinctive feature. The areas showing a colonial presence would be very small indeed. Apart from the northern Philippine Islands and much of Java, the European presence in eighteenth-century Southeast Asia was extremely limited, a few trading posts dotted along the coastlines of the various regions.

What sort of states existed in this still essentially traditional Southeast Asian world? The most distinctive was the Vietnamese state. Throughout most of the eighteenth century Vietnam was politically divided with one great family, the Trinh, dominating northern Vietnam, where a powerless Le family emperor lived, while another family, the Nguyen, dominated the southern areas. Despite this division, and indeed despite the dramatic developments of the last three decades of the century when a major uprising (the Tay Son rebellion) brought temporary unification under rulers who challenged and overcame the power of the great families, the ideal of a politically undivided Vietnamese state survived. This ideal state was thought of as one in which Confucian values were dominant and an administrative system modelled on that used in China prevailed. Yet attachment to Confucian values and a bureaucracy that took China as its example did not mean the Vietnamese were simply a provincial variant on a metropolitan Chinese theme. The rulers of Vietnam, or portions of it when the country was divided politically, copied much but not all from China. Most clearly they did not accept any suggestion that China had a right to interfere in Vietnam’s internal affairs, even if it claimed the right to demand Vietnam’s allegiance as a tributary state.

As a result of the partial Chinese overlay on Vietnam’s court and its officials, the state stood apart from its Southeast Asian neighbours in terms of the precision and formality that attached to the government structure. In theory, and to a considerable extent in practice also, the Vietnamese bureaucracy was open to all who could meet the tests of scholarship. In the Buddhist kingdoms of Southeast Asia, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Cambodia and in the lowland principalities of modern Laos officialdom was, in contrast, a quasi-hereditary affair. Being the son of an official was the vital fact that determined subsequent entry into the ranks of the ruler's administration. In Vietnam merit was taken as the guiding principle, even if it often proved the case that the sons of officials had more opportunity to succeed in their learning and so to enter the official ranks.

Vietnamese officials advised a ruler who was spoken of as the 'Son of Heaven' and who was thought to mediate between the physical world and the spiritual world by the correct observance of state and religious ceremonies. Just as the performance of these ceremonies followed a minutely drawn-up set of procedures, so was the rest of Vietnamese official life conceived of as following prescribed patterns. The bureaucracy was a pyramid with the ruler at the apex and with clearly defined links established between the apex and the lowest officials in the provinces who formed the base of this administration. The law was a written code, detailed in form and complete with learned commentaries. Strict rules covered the amount of authority possessed by each grade of official and the qualifications for each grade. And in another contrast with their neighbours, the Vietnamese believed in the desirability of clearly defined borders.

In this, as in so many other ways, Vietnam differed from the other major mainland states of Southeast Asia, for which, in a way that has been discussed in an earlier chapter, the important external cultural influence came from India rather than China. For all of its pervasive Indian cultural influence in Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and in the riverine states of Laos was a less clear-cut and obvious affair. Vietnamese officials dressed in the same fashion as Chinese mandarins. With the exception of some court priests such direct borrowing was not a characteristic of the Buddhist courts of mainland Southeast Asia. In Vietnam, again, official architecture drew directly from China, whereas in the Buddhist states the Indian influence was a more subtle matter, and by the eighteenth century only rarely directly recognisable as a case of cultural borrowing.

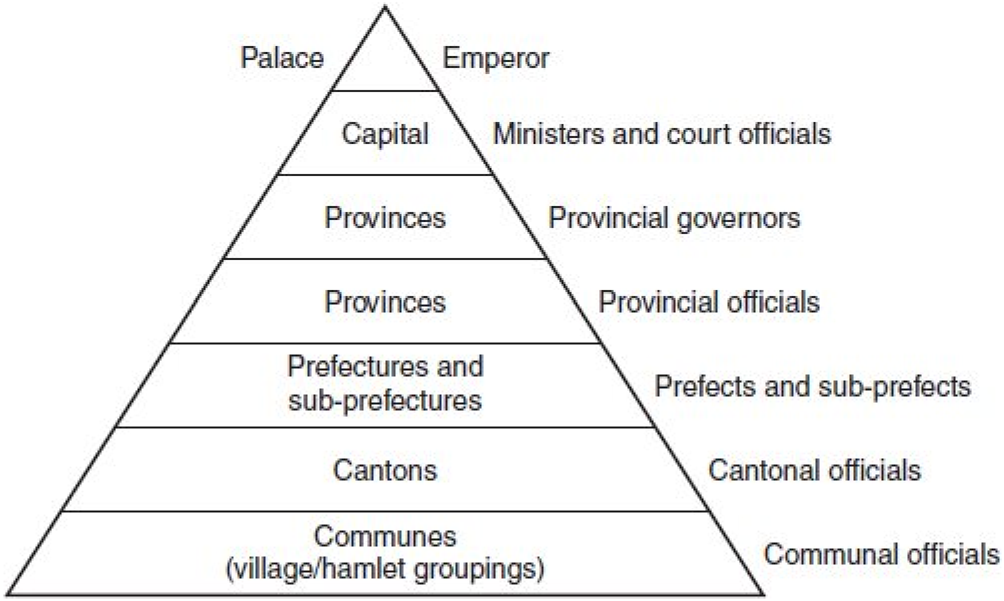
The organisation of the Buddhist states contrasted sharply with that found in Vietnam. The pattern of official relationships was in many ways much more complex, in part because it lacked the clearly defined lines of authority that were so much part of the Vietnamese system. Where the Vietnamese system sought to control the state in great detail down to the level of the village, the central power in the Buddhist kingdoms followed a very different practice. Control over the more distant regions of the kingdom was readily delegated to provincial governors who were able to exercise almost completely unfettered power, always providing that they did not challenge the king’s position as the ultimate arbiter of affairs within the state. If the pyramid is a useful symbol to depict the disposition of power within Vietnam, a series of concentric circles might be taken to represent the nature of power in the Buddhist kingdoms. The state might be considered as the area contained by the largest of these concentric circles, but it was only at the centre, where the smallest of these concentric circles is located, that the king’s power was truly absolute. Beyond the central circle—or beyond the limits of the palace, to take the real-life example instead of the graphic concept—it was frequently the case that the king’s power diminished in clear proportion to the distance one moved away from the capital. As for borders, the Buddhist rulers in mainland Southeast Asia, again in contrast to Vietnam, accepted that these were uncertain and porous. Indeed, given the lack of close links between the centre of Buddhist kingdoms and the outer regions, as well as the existence of numerous petty centres of power largely independent of their greater neighbours, some writers have argued that to talk of ‘states’ in the traditional Southeast Asian world is inappropriate. Certainly the states of traditional Southeast Asia, for we will continue to use the term for convenience, were very different from the political units we describe as states in the twenty-first century.

The officials who held power, whether at the centre of the state in the king’s palace or in the outer regions, were not men who gained their appointments through scholarship. Birth into a quasi-hereditary family, ability and an opportunity to gain the ruler’s notice all played their part in determining advancement. It would be quite wrong to suggest that the rulers of the Buddhist kingdoms did not have clear ideas on what constituted a good official, for the record is clear that they did. But the standards were much more flexible and much more personal than those that applied in Vietnam. In the same fashion, the conduct of business within the state was less set in a formal pattern, more subject to the personal likes and dislikes of the kings, at the highest level, or the officials great and small in the provinces away from the capital.

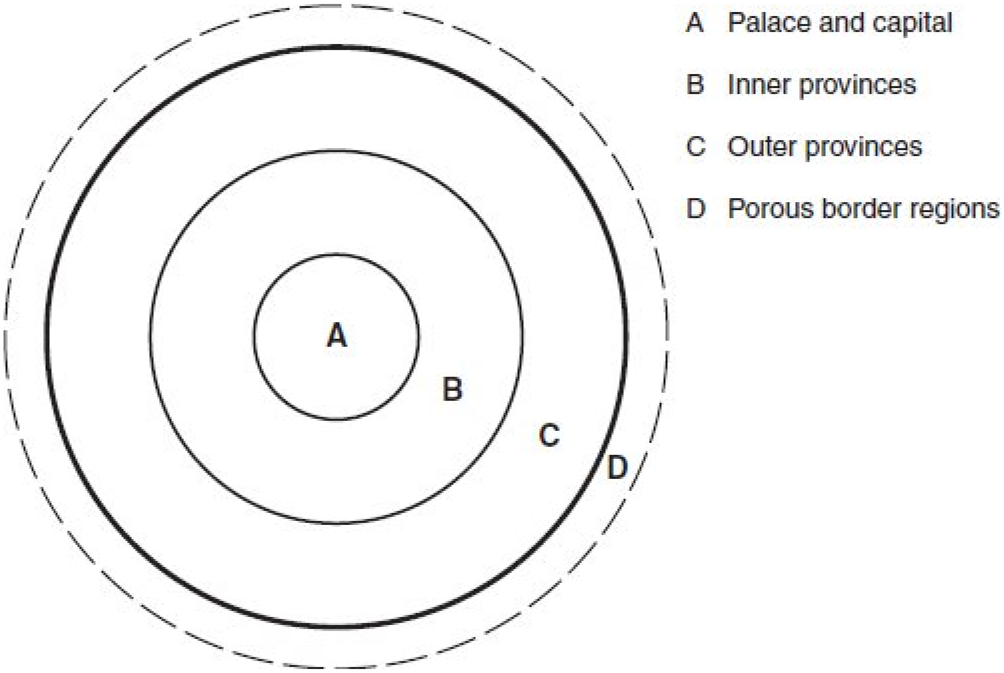
To write in these terms is to discuss the ideal, or at least the general, rather than to dwell on individual departures from the norm. Notably powerful Southeast Asian rulers of Buddhist states did attempt to impose their control over the kingdom as a whole, just as there were periods in

Vietnamese history when the clearly structured organisation of the state was unable to operate and the central power could not control ambitious governors in the regions more distant from the capital. But in the general terms that must be used in any broad historical survey there is no need to hesitate in underlining the great differences that existed between the government of Thailand, to take the example of one Buddhist kingdom, and Vietnam.

The king in Thailand was, like his counterpart the emperor in Vietnam, expected to intercede between the world of men and the spiritual world. But the nature of this intercession and the role assigned to the monarch involved in the act were very different. In Thailand, and in the other mainland Buddhist states, the king's semi-divine status reflected the fact that the monarch and the throne he occupied were the centre of the kingdom. Monarchy was the linchpin that held the Buddhist kingdoms together. Despite his title as the 'Son of Heaven' the Vietnamese emperor had no equivalent status. The Vietnamese emperors were essential to the existence of the state, but they were not the state. The point may be made clearer when it is noted that the Vietnamese were able to accept a situation in which for more than a hundred years during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries their emperor was no more than a figurehead, a puppet at the beck and call of one of the great families. However limited a king's power was away from the capital in which he had his palace, and however much senior officials might have tried to take advantage of a child succeeding to the throne, the idea of a state existing more as a reflection of its officials than of its ruler was not part of the system to be found in the Buddhist kingdoms.


Palace
Emperor
Capital
Ministers and court officials
Provinces
Provincial governors
Provinces
Provincial officials
Prefectures and sub-prefectures
Prefects and sub-prefects
Cantons
Cantonal officials
Communes (village/hamlet groupings)
Communal officials

*A schematic representation of the disposition of power in traditional Vietnamese society.* Those occupying positions as officials below the level of Prefects and Sub-prefects were not members of Vietnam's mandarinate.


A Palace and capital
B Inner provinces
C Outer provinces
D Porous border regions
A
B
C
D

*A schematic representation of the disposition of power in the traditional Buddhist states of mainland Southeast Asia.* The more distant a region from the kingdom's capital, the less likely it was that the ruler exercised significant power there. Beyond the outer provinces, the border regions were porous, with uncertain boundaries.

Common to all the Buddhist rulers of mainland Southeast Asia was a belief—held both by themselves and their subjects—in their semi-divine or near-divine character. The concept of a king possessing magical, divine-like characteristics is a difficult one to grasp from a Western viewpoint, and the more deeply one examines the matter the more complex the issue becomes. For a person seeking to understand Southeast Asia in general terms the following broad points deserve attention. The quasi-divine, magical role played by traditional Buddhist rulers in the states of mainland Southeast Asia involved something more than the concept of ‘divine right’ associated with Christian rulers in Europe. Such European rulers held an office sanctioned by the Christian divinity. But no matter how elevated the status of these kings and queens, they were not semi-divine or nearly god-like themselves. The Buddhist kings of mainland Southeast Asia, on the other hand, were seen as divine, or partially so. Their position as king was not only sanctioned by the Buddhist faith, and continuing Hindu religious beliefs, they were in themselves removed from the rest of mankind and credited with possessing powers that only the divine or near-divine could hold.

Once again, this is the ideal picture. If the ideal had prevailed without any qualification there would never have been any family feuds, *coups d’état*, or any of the other turbulent events that saw kings toppled from their thrones and ambitious men plotting, sometimes successfully and sometimes not, to usurp the monarch of the day. But if the reality was more complicated than the ideal, the ideal was nonetheless maintained. Challengers who succeeded in removing a ruler from the throne immediately tried to claim all the semi-divine powers of their defeated opponent. What is more, with rare exceptions, those who fought or schemed to overthrow a ruling king did so in terms of their own claim to have a more legitimate right to the throne than the actual monarch. The importance of this traditional historical background for more modern periods in Southeast Asia may already be apparent. Given the immensely elevated status of traditional Buddhist rulers, there should be no surprise in the fact that a ruler such as the Thai monarch has continued to be a fundamentally important figure in the modern history of Thailand. Traditional ideas of kingship also help to explain why Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia was for many years able to reap immense political advantage from the fact that he had been Cambodia’s king before abdicating his throne in 1955.

Royal figures have also been important in the recent history of the maritime regions of Southeast Asia. If their importance has not been so striking as has been the case for the mainland, the explanation owes something to tradition as well as to the fact that Thailand's monarchy ruled over a country that was never colonised, while Sihanouk and his ancestors reigned in a colonial system that allowed at least some of the symbolic importance of the king of Cambodia to be maintained. Unlike the mainland, Buddhist monarchies—again excluding Vietnam as a special case—the majority of the rulers of the states in the maritime world, by the end of the sixteenth century, were followers of Islam, sultans who acted in the name of their religion as well as their state. As followers of Islam the sultans could not, in strict theory, be other than men with the limitations that such a status involves. Strict theory was yet again qualified, and most particularly in those regions of maritime Southeast Asia that had sustained substantial influence from Indian ideas—in parts of Indonesia and Malaysia.

Nowhere was this more true than in Java, where the rulers of the central Javanese kingdom of Mataram, which rose to power at the end of the sixteenth century, were followers of Islam but just as importantly, perhaps even more importantly, inheritors of a rich mystical tradition drawing upon Hindu–Buddhist ideas as well as indigenous Javanese religious beliefs and cultural patterns. The rulers of Mataram *were* more than men in the eyes of their subjects, in a way that many of the sultans of the coastal and riverine states of maritime Southeast Asia were not. These latter rulers were men with special rights and almost limitless privilege, but they were men all the same. The ruler of Mataram ensconced in his *kraton*, or palace, gave formal acknowledgment to Islam but his kingship is more readily understood as having parallels with the Buddhist monarchs of the mainland than in terms of the patterns to be found in many of the other traditional courts of the islands.

Whatever the religious or philosophical underpinnings to their exercise of power, the rulers of Southeast Asia in the traditional world of the eighteenth century and the officials who served them were a group apart from the rest of the population. In Vietnam merit could enable a peasant child to move into the official ruling group. Once this change took place the youth or man of the people took on a new role. Even more marked was the division between ruling group and ruled in the rest of the region. Apart from the rarest exceptions, the division between the elite and the rest of the population was almost complete, a profound gap that could only be bridged in extraordinary times or by an extraordinary man.

When using such terms as ‘division’ or ‘gap’, however, it is essential to make clear what sort of separation between elite and non-elite is being discussed. The division involved was not one that separated kings or sultans from the peasantry in religious terms, for instance. On the contrary, the peasants quite clearly felt a religious link between themselves, their rulers, and the complex religious beliefs they held. This fact is bound up in such basic sayings as ‘to be a Burmese is to be a Buddhist’. In terms of traditional Burma one could add ‘and to know that the chief patron of Buddhism in Burma is the king’. The essential feature of the division was that of power. In traditional Southeast Asia power was concentrated in the hands of the elite few. No middle group or class existed to moderate the stark division between rulers and ruled. Whether power was exercised wisely or not it was in the hands of the few.

Such a situation should not be taken to mean that there were no differences among those who made up the ruled portion of the population in traditional Southeast Asia, for such was not the case. Most importantly, in all the countries of Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, there was a marked difference between the members of peasant society who acted as ‘headmen’ or village leaders and those who had no role in the determination of policies within a village community. Because the term ‘peasant society’ is used as a general description there is an easy tendency to think of all peasants being more or less the same: all poor, all farmers, and all with little role to perform in life except to tend their fields and obey higher authority. Such a general picture is unsatisfactory. No peasants in the traditional Southeast Asian world were truly rich, by whatever standards one may apply. But some were a great deal better off than others. These men and their families had gained power and influence in their village communities and once having achieved it seldom let it go. They were the community leaders who acted as headmen and so as go-betweens linking the village with higher provincial authority. Although their material condition may often have been better than that of their fellow villagers, their duties as the final link in the chain between the court and the village settlement could often be unenviable as they supervised tax collection, arranged labour contributions, or ensured that men went to war on their distant ruler’s behalf.

The application of power by these village leaders differed from country to country, and even from district to district. Given the emphasis that has already been placed on Vietnam's very distinct character, it will not be surprising to learn that village society in that country was dominated and directed by members of a very particular leadership system. Whereas power and executive responsibility generally went hand in hand in the rest of Southeast Asia—a headman held power and exercised it—the situation was different in the complex society of a Vietnamese village. There the more prosperous peasants were a self-perpetuating group, as elsewhere. The difference lay in the fact that the Vietnamese village leaders worked through a group of village officials who had responsibility for the government of the village but were themselves responsible to other more powerful villagers.

So far the survey of Southeast Asian society undertaken in this chapter has dealt with the traditional world that was largely untouched by European power or ideas until the end of the eighteenth century. Yet even before the eighteenth century began, and slowly through that century, men from Europe were beginning to become involved in the affairs of the region and in one notable instance, in the Philippines, to have an important impact on society at large. The Portuguese, the Spaniards and the Dutch were the earliest of those from Europe who came to the Southeast Asian region and played a role in its history that remains a matter for continuing debate and reassessment. In the sixteenth century it appeared that the Portuguese as the first upon the scene would establish a dominant role in the region and gain the major share in the rich trade in spices—the commodity that had drawn Europeans to Southeast Asia in the first place. But Portugal's early successes, including in 1511 the capture of Melaka, the great trading city on the western coast of the Malayan Peninsula, were followed by relatively quick decline as the Dutch became the most important European nation trading in the Malay–Indonesia world. But how important? For the merchants of the ports in the Netherlands, the Dutch who lived, and usually after a very short time died, in Indonesia were important indeed as they developed a commercial system that for a period brought great profit to the Dutch state. But the impact of the Dutch outside their base in Java, and their outposts scattered through the islands, was minimal until the middle or even the end of the eighteenth century. Indeed, for some regions of Indonesia the impact did not come until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In terms of society and its patterns of behaviour, an interesting case has been developed to suggest that Dutch men and women in Batavia (Jakarta) were as much, or more, affected by Indonesian values than the reverse. The interest of such a discussion must not hide the vital fact, however, that the Dutch were still of minor importance to the bulk of the Indonesian population until the middle of the eighteenth century. A similar statement cannot be made in relation to the Spaniards in the Philippines, however.

The Philippines comes into historical focus remarkably late by comparison with other parts of Southeast Asia. We know that trading junks from China and Japan visited the Philippines for centuries before the Spanish established themselves in the northern islands of the archipelago during the latter part of the sixteenth century. The records of these voyages tell us frustratingly little about the nature of society in the Philippines and as a result our knowledge of life in the Philippines *before* the Spanish arrived depends largely on the information provided by men who wrote *after* the colonial presence had become an established fact.

In the broadest terms, the Spanish came to an area of Southeast Asia in which authority was for the most part exercised over small communities without any central direction. The exceptions to this general rule were mostly found in the southern islands of the Philippines, where the adoption of Islam by traditional leaders had helped them to organise small states using the unifying force of religion to incorporate a number of scattered communities into a single political unit. By the middle of the sixteenth century Islam was slowly gaining ground in the more northerly islands and had reached as far as Manila. But this was a coastal phenomenon. The inland areas remained untouched by the new religion so that the Spaniards encountered a society in which a large village was the essential unit. Authority, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, rested in the hands of a headman who was, through birth and inheritance, or through ability, more prosperous and powerful than his fellow villagers.

The absence of central power in the northern Philippine islands, for the southern islands were never to experience significant Spanish rule away from a few port centres, enabled the Spanish colonial power to implant itself in a way unmatched anywhere else in the region. Unlike anywhere else in Southeast Asia, moreover, the principal agents for the Spanish advance were not soldiers and traders but missionary priests. This state of affairs was unique in the history of Southeast Asia, even though missionary priests played important roles elsewhere. In the Philippines, however, the link between the church and the state was of a different order from that existing during French rule over Vietnam. The church and the state were inseparable in the Philippines, as they were in other parts of the world that fell under Spanish colonial control. This distinctive feature has led some scholars to argue, to an extent convincingly, that in order to understand Philippine history and society from the seventeenth century onwards it is necessary to study the Spanish experience in Latin America.

Whether or not one seeks enlightenment from the comparison of the Philippine experience with that of the various countries of Latin America, the impact of Spanish values, particularly Spanish Christian values, on the peasant society of the Philippines was profound. The Philippines became the one country in the Southeast Asian region in which Christianity became more than a minority religion. The presence of Christian missionaries did not, of course, bring immediate change to social patterns in the countryside. Slowly, however, with the combined force of the church and state lending authority to developments, the Spanish colonial impact affected the life of the peasantry, giving new and greater power to the traditional local leaders, yet insisting that power beyond the village or district level could not pass out of the hands of Spaniards. The ultimate irony of this situation is well known to Filipinos but all too often unknown by others. By the early years of the nineteenth century, two hundred years of Spanish rule had brought into being a growing group of native Filipinos whose education fitted them to assume roles in the state and the church that were denied them because they were not Spanish. The resentments this situation caused became the seeds of the Philippine revolutionary movement in the late nineteenth century. Yet there was a further irony again. If the Spanish impact, coming so much earlier and so much more profoundly in the Philippines than elsewhere in Southeast Asia, created a class that resented Spanish political control, it also laid the foundations for a rural economic situation in which centuries of colonial control developed, strengthened, and gave legitimacy to the high degree of social stratification that remains a feature of Philippine life to the present day.

Extended discussion of the Philippines makes the point that the country’s experience was in many ways very different from the rest of Southeast Asia

—more different, in some important senses, than those features that always remind us of Vietnam’s special character. Nevertheless, for the Philippines as well as the rest of Southeast Asia, there was a general pattern to peasant life that allows us once more to enter the risky world of simplification and summary. Throughout Southeast Asia the basic pattern of peasant life was one in which men and women assured their right to farmland by the act of farming. For most of Southeast Asia the Western concept of land ownership did not apply—but Vietnam once again differed from most of its neighbours in the existence of clearly defined private land ownership. A family might work one area of land for many generations but the fields remained the ‘property’ of the ruler. Such a situation was not as full of difficulties as might be thought at first glance. And as long as the population of the various countries remained small there was little pressure on land. If circumstances conspired to make life in one agricultural area difficult through war, famine or the excessive demands of an overlord, then a family or a village could move on to find an alternative region in which to work. They could even move from one country to another. As late as the end of the nineteenth century French officials in Cambodia were amazed to find that peasants moved in both directions across the border between Cambodia and Thailand—a fact that needs to be remembered whenever emphasis is placed on the sense of national identity among a peasant population.

Life as a peasant was seldom easy and at times shockingly harsh. The risk of famine in countries that depended on monsoons to provide the water for irrigating wet-rice cultivation was always in the background. In all but the poorest regions there were occasions for village festivals with their accompanying gaiety, but these were the exceptions to a way of life that was plagued by disease as well as involving demanding physical labour.

Although the peasant farmers or cultivators were the most important Southeast Asian group outside of the elite ranks, there were other groups that also deserve attention. In villages of the larger kind and in the minor trading or administrative centres away from the great capitals there were artisans and small-scale merchants. Along the coasts of both mainland and maritime Southeast Asia and on the rivers and lakes there were fisher people whose occupation set them apart from the cultivators but who otherwise shared the same values and suffered comparable hardships of life.

The world of the peasant, whether cultivators or fishers, of the artisans and the small traders, was essentially a closed one. No truly autonomous villages existed but the links with the larger world were weak. The more prosperous villager might know a little of the world beyond the village's rice fields, as the fisher people of necessity knew of a world beyond the beach where they landed their catch and pulled their boats out of the water. But the world beyond the village was imperfectly perceived and the likelihood that anyone born into a village would leave it except during war or to live in another village was slim indeed. This fact explains a common theme to be found in the folk tales of many of the countries of the Southeast Asian region. The theme involves the remarkable transformation of a village youth into a great official or even a king through wit, good fortune, or magic—sometimes all three together.

Such a theme gives sharp emphasis to the basic reality of peasant life, the unchanging nature of existence. Life was not necessarily static. Villagers moved in the face of famine or to avoid war. Itinerant traders travelled with their caravans right across the face of mainland Southeast Asia, reaching from lower Burma into the highland regions of modern Vietnam. Indonesian traders from Sumatra, the northern ports of Java, and Sulawesi criss-crossed the seas of the archipelago in their trading voyages. But having ventured abroad they returned to a world that altered little in its essentials from year to year and decade to decade.

Yet change of momentous proportions was not far distant for Southeast Asia as a whole as the eighteenth century drew to a close. Many of the changes that came were the result of the Western impact on the region. During the nineteenth century Thailand alone escaped the experience of colonial rule, and even in Thailand's case the West impinged on the country in a fashion far greater than ever before. But other changes had little if any connection with the advance of the colonial powers. The last three decades of the eighteenth century in Vietnam were marked by political upheaval and by a challenge to established social and economic patterns—just how truly revolutionary the Tay Son rebellion (1771–1802) was in social terms is yet another unresolved historical controversy. The advent of a new dynasty on the Thai throne, the Chakri dynasty, from 1782 onwards, brought to power a remarkable series of kings whose personal energy and ability transformed the state. They did this as much through reinvigorating Thai forms of government as through later selective borrowing from the West.

Changes brought by growing Western influence and changes inspired by outstanding individuals within the ruling groups of the various Southeast

Asian states were later to affect the population as a whole. Initially, however, the fact and prospect of change had its greatest effect on the elite. Here, once more, emphasis is given to the division between the rulers and the ruled. It was the ruling class in Thailand who first were aware of the genius that inspired the first Chakri ruler, Rama I, in his profusion of decrees that codified and reorganised life at the court and in his own presentation of the Ramayana legend. And, similarly, the codification at the beginning of the nineteenth of the still much-loved folk epic, *The Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, was carried out by a member of the Thai elite. It was the central Javanese elite who welcomed the sudden burgeoning of literature from the middle of the eighteenth century. So too the Vietnamese elite were the first to respond to the remarkable epic poem, the *Kim Van Kieu*, that the author Nguyen Du wrote at the beginning of the nineteenth century and which has never been superseded as the finest Vietnamese literary examination of the moral dilemmas of human existence.

For the peasants the world went on as before, dominated by the cycle of crop planting and harvest, the seasons of the year, and the awesome events of birth and death. Visualising their physical world in the eighteenth century is difficult in the extreme as even the remotest villages of twenty-first century Southeast Asia have been touched and transformed by the modern world. Entering the spiritual world of the peasant during the eighteenth century is even more difficult an exercise. We may sense something of the complexity of this spiritual world, the blend of animistic beliefs with one or other of the great religions or philosophies—Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism—that were followed in the states of Southeast Asia. But even the most sympathetic student can only penetrate a certain distance into the religious world of another culture in another age.

Yet for all the emphasis that has been given in this chapter to the separateness of existence between ruler and ruled in the traditional Southeast Asian world it would be wrong not to end with an insistence upon the totality of the world within which these two groups lived. For this too was a feature of the traditional world that was soon to come under challenge as new forces and new ideas penetrated the region. The courts and kings were separate from the cultivators, fishers, and petty traders over whom they ruled. But all these groups inhabited a single, unified world. Just as the serf and the feudal lord of medieval Europe both, in very different ways, sensed themselves to be part of Christendom, so the cultivators or fisher people sensed themselves as being within the same world as their ruler, whether an Islamic sultan, a Buddhist king, a Vietnamese Confucian emperor, or a Catholic Spanish governor. To a considerable extent, the history of Southeast Asia from the beginning of the nineteenth century is a history of the changes brought to this assumption of a settled, single world.

# FOUR

# Minorities and slaves: The outsiders in traditional Southeast Asia

The ‘single world’ of the ruled and the rulers described in the previous chapter was a world for those who belonged to the dominant society, whether in a lowly or an exalted fashion. Not everyone who inhabited traditional Southeast Asia, however, did belong, in the sense of being a member of the dominant ethnic group within a state. A relatively small number of the outsiders in the various states that made up traditional Southeast Asia were immigrants or the descendants of immigrants from distant regions, Indians, Persians, Chinese and Arabs. The minorities of this sort were not really important, outside of a few port cities, until late in the nineteenth century. For the mainland of Southeast Asia, and to a much lesser extent in the maritime regions, the true outsiders in the traditional world were the people living in the hills and mountains.

The ‘hill–valley’ division of traditional Southeast Asian society was of a different order to the division between ruler and ruled in the ethnically unified mainland states or regions. The lowland cultivator was part of the dominant society, even if a very insignificant part. The people who lived in the upland regions were a group for whom the administrative apparatus of the lowland state did not apply and who did not share the values of lowland society.

Yet once again caution is needed when giving a general description, for the hill–valley separation was not absolute. The hill peoples of mainland Southeast Asia were outsiders in terms of the operation of everyday government, but they 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. In these and other ways the upland minority groups were linked with the dominant society without becoming part of it.

The general picture that is being described and which has changed little until very recent times may seem rather strange in a modern world marked by a very considerable degree of cultural unity—the ‘global village’ of popular commentary. What has been described would not, however, have seemed nearly so strange to Europeans of two hundred or even one hundred years ago. For the people of the hills and mountains of Europe were long regarded, and regarded themselves, as a group apart. And this was not only the case in Europe, as the record of the isolated mountain communities in the eastern United States makes clear. The variety of minority groups in the upland regions of Southeast Asia was and is considerable. Equally considerable is the variation in their levels of development as compared with those of lowland society. In traditional Southeast Asia many of the hill people were nomadic farmers, gaining an existence through the use of slash and burn techniques—‘eating the forest’—in their own evocative phrase. They levelled and burnt the trees and found in the resulting ash a temporarily highly fertile site for planting crops. Others were members of essentially fixed societies, farming with wet-rice techniques in the high valleys but resistant to any incorporation into the life of the plains.

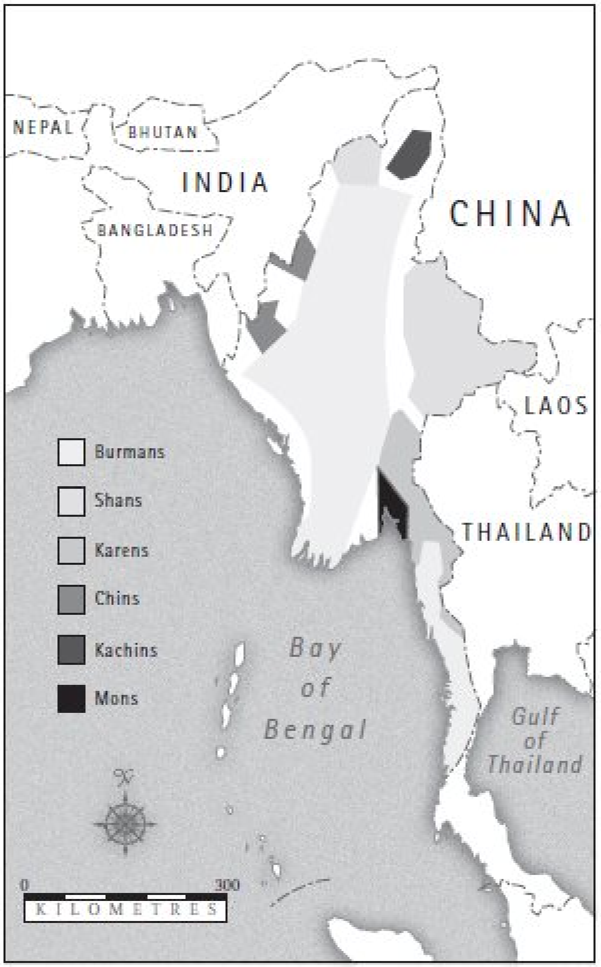
The ethnic and linguistic links between the people of the hills and those of the valleys were often close, even if this fact frequently went unrecognised. In one important case the link was recognised by the hill people themselves. Sections of the great Tai-speaking ethnic group who remained in their mountain valleys rather than joining their linguistic cousins in the lowlands were aware of the common basic language that existed between them so that they too called themselves Tai. But such an awareness does not seem to have been a feature of other groups. The Sedang and the Bahnar hill people of the southern mountains running between Cambodia and Vietnam speak a language that, very roughly, might be described as an early version of modern Cambodian or Khmer. This fact, however, has not led to any sense of shared ethnic identity between these hill people and the lowlands majority.

To a considerable extent the popular picture that has persisted for so long of an absolute separation between the upland minorities and the lowland majorities is a result of the almost absolute *social* division between the two groups. Whatever the links involving the interests of government and trade, there was a near absolute social division that was summed up in the words traditionally chosen by the dominant societies to describe the peoples of the hills. Without exception the words are pejorative, laden with disdain and emphasising the social and cultural gap that separated the two groups. Uplanders were *moi* to the Vietnamese, *phnong* to the Cambodians, and *kha* to the Lao. The words can all be translated as ‘savage’ or ‘barbarian’, and be seen as enshrining Kipling’s concept of a ‘lesser breed without the law’. Nowadays, these pejorative terms have generally been removed from official use, but still linger in the vocabularies of individuals.

Social division, in the very broad sense the term has in this case, may have been almost absolute, but, as already noted, it did not prevent contacts between the dominant and non-dominant groups. The hill people performed a variety of functions for the lowland societies. Who else could provide their knowledge if a lowland army wished to move across the hills and mountains to strike at an enemy? Who else could guide the slave-raiding parties from the lowlands to the most remote regions and aid in the capture of men, women and children whose way of life set them furthest apart from those dwelling on the plains? These tasks were irregular, as was the employment of levies from the hills to fight as soldiers in the armies led by lowland rulers. The importance of this soldierly role may be gauged from the appearance in Cambodian folk literature of a man from the hills who is the hero of a successful battle against invaders.

Other tasks were more regular. Until the French stopped the procedure, because they saw it as an example of slavery, a minority group living in the foothills of the mountains of southwestern Cambodia had the hereditary task of supplying the Cambodian court with cardamom seeds. In return for this tribute the Pear or Por hill people were allowed to live largely undisturbed in their malaria-infested environment.

Beyond such practical tasks the link between the peoples of hill and plain could be magical. While the traditional world of Southeast Asia still retained its essential character in the eighteenth century, both the Vietnamese and the Cambodian rulers accorded a special magical role to two Jarai sorcerers living in the chain of mountains lying between the two countries. These ‘kings of fire and water’, as they were known, were sufficiently important for the Cambodian monarch to send them gifts, a procedure that seems to have been curiously parallel to his act of sending tribute to the rulers of both Thailand and Vietnam. The explanation appears to lie in terms of a belief in the great magical power of these sorcerers and of their distant link with the most sacred component of the Cambodian royal regalia, the *preah khan*. This was a famous sword that was also described as the ‘lightning of Indra’, the king of the Hindu gods. (It vanished from the royal palace during the regime of Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge in the 1970s as another material tragedy of that awful period.) In more scientific terms the status attributed the two ‘kings’, and the tenuous links maintained between other royal families and particular groups of hill peoples, might be regarded as testimony to the long-forgotten shared origins of groups that now lived in isolation from each other.


NEPAL
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Gulf of Thailand
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300
KILOMETRES

**A simplified ethnolinguistic map of Burma**
Among the countries of mainland Southeast Asia, Burma is distinctive because of the high proportion of ethnic minorities within its borders. More than thirty per cent of Burma’s population is made up of minority groups.

Most of the observations about upland and lowland peoples made so far relate to those states of mainland Southeast Asia in which there was a clearly dominant ethnic group, the Vietnamese in Vietnam, the Cambodians (Khmers) in Cambodia, the Thais in Thailand, and to a much lesser extent the Lao in Laos. The picture was very different in other areas. On the mainland the situation in Burma (Myanmar) stood in sharp contrast to its neighbours. Despite its long history, Burma has seldom been a unified state. The Burmans (Bamar people) have dominated the major river valleys, but the populations of the upland regions that fall within the frontiers of Burma have seldom readily accepted the government the Burmans have tried to impose on them. Indeed, from the first recorded history of Burma to the present day, tension between different ethnic groups and the Burman-dominated central government has been a recurrent feature. It has been a feature because of the very considerable size of the indigenous minorities. The Shans, Kachins, Karens and Chins, to mention only the most prominent of the non-Burman groups, make up almost one-third of the entire population—the Shans and the Karens alone account for something like 16 per cent of Burma's total population.

Minorities of this size underline the much greater ethnic unity of Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia. In each of these countries the indigenous minorities are less than 15 per cent of the total population. Such a figure did not always prevent clashes between the dominant and the non-dominant groups in the past, but with the preponderance so clearly established in favour of the major ethnic groups there has never been any real question as to where power lies. The indigenous minorities in Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia could accurately be described as outsiders. But the term takes on a different meaning in relation to Burma. There the Shans, Karens and others were outsiders too, but outsiders who again and again showed they were able to resist any attempt by the Burmans to impose their Burman will upon them. In making this distinction there is a very necessary qualification that must be added. If in Thailand, for example, there was no question of where real power lay and which group exercised it, there was also another aspect of the upland–lowland relationship. Throughout the historical period, indeed until quite recently, lowland governments have not generally found it necessary to become involved in the day-to-day government of upland areas. Provided the populations of those areas did not act against the interests of the state then they were best left to govern themselves. Such a policy was possible in the states where the upland people were not seen as a threat. It was impossible, in Burman eyes, when the upland peoples posed all too clear a threat to the dream of Burmese unity.

The pattern of ethnic relationships that existed in mainland Southeast Asia in traditional times had no real parallel in the maritime regions. Although the inhabitants of the maritime world, from the Malayan Peninsula to the Philippine islands, spoke a series of languages that have a common linguistic root, the geographical character of their environment encouraged fragmentation rather than unity. The large island of Java gave scope for the development of sizeable states, such as Majapahit in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Yet even Majapahit and the earlier Sumatran-based empire of Srivijaya had little ethno-linguistic unity beyond their centres. As students of Southeast Asia have repeatedly emphasised, the maritime regions of Southeast Asia have an ethnic pattern very different from the mainland. Instead of there being a general pattern of dominant majorities and non-dominant minorities, the population of the maritime world is much better seen as composed of an intricately related series of ethnic groups. Only comparatively rarely was there a situation in which one clearly defined ethnic group dominated another minority group. Rather, territory was associated with groups of people who had a clear picture of their own identity and of their separateness from others. This was true whether one talks of the Bugis seafarers of Sulawesi, the Sundanese of West Java or the Dyak tribesmen of the interior of Borneo. In the geographically fragmented and often environmentally difficult world of maritime Southeast Asia the establishment of large territorial states was mostly impossible before modern times, and the survival of smaller states and of many tribal areas was the norm.

There were, and are, some limited instances of hill populations whose level of development set them apart from the larger ethnic groups of the maritime world. These peoples, to be found in scattered groups from the Malayan Peninsula through the Indonesian Archipelago and in the Philippine islands, are the descendants of some of the earliest inhabitants of the region. Always small in numbers and described as ‘Negritos’ by ethnologists, they never represented a challenge to those other ethnic groups whose life was lived in the lowlands.

The real division in the maritime world was not between hill dweller and valley dweller but rather between those who followed a pattern of life linked with a permanent base, whether for farming, fishing or trading, and those who still pursued a nomadic life combining hunting and slash and burn agriculture. In the mainland world the nomadic cultivator was, of necessity, an uplander, but such was not the case in large areas of maritime Southeast Asia. Moreover, for the bulk of the nomadic groups of the traditional maritime world there was no sense on their part, or on the part of others, that they were linked to state systems of more settled peoples.

The experience of being an outsider in traditional Southeast Asian society was in general determined by ethnic and geographical factors. But there were other outsiders who need to be considered in any survey of the region. These were the men, women and children whom European visitors so readily described as ‘slaves’. There were indeed persons whose position in society in traditional Southeast Asia combined all the deplorable features that are usually conjured up by the world ‘slave’. These were persons who were in a very clear and special fashion outsiders, persons who could never share in the benefits of established society. They were the property of their owners, to be treated and disposed of as their owners pleased, with no hope of release for themselves or for their children, who were automatically slaves from the moment of their birth. Prisoners of war and the persons seized in slaving expeditions were the groups who most usually filled this role.

Beyond these persons, for whom the fact of being a slave was a harsh matter with no prospect of relief, there were other groups whom Western observers also described as slaves but who, more accurately, deserved other descriptions. Western visitors to the traditional world of Southeast Asia seldom understood the difference, for instance, between the ‘true’ slaves, condemned to a life of servitude, and those persons who had voluntarily, but temporarily, given up their freedom in order to meet a debt or other unfulfilled obligation. These debt bondsmen were not outsiders in a true sense, though clearly the treatment they received at the hands of their masters varied greatly from place to place and from period to period.

Perhaps more importantly for our understanding of the complex nature of traditional Southeast Asia there were other groups of persons who occupied indeterminate positions as hereditary servants of rulers or great officials.

These men and women did not live outside the societies in which they performed their tasks, but they had no choices open to them; their position in life and the tasks they pursued were pre-ordained by birth. Such were the men and women who were hereditary palace servants, whether in the courts of the Buddhist kingdoms of mainland Southeast Asia or the sultanates of central Java.

Even the briefest review of those who were the outsiders in traditional Southeast Asia lends emphasis to the complexity of a region that began to experience a substantial impact from the West from the end of the eighteenth century onwards. Yet an awareness of that complexity should not blind an observer to the possibility of general judgments nor to the fact of there being some general themes in the history of the region. For all of the contrasts that exist between mainland and maritime Southeast Asia, between regions that have adopted Islam as a religion and those that follow Buddhism, or another religion, there are equally important unifying features to be considered.

All regions of Southeast Asia at the beginning of the eighteenth century were still dominated by a pattern of life that had altered little for many centuries. Industry, in a Western sense, was nonexistent, and artisans were only a small proportion of the total population. Outside of the ranks of the rulers, their officials and those who provided the services the elite demanded, there was little if any buffer between those who governed and the cultivators, the fisher people and the petty traders.

This was a world that placed a high value on order, the observance of proper procedures, and the maintenance of due respect for traditional practices. It was a world, as a result, that was also vulnerable to the efforts of those who were not Southeast Asians to change it. For the men of the West frequently did not work by the Southeast Asian rules. Even when they thought they were doing so this was seldom really the case and resultant change was often as great as if deliberate attempts had been made to introduce new ideas and techniques.

Those who lived in the traditional Southeast Asian world of the eighteenth century may have felt they had answers to their own problems, whether these were of peace and war, the relationship of man to the universe and the gods that controlled it, or the need to find proper patterns of behaviour towards different groups inside and outside society. But these were no longer the only problems that had to be answered as the West increasingly began to impinge upon the daily life of an ever-growing number of Southeast Asians. To a considerable extent the history of Southeast Asia from the beginning of the nineteenth century can be seen as a long-drawn-out debate or argument, and sometimes battle, over the issue of how Southeast Asians could find answers to the problems posed by the new challenges they faced. Some of the answers were the result of a conscious search for solutions. Some of the problems have never been fully answered. Challenge, in brief, became the keynote of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—challenge to traditional dispositions of power, to the acceptance of traditional values, and to the traditional pattern of economic life. As these challenges developed so was the traditional Southeast Asian world slowly but inexorably undermined.

# FIVE

# The European advance and challenge

The question of how important the European role has been in the history of Southeast Asia has been one of the great preoccupations of those who have studied the region since the Second World War. As in many scholarly debates there have been times when the real issues have been obscured by the dust of combat as advocates of particular points of view have been unready to see that theirs was not the only opinion that deserved consideration. At the heart of the controversy was the issue of what factors were really important in shaping the course of Southeast Asian history. As the debate developed most scholars came to agree that it was Southeast Asian factors that were the most important. And it was recognised that in the past non-Southeast Asians when writing about the region had frequently been prevented from giving full weight to those factors as the result of their own, usually Western, values.

Now that the dust has settled, however, there is additional general agreement that the period of European colonial activity cannot be dismissed as an unimportant episode in the broader history of Southeast Asia. What is now accepted as an important qualification to older ways of looking at the history of the region—ones that emphasised the role of Europe and so came to be called 'Eurocentric'—is that the nature of the European impact was highly varied and the force of its impact very uneven. Recognition of these facts, combined with an awareness of the rich and important history of Southeast Asian states and their populations that form the true stuff of Southeast Asian history no matter what the period under examination, has permitted a more balanced picture of developments to emerge. And this more balanced picture certainly takes account of the European role even if in a rather different fashion than was the case sixty or even fifty years ago.

One example will make the point clear. Before the Second World War it was quite common for history books to refer to Dutch rule over the Indonesian islands as if this had been established in a firm fashion for some hundreds of years. The Dutch had arrived in Indonesia in the early seventeenth century and so, general histories often suggested, these islands had been a Dutch colony for four hundred years. The errors of such a presentation are glaring, but the erroneous simplification had wide currency. The idea of a Dutch colony established for four hundred years takes no account of the fact that large areas of modern Indonesia did not fall under Dutch colonial control until late in the nineteenth century and even later, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Moreover, the type of history that was preoccupied with the Dutch role seldom, if ever, gave any significant attention to the Indonesian role in the history of their own islands. Indonesians formed the background for Dutch action instead of being seen as vital participants in the clash between two cultures that was part of a much larger *Indonesian* history.

None of this means that Indonesian history can be written without giving attention to the role of the Dutch. They in Indonesia, as was the case for the Spaniards and Americans in the Philippines, the French in the Indochinese region, and the British in Burma (Myanmar) and Malaya, and even the tiny number of Portuguese in East Timor, were important participants in the historical development of these countries. In some aspects of history the European role was vital in determining developments of far-reaching significance. The establishment of international boundaries in the Southeast Asian region was one such case. But in other aspects of life the part played by the European was much less important than it was once thought to have been. French officials in Vietnam, for instance, were often depicted in histories of that country, written before the Second World War and by their compatriots, as presiding over the implantation of French culture and language among the Vietnamese population. The error of such a view was most clearly revealed in the extent to which Vietnamese revolutionaries, as they fought the French in the 1940s and 1950s, were able to strengthen their capacities to challenge their opponents through the promotion of literacy in the Vietnamese language. French language and culture, all French claims to the contrary, never supplanted indigenous values and the indigenous language.

As much as anything else, we are dealing here with a question of focus. The older histories of the countries in Southeast Asia tended to have a narrow focus. They looked at the parts played by European governors and officials rather than at the whole scene. When the focus changes from this narrow approach to a broader view the Europeans do not disappear but they assume a different place within the overall Southeast Asian world. The Europeans become only one group of the many seeking to advance their position, and a group moreover that was often notably ill-informed about the societies within which they worked.

A further example reinforces the point being made. As the eighteenth century drew to a close the Dutch had been established in Batavia (Jakarta) for nearly two hundred years. Much of Java was linked with the Dutch East India Company through trading agreements or the Dutch appointment of senior provincial officials responsible to the alien power. Yet to think of Java as a region that was ‘Dutch’ in any political, let alone cultural, sense would be an extravagant nonsense. Not only did Javanese cultural life continue virtually unchanged from centuries before, the Dutch colonial rulers still had remarkably little knowledge of the region over which they claimed uncertain control. Not until just after the beginning of the nineteenth century did a European power in Java come to know in any detail of one of the world’s great Buddhist monuments, the giant stupa of Borobudur near the central Javanese city of Yogyakarta. And this information came not from the Dutch but as the result of investigations ordered by the British when, during the Napoleonic Wars, they briefly played a colonial role in Java.

What, then, did the Europeans achieve as they asserted their political and economic power in Southeast Asia? The European powers became, at the most fundamental level, the paramount powers of the region. This political development was accompanied by one of the most important features of the European advance into Southeast Asia: the creation by the colonial powers of the borders that, with minor exceptions, have become those of the modern states of Southeast Asia. At the same time, the Western advance called into question old values and ways of conducting government, since the success of the European powers in gaining control served as a testimony to the inadequacies of past systems. To understand these political developments, and the shifts in power and thought that were involved, the time has come for a country-by-country survey of the establishment of colonial rule that ended forever the traditional world described earlier.

## THE MAINLAND STATES

### Burma (Myanmar)

Up to the end of the eighteenth century Burma had not been the target of major European expansion. Beset by its chronic problems of ethnic disunity over the centuries, Burma in the second half of the eighteenth century seemed to have found new life under the vigorous leaders of a new dynasty, the Konbaung. Under the founder of this dynasty, Alaungpaya (reigned 1752–60) and his successors, most particularly Bodawpaya (reigned 1782–1819), Burma achieved a measure of internal unity and was able to lessen, if not entirely eliminate, the external threats posed by its neighbours, most particularly Thailand. Relative success in these fields, however, only solved one set of problems facing the Burmese state. The other set of problems was posed by the slow expansion of British power into areas of northeastern India that had previously been regarded by the Burmese as falling within their sphere of influence.

Here was an almost textbook instance of a clash between alien and Southeast Asian values. Eighteenth-century Burmese rulers regarded the areas of Assam, Manipur and Arakan (now Rakhine State) lying in or to the west of modern Burma as a frontier zone in which their interests should prevail. They did not, in general, seek to maintain strict control over these regions. What they expected was that Burmese interests should be paramount and that no place should be allowed to those who might challenge those interests. Such a view was quite the reverse of that held by the officials of the British East India Company, whose power was extending over an ever-wider area of India. The idea of frontier zones as opposed to clearly delineated borders was foreign to them. Equally inexplicable in their Western eyes was a political system that allowed the rulers of Burma to claim paramountcy over these regions lying between India and Burma, on the one hand, while accepting no responsibility for the conduct of the inhabitants of this region so long as Burmese interests were not involved. If, the British argument ran, raiding parties from Assam, Manipur or Arakan struck into territories under East India Company control, then the Burmese court was responsible and should act to prevent its ‘subjects’ from behaving in this way.

There was no meeting of minds. What was more, the problem of the frontier zones was not the only issue in dispute between Burma and the British. Other irritants involving differing views on the rights of British traders—or to make the point more clearly, the lack in Burmese eyes of those rights—and on the appropriate level of diplomatic interchange slowly but surely poisoned relations and led to the disastrous decision by Burma’s ruler, King Bagyidaw (reigned 1819–37), to confront the British by invading Bengal.

The tragic result for Burma was the British advance into Lower Burma, the capture of Rangoon, now renamed Yangon, and then the imposition of the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826 that gave the East India Company control of Arakan and Tenasserim.

For more than twenty years this was the limit of the British advance and in the Burmese capital at Ava complex domestic political concerns were of greater importance than the annoying but not unbearable British presence in Arakan and Tenasserim. Once again, however, totally different views of how government and business should be conducted led to a confrontation between the Burmese and the British.

The parallel between the developments in Rangoon in the early 1850s and those in Canton, now known as Guangzhou, and which led to the ‘First Opium War,’ is striking. Burmese officials in Rangoon allowed British merchants to trade, but did not hesitate to seek personal enrichment through persecution of men whom they regarded as alien interlopers. They believed that acting in this way enhanced Burmese prestige since it provided evidence of their unassailable power. Their judgment proved fatally wrong as the British in India came to see events in Burma as a test of strength with significance for their role in the East as a whole. At first without authorisation but later with approval from London, British troops fought the Second Burma War, of 1852–53, that led to the occupation of Lower Burma, an area of considerable agricultural and timber potential.

Once again there was a pause in the British advance. Having established themselves in Lower Burma by 1853 the British were content to wait, and the Burmese court found it impossible to muster sufficient military power to evict the British or even to present a united diplomatic front as chronic domestic rivalries continued despite diplomatic danger. By the 1880s

Burma had become important to Britain not only as a potential source of wealth but also as an element in Britain’s rivalry with France for spheres of influence in Asia. It is far from clear how much of this was apparent to the Burmese court, its ruler and officials. For some Burmese officials, British traders were still seen as providing an opportunity for personal enrichment and the humiliation of foreigners. For others in the court at Mandalay issues of protocol often seemed more important than those of power—though it is clear that the British just as much as the Burmese attached great importance to the question of whether or not foreigners should wear shoes in the presence of the king. Matters came to a head in 1885 as the Burmese court at Mandalay misjudged the strength of British determination to become the dominant power in Burma and to ensure that its commercial interests prevailed over those of France. In rejecting a British ultimatum, Thibaw, the Burmese king, sealed his country’s fate and British troops began the Third Burma War in November 1885.

By the beginning of 1886 Britain had captured Mandalay and proclaimed control over those areas of Burma not previously occupied. Although much hard fighting took place over the next few years, often accompanied by harsh punishment of those captured by British forces, ‘British Burma’ had come into existence and a western border was delineated between Burma and India. What might have happened if the Burmese leadership had better understood the nature of the challenge they faced can never be answered. The harsh, though accurate, judgment must be that the Burmese leaders as prisoners of their own view of the world were unable to see that the values to which they attached so much importance were meaningless to the British.

## Vietnam

Like Burma, Vietnam came under colonial rule in a series of steps. But unlike British rule in Burma the imposition of French rule was completed in a period of twenty-five rather than nearly sixty years. And in a fashion similar to Burma, also, Vietnam’s ruler and court at times behaved in a fashion that suggested there was no true understanding of the nature of the challenge presented by the French.

The search for similarities should not be carried too far, however, since Vietnam was a very different state from Burma at the time of the first invasion by French forces in the late 1850s. Quite apart from the great cultural differences between the two countries, Vietnam in the 1850s seemed set on an ever-rising path towards success. There were internal difficulties but the state was unified and expanding. Whatever the political and cultural differences between the two states, the governments of Burma and Vietnam shared a fatal flaw. In neither case was there any general appreciation of the power and the determination of the European invaders. In Vietnam's case the court at Hue was not ignorant of Western technological advances, but was convinced that these posed no threat to its independent existence.

The French saw Vietnam as a springboard for trade with China, little realising that Vietnam's geographical location next to China did not mean that any significant trade passed between one country and the other. When French forces invaded Vietnam, hoping for trade, pledged to protect Christian missionaries, and jealous of British colonial advance elsewhere, the Vietnamese court could scarcely believe what was happening. The Confucian order had not prepared the ruler and his officials for a development of this kind, despite their awareness of events in China as the Western powers imposed their presence upon the Chinese state, beginning in the 1840s. As a result the Vietnamese, once they found they did not have the material strength or the diplomatic capacity to chase the French from the country, adopted a policy that had little more than hope as its justification. With the French occupying a large, fertile area of southern Vietnam between 1859 and 1867, the Vietnamese in the capital of Hue hoped that the invaders would advance no further even if they did not go away.

Their hopes were notably astray. The French intended to stay and went on in the 1880s to extend their colonial possessions to include all of Vietnam. In doing so they did more than establish a new colonial empire in the East, they played a significant part in accelerating the developing intellectual crisis in Vietnam. The Vietnamese state at the time of the initial French invasion at the end of the 1850s was a paradoxical combination of dynamism and stagnation. Vietnam's continuing territorial advance into the lands of the western Mekong River delta was the clearest evidence of the state's persistent dynamism. But this was a dynamism that existed alongside the unreadiness of the Vietnamese emperor, Tu Duc, and the bulk of the official class to recognise how great a threat the West could pose. A very few voices were raised to argue the existence of a threat and the need for change, among them the Catholic scholar-official Nguyen Truong To. But until the full import of the West’s challenge was revealed by the establishment of French colonial rule throughout Vietnam, the conservative element remained dominant.

The geographical shape of Vietnam was not determined by the French in a fashion that was to be the case with the impact of colonial rule in other parts of Southeast Asia. In part this was so because of the long concern that Vietnamese rulers and officials had always shown to delineate their country’s borders. Nor, unlike the maritime regions, was France instrumental in creating a new state where none had existed previously. But in posing a military threat and then imposing an alien colonial government the French played an important part in the destruction of the old Vietnamese order. In their subsequent unreadiness to share power with the Vietnamese and consider the possibility of independence for their colony the French did more: they set the stage for one of the most powerful revolutions in Southeast Asia’s history.

## Cambodia

By comparison with Burma and Vietnam, Cambodia was a minor state in the mainland Southeast Asian world. Little remained of its former greatness, so far as power was concerned, and even its great temple ruins had by the middle of the nineteenth century passed out of Cambodian control to lie within the territories of the King of Thailand. That Cambodia survived at all was a reflection of the unreadiness of the rulers of Thailand and Vietnam to push their rivalry to its ultimate conclusion. Having clashed in a series of protracted campaigns fought across Cambodian territory earlier in the nineteenth century, the Thais and the Vietnamese concluded that their best interests would be served by permitting Cambodia’s continued existence, in vassal relationship to both the neighbouring courts, as a buffer zone between them.

We can only speculate what might have happened if the nineteenth century had not been marked by France’s advance into Vietnam and subsequently into Cambodia. Yet while it can only be speculation, the likely lines of historical development that might have affected Cambodia do not seem difficult to trace. Without the French advance it seems hard to think of Cambodia being left for long to play its buffer zone role. Eclipse as a state seemed—though it can never be argued in any certain fashion—the most likely fate in store for this painfully weak country.

The decision of the French in Vietnam to extend control over Cambodia beginning in the 1860s may therefore be seen as ensuring the state's survival. Not only the state's, moreover, for by treating the ruler of Cambodia, King Norodom, in such a way that he managed to remain as the symbolic leader of the nation the French also were instrumental in boosting the prestige of the royal family and of the officials associated with the court. In this their actions were in striking contrast to what happened in the two other countries already surveyed in this chapter. In Burma the British brought the monarchy to an end. In Vietnam the French undermined the authority of the royal house so that no Vietnamese emperor could ever again command the loyalty that was demanded and received in pre-colonial times. But in Cambodia as a result of both planning and the lack of it the French helped the traditional royal leadership to remain important politically.

## Laos

As the British and French pursued their aims in the rest of mainland Southeast Asia, two areas remained outside the general pattern of developments. The most important of these was Thailand, the one country in the whole of Southeast Asia that was able to avoid the experience of colonial rule. The other area was the region of the mainland that has come to be known as Laos.

No such entity existed in the nineteenth century. The region that is today called Laos was composed in the mid-nineteenth century of a confusing pattern of minor states, none of them able to act in any truly independent fashion. In the traditional Southeast Asian manner these petty states were vassals of more powerful overlords; on occasion a state would have more than one suzerain.

In a very real fashion the fact that a state of Laos came into existence was the result of colonial action, more specifically colonial rivalry. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, rivalry between the French and British on the mainland of Southeast Asia was intense. With the British established in Burma and the French controlling Vietnam and Cambodia, the question of where spheres of influence would lie was a matter for prolonged, and sometimes aggressively emotional, debate in London and Paris. Thailand both benefited and lost from this situation. The benefits flowed from the fact that so long as Thailand remained as an independent state between the

British holdings in Burma and the French holdings in Indochina, the advantages of a buffer state to the two imperial rivals helped to preserve its existence. But the benefits to Thailand had to be weighed against the losses that resulted from the concessions necessary to preserve the goodwill, or tolerance, of the rival European powers. So while Thailand remained free of colonial control it was at the cost of many concessions that ended some at least of the country’s independence. Foreign powers were able, for instance, to gain highly advantageous trading terms in Thailand and to insist, as they had done in China, on the right of their subjects to extra-territorial privileges should they become involved in both civil and criminal legal cases.

What was possible for Thailand was denied to the Lao states. Without unity of their own, as vassals of various overlords and subject to increasing disorder as Chinese refugees and bandits spilled out of China into the region south of the Yunnan–Quangxi border, the Lao states appeared an attractive prospect for colonial advance. The opportunity was seized by the French and between 1885 and 1899, through a combination of individual audacity, Great Power manoeuvring, and reliance on dubious claims linked to Vietnam’s past suzerainty over sections of Laos, the French established a colonial position in Laos. More clearly than anywhere else in mainland Southeast Asia this was a case of the European advance bringing into existence a new state, one that despite great political transformations has survived to the present day.

## Thailand

Thailand’s distinction in avoiding the experience of colonial control has already been stressed many times. Yet this success did not mean that Thailand was unaffected by the great changes that accompanied the colonial advance into the rest of Southeast Asia. Along with Vietnam, Thailand was one of the two notably successful states of Southeast Asia in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Unlike Vietnam, however, Thailand was able to build upon its historical success to survive without experiencing colonial rule. Many factors combined to make this possible. One of these has already been mentioned in discussion of developments in Laos—the fact that Thailand came to be seen by the rival European powers as a buffer zone between their conflicting interests. But there were other more positive reasons for the Thai achievement. Most importantly, Thailand gained advantage from the leadership of remarkable kings and officials. The contrast between Burma and Thailand is particularly striking in this regard. Facing a new and alien threat from the British, Burma's Buddhist kings and officials found it almost impossible to appreciate the nature of the challenge, let alone to formulate a means of resisting it. In Thailand, on the other hand, inquiring minds from the king downwards were already seeking to understand the nature of European power and the scientific and technical learning that formed an essential part of that power.

King Mongkut (reigned 1851–68) was one of the most outstanding of all Thai rulers and a vitally important architect of Thailand's plans for avoidance of foreign rule. A reforming Buddhist who had spent his early adult years as a monk, Mongkut's strategies involved positive efforts to acquire Western knowledge and diplomatic concessions that prevented an opportunity arising that could have been used by one or other of the European powers as an excuse to impose foreign rule. His approach was followed by his son and successor, the reformist-minded King Chulalongkorn (reigned 1868–1910). Both monarchs were remarkable men and fortunate in the calibre of their senior associates, whether these were other members of the royal family or officials in the Thai court.

Yet despite the great talents of Thailand's leaders the challenge of the European powers could not be evaded entirely. French determination to consolidate their colonial position in the Indochinese region led to Thailand losing its suzerainty over territories along the Mekong River in the Lao region and over the western provinces of Cambodia that had been regarded as part of Thailand for over a century. These losses took place around the turn of the century. A little later, in 1909, Thailand conceded control over four southern Malay states to the British. These states—Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan and Trengganu—then became associated with the British colonial empire in the Malayan Peninsula and form part of the modern state of Malaysia.

In short, if Thailand never experienced colonial rule in the fashion of its Southeast Asian neighbours it was nonetheless very much affected by the European advance. It lost control of territory and had to make substantial concessions to foreign interests. Despite this, Thailand presented a singular contrast to the rest of Southeast Asia in the late nineteenth century. Thai leaders followed policies that revealed a remarkable capacity to gain the greatest benefit from the new and intrusive element of European power.

Only in Thailand did an independent Southeast Asian state seek to gain the benefits of modern science and technology through the employment of foreign, European advisers.

## THE MARITIME STATES

### Indonesia

When discussing the mainland region of Southeast Asia and the challenge posed by European imperialism, the time span involved for the establishment of colonial states is at most some sixty years. For Indonesia the period during which the Dutch established an empire was in excess of three hundred years. Not surprisingly, with a slow advance of this sort spread over so many years, the character of the challenge posed and the response it evoked varied tremendously. Having made this point it is as well to remember, as emphasised later in this chapter, that the major period of Dutch advance in Indonesia took place over a period of some sixteen years at the end of the nineteenth century.

The Dutch came to the Indonesian Archipelago as traders. To pursue their initial goals it was sufficient to gain control of the major ports of northern Java and the principal commercial centres of the other islands engaged in the spice trade. Slowly, however, and in the fashion that has certain distinct similarities with developments involving the British in India, the Dutch East India Company became as much a territorial power as a trading venture. When Javanese rivalries led to the collapse of the kingdom of Mataram in the eighteenth century the Dutch had already become sufficiently involved in manipulating the internal affairs of Java to be vitally interested in playing a part in overseeing the establishment of Mataram’s successor states, based in the central Javanese capitals of Yogyakarta and Surakarta (Solo).

By the middle of the eighteenth century the Dutch East India Company could claim to exercise political control over most of Java. But this control was tenuous in character and there was no accompanying impact in terms of Dutch culture or technology. There was, however, an economic impact as the Dutch, working through the Javanese elite and through Chinese tax agents, developed an ever-increasing number of ways to raise money and extract the maximum agricultural production for the Company’s benefit. The burden of this economic impact fell on the peasantry. But for the peasantry as well as for the elite economic changes did not mean there were any sudden transformations of their traditional world, its values, and its hierarchy.

The same was essentially true in the limited number of areas away from Java that sustained the Dutch impact before the nineteenth century. Challenges to established relationships and systems of values were part of the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the Dutch slowly and intermittently expanded their control over the Indonesian Archipelago. This expansion was in part a response to a growing market for tropical products in Europe and in part a response to the increased activities of other foreign powers in the Southeast Asian region.

From the Dutch point of view the pressures of economic demand and foreign competition meant that it was no longer sufficient to maintain a loose control over the scattered islands, working from a limited number of bases and in association with local rulers. Instead the Dutch government in the Indies—for the Dutch East India Company had been abolished at the end of the eighteenth century—now sought to establish closer control and more uniform administration. These aims on occasion led to sharp and bloody conflict with local forces, particularly in areas of Sumatra. Most particularly the Dutch had to fight for decades before they were able to achieve dominance over the northern Sumatran region of Aceh at the end of the nineteenth century. In Bali, too, Dutch control was only achieved after bitter resistance was overcome.

By the early twentieth century the basic structure of the Dutch East Indies had been established. As the result of conquest and treaty the Dutch claimed control over all of the Archipelago, stretching from Sumatra in the west to the western part of New Guinea in the east. Only the tiny Portuguese colony located in the east of Timor escaped the Dutch net. The Dutch flag now flew above a strikingly diverse series of islands in which levels of cultural development ranged from the distinctive and refined world of Java to the modern stone age still found in New Guinea. In such a diverse region the impact of an alien European force had to be equally diverse, ranging from the increasing impoverishment of the peasantry in central and eastern Java to the implantation of Christianity in such sharply differing regions as the Toba highlands in Sumatra and the outer Indonesian island of Ambon.

More than all of the other changes and developments that came with Dutch rule the eventual establishment of foreign control over all of the islands of modern Indonesia brought something else. This was the possibility for the varied population groups in the Dutch East Indies to think of their common interests and a future common national identity. In more distant historical times there had been rulers who thought in terms of a *Nusantara*, an empire of the islands. As a result of foreign rule the outlines of such an empire were established, and in a clearer and firmer fashion than had ever seemed possible before. The final creation of the Indonesian Republic was the work of Indonesians. But this work was accomplished within a territorial framework that in considerable part was laid down during the period of Dutch colonial rule.

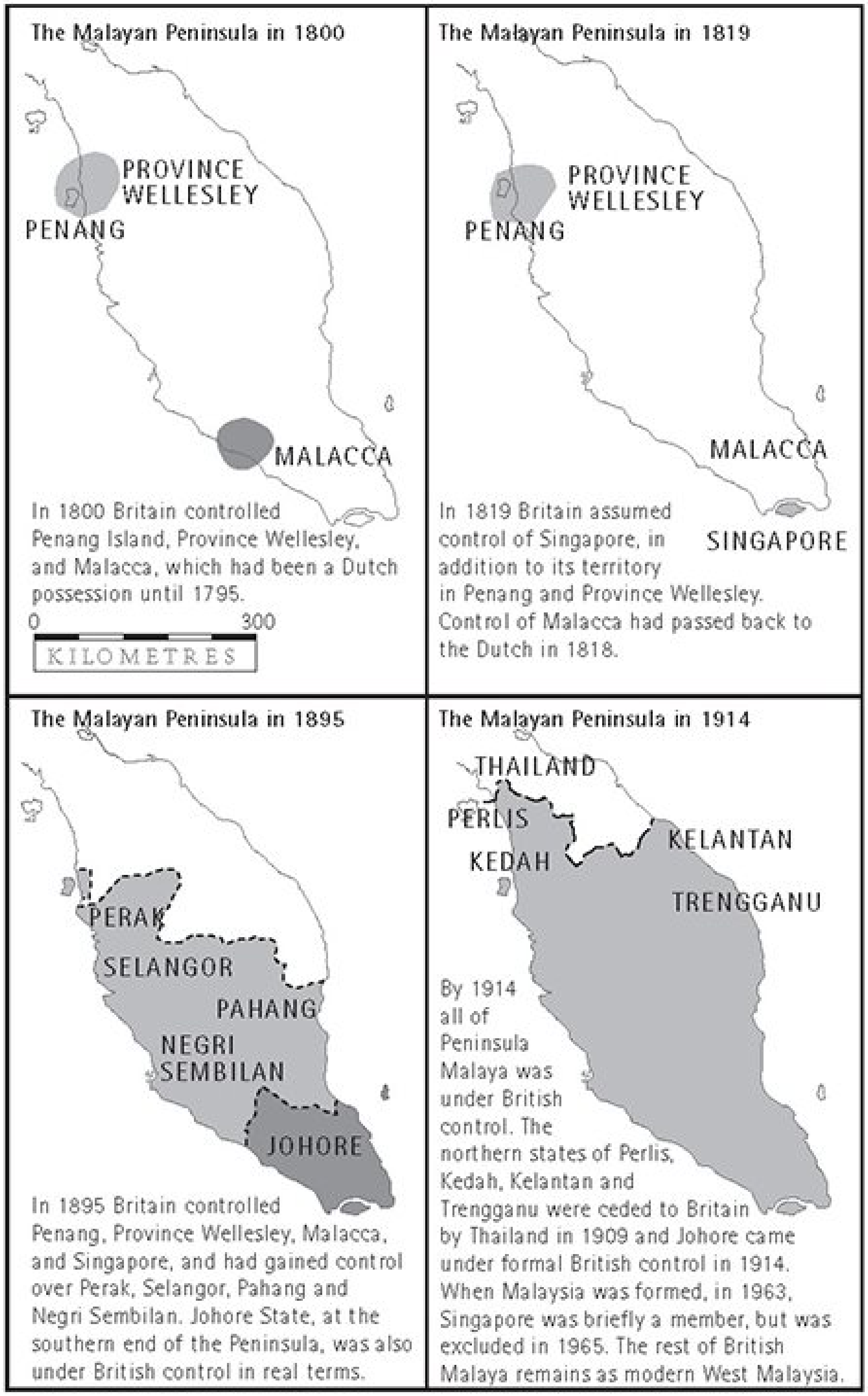
## Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei

No less than Indonesia the modern state of Malaysia finds its geographical origins in the colonial period. In traditional times the present state of Malaysia was part of the wider Indonesian–Malay world. Malay sultans ruled in states of varying size along the sea coasts of peninsular Malaya, the northern regions of the great island of Borneo and in eastern Sumatra, an island that came under Dutch control. Non-Malay peoples inhabited the hinterland of both the Peninsula and Borneo. In traditional times the area now occupied by Malaysia formed a region of shifting power and alliances. The northern states of peninsular Malaya were linked in vassal relationships with the rulers of Thailand, while the southern states of the Peninsula had ties with sultanates in areas that now form part of Indonesia.

European expansion into this region was a slow and haphazard affair. The Portuguese capture of Melaka in the early sixteenth century was not followed by any further major advance into the area of modern Malaysia until the late eighteenth century. By that time the Portuguese had been replaced by the Dutch as the rulers of Melaka and the first British settlement in the territory of modern Malaysia had been established on the island of Penang, in 1786. Settlement of Singapore followed in 1819 and by the 1830s the British had advanced to the point that they held three settlements on the fringe of the Malayan Peninsula, Singapore, Penang and Melaka, where they had now replaced the Dutch.

These settlements were not only on the fringe in a geographical sense, they also had a fringe character in terms of their relations with the Malay states of the Peninsula. The Straits Settlements, as the three British colonial bases came to be called, were *in* but not *of* the Malay world that surrounded them. In all three the population grew not so much as the result of migration by Malays, though some took place, but rather through the influx of Chinese, and later of a lesser number of Indians. Nevertheless, as the years of the nineteenth century passed, links between the British settlements and the Malay sultanates of the Peninsula grew. The southern Malay state of Johore became, in economic terms, a close partner with, if not an integral part of, Singapore. All three units of the Straits Settlements played roles as bases from which merchants and traders, tin miners and labourers, gradually began to transform the economic structure of the Peninsula. To a considerable extent the usual colonial paradigm was reversed and the flag followed trade into Malaya so that, as trade and commerce developed, Britain came first to achieve a political paramountcy in the region and subsequently to build on that paramountcy to ensure direct political control of affairs.

The process that led to the final emergence of British Malaya in the first two decades of the twentieth century need not be detailed here. By the time of the First World War British control, with some degrees of variation, extended over the whole of peninsular Malaysia in addition to the Straits Settlements. Together the two political conglomerates formed an economic whole and a more or less unified political entity. But whatever had been achieved in these terms, the result of colonial advance in the area of modern peninsular Malaysia had not been the achievement of unity in other terms. Chinese immigrants predominated in the Straits Settlements. In the sultanates of peninsular Malaya the ethnic Malays retained special rights as the ‘people of the country’ but they did so against a background of economic advance on the part of other communities, the European and the Chinese. Here was a very special result of the European advance into Southeast Asia. Britain’s colonial efforts in peninsular Malaysia drew new geographical boundaries that were to become the basis of a later new state. But within those boundaries the same colonial power followed policies, for the most part without thought, that led to the creation of problems that are still being worked out today.



The Malayan Peninsula in 1800

In 1800 Britain controlled Penang Island, Province Wellesley, and Malacca, which had been a Dutch possession until 1795.

The Malayan Peninsula in 1819

In 1819 Britain assumed control of Singapore, in addition to its territory in Penang and Province Wellesley. Control of Malacca had passed back to the Dutch in 1818.

The Malayan Peninsula in 1895

In 1895 Britain controlled Penang, Province Wellesley, Malacca, and Singapore, and had gained control over Perak, Selangor, Pahang and Negri Sembilan. Johore State, at the southern end of the Peninsula, was also under British control in real terms.

The Malayan Peninsula in 1914

By 1914 all of Peninsula Malaya was under British control. The northern states of Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan and Trengganu were ceded to Britain by Thailand in 1909 and Johore came under formal British control in 1914. When Malaysia was formed, in 1963, Singapore was briefly a member, but was excluded in 1965. The rest of British Malaya remains as modern West Malaysia.

PROVINCE WELLESLEY
PENANG
MALACCA
0
300
KILOMETRES
PROVINCE WELLESLEY
PENANG
MALACCA
SINGAPORE
PERAK
SELANGOR
PAHANG
NEGRI SEMBILAN
JOHORE
THAILAND
PERLIS
KEDAH
KELANTAN
TRENGGANU

**The making of modern peninsular Malaysia**

The importance of the European powers in the creation of new boundaries is abundantly apparent in relation to peninsular Malaysia, but nothing could make the point more plainly than the developments that took place in Borneo, in the areas that have come to constitute East Malaysia (modern Sarawak and Sabah) and Brunei. As part of the general colonial advance of the nineteenth century, Europeans considered the possibility of gaining economic and strategic advantage in northern Borneo. This was done at the cost of further diminishing the already declining power of the Brunei sultanate, which once had extensive power along the coast of Borneo and over parts of the Sulu Archipelago. In the event the areas that have now been incorporated in the modern state of Malaysia were brought under a measure of European political control by two of the most unusual colonial powers to operate in Southeast Asia, while the Brunei sultanate was left as a small enclave, becoming a British protectorate in 1888.

In Sarawak the agent of colonial advance was not a government but an individual: James Brooke, the first of the 'white rajahs' about whom so much has been written. In Sabah, by contrast, the colonial power was a commercial venture, the Chartered Company of North Borneo. In each case the peculiarities of the colonial 'power' led to very distinctive developments within these two territories. Yet the fundamental thread that has linked so much of the commentary on developments in the maritime world was there nonetheless. In Sarawak and Sabah, as elsewhere, the very existence of the later post-colonial states was the partial result of the European advance. Where no comparable state had existed before and no boundary lines had been drawn, the nineteenth century, even in these two eccentric cases, witnessed the establishment of new political entities.

## East Timor (Timor-Leste)

Within five years of capturing the great port city of Melaka the Portuguese made contact with East Timor, a site known through the Indonesian Archipelago as a source of sandalwood, a highly valued commodity in both China and India. It was not until the 1560s, however, that the Portuguese established their first permanent settlement on a small island near East Timor, and not until the middle of the seventeenth century that Portuguese in any numbers—at most, a few hundred—settled in East Timor itself. Many of these settlers were members of religious orders. After operating from a base at Lifau in the Oecusse region of the island for some time, the Portuguese moved their administrative headquarters to Dili in 1769.

Distant from Portugal and with limited resources, the settlement in East Timor became a neglected part of Portugal's overseas empire. Located near the much stronger Dutch East Indies possessions, East Timor frequently seemed at risk of being absorbed into the Dutch empire. Nevertheless, treaties concluded with the Dutch in 1859 and 1893 preserved its existence. The certainty afforded by these treaties did little for the economic or political development of East Timor which, up to the Second World War, was used by the faraway government in Lisbon as a location to which political opponents of the state could be deported.

## The Philippines

Much of what has been written in this chapter concerning the importance of the European impact in establishing the territorial boundaries of Indonesia and Malaysia applies with equal force to the Philippines. The long period of Spanish rule over these islands was vitally important in delineating the boundaries of a state where neither boundaries nor any entity equivalent to the modern Philippines existed previously. Yet just as the Dutch in Indonesia moved much more slowly than is often recognised to establish control over the whole of the modern Indonesian state, so was the Spanish achievement of control in the Philippines a slow affair. And not only slow; it was also incomplete. Although Spanish power was able to dominate most of the lowland areas of the northern Philippines by the middle of the eighteenth century, the highland areas remained regions apart. Moreover, the southern Muslim areas of the Philippines never came under effective Spanish control. Repeated Spanish attempts to dominate the fiercely independent sultanates of the southern regions failed. Spanish control was achieved in some major southern ports such as Zamboanga, but the Sultan of Sulu and his less powerful counterparts never submitted to Spanish rule. The seeds of contemporary Muslim separatism in the southern Philippines were sown long ago.

But while the Philippines’ experience of the European challenge had the similarities with Indonesia and Malaysia that have just been noted, the imposition of Spanish rule provided an additional element in the history of those islands that did not exist elsewhere. This vitally important element was Catholicism. Conversion to the religion of the invading European colonial powers took place elsewhere, most particularly in Vietnam. But nowhere else in Southeast Asia—Portuguese Timor included, before 1975—did the religion of the colonialists become, in a broadly universal sense, the religion of the colonised. (Once again stress must be given to the fact that it is the northern Philippines that is being discussed.)

At a wider level one might see the implantation of Catholicism as reflecting the more general fact that Spanish rule in the Philippines gave the northern islands a new framework for society. Building upon the village structure of pre-colonial times, the Spaniards created a new, non-indigenous system. To suggest that this system removed all indigenous elements from Philippine society would be an error. But it would be equally erroneous not to recognise that the administrative and economic, as well as the religious, structure instituted by the Spanish had the most profound effect.

The historical irony that marked the Philippine reaction to Spanish rule has been recorded in an earlier chapter. Filipinos became dissatisfied with Spanish rule when it became clear that the colonial power would not allow *Indios*—the non-Spanish inhabitants of the islands—to enjoy the same civil and ecclesiastical rights as the Spaniards did themselves. Yet the *Indios* who claimed these rights were the products of Spanish schools, seminaries, and universities. The Spaniards who ruled in the Philippines had created a situation with no real parallel elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Their colonial subjects began the revolt against Spanish rule in the nineteenth century because they were, in effect, excluded from being Spanish. In their resentment of the barrier placed in the way of becoming Spanish the Filipinos established their own national identity, one that nonetheless remained inseparably linked with the experience of Spanish rule and the importance of Catholicism. When, at the end of the nineteenth century, a nationalist revolt against Spanish rule challenged the status quo its aims and possibilities for long-term success were negated by the events of the Spanish–American War, which broke out in 1898. In the settlement of the war the United States replaced the Spanish as a very different colonising power. The new administration quite early made clear that working towards independence for the Philippines would be their ultimate aim. Otherwise, and in terms of the borders of the state, little changed with the passage from Spanish to American rule.

The attention given in this chapter to such administrative matters as the establishment of states’ borders must be seen as only one facet of a complex whole. The colonial powers may be correctly seen as having established borders where none existed before, and their actions, whether good or bad, self-interested or altruistic, played a part in shaping the new nations that were to emerge in Southeast Asia. Such developments were not, it is useful to remember, confined to one area of the world. The creation of new borders and the establishment of new nations were associated with the years of colonial rule in Africa as well as in Southeast Asia.

Beyond these administrative matters, which were momentous in themselves, other processes were at work that have only been mentioned briefly so far, but which will receive more consideration as the history of Southeast Asia is traced into more modern times. Colonial powers delineated the areas of states and played a part in shaping the character of their populations. In the final analysis, nonetheless, the indigenous inhabitants, the Southeast Asians themselves, determined how they should live and by what standards. It was this determination that ultimately led to the emergence of modern nationalist movements discussed later in this book. This fact must be constantly remembered when the challenge and the advance of the Europeans into Southeast Asia are being considered.

## SIX

# Economic transformation

In the preceding chapter great emphasis was placed on the territorial impact of the alien European colonial powers that established themselves in Southeast Asia. The advance of the colonial powers began as early as the sixteenth century, but developed more importantly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And, as the previous chapter underlined, the nature of the European impact was complex and varied. It was more than this; it was also paradoxical. Southeast Asians were now controlled by alien newcomers who were strangers to the cultures and values of the region and they came, some sooner, some later, to resent this control and so to fight against it. Yet, as has already been noted, the same control that evoked resentment also played its part in establishing the political map of Southeast Asia as it exists today. The room for argument about the true importance or the true cost of European expansion and colonisation is almost limitless, just as the balance sheet recording ‘good’ and ‘bad’ will vary from individual to individual, time to time, and most certainly nationality to nationality. But there is no question that in contemporary terms the nature of European expansion and colonial control of Southeast Asia is frequently viewed in negative terms. What there can be no doubt about is that there *was* a European impact on the societies of Southeast Asia and that this impact had enormous consequences. One of these many consequences that has only been mentioned briefly so far was the economic transformation of the region.

Although Southeast Asia’s economic transformation from the seventeenth century onwards involved the essential participation of its indigenous population, there is no way of avoiding the conclusion that great change took place because of decisions taken by the colonial administrations that ruled over all but one of the countries in the region. In terms of the interests of the indigenous populations, many of the changes that took place were negative and it was rare, if ever, that the colonial powers placed the interests of the indigenous population above their own. But whatever the motivations and the nature of the results, Southeast Asia experienced massive economic change, particularly during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This chapter's concern is to provide an outline of those changes.

To fly over modern Southeast Asia on a clear day is to be struck by the great contrast between areas of land that have been brought into agricultural or mineral production and those that have not. Whether on the mainland or in the maritime regions, the transformation of the landscape by human agencies stands out clearly. Vast rice fields spread about river deltas. Open-cut mining leaves bleached scars on the ground below. The repetitious patterns of rubber and oil palm plantations are clearly differentiated from the chaotic world of the still uncleared jungle. It is staggering to realise how much of this landscape did not exist one hundred years ago. Rubber plantations, to take what is perhaps the most striking example, are essentially a development of the twentieth century. A relatively small number of plantations were begun in the late nineteenth century, but the great expansion of rubber-growing began in the twentieth. It took place either as the result of European investment or, when smallholder rubber grown by Southeast Asians was involved, in response to the demands of the European or American capitalist world.

The expansion of rice growing in Southeast Asia is another example of the tremendous changes that took place from the nineteenth century onwards and owed much, though by no means all, to the onset of European colonial control. The massive efforts that transformed the Mekong River delta in southern Vietnam from a maze of swamps and undirected watercourses had begun before the arrival of the French in the early 1860s. As change took place in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth it was still Vietnamese, for the most part, who both contributed the labour and, for a limited few, reaped the financial benefits of the transformation that was achieved. But the fact that such vast change took place depended in considerable measure on the European control that made the draining and cultivation both possible and profitable. This same European, more particularly in this case French, control also permitted a series of social developments that led to deep resentment of the economic system that emerged. For the changes in the Mekong delta region did not bring economic enrichment of the many, but of the few.

This fact points once again to the other side of Southeast Asia's economic transformation that was all too often ignored while European powers held sway in the region. When the term 'transformation' is used it carries with it, for many persons, the suggestion of 'progress'. Change has often in the past been seen as good in itself, particularly when it could readily be seen to involve the expansion of areas under cultivation, the introduction of new crops and plantation products, and the establishment of new infrastructure where there was none before. Yet each of these transformations had not one effect but many. At the very least it is essential in seeking to understand how Southeast Asia's economy changed so rapidly from the nineteenth century onwards to ask, 'Who benefited from this transformation?'

In order to answer the question and to understand the importance of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it is essential to realise that the economic activity that accompanied the expansion of European economic control of Southeast Asia was very different from that of traditional times. Certainly, there was abundant economic activity in traditional Southeast Asia. The great empire of Srivijaya was a forerunner of later maritime states that sought to gain wealth through a monopoly of the sea routes and the markets. Even in such states as Angkor, where participation in external commerce was a minor part of national life, complex internal economic patterns were developed to meet the cost of maintaining and staffing the many monastic institutions that formed such a vital feature of Cambodian life. As an example, no fewer than 5300 villages provided economic and services support for the great Preah Khan temple at Angkor that Jayavarman VII founded in 1191. And Zhou Daguan (Chou Ta-kuan), the only eyewitness to describe Angkor in its days of glory, gives a picture of petty trade taking place on a daily basis. Melaka before it fell to the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century was a flourishing international entrepôt. Chinese and Japanese junks traded into the 'southern seas'. Caravans of merchants wended their way across the heart of the mainland regions and inter-island trade in the maritime world was as much part of life in pre-colonial times as it continued to be once the European presence was established.

The prospect of becoming involved in the existing pattern of trade and so of gaining wealth was, after all, one of the single most important factors bringing the Europeans to Southeast Asia. They wanted to gain a part, the largest part indeed, in an existing spice trade that promised great riches. That the Iberians—the Portuguese and the Spanish—wanted more need not delay us long at this stage. They wanted converts to Christianity, it is true. But this hope never excluded the possibility of gaining wealth through trade, though in the case of the Philippines there were sad disappointments when it was found how little opportunity existed for the development of profitable exports, in the early stages of Spanish rule at least.

For a period, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Portuguese and the Dutch succeeded in their aims. They gained a monopoly of the spice trade in Southeast Asia, more exactly in the islands of modern Indonesia, and so controlled the supply of these commodities for the European market. In doing so, however, they commenced a process of peasant impoverishment in the Indonesian world that has left its mark to the present day. The Dutch aimed at complete control of the spice trade and worked to achieve it through destruction of spice trees outside areas they controlled. Having begun as aliens working within an existing system the Dutch, through their technological and organisational superiority, began to alter that system significantly. Whole islands that had once formed an integral part of the traditional pattern of trade were suddenly removed from participation. Even when production was still permitted, trees were destroyed to meet short-term Dutch efforts to maintain high price levels. Already Southeast Asia’s economic activity was being linked to the European market economy in a way that had never existed before.

The Dutch succeeded in controlling the spice trade in cloves and nutmeg in the eastern part of Indonesia, and the pepper trade in much of the western regions, and they then went on to exert increasing control over the production and marketing of agricultural crops in Java during the eighteenth century. Coffee, most particularly, became the object of Dutch regulation. Working through local rulers and Chinese agents, the Dutch themselves were at one remove in this process. But it was they who determined upon the system of ‘forced deliveries’ that required a set amount of the crop to be made available to the Dutch authorities under threat of severe corporate punishment of villages if the goods were not forthcoming. At the same time the Dutch expectation was that the Indonesians who furnished the goods so much in demand in the European market would themselves provide a market for the manufactured goods, particularly textiles brought to Southeast Asia by Dutch ships.

It would probably be an error to suggest that Java, the Spice Islands and the other sections of Indonesia that had became part of the Dutch colonial economic system had been plunged irretrievably into economic disaster by the beginning of the middle of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, a pattern of economic development had been clearly established that placed the interests of the exploiting power, and its agents, above all else. And the role of the bulk of the population in this pattern was clearly, and disadvantageously, determined. Such a pattern was to be reinforced as the economy of Indonesia, and the whole of Southeast Asia, became more diverse and more closely attuned to a broad range of European interests in the nineteenth century.

The nineteenth century was the age of Europe's industrialisation. That technological revolution played a major—many would agree *the* major—part in accelerating the search for colonial possessions overseas. Colonies, in the simplest form, were seen as essential elements in the economic pattern that required the supply of raw materials to the industrial countries of Europe. Once processed these raw materials could be sold to the markets of the world, including, if possible, the colonies from which the processed materials originally came. Seen in retrospect the whole system seems quite remarkably unbalanced in Europe's favour. Southeast Asians in Burma (Myanmar), Vietnam or the Philippines, for instance, were expected to play an uncomplaining role in a process that enriched their colonial masters but offered little reward to them or their fellows. The fact that an imbalance existed and that this did not trouble the bulk of the Europeans concerned with the colonies may be hard to believe, but it was certainly true. An essential feature of the expanding imperial age and the economic developments that went with it was a belief that what they were doing was right and proper. For most European colonisers questions of equity simply did not arise. They saw the world in different terms and thought in grandiose fashion, so that the prominent mid-nineteenth-century French colonialist and explorer, Francis Garnier, an intelligent and in many ways a cultured man, saw nothing unrealistic or unreasonable about stating the proposition that 'nations without colonies are dead'.

His observation avoids examination of a whole range of questions, not forgetting the fundamental issue of whether or not those who were colonised wished to undergo this experience. As a statement of the kind of beliefs that urged men to develop rubber estates, to exploit tin mines, and to grow copra palms, the Frenchman's view cannot be ignored, however much it is out of touch with twenty-first century attitudes. For Southeast Asia could, like Africa, supply many of the materials that became, during the nineteenth century, essential to the needs of modern Europe and America. Tin from Malaysia and Indonesia could help meet the industrial nations' demand for cheap tinplate and the bearings so essential to the development of fast-running factory machinery. Rubber from Southeast Asia as a whole, but particularly from Indonesia, Malaysia and French Indochina, could help meet the multiple needs of societies that expected constant improvement in a range of items from motor car tyres to surgical equipment. Copra could play a major part in the vast expansion of the soap industry as rising standards of living in Europe and America made personal cleanliness the norm rather than the exception.

Since Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century came to meet new demands from Europe it will be readily understood that a new kind of economic relationship developed between Southeast Asia and the industrial world during that century. The old system, characterised by the Dutch-monopolised spice trade, faded into unimportance as the new pattern developed. Rather than survey this pattern country by country, a more useful approach is to consider the economic changes that took place in terms of some of the principal industries or commodities involved.

## RUBBER

The existence of natural rubber had been known for centuries before scientific advances in the nineteenth century—vulcanisation—permitted the development of a stable substance, largely unaffected by temperature changes, that was rapidly recognised as having a vast range of uses. The problem remained of finding a reliable source for this product since initially it was available only at high price and in erratic quantities from South America.

Mostly as the result of British efforts, the possibility of growing rubber in Southeast Asia was discovered. Since the discovery did not take place until the last two decades of the nineteenth century it must be noted that rubber was not, in itself, one of the initial causes for the dramatic advance of European power into Southeast Asia in the second half of the nineteenth century. Other economic factors had been at work before rubber came to play its part, but once established rubber plantations became a vital justification for colonial endeavour. For in one of those notable conjunctions between supply and demand the discovery that rubber could be grown profitably coincided with the sudden expansion of demand in the early twentieth century that culminated in the period of the First World War.

Vast areas of the Malayan Peninsula, of Java and Sumatra, and of Vietnam and Cambodia, were brought under rubber cultivation. Here was transformation indeed, for many of the areas that were planted with rubber had not been cultivated previously. Some sense of the size of development involved is provided even in the briefest review of statistics. West Malaysia (peninsular Malaysia) had no rubber plantations—not even the exploitation of wild rubber in its various forms—before the 1880s. Yet by the beginning of the 1970s rubber plantations accounted for nearly 65 per cent of all cultivated land, with one-third of the agricultural workforce engaged in the plantation industry. This is the most dramatic example of all, but reflects a pattern that took place elsewhere, even if on a smaller scale. Where once land lay uncultivated, or covered by jungle, new plantations were established.

Such vast enterprises required large investments of capital and this fact ensured that ownership of large-scale rubber holdings was in the hands either of foreigners or that very small group within the indigenous community who could provide the investment capital necessary for establishing a plantation and then wait at least five years for production to begin. Initially, therefore, large investors controlled the rubber industry and the benefits to Southeast Asians themselves were limited. Even in the field of labour, the employment opportunities in Malaya went to non-indigenous workers as the plantation companies imported indentured labourers from India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). In Vietnam the bulk of the labour force was indeed Vietnamese but this guaranteed no real personal or social gain since the conditions under which labour was recruited and subsequently used were the basis for repeated complaint and justified scandal.

Yet for all the lack of benefit to Southeast Asians associated with the establishment of much of the rubber-growing industry, developments from the 1920s onwards redressed the balance to some degree. For it was from that decade onwards that the smallholder began to play an important part in the production of rubber. While they could never challenge the role played by the great plantations, the smallholders were able to grow rubber as part of their broader agricultural activities and initially to reap unexpected benefits as a result. By the end of the 1930s well over 40 per cent of the rubber being produced in Malaya and Indonesia came from smallholders. In the closing years of the 1970s the smallholders in West Malaysia (the former British Malaya) had improved their share to above 50 per cent. And today (2022) smallholders produce some 90 per cent of the rubber exported from Malaysia, exports that account for 20 per cent of world production. Such an advance took place against opposition from the large plantation interests before independence and continued after independence was achieved. But this increase in smallholder production had a downside since the size of their holdings did not permit economies of scale. As a result the increase in their proportion of overall output was not matched by a comparable increase in income, since both the governments of British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies discriminated against the smaller grower in favour of the large plantations. There could be few more sharply defined demonstrations of the extent to which, under colonial regimes, the economic interests that the colonial governments believed should be served were not those of the indigenous inhabitants.

## TIN

Tin mining had been part of Southeast Asia’s economic life for millennia before it assumed new importance in the nineteenth century with the growth of demand in Europe and America. Although deposits of tin are found elsewhere in the region, it was in Malaya (West Malaysia) that the industry developed to its greatest degree. There, from the 1870s onwards, the establishment of British political control over the Malay states enabled the rapid expansion of already existing Chinese tin-mining enterprises. In the twentieth century Chinese dominance was challenged by European capital and the greater technological efficiency of the extraction methods used by the large Western firms that now sought to gain a major share of the industry. Although the Chinese share declined, this section of the industry, with its reliance on labour-intensive methods, was never overwhelmed by the capital-intensive Western firms that relied on the tin dredge—giant mechanical constructions used to extract the metal from the ground and to ‘wash’ it through sluices.

In contrast to the situation that existed in the rubber-growing industry, the competition that has just been described was between two different sets of non-indigenous groups, the Europeans and the immigrant Chinese. The exploitation of tin by Chinese mining groups, with the sanction and for the partial benefit of local authorities, had been going on in Malaya for centuries. Only with the establishment of a British colonial presence in Malaya, however, did the situation favour a very considerable expansion of Chinese mining activity. The final resulting situation, before the Second World War, was that Malaya’s tin-mining industry remained in the hands of groups, whether Chinese or European, who were considered outsiders by the Malays, and who regarded themselves as the only true owners of the country known as British Malaya.

## RICE

The rubber plantations, with the exception of Vietnam, were largely dependent on imported labour. The tin industry was in the hands of non-indigenous groups. But in the development of the most important Southeast Asian export crop of all, rice, the role of the indigenous peasant was absolutely vital. This did not mean, for the most part, that the final result in terms of the peasants’ interests was startlingly different from other aspects of the economic development of Southeast Asia. Unlike the plantation and mining enterprises, however, in rice growing the role of the Southeast Asian peasant was essential.

Rice had been exported from Southeast Asia before the onset of a full-scale colonial advance in the mid-nineteenth century. But the value of the exports was small, and internal movement within a single country, from a rice surplus area to a deficit area, was certainly more important than any export trade that was carried on. Moreover, rice was not generally grown for export. The bulk of the rice produced before the nineteenth century was for subsistence, to feed the peasant farmers and their families. Only if conditions were particularly favourable and yields higher than expected was a surplus available for disposal outside the growing area.

An increasing world market in the second half of the nineteenth century provided the stimulus for rapid expansion of those of Southeast Asia’s rice-growing areas that were capable of developing rice surpluses—the Mekong River delta region of southern Vietnam, the Chao Phraya (Menam) River delta in central Thailand, and the Irrawaddy River delta in Burma. In Vietnam and Burma the expansion of the rice-growing industry took place within a colonial context. In Thailand, by contrast, the almost equally rapid expansion occurred in an independent state. The differences between the colonial and the non-colonial experience are worthy of attention.

Just as the development of large-scale rubber plantations represented a tremendous physical transformation of the countryside as well as an economic development of great importance, so too the expansion of the main rice-growing areas changed the landscape. In the deltas of the Irrawaddy, the Chao Phraya and the Mekong, a bare 150 years ago, rice growing took place on a sparse, scattered basis. In a real sense these were untamed frontier lands. Seen today, the deltas offer a vision of immense agricultural richness and are a testimony to the millions of anonymous peasants whose labour drained the swamps, built the canals, and brought the rich soil into crop production. In the face of such evidence of agricultural richness the fact that these deltas, most particularly in Burma and Vietnam, became regions of major economic and social inequality demands an answer.

Put simply but accurately, the promise of the open frontier eluded the peasantry of Burma and Vietnam because they were not equipped to supply more than their labour. To grow rice is an age-old peasant activity and one that they have carried out with tireless efficiency. But in the developing conditions more than labour was required. Expansion of the area under cultivation may, at first, have seemed a golden opportunity to the small peasant cultivator. As never before it appeared that there could be a chance to break the cycle that kept the peasants what they were—subsistence farmers living in the shadow of want. But the financial demands of the expanding rice-growing industry were beyond the peasant. Capital was required for seed, for equipment and to employ the labour necessary to ensure that the harvest was collected with the minimum of delay. With great luck an individual Burmese or Vietnamese peasant did occasionally overcome the problems involved in such a situation. In general, however, the tide ran against the small peasants’ interests.

Almost from the beginning of the dramatic expansion of the rice-growing area in southern Vietnam the peasants found they had no role to play in developing large holdings other than as tenants, at best, and as simple labourers, at worst. Interestingly enough, the hopes of individual Frenchmen that they would be able to acquire and control the great rice-growing areas of southern Vietnam proved as ill-founded as the different hopes of the peasants who sought to change their lot. The real beneficiaries of the expansion of Vietnam's rice-growing capacities, and in participation in the expanding export trade, were a relatively small number of rich Vietnamese landowners and the Chinese rice merchants of Cholon, Saigon's (modern Ho Chi Minh City) twin city. The Vietnamese landowners, their interests closely linked with the French colonial power, were able to command both the capital and the labour necessary to bring the previously unproductive regions into production. The Chinese merchants and shippers, who also controlled the vital rice mills in Cholon, provided an unsurpassed international commercial network that no one, European or Vietnamese, could successfully challenge.

In the Burmese case the situation was a little more complicated and the eclipse of the peasant from other than a labouring role took a little longer. But the general pattern was essentially the same. One notably different element existed in Burma as the result of that country's administrative link with British India. As Britain established its colonial control over Burma, the new territories came under the general administration of India, despite the substantial cultural differences dividing the two countries. As 'part' of British India, Burma was open to virtually unrestricted immigration from India and many of these Indian immigrants were to play a major, and most would argue negative, social role in the development of the rice-growing industry of Lower Burma. Although it is true that the availability of rural credit owed much to Indian moneylenders, it is equally true that the long-term trend was one in which Indians slowly drove out the Burmese from many of the essential sections of the rice industry, including the basic role of labourer. Burmese landlords remained an important element in the overall scheme of things, but like the Vietnamese landowners who profited from the Mekong delta rice fields they were separated in almost every sense from their workers.

For both Vietnam and Burma the weaknesses and dangers that had accompanied this economic transformation of the rice industry during colonial times were dramatically and tragically revealed in the Great Depression of the 1930s. Once the export markets of the world collapsed so were the weaknesses within the rice industry starkly revealed. Although the major landowners were able to weather the storm through reliance on accumulated savings or by drawing on reserves of capital, no such choice lay open to the labourers, who suddenly found themselves without funds and without work. The social costs of such a situation had immediate consequences in riots and protests. In the long term the political consequences were of a more formidable character.

In very considerable contrast to the description of events in Vietnam and Burma was the history of the rice industry in Thailand. To suggest that no peasants suffered in the expansion of rice growing in the Chao Phraya delta region of Thailand would be to ignore reality. Few, if any, major economic changes take place without some human cost. Yet if there were losers in this massive development there were certainly far fewer than elsewhere and the social costs were notably smaller. Like Vietnam and Burma, Thailand in the mid-nineteenth century possessed a vast area suitable for rice growing that had not been previously developed. Unlike in the other two countries, however, exploitation of this formerly untilled area was the essential prerogative of the peasant. Just why this should have been so is not always clear, but the main reasons are not hard to find. The fact that Thailand was not a colony of an external power—whatever limitations external powers might have succeeded in imposing on Thai freedom of action—was of cardinal importance. The Thai government was not accountable to a distant parliament, ministry or electorate that expected the colonies to pay. Instead the control of agricultural development was in the hands of the Thai monarch and his close advisers. It was they, rather than foreign commercial interests, who determined the broad pattern of developments that saw the peasants retaining land ownership and the size of land holdings much more restricted than in Burma and Vietnam. The availability of capital was important in Thailand too. Once again the role of Chinese rice millers and merchants was essential for expansion. Yet unlike the other two expanding areas geared to the export market, the relationship between the peasants and the merchants in Thailand could be accurately be described as involving a sense of partnership rather than exploitation.

## OTHER EXPORT COMMODITIES

Rubber, tin and rice were among the most important of the commodities exported from Southeast Asia. But there were many others that also contributed to the character of the region's economy, in particular its increasing dependence on capital investment and the use of wage labour. The development of copra plantations, for instance, followed the pattern set by the rubber industry, though on a much smaller scale. A range of other crops proved suitable for plantation development, including tobacco and coffee and, most importantly, sugar. This last crop developed as a major export item in Java and the Philippines. Drawing on the local population for its labour supply, the sugar industry played a significant part in shifting the balance of peasant labour away from subsistence farming to paid employment. In doing so the sugar-growing industry was yet another factor in aiding the great economic changes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The development of Southeast Asia's oil industry was less labour intensive but required very substantial capital investment. As early as the 1880s oil was being produced in Burma. Subsequently, from the second decade of the twentieth century onward, oil production was an important export commodity from the Indonesian island of Sumatra and from the territories of Sarawak and Brunei in northern Borneo.

So far the emphasis in this chapter has been on one broad aspect of the general economic transformation that took place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many other changes and developments occurred that were of great importance, including changes in the region's infrastructure, its roads, railways, bridges, dams and ports. But there is still an important question that needs answering: how widespread were the changes that were taking place? Should we imagine a situation in which, from some time in the second half of the nineteenth century, Southeast Asia was 'gripped' by economic change, so that no part of life was untouched by the kind of developments that have already been described?

Quite clearly such was not the case. In the more remote areas of the Southeast Asian world the inhabitants were largely, if not totally, unaware of the momentous changes that were occurring elsewhere. Even in less remote regions, and most particularly in the rural villages, much of life went on with only the most limited effects being felt as a result of the economic developments associated with the expansion of Southeast Asia's export economy. Village cultural life, to take one of the most notable examples, demonstrated an extraordinary resilience to outside pressures, even when these were geographically not far distant. Increasingly, however, recent research has laid stress on the extent to which the economic transformation did reach down and affect a quite remarkably broad range of Southeast Asian life, whether this was the intention of the ruling colonial administrations or not.

The development of an export-oriented economy not only posed the possibility of an alternative to subsistence farming, it also introduced those who were prepared to engage in wage labour to the concept of a cash economy. This, for most of the rural population of Southeast Asia, was a totally new element that replaced traditional barter arrangements. The development of a cash economy went hand in hand with the slow but steady growth of a demand for consumer goods on which to spend wages. And this pattern encouraged the spread of petty retail business, usually run by one or other of the two major immigrant groups in Southeast Asia, the Chinese or the Indians.

Developments of this sort were most obviously associated with areas in which the establishment of plantation industries had immediate and easily observable results. Other results were less easily observable. To a considerable extent their existence has only come to be recognised by scholars who have been able to review the past with the benefit of the accumulated knowledge and the perspective that the passage of time affords—which does not mean that Southeast Asian peasants were unable to recognise the problems in a less academic fashion at the time. It is now clear, to take one of the best-known examples, that as the economic transformation of Java took place, and as there was a simultaneous major growth in the size of the rural population, the Indonesian peasants who lived on that island responded by a process that has been called ‘agricultural involution’. Instead of seeking to escape from the increasing difficulties of rural life by migration—one of the methods adopted elsewhere—the peasants methodically set to work to grow more and more on what was, proportionately per capita, less and less space. This effort may have been admirable in terms of the determination displayed. In terms of the social costs that it exacted it was highly negative in character. The already harsh conditions of normal existence became worse. The value of land increased to benefit not the average peasant but the moderately well-to-do rural dweller. And the downward spiral of rural poverty was followed at an increasing pace.

Developments in Java are perhaps the best known of those important changes that were taking place in the background of economic transformation but which were often misunderstood or ignored at the time. A much less well-known example, that also reflects some general developments, may be taken from the history of Cambodia. This country, in great contrast to Java, was untroubled by population pressure throughout its modern history. Yet even here, in a country that did not develop large-scale plantation industries until after the First World War, the existence of a colonial presence led to economic changes that profoundly affected the life of the rural population. The institution of new taxes, the establishment of new authorities within the village structure where none had existed before, and the requirement for men to engage in unpaid labour on the state's behalf disrupted the traditional rural scene. Only as the full impact of French policies in rural Cambodia have begun to be understood has it become possible to understand why rural discontent in 1915 and 1916 was sufficiently strong to involve protest demonstrations by perhaps as many as 100 000 peasants.

So change as the result of economic developments was indeed widespread, but it was also very uneven. The views of some earlier economic analysts who thought in terms of there being two separate economies—one linked to the world market and the other a closed 'native' economy—operating in Southeast Asia were incorrect. Certainly there were broad divisions within the economic life of the various countries of Southeast Asia. These broad divisions were, however, interrelated so that the life of a subsistence farmer as well as the wage labourer on a plantation was affected by the economic changes that were taking place on the world stage.

The development of cities provided one instance of general economic change. In the early nineteenth century the number of cities of any size in Southeast Asia was very small. Royal capitals, such as Bangkok in Thailand, or Yogyakarta in central Java, had populations that were numbered in tens of thousands, not hundreds of thousands. Even the older colonial capitals such as Batavia (Jakarta) and Manila had, after centuries of an alien presence, populations of less than 200 000. Saigon in 1820 had a population of about 180 000, but it was unquestionably the largest city in

Vietnam, a country that the French in the 1860s accurately described as being almost entirely without cities.

The great cities of Southeast Asia, in short, date for the most part from the nineteenth century, in terms of their possessing a character as metropolitan centres with vital links to the wider world. Singapore, to take perhaps the most dramatic example of all, was a tiny Malay fishing settlement at the time of its foundation as a British colony in 1819, probably with less than two hundred permanent residents. Its rapid growth during the nineteenth century was chiefly due to immigration from China in response to a rapidly expanding economy. As *the* great entrepôt for the Southeast Asian region as a whole, Singapore's development was a vivid reflection of the wider economic changes that were taking place. It was the transhipment point for goods that were sent to ports in the rest of the world. After the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, Singapore's role as link between Asia and Europe was strengthened as the time required for a voyage to or from Europe was sharply reduced.

Just as the growth of cities was a feature of the nineteenth century, so too was the expansion of the infrastructure, the roads, canals and other forms of communication so essential to modern economic life. The effect of the new road and rail systems introduced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries varied greatly from country to country. In some cases, moreover, the long-term and unplanned effect was just as important as the immediate intentions for which a particular communications artery was constructed. The case of the roads built in peninsular Malaysia is a good example of such a development.

Before the last decades of the nineteenth century almost all communication in Malaysia was by water. Instead of the modern road and rail systems that carry traffic north and south, on both the west and east coasts of the Peninsula, transport moved slowly on the sea and in an even more restricted fashion along the rivers that flowed down from the central mountain range to the coast. The construction of a road and rail network took place to carry the growing quantities of tin and rubber that were produced as economic transformation played its part in this region. At first there was little benefit to the population in general as a result of this new communications system, for it was specifically designed to serve particular and mostly alien commercial interests. Yet with the passage of time the expanding communications system came to be important for the Malay peasantry as well, and eventually to serve the interests of those peasants. Settlement patterns in Malaysia, in Vietnam and Cambodia, and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, changed to take account of the new infrastructure that developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and made ease of movement an expectation for large numbers of the population. Comfort may not be the most striking feature of travel by local bus or third-class train in the region, but no one who has used such transport in modern Southeast Asia can doubt the importance and relative ease of the travel that has become such an accepted feature of daily life.

There can be no room in anything less than a full-length study of Southeast Asia's economy to provide more than the briefest mention of some of the other features of the vital transformation that began in the nineteenth century. A longer examination of the economic changes would need to dwell on the development of the banking system. Space would need to be found for discussion of the contrasts in development from country to country and region to region, as well as the broad similarities that have been given emphasis in this chapter. And attention would certainly need to be paid to complex questions concerning the interplay of economic and political forces—a point that will be examined later in relation to the rise of nationalism.

From the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, the broad lines of development are clear, as is the importance of those developments. Southeast Asia in a period of less than one hundred years changed from being a region in which exports played a relatively minor role and subsistence farming was essentially dominant to a vital area in the world economy as a whole as its exports met European and American demands that had been fuelled by the changes following the industrial revolution. As Southeast Asia's export economy developed, so did more general economic and social change penetrate into almost every level of society, leaving only the most remote regions and populations untouched. The growth of the great metropolitan cities, the rise of exports and the development of a cash economy, the institution of new communications systems, including the telegraph and later phone systems that linked Southeast Asia with Europe—all these are products of economic change in a period beginning only one hundred and sixty years ago. Indeed, during the years between the mid-nineteenth century and the outbreak of the Second World War, Southeast

Asia’s economy underwent greater change that at any time in the region’s entire history.

# SEVEN

# The Asian immigrants in Southeast Asia

Almost anyone who visits Southeast Asia for the first time will be struck by the variety of ethnic groups encountered in any of the major cities of the region. The ‘mix’ will vary considerably from city to city. But there is scarcely an urban centre in which a visitor will not readily recognise the wide range of differing groups that make up the city population. Sometimes the clues to the existence of differing ethnic groups will be in terms of physical appearance. Descendants of darker-skinned Tamil immigrants from southern India and Sri Lanka (Ceylon) are quickly identified as different in appearance from the descendants of immigrants from China or, indeed, northern India. At other times the fact of ethnic diversity is made apparent through the clothing worn by one set of immigrants rather than another, or in contrast to those worn by the descendants of the original inhabitants of the country in which the immigrants now live. Other indications of ethnic differences abound. The places of worship of one group are usually in stark architectural contrast to those of another. A visitor has no difficulty, in Singapore for instance, in seeing the difference between a Malay mosque, a Chinese or Indian temple, or the imported European architectural style of a Christian church, the religious symbol of yet another immigrant community.

Technically, of course, the term ‘immigrant’ applies only to the first generation of settlers who left their own lands to come and live in a foreign country or region. In using the term in this present chapter, an extended meaning is being given to the word. In discussing immigrant communities this chapter will focus on the important phenomenon of modern Southeast Asian history that has involved those groups of settlers who established new communities that were, for generations, regarded as being *in* but not really *part of* the country in which they were located. To put the matter another way, difficult though it may be to believe in the third decade of the twenty-first century, most of the ethnic Chinese living in Malaya (peninsular Malaysia) in the 1930s were not regarded as permanent settlers. The majority of the Chinese population had not at that stage been born in Malaya and, so far as their political preoccupations were concerned, China rather than Malaya was where these interests lay. A similar series of comments could be made about the Indian immigrant community in the same colonial situation. The majority had been born in India rather than Malaya and those in the Indian immigrant community with political interests directed these, almost exclusively, towards India.

Even the brief amount of information provided so far will alert a reader to some of the most important features of Asian immigration into Southeast Asia. The major immigrant groups involved came from China and India, though as will be made clear later in this chapter there were very considerable variations within these two broad ethnic groups. Large-scale immigration from India and China into Southeast Asia is a relatively modern development, dating from the second half of the nineteenth century in most cases. And finally, though far from exhaustively, many of those who made up the immigrant communities in Southeast Asia settled in cities or were involved in occupations linked to the commercial centres of the region.

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Immigration in its various forms is as old as Southeast Asia’s history, in fact older. During prehistoric times successive waves of immigrants moved southwards through mainland Southeast Asia so that the area of modern Cambodia probably experienced two major immigrant waves before the Khmer or Cambodian ethnic group established its political dominance in the fifth and sixth centuries CE. (Some scholars would argue that what was involved was the passage of new cultures rather than of people; for the moment the matter is unresolved.) In the maritime regions of Southeast Asia, also, there were broad movements of population in prehistoric and historic times. Specialists still argue about the nature and direction of these movements. As an example of such controversies, it is only quite recently that scholarly agreement has been reached on the fact that both the

Melanesian and Polynesian islands of the Pacific were settled by people who migrated out of Southeast Asia in prehistoric times. Part of the significance and scale of these early migrations may be grasped from the fact that outposts of Indonesian culture may be found in as distant a location as the island of Madagascar lying off the east coast of Africa.

As prehistory blends into history so do we become aware of another form of migration—a much more limited and selective form of population movement than the large-scale changes that appear to have taken place, for instance, when Australoid peoples were succeeded by Indonesian peoples moving through the Southeast Asia mainland several thousands of years ago. The migration in question involved the limited but very important movement of priests and traders from India into the early states of Southeast Asia. These men, for few if any women were involved, were not part of any massive wave of population movement. Instead, by their command of specialist knowledge, they came to fill vitally important roles in the emerging Southeast Asian states and so to implant the Indian cultural contribution to Southeast Asia's historical development that was discussed earlier in this book. (As noted earlier, some scholars now place at least as much importance on imported ideas being brought back to Southeast Asia from India by Southeast Asians who had travelled there.)

In general, the period of classical or early Southeast Asian history does not seem to have been marked by large-scale voluntary migration. In the still generally accepted view, a limited but highly important number of Indians settled in the area and made their mark. From an early time, too, there were Chinese visitors to Southeast Asia, some of whom became settlers. Writing about Cambodia at the end of the thirteenth century, but in all probability describing a situation that had existed for some hundreds of years, the Chinese diplomat Zhou Daguan (Chou Ta-kuan) reported on his countrymen whom he saw in the Cambodian capital at Angkor. They were mostly sailors who had settled in Cambodia and become traders, marrying local women with their descendants becoming, we must presume, thoroughly absorbed within the population in a generation or two.

The advance of the ethnic Thai (that is, people speaking the Tai language) into the territories of modern Laos and Thailand was a major instance of migration that did take place in the latter part of the classical age. Just what was involved in this migration is a subject for the familiar controversy associated with so much of Southeast Asia's history. Did the advance of the Thai people into the fertile lowlands of Southeast Asia involve a mass movement of population? Or was the process more subtle, involving the spread of the Tai language and culture by an elite that succeeded in imposing a new Thai identity on others?

The answer is less important for the moment than the contrast the Thai case provides with the rest of Southeast Asia. Leaving aside the forced movement of large numbers of persons from one area to another as prisoners of war, Southeast Asia by the end of the classical period was not an area in which major migrations any longer occurred. Developments involving Vietnam once again were an exception. From the achievement of independence from China in 939 CE the Vietnamese population slowly but surely moved southward into territories that had been controlled by Champa and Cambodia. This *nam-tien* (southern march, or advance) was still in progress when the French colonists arrived in the nineteenth century. For the rest, what had begun to develop very slowly was the type of immigration Zhou Daguan saw at Angkor: the settlement of individuals and families in response to the opportunities these persons saw in foreign lands. Some of these immigrants were quickly absorbed into the existing population. Others, most notably the communities of traders associated with a great port city such as Melaka, maintained their very sharply defined ethnic identity. At the height of Malacca’s power and fame in the fifteenth century there were major communities of Chinese, Arabs, Indians of different regions, Indonesians and Persians, to mention only some of the cosmopolitan inhabitants in the city, each living in their own clearly defined quarters within the city. It is almost certain that most of these people living far from their homelands did not think of Melaka as their home. They might die or have children in Melaka, but their home remained in a distant region across the sea.

This continued to be the attitude of the great majority of non-indigenous Asian communities living in Southeast Asia until very recent times. Individual immigrants might become important within a particular state so that their descendants blended completely into what had been a new culture for their ancestor. The Thai kingdom provides such a case in which a Persian family, the Bunnags, settled in Ayuthia in the seventeenth century and rose by the nineteenth to be among the most powerful in the land. (Members of this family continue to be prominent in official, commercial and legal life in contemporary Thailand.)

There were others who did not conform to the general pattern. The Baba Chinese of Melaka were a case in point. These descendants of immigrants lived in a special world that was half Chinese and half Malay, never completely one nor the other. But perhaps as their most distinctive characteristic they *did* regard themselves as permanent settlers in Malaya. In a somewhat similar way the Chinese *mestizo* community in the Philippines, and most notably in Manila, came to be a group that sank deep roots into what had originally been an alien land. This mestizo community was already important by the eighteenth century and the descendants of the mixed alliances involving Chinese and Filipinos played a vital role in Philippine life that continues to the present day. President Corazon Aquino, who succeeded President Marcos in the 'People Power Revolution' of the 1980s, is a name that immediately comes to mind.

Yet despite these and other exceptions to the general pattern, including the refugees from Qing (Ch'ing) rule in China who fled to Vietnam and settled there in the seventeenth century (the Minh Huong), the situation throughout Southeast Asia had a broadly uniform character. In the port cities and to a much lesser extent in the urban centres of the interior there were small immigrant communities engaged in commerce that was, for the most part, shunned by Southeast Asians themselves. Of these immigrant communities the Chinese were by far the most important. The range of Chinese business and financial interests was immense, but their numbers by comparison with later stages of full-scale immigration were limited. At the end of the eighteenth century the number of Chinese in and around Batavia (Jakarta), to take an example, was about 22 000. This figure, moreover, related to one of the two major colonial cities in the whole of Southeast Asia—the other was Manila. Outside of these two cities, the numbers were much smaller.

Change came in the nineteenth century, and as the result of many factors. Nowhere was the impact of Asian immigration more obvious than in the British colonial possessions that came to be known as the Straits Settlements (Penang, Melaka and Singapore) and Malaya. And of these Singapore provides, perhaps, the most dramatic if atypical example of how Asian immigration into Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century transformed the previously existing political and demographic balance.

When Thomas Stamford Raffles took possession of Singapore for the British Crown in 1819 his actions ‘removed’ a sparsely populated haunt of fisher people and pirates from the surrounding Malay world. He claimed a legal basis for his actions in terms of the agreements he concluded with one of the parties to a succession dispute involving the Johore sultanate, within whose territory Singapore island lay. Leaving these justifications aside, Raffles’ aim of making Singapore the centre for international trade in Southeast Asia had a very immediate consequence. Manpower was needed to turn Singapore into an entrepôt and the hundred or two hundred Malay fishers on the island were neither inclined nor sufficient in their numbers to provide this. Chinese, and to a lesser extent Indians, were ready to do so. Singapore’s census figures tell the story. Within five years of its foundation Singapore’s population had risen to more than 10 000. Malay numbers had increased so that this group exceeded 4500—a notable increase on the situation in 1819 and a figure representing more than 40 per cent of the total population. But the trend for the future was already clear in the fact that Singapore’s Chinese population was already nearly 3500 persons (over 30 per cent) where previously there had been no Chinese settlers at all.

Within twenty-five years of Singapore’s foundation the Chinese in the British colony represented an absolute majority of the total population. Of the 52 000 residents in the mid-1840s, no less than 32 000, or 61 per cent, were Chinese. Descriptions of Singapore written in the mid-nineteenth century make very clear how dependent the growing settlement was on the labour and services of the immigrant Chinese. It seemed that scarcely a trade existed that was not filled by the newcomers from China. And as the years passed a growing number of immigrants became men of substance, as wealthy as and even wealthier than the European businessmen who had also found excellent prospects in Singapore.

Through being a barely inhabited island Singapore was a special case in the Southeast Asian region as a whole. Nowhere else in the region experienced the same combination of commercial success and Chinese immigration that eventually formed the basis for a new state in which the descendants of ethnic Chinese were and are the dominant ethnic group. Yet if the Singapore experience must be noted as unique, this should not diminish the importance and significance of Chinese immigration elsewhere in Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century. In Singapore’s neighbour, peninsular Malaysia, for example, the size of the Chinese immigration into that country during the second half of the nineteenth century and up to the beginning of the Second World War created political challenges that are still present today.

In the mid-nineteenth century the political map of the Malaysian–Singaporean world was very different from that known today. Britain administered its three territories of Penang, Melaka and Singapore. But what was to become British Malaya, the Peninsula, lay outside British control. The growth of Singapore was, by the middle of the nineteenth century, playing a part in changing the British reluctance to become involved in the often complex affairs of the various Malay sultanates of the Peninsula. The sultanate of Johore, separated from Singapore by less than a mile of shallow water, was one of the first of the Malay states in the Peninsula to develop important links with Singapore. In economic if not political terms, Johore by the middle of the nineteenth century might be described as Singapore's hinterland. Although many decades were to pass before Johore became the essential supplier of much of Singapore's fresh water and produce, this role was foreshadowed in the steady expansion of agriculture by Chinese settlers with close links to Singapore. In the middle of the nineteenth century, most particularly, Johore was a base for the production of gambier, a plant used to produce black dye, and for growing pepper.

Chinese agricultural settlement in Johore, important though it was, was much less significant than another Malayan industry that developed rapidly from the middle of the nineteenth century. From the 1850s onwards there was a rapid expansion of tin mining and for this Chinese labour and Chinese capital became vitally important. Tin had been mined in Malaya for centuries, but in an essentially limited fashion. As the Western world moved more and more quickly into the industrial age, however, the growing demand for tin changed the old pattern of limited exploitation of Malaya's vast reserves of the metal. But there was a problem: who was going to mine the tin?

Already by the 1850s the Malay sultans, their noblemen and chiefs, had recognised the value of Chinese labour and recruited Chinese workmen either directly from China or through agents in Singapore. By the 1860s, as demand for tin continued to grow, so did the number of Chinese tin miners in Malaya increase, and with them Chinese merchants and businessmen. Tin mining was not an activity that Malay peasants found attractive so that if the Malay rulers and aristocracy wanted to expand the tin-mining industry the easiest way to do this was to expand the Chinese work force.

This policy presented problems. The Malays did not regard the Chinese miners as permanent settlers, nor did they think of themselves in these terms. Equally, the miners did not think in terms of the rulers of the Malay states as having any authority over them. Such authority as they recognised was exercised by clan associations, self-help groups, and most importantly by secret societies. This state of affairs had profound implications for Malaya, for the Chinese miners, numbering in the tens of thousands by the 1870s, became a major factor in the increasingly unsettled conditions in the Peninsula. As Malay factions in the various sultanates quarrelled over succession disputes, Chinese secret societies clashed with each other over the right to exclusive mining privileges in one area or another. Not surprisingly, moreover, the disputes of the Malay aristocracy came to involve the contending Chinese groups. When to this already dangerous and unstable situation was added an increase in piracy along the coast of the Peninsula it was not surprising, in terms of the temper of the times, that arguments were increasingly heard in Singapore calling for Britain to play a part in the political affairs of the Malayan Peninsula. For the Peninsula was, by the 1860s and 1870s, an important market for commercial firms based in Singapore and Singapore was, in turn, heavily involved in the tin-mining industry.

When British involvement did take place from the mid-1870s, one of the clearly seen results was the continuing influx of Chinese workers and merchants. The new colonial presence succeeded in establishing law and order and in doing so created a more stable environment for commercial activity of all kinds. As towns grew up in Malaya they were, on the west coast of the Peninsula, overwhelmingly Chinese in character. Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur, Seremban, and dozens of other smaller settlements were centres for Chinese commerce both large and small. Yet, difficult though it may be to believe more than a hundred years later, the Chinese who came to Malaya in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw themselves not as immigrants who had left their homeland permanently but rather as persons who, however long the stay might be, were only temporarily living in a foreign land—‘sojourners’ has become the term often used.

Only if this is understood is it possible to explain the nature of the Chinese community in Malaya before the Second World War and the policy, or lack of it, on the part of the British colonial government towards that community. As late as the 1930s the overwhelming majority of Chinese in peninsular Malaya had either been born in China or were the children of parents born in China. The political interests of the Chinese community lay, for the most part, outside Malaya in China itself. Rather than pursuing political activity connected with Malaya the great issue dividing the community was the clash between the Nationalist and Communist Parties in China. While living in Malaya, the bulk of the Chinese continued to think of China as their home, as a place to return to die, and as the country from which they would draw their cultural values and which would shape their political opinions.

The Second World War was to bring an abrupt end to this situation. Then, after that war had ended, the momentous changes in China that followed the victory of the Chinese Communist forces meant that the old relationship between communities of ethnic Chinese overseas and the Chinese state could never be the same again. But by the time the Second World War had interrupted the apparent colonial calm of Southeast Asia the Chinese population resident in Malaya had grown to be nearly 40 per cent of the country's total population, a formidably large proportion and one that was increasingly seen as a threat by the growing number of politically conscious Malays.

Why were Chinese immigrants so important in Malaysia and, if on a smaller scale, in so many other areas of Southeast Asia? How does an historian, or any other scholar, explain the repeated success of the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia in a wide range of commercial and other undertakings?

There is a temptation, not always avoided in the past by those trying to find answers to these and similar questions, to retreat into mystifying generalisations about Chinese 'commercial skill' or the 'innate capacity' of the Chinese to succeed in business by really trying. The attraction of such answers is obvious—broad, general answers to big questions, without too much complicated analysis. A more helpful and accurate set of responses to the questions can be offered, but a warning should be given. These more accurate answers, particularly if they are explored in any depth, are complex and even difficult to understand. The study of China has always been the study of a world apart by a group of scholars whose mastery of the

Chinese language sets them apart from their fellows. To some extent the same comment is true for those who study the *Nanyang* Chinese, the 'Chinese of the Southern Seas' with their wide variety of dialects, and the present writer's readers should be aware that he has no specialist knowledge of this field.

The effort of explaining the success of Chinese commercial activity in Southeast Asia may be lessened by noting one vital fact that is often forgotten. A large proportion of the Chinese immigrants into Southeast Asia came, worked, and died as coolies—labourers, working for low wages and doing hard, physically demanding work. The success of the Chinese immigrants who were businessmen should not be allowed to obscure the existence of the poorly paid and often ill-treated labourers. Other Chinese immigrants worked in occupations far removed from the upper ranks of the commercial world, as market gardeners or as kitchen hands, as carpenters and as clerks. In brief, success in business and access to great wealth was not a universal feature of life for the Chinese immigrant in Southeast Asia.

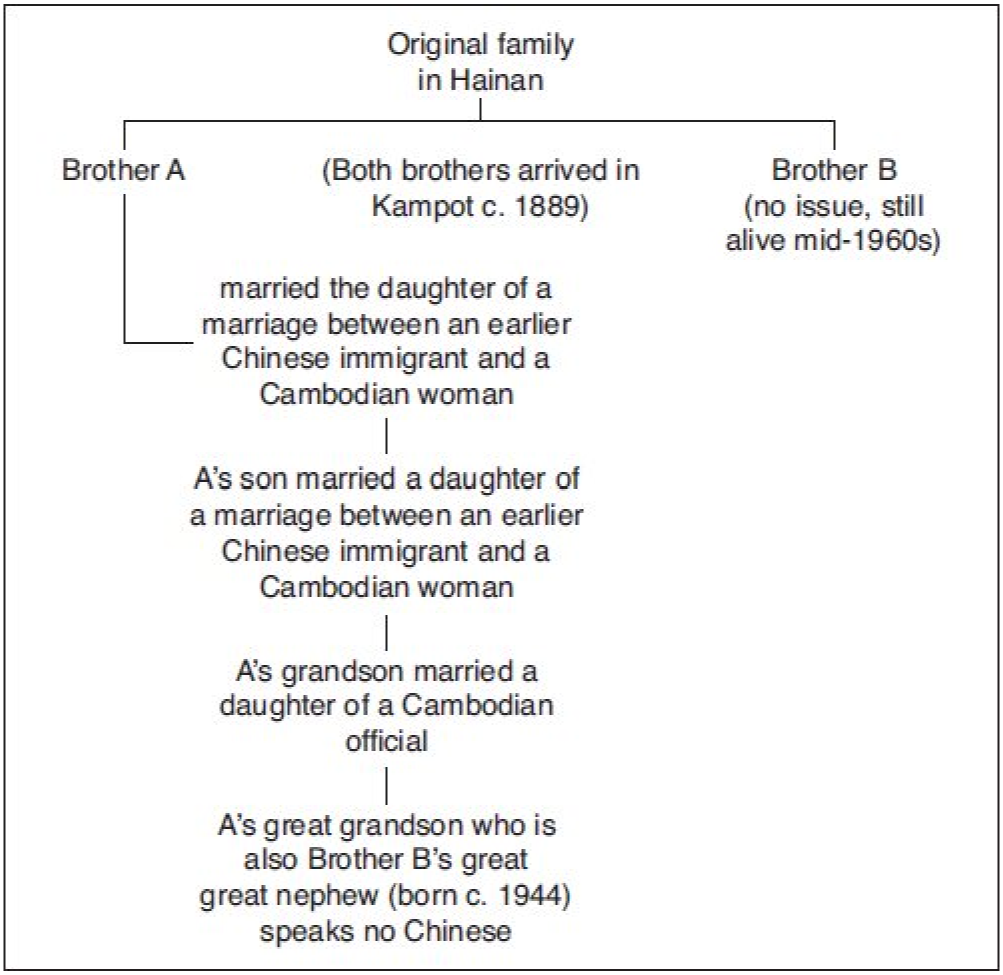
For those who were successful some general and straightforward explanations are possible. Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia filled roles in society that others would not or could not fill. The situation in Vietnam during the period of French colonial rule makes this point clear. When the French invaded southern Vietnam in the late 1850s and then captured Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) in 1861 they encouraged Chinese settlement because they knew that Chinese businessmen could play a commercial role for which no one else in the colony—French or Vietnamese—was equipped to play. What was true in Vietnam was true elsewhere. Chinese immigrants were ready and able to undertake tasks that Southeast Asians themselves either shunned or for which they lacked training and expertise. The role of a rural shopkeeper provides a good example of the kind of position that a Chinese immigrant occupied but which was, in general, shunned by Southeast Asians themselves. Southeast Asians, with some notable exceptions, did not regard commercial endeavour as an attractive way of life. Moreover, even to engage in the business of small-scale shopkeeping in a rural area required capital and an understanding of a cash economy. Chinese immigrants did have notable advantages here. Even if a man of ability did not possess capital of his own he could often gain access to funds through family or clan connections. And once he possessed funds his knowledge of the workings of a cash economy enabled him to become not simply a vendor of goods but in addition to engage in a broad range of business, selling on credit to farmers in return for a share of their crop and lending money. It is easy enough to see why Chinese immigrants were, on occasion, the subjects of resentment. A successful shopkeeper with interests extending into the rice industry, most particularly, could become a vital and sometimes oppressive figure.

Resentment of Chinese immigrants was also felt, on occasion, because of the links they had with colonial governments. As the presence of colonial governments became more and more a matter of resentment among the peoples of Southeast Asia, so did that resentment come to encompass those Chinese immigrants, in particular, whose livelihood was closely linked with the alien, European authorities. In Indonesia, for instance, there was bitter resentment of the Chinese who acted as tax collectors and as the agents for the colonial government’s opium monopoly. And feeling against these Chinese agents of the government was given a sharper edge by their readiness to use the colonial government’s laws to settle disputes rather than relying on the customary or *adat* law of the Indonesians.

Resentment of the Chinese immigrant communities in Southeast Asia was more acute in those regions where a variety of social and religious factors made any prospect of assimilating the immigrants into the existing community extremely difficult, if not impossible. Only in Cambodia, Thailand and the Philippines has there been major assimilation of Chinese into existing societies—perhaps surprisingly, Burma (Myanmar), despite its Buddhist orientation, was less welcoming than either Cambodia or Thailand. Elsewhere, with Vietnam as a partial exception, assimilation has been limited, even rare. For the Indonesian and Malaysian regions of Southeast Asia the reluctance of the Chinese immigrants to embrace Islam has been a major barrier to assimilation. In Cambodia and Thailand, by contrast, the national religion of Buddhism provided a flexible framework within which immigrant Chinese found it possible to begin the assimilation process that was then carried through by subsequent generations. The Catholic church in the Philippines may not, perhaps, be described as flexible in the same way as the Buddhist church in Thailand or Cambodia, but without Islam’s dietary restrictions and with, in practice if not always in strict theory, considerable tolerance towards widely varying degrees of religious observance, Catholicism in the Philippines played a vital role in the assimilative process.

In the mid-1960s it was possible for the present writer to see the process of assimilation at work in Cambodia in a clear fashion. The experience of each family had its distinctive features but the actual case that is described in the following paragraphs may fairly be designated as representative of a process repeated elsewhere hundreds upon thousands of times.

In the Cambodian seaport town of Kampot a few families dominated the important pepper trade. One of these families still, in the mid-1960s, had a founder member alive. He, by then in his nineties, had come to Cambodia with his brother in the late 1880s. They were then in their early twenties and had left their native Chinese island of Hainan to settle in an area where Hainanese had begun to develop the cultivation of pepper before the end of the eighteenth century. This old man, who spoke no Cambodian, was the great-great-uncle of the youngest member of the family, three generations removed from the immigrants of the 1880s. And this young man in his early twenties spoke virtually no Chinese, was legally Cambodian, spoke Cambodian as his first language, and was indistinguishable to an outside observer from the many thousands of other Cambodians whose ancestry included ethnic Chinese forebears.


Original family in Hainan
Brother A
(Both brothers arrived in Kampot c. 1889)
Brother B (no issue, still alive mid-1960s)
married the daughter of a marriage between an earlier Chinese immigrant and a Cambodian woman
A's son married a daughter of a marriage between an earlier Chinese immigrant and a Cambodian woman
A's grandson married a daughter of a Cambodian official
A's great grandson who is also Brother B's great great nephew (born c. 1944) speaks no Chinese

To see the oldest and youngest members of the family together was to have the reality of assimilation forcefully demonstrated. An equally striking insight came in the vast shop-house that accommodated three generations. Depending on the generation involved, there were subtle clues to the balance existing between 'Chineseness' and 'Cambodianness'. Buddha images, in the Cambodian style, rested near strips of red paper painted with Chinese characters in gold that offered the traditional wishes for health, wealth, longevity and fecundity. Of the dwellers in the shop-house perhaps no more than half could read these characters. A glance at a simplified family tree emphasises the subtle but steady change from being Chinese to becoming Cambodian in the family just described.

Whether welcomed or resented, assimilated or kept as a community rigidly apart, the Chinese immigrants into Southeast Asia played a major role in the region's history. Their economic role was most obvious but time and again that economic role was one that had important political implications. Above all, the presence of large numbers of unassimilated Chinese in their immigrant communities was, whatever their role beforehand, transformed into a major political problem once the Second World War and the establishment of the Chinese People's Republic in 1949 meant that a return to their homeland was, for the great majority, a personal and a political impossibility.

Mention has already been made of the fact that the Chinese were far from being the only immigrant community in Southeast Asia. Some of the other immigrant communities were of minor importance in the broad history of the region, however important individual members of a particular ethnic group may have been. The scattered immigrant communities from parts of the Middle East are a case in point. Other immigrant communities were important in particular areas but not in others. In Cambodia and Laos, for instance, the French encouraged Vietnamese migration since the Vietnamese were ready to undertake the clerical duties required by the French colonial administration and engage in small-scale commerce that only very rarely attracted Cambodian and Lao interest. Of all the immigrant communities, however, only one other ethnic group played a part in economic life that even approached that played by the Chinese. This was the overseas Indian community; a community, moreover, that like the Chinese can be discussed in general terms only so long as due weight is given to the great variations within it.

Although we are aware of Indian immigration in Southeast Asia dating back to the early period of written records, major Indian immigration into the region did not begin until the nineteenth century. As was the case with Chinese immigration, Indians came to Southeast Asia to fill positions that could not or would not be filled by Southeast Asians themselves. And like the Chinese who immigrated to Southeast Asia the bulk of the Indians who came to the region did so because the chances for employment appeared better than in their native land.

While Indian immigrants established themselves throughout the Southeast Asian region, their numbers were greatest in Burma (Myanmar) and the Malaysia–Singapore region. The reasons for this situation are readily recognised. India was administered by a British colonial government and emigration from India was mostly to other British colonial possessions. The bulk of the Indians who migrated were labourers, particularly plantation labourers. But Indian labour became important in other spheres too—in road building and in railway work. Right up to the present day the importance of Indian labour can be readily seen in the fields just mentioned by any visitor to Malaysia.

Like the Chinese, however, Indian immigrants into Southeast Asia worked in a wide range of occupations. Some were recruited in India to occupy military and police positions that their caste or religious group had traditionally occupied in India. Others, among them the moneylenders, came of their own accord to practise a profession that frequently led to resentment when local Southeast Asian peasants found themselves deeply in debt to an alien. The activities of Indian moneylenders in Burma were among the reasons for the very great resentment felt by the Burmese towards the Indians, a resentment that led, after Burma's independence, to a mass expulsion of Indians from the country.

As with other immigrants into Southeast Asia in the expanding economic circumstances of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were some who prospered mightily. Indian immigrants and their first-generation descendants became successful businessmen, lawyers and doctors. Yet while it is difficult to supply very satisfactory figures, it is quite clear that a smaller proportion of Indian immigrants into Southeast Asia rose to the towering heights of commercial success attained by some Chinese. The explanation for this difference seems fairly clear even if a great deal more research into the question still needs to be done. In general, Indian commercial success in Southeast Asia appears to have been very much at the family level. As the result of a system of values that included reluctance to become engaged in business ventures involving joint stock operations, Indian commercial success was never so far-reaching as for the Chinese.

Asian immigration into Southeast Asia was one of the most important features of the great economic changes that took place from the middle of the nineteenth century. The immigrants provided the physical muscle, the energy, and later the finance for much of the development that took place as Southeast Asia moved firmly, if unevenly, away from the traditional past. In Singapore, where the state that ultimately emerged at independence was dominated by ethnic Chinese, and in Malaysia, where the Peninsula of Malaya came to have a population that was more than one-third ethnic Chinese, the arrival and settlement of Chinese was and is of vital importance. Indian immigration into Malaya and Singapore was less numerous and correspondingly less significant. That it was, nonetheless, vitally important is beyond dispute, just as Indian immigration into Burma was of great significance also.

As has been made clear, however, immigration into Southeast Asia has not been free of problems and resentments. The point has been made several times that the immigrants filled the jobs that Southeast Asians shunned or for which they lacked the skill. This was true, but times changed and Southeast Asians came to resent the difficulty in gaining access to jobs held by immigrants or their descendants once they—the Southeast Asians—had gained the skills or training they previously lacked. At the same time, and as part of the long and often turbulent process leading up to independence, Southeast Asians often came to see the Asian immigrants in their countries as an integral part of the colonial regimes ruling over them. When, as in Burma, this perception was added to sharp resentment of the dominant economic role many Indian immigrants had attained, the stage was set for reaction and retribution once independence was achieved.

It would seem wrong to end a discussion of Asian immigration into Southeast Asia without introducing a note of tragedy. For all of the many who prospered, and continue to prosper, and despite the very special experience of Singapore, Asian immigration into Southeast Asia has always had a risk of tragedy associated with it. For the early immigrants in the nineteenth century, it was the tragedy that would overtake them if they died in a foreign land. For later immigrants and their descendants there was the special and very personal tragedy of finding that they ‘belonged’ neither in the land of their ancestors nor, in the eyes of many Southeast Asians, in the new land where they had been born and established roots. On occasion the sense of tragedy linked to Asian immigration has become powerfully apparent—in the forced deportation of Indians from Burma, for example, or the large-scale killing of Chinese in Indonesia in the 1960s when to be Chinese was to be regarded as a Communist.

The contrast between the experience of the Asian immigrants into Southeast Asia and those immigrants from Europe who travelled to America and Australia is instructive. For the Europeans in the nineteenth century America and Australia offered many challenges, but the states to which they migrated were recognisably similar to those they had left. The Asian immigrants by contrast not only moved to states that were different culturally and ethnically, but additionally were undergoing transformation. Unlike their European counterparts the Asian immigrants often found they could not become full members of the state. The Asian immigrants were vital for the economic transformation of Southeast Asia but for the most part, with Singapore as the notable exception, they were not to be among its political masters.

# EIGHT

# The years of illusion: Southeast Asia between the wars, 1918–41

Until recently, and for those who gave Southeast Asia more than passing thought, the years between the First and Second World Wars presented a striking paradox. On the one hand these were the years that have provided the basis for some of the most widely held views of the nature of Southeast Asia in the period of colonial rule—‘British Malaya’, the ‘Netherlands Indies’, and ‘French Indochina’ were seen by many observers as having been at the height of their success during these years. This was often a judgment present in descriptions of the late colonial period written in retirement by the alien men and women who had lived and worked in the colonies. To some extent, of course, this estimation reflected the sense of nostalgia felt by those who had believed in their colonial role. And it is not too cynical to suggest, additionally, that at times this nostalgia also reflected the fact that many had found life in the colonies a great deal more comfortable than in the homelands to which they had retired.

Yet even for later generations, at least some of our sense of Southeast Asia reflects an awareness of the interwar period. It is an awareness gained through novels and travel books and in some cases through family association. It is a period captured in the writings of such popular authors as Somerset Maugham, and it is striking how often hotels in modern Southeast Asia choose to make photographs from this late colonial period a feature of their decor. So the image of the European planter or official, his white tropical suit spotless or stained and shabby according to his personal character, has become more than a figure in a short story and, instead, an historically significant and representative reflection of an age. In the same way, the 1920s and 1930s have, in the imperfectly formed image of popular memory, been seen as a period when Southeast Asians, ‘natives’ in the terminology of the times, were stereotypes: self-effacing and industrious peasants, faithful servants, courtly but ineffective princes, rare and occasionally heroic rebels against modern colonial rule and the values that went with it.

On the other hand, and here is the paradox, knowledge of the interwar period at a deeper level, a level that penetrates below the easy generalisations of popular literature and travellers' tales, suggests a very different world from the images that still have widespread currency. For all that we may think of the 1920s and 1930s as the heyday of colonialism, a time when, with the exception of Thailand, all the countries of Southeast Asia were under foreign European or American rule, these were years when the foundations of colonial rule in Southeast Asia were under very considerable strain. Sometimes this was recognised by those who exercised colonial rule. For others the threats to the colonial position were hardly realised. Whatever the degree of awareness that was present, however, the interwar years were marked by two notably contradictory characteristics: at the very time when external powers held their most extensive presence in the region, new and essentially internal forces were beginning to operate that would help ensure the end of all the colonial regimes.

By the end of the second decade of the twentieth century Southeast Asia possessed a pattern of boundaries that has changed little up to the present. Various territorial adjustments in the early years of the century brought to an end some long-standing disputes, and colonial expansion had virtually reached its limits. On the mainland there was a British colonial government in Burma (Myanmar); France ruled over Vietnam, Cambodia, and the Lao states, with the sum of these possessions being described as French Indochina; and Thailand, alone, preserved a tenuous independence. The modern states that exist in the Southeast Asian mainland have, with only limited change, inherited the boundaries observed in the colonial years. The same is true for the maritime regions, though rather more qualification is required when discussing their case. The territories of the Netherlands Indies were to become Indonesia. In the same way the boundaries of the Philippines under Spanish and then American colonial control became the boundaries of the independent Philippine state, and Portuguese Timor was, eventually, to become the independent state of Timor-Leste. But in modern Malaysia's case there was no single predecessor state uniting the territories that now constitute that country. True, Britain ruled over the Malayan Peninsula and Singapore, but in Borneo there were two of the more unusual examples of European control to be found in Southeast Asia. In what has become the Malaysian state of Sarawak, rule by the ‘White Rajahs’ of the Brooke family lasted until the Second World War. And in modern Sabah, a chartered trading company provided the apparatus of government, following in the pattern, if on a much smaller scale, of the British East India Company. Yet even if Sarawak and Sabah were administrative oddities, their links to Britain were clear and the eventual foundation of an independent Malaysia between 1956 and 1963 provided another example of a modern state assuming the boundaries laid down and stabilised during the period of colonial rule.

With stable borders and the conclusion of the First World War, the most terrible war in history, the European powers that controlled the colonised states in Southeast Asia looked forward to a period of governmental calm and economic expansion. So far as the second of these hopes was concerned, the experience of the early 1920s seemed to match and even exceed their expectations. The economic expansion of Southeast Asia that had begun in the closing decades of the nineteenth century had transformed the region and left it ready to meet the demands of the peace-time boom that followed on the heels of the war. With Southeast Asia as a prime source for rubber, rice and tin, the export earnings of those who controlled the plantations, mines and paddy fields rose rapidly. Southeast Asian rubber made the tyres for a Western world that had come increasingly to depend on motor transport. Southeast Asian tin played a vital part in manufacturing, both in end products, such as those involving tinplate, and as a component in specialist industrial equipment. The rice grown in Southeast Asian countries fed populations from India to Europe. And in this period of widespread economic expansion the other export products of Southeast Asia enjoyed a comparable expansion.

If colonial officials hoped that a period of increased economic activity would be matched by a lack of overt resentment of or reaction to their alien rule by the populations they governed, these hopes also seemed justified initially. In the early 1920s calm did seem to be the general, though not absolutely complete, order of the day. Whether this calm grew out of a period of expanding economic activity is, at the very least, open to argument. Just as much weight would have to be given to the proposition that it was not until the mid-1920s that modern political movements began to develop in Southeast Asia that looked beyond the basic goal of regaining independence from foreign control and towards the eventual establishment of a new state governed in accordance with new, even revolutionary, political theory.

This development, so often discounted and dismissed as insignificant at the time, was what made the 1920s so important. Colonial governments had encountered resistance before. The Dutch had fought bitter colonial wars as they expanded their hold over the Indonesian islands in the nineteenth century. In Burma the so-called program of ‘pacification’, pursued by the British for many years, had been a testimony to the reluctance of large numbers of the population to submit to foreign rule; while in Vietnam the record of resistance to the French was almost continuous, ebbing and flowing according to circumstances, but never absent for a significant period. Before the First World War, however, all the movements that had resisted foreign rule in Southeast Asia had been *essentially* traditional in character. And not only traditional, but in many cases linked in one way or another to religious and millenarian movements. This fact, of course, made it all the easier for sceptical colonial powers to dismiss these resistance movements as lacking in real significance.

The change from traditional resistance to modern anti-colonial challenge has usually been described as the growth of nationalism. Such a description, however accurate it may be from some points of view, is unsatisfactory as an explanation in itself because it begs too many questions. If one talks about nationalism, what is being described? And was the rise of Southeast Asian nationalism a process similar to or significantly different from the rise of nationalism in Europe or Latin America?

Rather than giving a detailed account of the controversies that this issue has generated, a more positive approach is to look at the areas of general agreement that have been reached among those who study Southeast Asia—always accepting that there is no absolute identity of view concerning such a complex and, on occasion, emotion-charged subject. Most scholars now agree that the political movements that emerged to challenge the existing colonial order after the First World War were different, in important ways, from those that had existed in the nineteenth century. To see the fact of difference does not mean that those who sought independence from their colonial rulers in the 1920s and 1930s disregarded the more traditional opposition to colonial rule of other centuries. Rather, the modern generation of Southeast Asians who opposed colonial rule saw themselves building upon the traditions already established by their compatriots, but doing so in a way that took account of changed social, economic and political factors.

The development of the modern Indonesian independence movement provides a particularly instructive example of an awareness of the past being joined to a new political program that was directed both at ending colonial rule *and* towards creating a new Indonesian state. The men who emerged into prominence as advocates of Indonesian independence in the 1920s were very much aware of the efforts of the men and women who had fought against the Dutch expansion of control in such campaigns as the Java War (1825–30), the Paderi Wars in Sumatra (1820s and 1830s), and the Aceh War, again in Sumatra (1872–1908). But for a man such as Sukarno, who was to become the first president of Indonesia, the campaign waged against the Dutch had new elements that had not been dreamed of by the earlier anti-colonial leaders. First and foremost, for Sukarno and the other leaders of his generation who emerged into prominence in the 1920s, a clear link was now proclaimed between independence from foreign rule and the establishment of a new Indonesian *nation* where none had previously existed. This new nation, incorporating all the peoples and territories ruled over by the Dutch, was acknowledged to be a diverse entity—the Indonesian national motto is ‘Unity in Diversity’—but it was to be united by more than a rejection of colonialism. Unity was to be forged through an acceptance of new political values, some from Indonesia’s own past, some from Europe, where the ferment of the nineteenth century had brought forth a host of new political theories and immense practical change in the disposition of actual political power.

In a loose but accurate sense, the new nationalism that emerged in Indonesia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia did combine the old and the new, something of the values of the West as well as the values of Southeast Asia itself. Nationalism asserted that populations and territories ruled as colonial possessions had their own independent right to existence, to the pursuit of national goals that were the preserve of one particular group of peoples living in one particular area. The colonial powers, unsurprisingly in terms of the values of the times, opposed these demands for basic change in political control. Moreover, the obstacles that lay in the way of achieving the nationalists’ goals often seemed formidable and frequently led the colonial administrators to dismiss the force of the new movements. For the nationalists themselves, a faith in their ideals enabled them to believe that political power could be gained and that apparently unfavourable and even impossible odds would be overcome.

Still the question remains: why did the growth of this new national spirit take place in the 1920s and 1930s and not before? Some historians would reject the basis for this question, preferring to stress the way that old forms of anti-colonial resistance were transformed into new nationalist efforts. For most observers, however, there seems not only to have been a significant difference between traditional and more modern anti-colonial movements, but also some readily identifiable explanations for why change came when it did. Central to most explanations is the fact of *awareness*. By the 1920s, and increasingly thereafter, there was a new sense of awareness among an ever-growing number of Southeast Asians that the colonial relationship that dominated their lives was not beyond question but, rather, open to challenge.

In a country such as Vietnam, where a sense of national identity had a long history, this sense of awareness was particularly marked by an embrace of new political theories that were seen as offering a program for ending their country's colonial status. In other countries, perhaps most particularly Indonesia, where a new sense of national identity developed very much as a consequence of the colonial experience, it may be argued that it was the awakening of a national awareness, more than the adoption of one rather than another political theory, that was most important. Throughout Southeast Asia, including Thailand, which never experienced a formal colonial relationship, the 1920s and 1930s saw an awakening of interest concerning the nature and purpose of government.

In stressing the growth of this sense of awareness, with all the different paths that were followed by the new nationalist leaders in the different countries of the region, attention is again focused on Southeast Asia's role as a receiver and adaptor of external theories and concepts. Political ideas relating to socialism, Communism, democracy and a host of other theories and concepts did not *develop* in Southeast Asia, however much of these theories came to be used and adapted. And here, moving beyond the global explanation of awareness, the importance of the 1920s and 1930s is more readily understood.

Europe achieved its modern political configuration—the delineation of state boundaries and the consolidation of national units—in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This process was accompanied and followed by an outpouring of writing on political theory. By the early twentieth century debates that continue today were already joined between those in favour of revolutionary solutions to political problems and issues and those who sought a variety of evolutionary approaches. Not surprisingly, Southeast Asians who resented or had become dissatisfied with their colonial status looked to the great body of Western political thought to see whether it contained answers to their political dilemmas.

It was an unsurprising decision since one important result of the major political changes that took place in Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the growth of a body of opinion—never particularly large but always significant—that insisted that opportunities for education should be extended to the populations in the colonised states. With education, for a few at least, came the opportunity to read of the momentous political changes that had taken place in Europe and of the political forces that had brought those changes. No exaggeration is involved when it is observed that once a significant number of Southeast Asians were exposed to Western education the development of a new nationalist spirit received one of its most powerful boosts. Moreover, education and changing administrative and social patterns led, by the beginning of the twentieth century, to the development of a new and significant class, the intelligentsia. Although arguments may be developed to suggest that such a class had long existed in Vietnam, both in that country and elsewhere in the Southeast Asian region the new class that now emerged was distinguished from its predecessors or precursors by a political as well as an intellectual commitment. For the first time there was a significant group of educated Southeast Asians who questioned the position of their rulers—the colonial powers—in terms of political theory, and who were able to see themselves as part of a wider intellectual community concerned to debate, discuss and act in the hope of attaining their nationalist goals.

Exposure to Western education and through it to new political concepts took many forms. For some the exposure came in a formal sense, through schooling and study, sometimes culminating in years spent in Europe. For others an understanding of Western political ideas came through less formal, but no less important, contacts with the West. The careers of

Mohammad Hatta of Indonesia and Ho Chi Minh of Vietnam provide examples of the very different ways that Southeast Asians came to know Western political theories and to see in them a way to end colonial rule in their countries. Hatta, seen by the Dutch as a model Indonesian student, spent nearly ten years of his early adult life studying economics in the Netherlands. He was an outstanding student. He was also a man who increasingly found it impossible to reconcile the political ideas that prevailed in Holland, not least the opportunity for an individual to cast a vote to change the government, with those existing in Indonesia. When he returned to Indonesia in 1932 his advocacy of independence for his countrymen led to his imprisonment by the Dutch colonial authorities, an imprisonment that lasted until his release by the Japanese during the Second World War.

Ho Chi Minh's acquaintance with the West came in a very different fashion. Unlike Hatta, the French never saw Ho as a model student. Instead he was the troublesome son of a minor but scholarly official who had refused to cooperate with the colonial government. He left Vietnam at an early age to work as a member of a ship's crew and found his way to Europe and to a changing series of low-paid jobs in London and Paris, and for a short period of time in New York and Boston. It was in Paris that he slowly became acquainted with the revolutionary literature of those who had adopted Marx, Engels and Lenin as their guides to political philosophy and action. Convinced that Communism offered the answer to the problems of the world, and most particularly those of colonised peoples, Ho became one of the founder members of the French Communist Party. This fateful step was to lead him along an extraordinary path of personal hardship, imprisonment and eventual partial triumph in his battle against French rule in Vietnam.

For those in the colonised regions of Southeast Asia who came to learn of the nature of government in the West, whether through personal experience or from books and the accounts of their fellow countrymen, the most striking realisation was how contradictory were the patterns of life and behaviour that applied in Europe and the United States and those that applied in the colonies. In this regard a well-known saying about the British in India could equally be applied to the Europeans and Americans who lived their lives in Southeast Asia in the 1920s and 1930s. All Englishmen, the saying went, were *sahibs* east of the Suez Canal. The very fact of being a white man, in other words, transformed individuals who in their own countries might have been of very humble status into ‘lords’ or ‘masters’. There is abundant evidence to show the ease with which Europeans in the colonies of Southeast Asia readily slipped into a pattern that presumed their moral elevation above the ‘native’ masses and ensured their conditions of existence were fitting for such elevated status. Dutchmen and Englishmen, to take two examples, found no more difficulty in regarding themselves as *tuans* (*tuan* is the word for ‘lord’ or master’ in Indonesian and Malay) than did their counterparts in India. This was a situation that more and more came to cause resentment. And this resentment was further fuelled by the growing realisation that the economic benefits of the colonies accrued overwhelmingly to the distant metropolitan states and to the alien members of the colonial community and those who had joined their interests to them. Awareness of the inequities of colonialism was, for the bulk of those active in the developing nationalist movements, increasingly focused on these two features: the social and political dominance of the alien colonists over the indigenous population and the economic dominance of those colonists.

When the obvious link between the various colonial political systems and the economic situation in the colonies was discerned, thoughtful Southeast Asian nationalists asked whether Western political and economic theory might offer an answer to the problems they confronted. There should be no surprise that for some an apparent answer to the problem of how to gain independence was seen in Communism. Now, more than one hundred years after the event, it is difficult to sense the profound international concern and excitement that accompanied the 1917 Communist Revolution in Russia. What was seen by the conservative politicians of the West as a terrible illustration of what could happen if too much power fell into the hands of the workers was, of course, viewed very differently by underprivileged and disadvantaged groups throughout the world. For some men and women in Asia—not just in Southeast Asia—the Russian Revolution offered not merely the spectacle of a corrupt, authoritarian monarchy being overthrown by a political group that acted in the name of the workers of Russia. It was seen as an event that signalled much more: the imminence of revolution throughout the world, but most particularly in their own colonised situation.

How inaccurate that view was is apparent many years later. For some Southeast Asians, however, the promise of independence through Communist revolution seemed very real in the 1920s and 1930s. The force and appeal of the revolutionary philosophy of Communism in Vietnam provides the best-known example. But Communism had an important following in Indonesia and played a small but significant role in the Philippines also. In British Malaya, Communist organisers were active in the Chinese community, but developments in that colony were very different from elsewhere in the Southeast Asian region. The Chinese community in British Malaya in the 1920s and 1930s still saw its interest as inextricably linked with the Chinese homeland. Since this was so, those who supported Communism did so not in terms of challenging British authority but rather in terms of raising funds and providing support for their Communist countrymen in China.

Why was it then that only in Vietnam did a Communist party emerge as the leader of a nationalist independence movement? There is no simple answer to this question, but an attempt to provide *some* of the answers has much to tell us about the development of modern Southeast Asia. Of all the countries of Southeast Asia only Vietnam and Indonesia were forced to fight a protracted war in order to achieve independence from their colonial rulers. These wars, fought after the Second World War had ended, may be seen as a reflection of the determination of France and the Netherlands to maintain and reassert control of their colonial empires at a time when other European powers had accepted that the age of colonies either was passing or had passed. The wars of independence fought in Vietnam and Indonesia after the Second World War may also be regarded as the logical extension of the situation that had existed in those countries during the 1920s and 1930s. For in both Indonesia and Vietnam the colonial governments had made very clear their position that independence was simply not a possibility that would be considered, despite the growing and insistent demands that independence should be granted.

But what was different about the Vietnamese experience when it is compared with the events in Indonesia? Why did the Communists become the leaders of the nationalist resistance to the French while in Indonesia the Communist Party was only one of the various groups that combined to form the anti-Dutch nationalist movement? Part of the answer may be given in terms of leadership and personalities. The leaders of the small but determined Vietnamese Communist Party—Pham Van Dong and Vo Nguyen Giap, to name but two in addition to Ho Chi Minh—were men of exceptional talent. There were able and dedicated Indonesian Communists also—men such as Semaun and Tan Malaka—but the talent of non-Communist Indonesian nationalist leaders was at least equal to that of their Communist allies. Another contrast between the Vietnamese and Indonesian situations lay in the nature of their respective colonial regimes. Both the French and the Dutch colonial regimes were repressive, but it is arguable that the repression in Vietnam was fiercer than in Indonesia. Although the Dutch did not hesitate to exile such men as Sukarno, Hatta and Sutan Sjahrir, and to imprison hundreds of other less eminent nationalists, it seems correct to note that repression in Indonesia was never so complete, or indeed as brutal, as in Vietnam under the French.

To argue that because of the severe political repression that operated in Vietnam only the Communist Party could survive and eventually succeed because of its clandestine nature and organisational capacities would fall far short of a satisfactory explanation. Repression in Vietnam during the 1920s and 1930s did eliminate or render impotent other political groupings. And the Vietnamese Communist Party was aided in its efforts to survive by its secret character—a bitter complaint of the French security services was of their failure to penetrate the inner ranks of the party’s leadership. But there was more to the party’s slow progress to power than this. For the party leaders and their followers Communism seemed to provide both a political theory and a program for action that was particularly appropriate for the conditions that existed in Vietnam. The colonial economic system seemed to fit quite remarkably well into the exploitative pattern described in the writings of Marx and even more particularly Lenin, a fact seized on by Ho Chi Minh. Nonetheless, it is as well to remember that, although the Communists had established themselves as the leading nationalist group in Vietnam by the end of the 1930s, they were still far from being in a position to seize power.

The Indonesian nationalist opponents of the Dutch were not close to power either at the end of the 1930s. But if they shared this experience with the Vietnamese, there was much else that was profoundly different. The Vietnamese Communists had emerged as the leading political force in a country that had a long tradition of national identity and in which the old absolutist values of a Confucian society had first been under threat and then shown to be inadequate to meeting the challenges of colonialism and the changing nature of the modern world. By contrast, the development of a sense of Indonesian identity was essentially a modern phenomenon in a society marked by all manner of pluralist tendencies. Moreover, if it is possible by simplifying greatly to speak of twentieth-century Communist political theory and practice filling the void left by the collapse of traditional Confucian values in Vietnam, no such parallel could be found in Indonesia. As Indonesian nationalists formulated their plans for the future they did so in a situation in which traditional cultural values and both traditional and modern religious values had not proved to be failures. Vietnamese might mourn the passing of a society in which Confucian values had had their place but they had to seek something to replace them, most particularly because even those who regretted the passing of the old order would usually admit its inadequacies. Most Indonesians, on the other hand, did not see their varied and rich cultural heritage or their Islamic religion as the cause of Dutch colonialism, or as the reason for the failure of their countrymen to expel the Dutch. Instead, and not even excluding the Communists so far as cultural values were concerned, Indonesia's nationalists drew strength from their heritage and saw it as having at least as much importance as Western political theory.

Consider Sukarno. He embodied so many of the characteristics of his countrymen, and particularly of his fellow Javanese, that one begins to understand why a man who could be seen by unsympathetic outside observers as a caricature was, to his fellow Indonesians, a reassuring figure in whom an almost endless range of personal, cultural and political traits were harmoniously combined. Sukarno's defence of his nationalist position when the Dutch put him on trial in 1930 is a remarkable testimony not only to his energy in reading a vast and varied range of political writings but also to his readiness to look for a path to Indonesian independence incorporating the widest scope of ideas on the state and its character. In Indonesia, for the most part, those who opposed the Dutch did not feel the need for an absolute set of political principles of the kind associated with Communism. Nationalism in Indonesia accommodated a range of political beliefs rather than becoming, as in Vietnam, a movement that was, essentially, synonymous with Communism.

The very considerable contrasts between Indonesia and Vietnam serve as a timely reminder of the slow progress of Communism elsewhere in Southeast Asia. In Thailand, for instance, the gradual transformation of the traditional Thai state that owed so much to the energies of two remarkable kings, Mongkut (1851–68) and Chulalongkorn (1868–1910), reached its culmination in the ‘Revolution’ of 1932. This ‘Revolution’ did indeed represent a major change in the system of governing Thailand, for from that date onward the Thai king was to occupy the position of a constitutional monarch rather than be, in theory at least, an absolute ruler. The aims of the ‘revolutionaries’ who insisted on this new state of affairs—they were mostly younger men in the civil service and military, many with experience abroad—were far removed from Communism. Instead, with the various European models as guides to follow, they looked for a means to end a situation in which the nature of the Thai political system depended so much upon one man, the king. What followed the 1932 ‘Revolution’ in Thailand could hardly be described as the implementation of democracy. It was, however, an important shift in power and this shift was sufficient to meet the interests of those who, in the late 1920s, had feared that the ruler, King Prajadhipok, would not take account of the political aspirations of those outside his tight royal circle. The political changes that took place in Thailand, however, were achieved within a society in which a prevailing sense of unity about the throne and within the Buddhist religion provided a basis for stability very different from some other parts of Southeast Asia.

The limited success of Communism elsewhere in Southeast Asia need not, however, be seen only in terms of the capacity of some nationalists to achieve change peacefully while others sought change through violent means. Just as the monarchy and the Buddhist religion were a unifying factor in Thailand, so were other ‘models’ seen as offering alternative answers to the dilemmas of the emerging nationalists. Long before the success of the 1917 Russian Revolution, Southeast Asians had been struck by the success of the Japanese in challenging and defeating the power of Tsarist Russia in the Russo–Japanese War of 1905. In a similar way the Chinese Revolution of 1911 presented an example of revolutionaries in an Asian country successfully achieving great political changes. For some the success of the Japanese state and of the Chinese revolutionaries were models to be followed closely. For others the success had a more general importance. Japan’s defeat of Russia showed that Asians could triumph over Europeans just as the Chinese Revolution showed that major political change could be achieved by those seeking to institute revolutionary goals even in the most traditional of circumstances.

Beyond these general examples provided by particular events, there were longer-term influences that played a significant role in stimulating the development of nationalist policies and which might also be seen as having provided alternative rallying points to Communism. To write in these terms is not to suggest that the role of Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia, or of Buddhism in Burma, was something consciously developed during the 1920s and 1930s in opposition to the challenge of Communism. Rather, the existence of Islamic and Buddhist movements in these countries meant that there were already important rallying points about which nationalist thought could develop *before* consideration was ever given to the possibility of finding an answer to the problems of a colonial existence through the adoption of Communism as a guide for both theory and action.

More than usual difficulty attaches to writing about the history of religious movements in Southeast Asia. Religious experience is such a personal matter that an historian often finds it hard to do much more than emphasise the barest outlines of developments. Accepting that this difficulty exists, it is nonetheless possible for an outsider to sense something of the force and impact of the Islamic movements that were important in Indonesia and Malaya during the first four decades of the twentieth century and to see their significance for the development of nationalist politics. Islam, particularly Reformed Islam that stressed the basic teachings of the Koran, gave an impetus to the growing awareness of community felt by certain groups in Indonesia. Finding spiritual comfort and support from their religion, these Indonesian followers of Islam also found that shared belief formed a basis for shared political and economic aims. The first truly important national organisation in Indonesia was the Sarekat Islam, established in 1912, originally an association of Indonesian *batik* cloth merchants who first came together in 1908 (with a slightly different name) to advance their interests in the face of competition from Chinese dealers and who found a basis for unity in a shared religious faith. For many Indonesians who joined Sarekat Islam in its early, essentially economic phase, and for others who through the 1920s and 1930s associated themselves with one or other of the various Islamic organisations that emerged in those years, their religion became more than a statement of personal faith and belief. The fact of being a follower of Islam became a political statement as well. To be a follower of Islam was to be identified with all the other members of an Indonesian community whose interests were separate from, and indeed opposed to, both the Dutch with their political power and the Chinese merchants who controlled so much commerce in the islands.

In Malaya, from the beginning of the twentieth century, Islam played a similar, if less significant, role in emphasising the common interests of followers of this faith throughout the Peninsula. Although those who had experienced the impact of Reformed Islam, often in the course of study in the Middle East, argued for its importance in efforts to bring a social renovation to Malaya, religious organisations did not have the same impact in the slowly developing course of Malay (*not* Malayan) politics in the 1920s and 1930s. In the face of British Malaya’s development as a multiracial society in which there were major Chinese and Indian immigrant communities, adherence to Islam was only one of the factors that made up the sharply increasing sense of Malay identity that set politically conscious Malays apart from the Chinese and Indians. The realities of economic life as much as membership of the Islamic faith spurred men to find some way of matching a sense of Malay identity to the need for gaining some significant share of economic progress. Nonetheless, if Islamic movements did not have the same impact in Malaya in the 1920s and 1930s as was the case in Indonesia, they probably should be judged to have had a longer-term effect than was realised at the time. In contemporary Malaysia, with Malay political dominance firmly established, Islam plays a major role as a factor defining political and social interests of the Malay community, though it should be noted that there are competing political parties that claim to speak for the Malay Islamic community.

Among those for whom nationalist politics were important in Burma during the years between the world wars, Buddhism provided a central rallying point. While it would be misleading to paint a picture of Burma in the 1920s and 1930s that suggested the level of agitation for independence from colonial rule was of the same order as that found in Vietnam and Indonesia, there was an active nationalist movement and no account of it could neglect the Buddhist element present. Buddhism not only was seen as setting its followers apart from alien non-Buddhists, including non-Buddhist Asians such as the Indians who had flocked to Burma once British colonial rule was established, the religion also provided an administrative framework for the nationalists to spread their ideas. Propaganda in favour of independence could be circulated within the monkhood and anti-colonial strategy could be discussed at Buddhist councils. Just as was the case for dedicated followers of Islam in Indonesia, the Burmese Buddhist activists found in their religion an affirmation of national identity as well as a basis for spiritual comfort.

So far in this chapter the overwhelming emphasis has been on the emergence of nationalist movements in Vietnam and Indonesia, with only a limited amount of attention paid to developments in other parts of Southeast Asia. The reason for this apparently lopsided approach is very simple. In the rest of Southeast Asia the nature of nationalist movements was either very different from those found in Vietnam and Indonesia, or, as was the case in some countries, nationalist movements simply did not exist in any significant fashion. Cambodia and the Lao states in the 1920s and 1930s could accurately be described as barely affected by nationalist activity. In both these countries, in very considerable contrast to Vietnam, the other French colony in Indochina, traditional society and the traditional ruling class were preserved under the control of a French administration. French rule brought changes to Cambodia and Laos, but these were not of a kind to bring forth nationalist reactions comparable to those found elsewhere.

Consider the contrast between Cambodia and Indonesia. In the former the real impact of French colonialism was not felt until the beginning of the twentieth century. The King of Cambodia continued to reign and to remain for the overwhelming majority of his subjects the almost divine centre of their world. Western ideas and Western education had only barely penetrated Cambodia before the Second World War, and the impact of the French-controlled colonial economy had little clear effect on the bulk of the population. In Indonesia things were very different. Although much of what was traditional in Indonesian society survived in the 1920s and 1930s, the impact of the Dutch colonial regime, particularly in Java, was profoundly greater than the French impact in Cambodia. It was certainly the case that royal courts also remained important in Indonesia in the inter-war period, but whatever their significance the alternative focus of a modern outward-looking city existed in Batavia (modern Jakarta). Western education had had an impact in Indonesia by the end of the 1930s that was of an order that simply could not be compared with the situation in Cambodia, where by

1939 fewer than a dozen Cambodians had completed the equivalent of a French secondary school education.

Cambodia, Laos, and to some extent Malaya, showed the degree to which an alliance of interest between members of the traditional ruling class and the colonial power could act to inhibit the development of nationalist activity. The alliance involved did not just relate to personal concerns such as a measure of power and wealth. In the political and social climate of the 1920s and 1930s it was possible for Cambodian and Lao kings and princes, and for Malay sultans, to feel that their countrymen were benefiting from the operation of the colonial system. Who else but the French, a Cambodian or Lao prince might well have argued, would ensure that the Vietnamese did not expand to subjugate Cambodia? Who else but the British, in the view of Malay royalty, could be relied upon to bolster Malay interests in the face of the energetic and resourceful economic competition of the Chinese?

The Philippines presents a very different case. Like parts of Indonesia the Philippines, particularly the northern islands of the country, had experienced a long-term colonial impact. Of all the countries of Southeast Asia the Philippines can lay claim to having developed the earliest modern nationalist movement, for the attempted revolution against Spain at the beginning of the twentieth century possessed distinctly modern characteristics in its aims. Nonetheless, the Philippines remained in a colonial relationship with the United States until the end of the 1930s with remarkably little manifestation of nationalist resentment of this position. The explanation for this state of affairs may be found in the following two broad sets of facts. On the one hand the United States government, however much some of its citizens may have acted like the colonisers of other nations, made clear from the start of its rule over the Philippines its firm intention to grant independence to the country. There were periods of hesitation as to eventual timing and various individuals pursued the policy with greater and lesser enthusiasm. But the basic commitment to granting independence was always there. On the other hand the Filipino elite, the group most likely to furnish the nucleus of a nationalist movement should there have been any doubt as to the eventual intentions of the United States, not only believed that independence would come, but just as importantly found that their personal economic interests were served perfectly well by the system that evolved under American control. In 1936, the inauguration of the Commonwealth of the Philippines reflected the shared interests of the

Americans and the Filipino politicians. The United States retained control over matters of foreign relations and defence while almost all domestic matters were the preserve of the Philippines congress. Most importantly of all, independence was projected to take place in 1946. Once again, though in very different circumstances from those existing in Cambodia and Laos, there was an alliance of interest between the colonised and the coloniser.

To what extent, throughout the Southeast Asia region, did the prospect of independence for the colonised countries seem near or far off towards the end of the 1930s? Not only does the answer to this question vary from country to country; equally obviously the answer varies whether one looks at the problem from the point of view of Southeast Asians or colonisers. From some points of view it is, perhaps, easier to attempt to recreate the assessments of the colonisers rather than the Southeast Asians, though even in this case the fact of very considerable variation from colony to colony and from individual to individual must be stressed.

One of the chief factors that helped to convince many Europeans that the age of colonial rule still had many years to run was the nature of the challenges that were mounted against colonial governments during the years between the two world wars. With the exception of a period of sustained Communist-led resistance to French rule in Vietnam in 1930–31, all the other challenges posed to colonial governments were essentially short term in character and relatively easily overcome. Not only that, the various challenges that did emerge, including the Communist-led risings against Dutch rule in the Netherlands Indies, had a sufficient number of traditional overtones, sometimes including reliance on magic and adherence to millenarian expectations, for the colonial powers to dismiss them as having little modern political, let alone nationalist, significance. The Saya San rising in Burma in 1930–31 appears to have been stimulated in part by economic conditions that owed their existence to the fact of British colonial rule over Burma, in particular a deep resentment of the taxes imposed by the colonial power. But although the British-controlled administration became the target for Saya San’s followers, they tried to achieve a traditional aim through traditional methods. The former Buddhist monk, Saya San, was to be installed as a new ‘king’ of Burma by peasants who were ready to confront the firearms of the police with antique weaponry and a belief in magic amulets that would protect them from bullets.

The protesters against Dutch rule who followed the lead of second-echelon Communist activists in Java and Sumatra in 1926 and 1927, and briefly succeeded in convincing the colonial authorities that there might indeed be a serious threat to Dutch control, were only a little more attuned to the realities of the modern world. As in Burma the case can be convincingly made that colonial rule had brought about the general conditions that had led to a sense of distress and disorientation being felt by sections of the Indonesian population. But the hopes held for the success of these risings in Java and Sumatra by the followers, if not the leaders, were far removed from the expectations of those thoughtful nationalists who recognised that eventual independence would entail costs as well as benefits. Men such as Hatta, Sukarno and Sjahrir thought about the theory and practice of government in the new state that would be instituted after independence. The participants in the 1926–27 risings in Indonesia thought of the abolition of all taxes, of free taxi rides in the urban areas, and of Kemal Ataturk, the reforming Turkish dictator, suddenly appearing in Indonesia to lead the movement for independence after descending from a great aircraft.

These developments in Indonesia and Burma, as well as such affairs as the rare instances of Malay protest against British administration in Malaya and the Sakdalist peasant movement in the Philippines in the 1930s, could not be seen by the alien colonial administrators as posing any true threat to their rule, however troublesome such events might be at the time. The same observation could not be made about the Communist-led challenge to French rule in Vietnam in 1930–31 that has come to be known as the Nghe-Tinh Soviets. For nearly a year French control over sections of two poverty-ridden provinces in north-central Vietnam was resisted by peasants led by adherents of the Vietnamese Communist Party who succeeded for a time in setting up their own soviet-style administration. Only after the French Foreign Legion was sent to the area and given an almost completely free hand to subdue this challenge to French authority by any means, including the routine execution of nine out of ten prisoners, were the Nghe-Tinh Soviets brought to an end. Even in this instance there were some French officials who fell prey to their own propaganda. They chose to believe that the challenge that had confronted them was more reflective of the supposed ‘debased’ character of ‘Asiatics’ than of any true spirit of nationalism or a desire for the establishment of a more modern society, let alone a protest by peasants against their desperate economic circumstances.

Despite the unwillingness of colonial officials to believe that early independence was a real possibility for the populations of the various colonised regions of Southeast Asia, the 1930s seem, nonetheless, to have been a period of considerable unease or at least uncertainty for these alien administrators. For all the insistence of a man such as Governor-General de Jonge in the Netherlands Indies that the Dutch would still be ruling over their colonial subjects for another three hundred years, there were other more hesitant estimates about the future. In British Malaya the remarkable failure of the colonial administration to think about the future was slowly changing by the end of the 1930s, and with this change came the first tentative thoughts about possible independence at some undefined date. In Burma the British administration, conscious of developments in nearby India and confronting a slowly increasing demand for an end to the colonial regime from Burmese nationalist groups, was also no longer able to pretend that independence was not an eventual possibility. Nonetheless, no clear timetable for independence was considered. In the countries of French Indochina attitudes towards the future were very different according to location. In Cambodia and Laos the French saw little to suggest that nationalism would undermine their rule. Vietnam was a different matter, but opinions vary on the extent to which there was a French awareness of the size and force of the Communist-led opposition to their rule. Possibly, in a brief survey, no better summary can be provided than the observation that there were significant sections of the French colonial administration in Vietnam—most notably the security services—and certainly a range of individuals who doubted the public official stance that French rule in Vietnam was likely to last for the indefinite future.

Only in the Philippines, with little if any serious consideration being given to the possibility of Japan’s armed expansion southwards, were the 1930s a time when Southeast Asian politicians could look forward confidently to an independent future and plan and bargain for that future with the colonial power. Unlike the other colonial administrations in Southeast Asia, the United States officials in the Philippines in the 1930s were working within a structure that had accepted the inevitability of independence.

The other side of the story is more difficult to describe. In particular it is hard for an outsider to strike a balance between an awareness of the burning conviction that drove Southeast Asian nationalists on towards their goal of independence and the effect upon their aims of the often tremendous obstacles placed in their way by the colonial authorities. How close to independence and national emancipation could the Indonesian political prisoners languishing in exile feel during the 1930s? And what were the inner estimations of Vietnamese held in the harsh jails and prison colonies of Indochina? Despite the memoirs that some of these prisoners have published after their release there must be real uncertainty as to their actual judgments of the likely progress of efforts to achieve freedom from colonial rule. Whatever doubts or difficulties remain, however, the fact of these nationalists' conviction in the rightness of their cause and in the eventual inevitability of their success must be recorded. They may have been uncertain about the speed with which they would obtain their goals, but they never doubted their ultimate attainment of success.

The suggestion has already been made that the 1920s, and more particularly the 1930s, were years of uncertainty. There was uncertainty of various kinds, political, social and economic, and this atmosphere of doubt and indecision must be remembered when the inter-war years are considered and put against the still widespread picture of this period before the outbreak of the Second World War being a time of colonial calm and untroubled European dominance. To the extent that uncertainty did reign, this state of affairs might help to explain why so many Southeast Asian nationalists could look to the future with confidence even if the colonial powers still appeared to have a monopoly of physical power.

Southeast Asia did not escape the effects of the Great Depression that burst upon the Western industrialised world at the beginning of the 1930s. The dramatic slow-down of the economies of the Western nations had an equally dramatic effect on the countries of Southeast Asia with their export industries that were so dependent on Western demand. The Great Depression may often be thought of in terms of Wall Street brokers plunging to their deaths as the market collapsed, or of men, both skilled and unskilled, forming huge dole queues in the cities of the industrialised world. But it should also be thought of as a time when the markets for tin and rubber and rice collapsed so that the export economies of Southeast Asia were temporarily crippled and employment opportunities for hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asians were also eclipsed.

Political uncertainty and economic difficulty were not the only deeply unsettling factors at work in Southeast Asia before the Second World War. The problem of overpopulation in certain areas of Southeast Asia, notably in Java and in parts of Vietnam, was already apparent. And with overpopulation came the threat of famine. Eyewitness accounts of areas of north-central Vietnam at a time of famine in the early 1930s still make harrowing reading today. Skeletal figures fought each other for a handful of potatoes in the provinces of Nghe-An and Ha-Tinh when famine ravaged that area in 1930.

Social inequalities had been sharpened by the period of colonial rule and an awareness of this situation was a further cause for unease and uncertainty. Southeast Asian nationalists were aware not only of the dominance of their alien rulers in economic matters, they were aware also of the growing inequalities that existed between the small numbers of their own countrymen who did profit from the presence of colonial rule and the vast mass that did not. Convincing arguments have been put forward, moreover, to suggest that at least some of the public signs of discontent that emerged in parts of Southeast Asia in the inter-war years were a reflection of the sense of frustration that existed among sections of the population that believed they were prevented from participating in an economic advancement that was rightfully theirs.

The changes that took place during the 1920s and 1930s are not always easy to summarise. Nor were these changes always recognised as taking place, either by the people of Southeast Asia or by the outsiders from Europe or America who had come to live in and rule over the region. But changes of very great importance did take place. The growth of nationalism may have been unequal throughout the region but, however uneven, the subsequent events of the war years themselves were to show that in every colonised country of Southeast Asia the force of nationalism was such that in no case was it possible to put back the clock, to return to how things had been before the war began.

The population of Southeast Asia was, by the end of the 1930s, one that knew more of the outside world, of the extent to which the colonial powers depended on their distant possessions for prosperity, and of the inequalities present in a colonial situation. To write in these terms should not be regarded as meaning that we should have a view of *all* Southeast Asians straining for independence and poised for revolution just before the Second World War began. Quite clearly this was not the case. But the numbers of Southeast Asians who had come to believe change must take place had grown substantially. And even among those, such as the peasantry, for whom modern political issues remained outside their knowledge, an awareness that change had occurred was present. The slow but important extension of education, the expansion of the modern economic sector into wider and wider areas of each country, the dim but definite awareness of developments elsewhere in the world, whether the momentous events taking place in China or the constitutional developments in India, all of these and many others were factors making for change or the desire for change.

How much of this was clear to the colonisers as they reviewed their position over a ‘sundowner’ at the end of the day may remain a matter of debate. Did the Dutch with their *genever* or the English with their whisky and soda sense what was happening, sitting in their clubs or on their bungalow verandahs as the sharp tropical change from day to night took place? Perhaps only a perceptive minority ever did. For the others, who believed change was far away, the illusion of continuity blinded them to the great changes that had taken place in just over twenty years.

## NINE

# The Second World War in Southeast Asia

During the years between the First and Second World Wars it was still possible for the colonial powers to believe that their rule in most of the countries of Southeast Asia had an unlimited future. An independent Philippines was not far distant, it is true, and Thailand, of course, had retained its independence. But for the rest of Southeast Asia, including Burma (Myanmar), where there was inconclusive discussion about possible self-government, the future, for the colonial administrations at least, was charted in terms of their continuing, alien rule. Even for the most optimistic and dedicated of Southeast Asian nationalists, at the end of the 1930s there could be little expectation of a sudden disappearance of the colonial powers. Only when this general state of affairs is appreciated can we begin to sense why it was that the Second World War had such a shattering impact on Southeast Asia, on its peoples, and on the colonial administrators who served in the region. Spurred on by a military-dominated government and determined to gain control of the region's rich resources, most particularly oil, Japan's invasion of Southeast Asia transformed Southeast Asian politics. Indeed, the years between 1941 and 1945 must be judged as among the most momentous in modern Southeast Asia's history.

Why then, at least until quite recently, has so relatively little been written about this period? Although the *military* history of the war in the Pacific and Southeast Asia has received considerable attention, perusal of any bibliography will emphasise that much less attention has been given to the political aspects of the war years themselves as opposed to the events in the immediate post-war period. One answer to this question, for scholars who studied Southeast Asia in the years immediately after the Second World War, is that the period posed such great psychological and political dilemmas that some historians preferred to avoid too close an examination of a painful episode. In a fashion that may be difficult to grasp in the third decade of the twenty-first century, the populations of countries fighting against Germany and Japan during the Second World War believed with virtually no reservation that their cause was a just one. The doubts expressed about policy in the Korean War and the massive dissent sparked by the war in Vietnam in the 1960s simply had no counterpart in the Second World War. It is necessary to understand this to see why historians should have found it difficult to face the complex and sometimes uncomfortable facts of the war years; to come to terms with the welcome that some Southeast Asians gave to the Japanese invaders; to deal with the fact that the Japanese interregnum provided a vital boost for nationalist movements in the region.

As memories of the Second World War have faded, so have problems diminished of the kind just noted. Other problems have, however, remained. The sources that need to be consulted for a detailed history of any part of Southeast Asia during the Second World War are formidable in their volume, in the complexity of the issues they raise and in the linguistic abilities they demand. It is still the case today that important Japanese studies of the Second World War period have not been translated and so remain inaccessible to those who do not possess the capacity to read Japanese. The result has been that although there are a few outstanding studies of the war years, much has been left unstudied or treated in only a superficial fashion. This present chapter must of necessity be superficial too, but it seeks within its limited space to allot due importance to the impact of the 1941–45 period in Southeast Asia.

## JAPANESE VICTORIES

More important than anything else, the Second World War in Southeast Asia marked a point of no return. Impossible though it may have been for politicians in Europe, such as Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle, to accept, the events of the wartime years meant that the old pattern of European colonial dominance could never again be re-established. For the Japanese invasion was not just a military event, or series of events, of formidable proportions. It was a political bombshell that shattered some of the most significant presumptions of the past. The Japanese advance into

Southeast Asia gave telling emphasis to the argument that nationalists in the region had been advancing for years—Asians *could* defeat the colonial powers and their representatives in Southeast Asia. And not only defeat them. Following their defeat the white-skinned aliens could be toppled from their privileged position in society to become no better off than the coolies who had laboured to maintain the fabric of colonial society in the years of peace. Probably it is impossible to place too much emphasis on the importance of this radical transformation of relationships within the societies of Southeast Asia. Even for those who had no strong nationalist leanings, the fact that the myth of European superiority could be demolished almost overnight was of the greatest importance. The world of Southeast Asia could never be the same again.

Even the briefest recital of the principal events of the Japanese advance stresses the extent to which humiliation upon humiliation was heaped upon the colonial powers. The Japanese entry into the countries of French Indochina was followed by the establishment of an understanding between the French authorities and the Japanese army that was unique for the Southeast Asian region. The French were allowed to retain control of the apparatus of government in return for permitting the Japanese to use French Indochinese territory as a staging, training and supply area. This was never the ‘victory’ claimed by the pro-Vichy French Governor-General, Admiral Decoux. On the contrary, it provided an assurance to the nationalist forces, in Vietnam most particularly, that hopes for independence rested on a firmer base than might have been hoped for only a few years before. While the French flag continued to fly in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the politically conscious members of the population were well aware that the French administration functioned only at the will of the Japanese.

The conquest of Malaya and Singapore in 1942 involved an even greater humiliation. Years of planning neglect and a staggering unreadiness on the part of British service chiefs to face up to the reality of Japanese military power led to a debacle of the most formidable kind. The Japanese, it had been confidently asserted in the 1930s, could not become adequate pilots because of an alleged national disposition to weak eyesight. But their pilots not only inflicted the dramatic attack against the American Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor in December 1941, they also, in the context of the war in British Malaya and Singapore, sank the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, two British capital ships, following the Japanese invasion of Malaya the same month. Had this not happened, these warships might have helped to adjust the balance of forces that pitched jungle-wise Japanese soldiers against ill-trained and badly led British and Commonwealth troops. The Japanese, it was said, could not conquer the Malayan Peninsula since British forces could control the main roads and passage through the jungle would be impossible. For many decades after the event it was still possible to see the pathetically inadequate pill-boxes that were placed beside the north–south roads on the eastern coast of peninsular Malaysia in the expectation that the Japanese army could not advance through the jungle. But, of course, this was what the invaders did with skill and efficiency until they had the overcrowded island of Singapore, the population swollen with refugees, the main water supply from Malaya cut off, at their mercy. Singapore fell on 15 February 1942.

After the defeat of the British in Malaya and Singapore it was the turn of the Dutch to face defeat in Indonesia. The Battle of the Java Sea, at the end of February 1942, ensured the capitulation of the Dutch and Allied forces in Java and the subsequent surrender of Dutch forces in nearly all of Indonesia by the end of March. In a little more than three months, therefore, Japan was in military control of the countries of French Indochina, the British possessions in Malaya, Singapore and Borneo, almost all of the Netherlands East Indies (Indonesia) and was occupying Portuguese Timor. Thailand retained its independence at the cost of permitting the Japanese the right to move troops through its territory. Unlike the French administration in Indochina, however, the Thai government could not be said to have held office at the pleasure of the Japanese, no matter how much there was a need to take account of Japanese interests. Only Burma and the Philippines had still not come under something approaching full Japanese military control as March 1942 came to an end.

The end of resistance to the Japanese offensive in these last two countries was not long delayed. Bitter fighting by American and Philippine forces delayed a Japanese victory in the Philippines until the first half of May 1942. And in Burma fighting dragged on into July as British, Indian and Chinese troops fought to escape, not to hold ground against the advancing Japanese army. The speed of these events, with the greater part of Southeast Asia falling to the Japanese in less than six months of fighting, had never been expected by the colonial powers and had amazed the Japanese themselves, who had anticipated more effective resistance. With the old colonial masters removed and their prestige tarnished beyond repair, the peoples of Southeast Asia found that they now had new colonial masters—Asians this time it was true, but in other ways occupying the same sort of position as those they had just defeated. Leaving aside independent Thailand and the curious state of affairs that prevailed in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, the rest of Southeast Asia saw one alien sovereignty removed to make way for the implantation of another.

In only one of the countries of the region that had witnessed the defeat of a colonial power had there been any effort on the part of nationalists to associate themselves with the Japanese military effort. This was in Burma, where members of the Burma Independence Army (BIA) accompanied the advancing Japanese forces. With barely a thousand members when the Japanese invasion of southern Burma began in January 1942, the BIA's numbers grew as the Japanese advance moved steadily onwards. But even at the end of the Burma campaign, when the BIA claimed a membership approaching 30 000, the Japanese gave no sign of allotting its leaders any real power. In Burma, as elsewhere, Japan saw its interests as supreme and rapidly revealed the hollowness of earlier propaganda couched in terms of an 'Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere' and of 'Asia for the Asians'.

## THE JAPANESE INTERREGNUM

The fact that Japan filled a role that was in many ways not greatly different from that of the colonial powers it had displaced must not blind us to the fact that there were important differences. Nor should we ignore the extent to which, particularly early in the period of the Japanese interregnum, there was much that the Japanese did and said that was welcomed by Southeast Asians. The Japanese wreaked savage vengeance on thousands of ethnic Chinese in Malaya and Singapore, whom they saw not only as bitter opponents who could not be trusted for the future but also as supporters of the Chinese armies that continued to fight against their brothers-in-arms in China itself. But their treatment of the Malay population was very different as they tried initially to gain the support of this portion of the population of Malaya through careful respect for the Malay sultans and their courts and by placing Malays in position of prominence, if not power, in the administration they established to replace the British colonial regime.

### Indonesia

In Indonesia the overthrow of the Dutch colonial regime led to the release of the Indonesian nationalists who had languished in colonial prisons, some of them for a decade or more, and this event, as well as the defeat of the former colonial power, led many Indonesians to be well disposed towards the Japanese. Some, such as Sukarno and Hatta, decided to pursue their goal of true Indonesian independence by working with the Japanese. This decision, which involved both the political judgment that such action was the most effective way to prepare for independence and a readiness to cooperate with those who had defeated the Dutch, was to bedevil relations between the Indonesian nationalists and the Dutch government when the war ended. Instead of recognising that the Indonesians could not have been expected to sympathise with the Dutch in their defeat, strong voices in the Netherlands argued at the Second World War's end that men such as Hatta and Sukarno should be regarded as 'collaborators' with the hated Japanese enemy.

There could be no meeting of minds when this post-war clash took place. In part this was so because, with the rarest exceptions, the defeated Dutch simply had no appreciation of the complex and in many ways subtle relationship that developed between the Indonesians and the Japanese during the course of the Second World War. Hailed by many Indonesians as liberators, the Japanese soon came to be seen as another alien power—only this time it was an Asian power. Despite the fact that the Japanese showed very quickly that it was their interests which were paramount, Indonesians during the Japanese occupation were able to involve themselves in a far greater degree of political organisation than had ever been possible under Dutch rule. This was one of the single most important aspects of the Japanese occupation of Indonesia. Nationalist leaders could organise, establish chains of command and, with the sympathetic acquiescence of some Japanese command, advance their nationalist aims through broadcasts in favour of independence.

Japanese military men controlled the various efforts to develop support for their country's war effort, but for the Indonesians who participated in military training, in Islamic organisations, or in youth groups, the fact of foreign control was far less important than the opportunity to demonstrate their Indonesian identity. The Indonesian national flag, banned from use by the Dutch, could be flown and songs of independence sung. These were symbolic changes, but no less important because of that. The reinforcement of a sense of Indonesian national identity that transcended local, religious and class interests was an essential accompaniment to such practical matters as the development of an administrative framework and the creation, both clandestinely and overtly, of a military organisation.

The Japanese occupation provided another important symbolic guide for Indonesians, particularly for the young. Throughout much of Indonesia, and most notably in Java, traditional Indonesian cultural values laid great emphasis upon deference and saw ideal behaviour as non-demonstrative and lacking in aggression. Now, the victorious Japanese offered a radically different model to follow, one that admired the use of force and accepted that violence could not only be necessary but also desirable. Nothing could have been further apart than the ideals enshrined in Japanese military tradition and those associated with the measured calm of traditional Javanese life. Yet because of this contrast young Indonesians began to question the values of their elders, asking whether it would not have been better in the past to have responded aggressively to Dutch colonisation rather than acquiescing to it and so accepting its existence. The young Indonesians who found themselves questioning the values of their elders did not accept the contrary values of the Japanese in any total sense. They did, however, see some aspects of Japanese behaviour that had relevance to their own position. And in seeing these they came to feel themselves a separate generation, most particularly separate from those older men who had acquiesced to Dutch rule in the 1920s and 1930s and who under the Japanese occupation were prepared to work unquestioningly with the new rulers. These new attitudes on the part of the younger generations of Indonesia were to play an important part in their readiness to fight against the reimposition of colonial rule once the war ended.

## Malaya and Singapore

A readiness to work with the Japanese was a feature of the wartime years elsewhere in Southeast Asia. This did not mean, however, that the aims of those who cooperated with the Japanese were the same from country to country, or from group to group within each country. The complexity of the wartime years was very apparent in Malaya and Singapore. In these British territories the Chinese were regarded as enemies and were treated savagely, particularly at the beginning of the Japanese occupation when some tens of thousands of Chinese were executed. Less harsh treatment was accorded the Malays and the Indians, with the Japanese occupying forces, at least initially, showing some deference to traditional Malay leaders and in some areas instituting special education programs for young Malays. The Japanese also had some success in recruiting members of the Indian minority to enrol in the 'Indian National Army', a force created to liberate India from colonial control. Yet while it was undoubtedly the case that some sections of the populations of Malaya and Singapore suffered less than others, the wartime years were marked by food shortages and Japanese demands for labour that were deeply resented.

## Burma (Myanmar) and the Philippines

The wartime history of Burma and the Philippines was extremely complex and only the bare outlines can be provided here. In both countries, in contrast to the policies followed in the rest of the region, the Japanese encouraged local politicians to become part of an administrative structure in which, in theory at least, they had a significant part to play. When the Japanese gained control of Burma in mid-1942 they found that an end to military hostilities was not followed by the easy imposition of a new administration. Many thousands of younger Burmese who had not played any part in the administration of the country under the British now claimed the right to do so and matched actions to their claim by seeking to control areas of the country on the strength of their adherence to nationalist ideas. The results of these haphazard early attempts at the establishment of a Burmese administration were very uneven. In some areas the nationalist fervour of the moment was channelled into confrontation and then bloodshed as Burmans (Bamar people) harried the Indian settlers and members of the various minority groups that form such an important proportion of the Burmese population as a whole. It was in these circumstances that the Japanese established a civilian Burmese administration headed by a well-known older nationalist, Ba Maw, and sought through him to rally the support of the Burmese civil servants who had previously worked with the British.

For a brief period this arrangement seemed to meet the divergent interests of both parties. The Japanese saw the administration headed by Ba Maw as offering the promise of Burmese cooperation in the difficult days of the war that still lay ahead. From the Burmese point of view, in contrast, the arrangement provided the possibility of laying down a firm basis for a truly independent Burmese administration once, as was judged likely, Japan emerged as the victor at the end of the war. These Burmese estimations presumed a degree of restraint on the part of the Japanese, a belief that the Japanese would pay due attention to Burmese interests. In this they were wrong and the history of relations between the Japanese and the Burmese from late 1942 until the end of the war in 1945 is one of a progressive growth of distrust and the ever-sharper divergence of interests to the point where there was no common thread to hold the two groups together.

What happened in Burma, so far as relations between the Burmese and the Japanese were concerned, was in its essentials the same as what happened in other parts of Southeast Asia. Japanese interests remained paramount and for all the much-vaunted discussion of Burmese independence—something that was actually proclaimed in 1943—power remained firmly in the hands of the invading army. Moreover, even in Burma, where the Japanese professed to have deep respect for Buddhism and to be ready to pay all due attention to Burmese interests in more secular matters, the demands of the war soon led them to follow a policy that mocked professions of religious piety and political concern. Japanese interest in Buddhism was readily revealed as motivated by an effort to use the Buddhist church as a vehicle for furthering the war effort. The supposed ‘independence’ that was accorded Burma did not stop the Japanese authorities from making severe demands upon the Burmese population in terms of the provision of food and other resources and, even more disturbingly, in terms of coolie labour for their strategic rail- and road-building projects. The internal results of this situation were apparent in the growing resentment by the Burmese of the Japanese presence and the formation of a clandestine organisation by a group of Burmese who were ready to oppose the Japanese once the fortunes of war started running against them. This group, with the young military officer Aung San as a prominent member, was at the same time preparing to work to gain independence should the British seek to restore the pre-war situation.

The other country to experience the granting of ‘independence’ while the result of the war in the Pacific and Southeast Asia was still undecided was the Philippines. Just as the Philippines had experienced a very different historical development from the rest of Southeast Asia because of its long period of rule by the Spanish, so in the Second World War the history of the

Philippines was once again notably particular. When the American and Filipino forces were defeated by the Japanese in 1942, a large proportion of the political and economic leadership of the pre-war Commonwealth period decided to cooperate with the conquering Japanese. Because the Philippines had already moved so far towards independence before the war began, the administration that rallied to the Japanese should have been a much more developed and effective body than was the case in Burma. This did not turn out to be what happened. As students of Philippines history have repeatedly observed, the rallying of the elite to the Japanese, whether out of a particular vision of ‘patriotism’ or because of undisguised self-interest, was not matched by a similar decision on the part of the population at large. The proclamation of Philippines ‘independence’ in 1943 did nothing to transform the situation. The Philippines politicians who worked with the Japanese never succeeded in seeming other than puppets. At the same time, instances of Japanese brutality against the civilian population and the heavy economic demands made by the conquerors only tended to reinforce a widespread feeling among ordinary, non-elite Filipinos that their interests lay more with their pre-war American rulers than with their supposed fellow Asian ‘liberators’. In brief, the wartime experience of the Philippines showed that there as elsewhere Japanese interests were the guiding principle for all important decisions and that talk of mutual interests uniting the Japanese and the population of the lands that had been occupied was little more than cosmetic propaganda.

Nevertheless, despite the presence of deep resentment of the Japanese among Filipinos at large and the puppet-like character of those who chose to work with the Japanese, the Philippines was the only country in Southeast Asia in which there was both a significant guerrilla resistance movement that fought against the Japanese throughout the war and a large group of politicians and administrators who worked with the invaders and then were able to continue their careers once hostilities ended. Collaboration or cooperation between the Philippine elite and the Japanese had been on such a scale that the final practical outcome, which was in effect, and after much bitterness, to forget about which side an individual politician took during the war, should not be regarded as very surprising. At the same time, the deep underlying divisions caused by the war were to trouble the Philippines for many years.

## French Indochina: Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos

So far in this rapid review attention has been given almost entirely to those countries in Southeast Asia that were occupied by the Japanese after the defeat of the various colonial powers. In the countries colonised by France, however, Vietnam, Cambodia and the Lao states, the French administration continued to function until early 1945, at which point the Japanese seized power. There was some small truth in the argument developed by those Frenchmen who continued to serve in Indochina during the war when they asserted that their actions preserved France's colonial position. In Cambodia and Laos, in the short term at least, the fact that the French continued to administer these territories and to prop up the traditional rulers minimised the growth of nationalist feeling. But the force of the argument was always limited since nationalism had not been a notable feature of either Cambodia or Laos before the war and it was to grow only with the rapidly changing political balance of the post-war world. Even more of a qualification to the French position that argued for the 'success' of the arrangement made with the Japanese were the developments that took place in Vietnam, by far the most important part of France's colonial empire in Southeast Asia.

The argument has already been developed in the previous chapter that by the end of the 1930s nationalist resistance to the French in Vietnam had become largely, though not entirely, dominated by the Vietnamese Communists. When war came to Southeast Asia and the French administration struck its dubious bargain with the Japanese, the Vietnamese Communists were certainly in no position to make a successful bid for power. Their numbers remained small and the French security services continued waging an unremitting battle to contain and if possible eliminate the one political force that they correctly judged to be the real threat to continuing French rule. As the war advanced, however, the balance of opportunity, though still not power, slowly began to tip in favour of the Vietnamese Communist-Nationalists. To some extent the change came about because of the altered political atmosphere. For all the speeches by Governor-General Decoux and his subordinates arguing for the unchanging role of France in Indochina, there was a growing awareness that France continued to administer its colonial territories simply at the will of the Japanese, who exercised ultimate political and military power. Japanese demands for resources and manpower had priority over French policies and made clear the hollowness of claims by the colonial administration that the Japanese presence was the result of mutual agreement.

To the pervasive sense of change was added the slow but nonetheless quite tangible achievements of the Vietnamese Communists. Thwarting the efforts made by the Chinese Nationalist forces to aid groups within Vietnam that did not subscribe to their aims, the Communists under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh succeeded in 1941 in establishing a political front organisation, the Viet Minh (the Vietnamese Independence and Brotherhood League). This organisation was dominated by party members but recruited to its ranks a broad spectrum of Vietnamese united by the shared aim of gaining independence from the French. The importance of this slow but steady *political* effort cannot be overestimated. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese Communists themselves have readily admitted that in terms of *military* power, or territory over which they were able to claim any form of administrative control, their position was, until the dramatic developments of March 1945, very weak. But when the events of 1945 did take place the Vietnamese Communists were quite clearly the most important political group in the country and determined, as the subsequent bitter years of blood were to show, to fight to maintain that position against both internal and external enemies.

## THE TIDE OF WAR TURNS

For all of Southeast Asia the events of the closing months of the Second World War were of major importance. This was true both for those countries that had experienced a form of Japanese occupation that had provided little opportunity for political participation and for the other countries where the Japanese victories of 1942 had meant the establishment of new administrations in which local politicians played a part. The swift Japanese advance into Southeast Asia had shattered myths of white supremacy and opened the prospect, briefly, to Southeast Asians of participating in something close to true independence. Disillusionment set in shortly afterwards as the hollowness of Japanese slogans was revealed and the priority of Japanese interests became apparent. Then, as the fortunes of war slowly but steadily turned against the Japanese, the peoples of Southeast Asia began to contemplate the increasingly certain probability of a Japanese defeat. Beyond noting the very broadly shared fact that the

Japanese interregnum had brought irrevocable change to the region, an account of the outlook before the peoples of the various countries of Southeast Asia at this time must give more attention to the differences than to the common aspects of their experience. For if the end of the war was a dramatic development for the whole of Southeast Asia, the problems and opportunities that it brought with it differed greatly from country to country.

In Thailand, which had aligned itself rather half-heartedly on the Japanese side while the war had run in Japan's favour, the implications of impending Japanese defeat were particularly disturbing. Thai policy at the beginning of the war had taken account of overwhelming Japanese military power and the chance that enlisting on the Japanese side gave of regaining control of areas of Cambodia and Laos, and later of Burma, to which Thai irredentists had long laid claim. This policy had prevented Thailand from suffering the physical destruction of war that was sustained by so many other areas of Southeast Asia. As circumstances changed so did the Thai leadership begin its shift to a position that signalled a clear defection from the Japanese camp, without its being of a kind that could provoke a major Japanese reaction. Nevertheless, all of Thailand's traditional capacity for astute diplomacy was required when the war did end and the Allied powers contemplated their policies towards a state that had sided against them. Diplomatic skill and more demanding problems elsewhere in Southeast Asia saved Thailand from any serious humiliation and the country found itself at the end of the war much less affected than any other part of the region. For Thailand the Second World War was important but not the cause for overwhelming change either in its relations with the rest of the world or in terms of the nature of its domestic politics. Such an estimation could scarcely be made about any other country in Southeast Asia.

In both Burma and the Philippines, the closing months of the Second World War became a time for preparation for the relatively swift transfer from colonial status to independence. In Burma, as British and Indian military forces carried on a successful campaign that led to the defeat of the Japanese army in 1945, the Allied Supreme Commander in the area, Lord Louis Mountbatten, had agreed to cooperate with the leading Burmese nationalists, men dedicated to complete independence for their country. This wartime decision strengthened the subsequent Burman conviction that the post-war political discussions held with the British were concerned with technicalities for achieving full independence and not about the issue of whether independence should be granted. The path to agreement was not always easy and the policies of the first post-war British government initially seemed a reversal of the approach followed by Mountbatten. In the end, however, and with a minimum of bloodshed, Burma's passage towards independence was assured.

The reconquest of the Philippines took place at a time when the Japanese were making desperate and largely unsuccessful attempts to rally Filipino support to their losing side and against a background of increasing nervousness on the part of those politicians and administrators who had chosen to work with the Japanese throughout the war. The reconquest also took place with considerable assistance from various guerrilla groups, among which was the Hukbalahap group,[1] a Communist-led organisation that had fought with some success against the Japanese in parts of Luzon. The Huks, as members of this movement were usually known, reflected an important rural tradition in sections of the Philippines, one that questioned the established patterns of patron–client relationships and championed the interests of the poor peasant farmer. Their emergence as a significant force in the latter part of the Japanese occupation period had long-term political consequences since they combined excellent anti-Japanese credentials with a program for social change that was radically different from the accepted and essentially conservative values of Philippine political life.

As the war drew to a close, two other issues dominated political life in the Philippines. First was the need to make rapid progress towards independence, a point on which American and Filipino politicians were essentially of one mind. The other issue that had to be faced was the fact of large-scale collaboration or cooperation with the recent enemy. The commitment that all politicians had to the achievement of independence made it easier to come to terms with the second problem. Some have argued that American politicians and military leaders, most notably General Douglas MacArthur, saw that conservative interests would be served by disregarding the issue of association with the Japanese and accepting that most of those who had such an association were to be relied on in peacetime to pursue conservative, pro-American policies. Whether such an assessment of MacArthur's thinking is accurate is open to debate, though there would be little grounds for disagreement over the suggestion that the Philippine elite, whatever role its members had chosen to play during the war, was essentially conservative in its political outlook. The elite was also relatively small and closely knit as the result of intricate political and personal alliances. Assured that independence would be granted, the members of the elite were able to come to terms with the disagreeable features of the war by looking forward to the possibilities of peace. In doing so, few of its members suspected how difficult those early years of peace were to be when the Hukbalahap went into open rebellion against the government.

## FIRST STEPS TO INDEPENDENCE

While a difficult but still surprisingly smooth transition to independence was being made in the Philippines and in Burma as the war drew to an end, events of a very different order were taking place in Indonesia and Vietnam. In neither of these countries could the closing months of the Second World War be faced by Indonesians and Vietnamese in the same way as was the case in Burma and the Philippines, for the Dutch as the former rulers of Indonesia and the French as the former rulers of the countries of Indochina were known to be determined to reassert their sovereignty. The result in each country was a bitter war of revolution and independence, one lasting for three years, the other for nine—and some would say for thirty—years.

Well before the final Japanese surrender to the Allies in August 1945, the course of developments leading to an ultimate Japanese defeat had become apparent to Indonesian nationalists. Although various pressures were put upon the occupying Japanese, including some attempt at the use of force, it was only very near to the end of the war that the leading Indonesian nationalists were able to persuade the occupiers that independence should be discussed and proclaimed before the war's end provided an opportunity for the Dutch to return. The moment finally came on 17 August 1945 when Sukarno, with Hatta at his side, proclaimed Indonesia's independence and so served notice of his countrymen's readiness to fight against any attempt at the reimposition of Dutch rule. In their proclamation the Indonesian nationalists declared their adherence to the concept of a secular state within the Five Principles of *panca sila*: belief in God, nationalism, humanitarianism, social justice and democracy.

The new independent Indonesian state did not have long to wait to prove that it would fight, and fight with surprising effectiveness, against attempts to return to the pre-war colonial state of affairs. Ironically, both in Indonesia and in Vietnam the first armed confrontation in the battle to achieve post-war independence was waged against the British rather than against troops of the former colonial power. Barely two months after Sukarno had declared Indonesia's independence in Jakarta, troops fighting in the new republic's name sought to prevent British forces, acting as the Allied representative in this area of Southeast Asia, entering the major port city of Surabaya. The ensuing battle for Surabaya was prolonged and costly to both sides. It led to the British force commanders, who had been ordered to maintain control until the Dutch were able to return, adopting a very cautious approach to further contact with the Indonesians. But more importantly the battle of Surabaya was a signal that the Indonesians were ready and able, even if at heavy cost, to fight for the goal of total independence. The events of the war had made anything less unacceptable.

As the Second World War drew to an end, the situation in Vietnam was possibly more complicated than anywhere else in Southeast Asia. In March 1945, six months before the end of the war, the Japanese forces throughout Indochina overthrew the French administration that had continued to function throughout the earlier phase of the war and imprisoned French government and military personnel. The Japanese acted as they did in an effort to maintain maximum control over the economically and strategically important Indochinese region as the possibility of defeat became more and more apparent. In Vietnam the Japanese seizure of power was followed shortly after by the proclamation of Vietnamese 'independence' under the leadership of the powerless Vietnamese emperor, Bao Dai. The 'independent' state of Vietnam was, in fact, no more than a device designed to disguise Japanese domination of the country, and this was recognised by almost all politically conscious Vietnamese. But with the removal of the French administrators, it became possible for the communist-led Viet Minh forces, both military and political, to accelerate their efforts to gain power. The Japanese remained in military control of the major cities and towns. In both the cities and the countryside, however, the Viet Minh worked feverishly to develop a political structure that could resist the expected return of the French once the war ended in Japan's defeat.

As they worked for the goal of future political power the Viet Minh were not the only Vietnamese who thought about the opportunities of the post-war situation. What seems undeniable, nevertheless, is that the Communist-led forces were the most able and effective of the various political groupings that jockeyed for power in Vietnam. They had gained a position of pre-eminence in nationalist politics by the end of the 1930s, and they had no intention of losing their position as the war drew to a close. When Japan surrendered, the Viet Minh were ready to claim leadership of those opposing the return of the French and, following a series of events now known as the August Revolution, the Viet Minh leader, Ho Chi Minh, proclaimed the establishment of an independent Vietnamese state on 2 September 1945. For a brief period in the early part of September the success of the Viet Minh seemed complete, although there was opposition from political and religious groups in southern Vietnam and the Viet Minh's military and political power was spread extremely thin. Despite these problems the possibility seemed to exist that Ho Chi Minh's forces would succeed in establishing an administrative framework that would enable them to convince the French that reconquest was not to be contemplated. The possibility may have been there but, as the months immediately after the war were to show, French policy towards Vietnam was set on a collision course that could only lead, eventually, to war.

Events in the other countries that made up French Indochina, Cambodia and Laos, did not have the high drama that marked the closing stages of the Second World War in Vietnam. Important developments took place, it is true, as Cambodia's king, Norodom Sihanouk, proclaimed an ephemeral independence for his country, and as a limited but important number of Lao demonstrated their determination to resist the return of France as a colonial power. But in both these countries the strength of the traditional leadership that had, for the most part, linked its fortunes with the French administration before the war continued to be such that the experience of a brief period without colonial direction was not sufficient to set the stage for a conflict of the sort that developed in Vietnam. Individuals who emerged into prominence at this time were to be important in the post-war history of Cambodia and Laos. For the moment, however, the events of the war seemed less important than the re-establishment of the previous patterns of close association between the traditional ruling classes and the French colonial administration.

High drama was also lacking in the history of Malaya as the war drew to an end. The Japanese occupation of Malaya had differed from the occupation of other countries in Southeast Asia to the extent that no effort was made to promote even the most circumscribed form of 'independence'.

Malaya and Singapore were seen as providing resources for the Japanese war effort. But in a society made up of Malays, Chinese and Indians in which there was little shared interest between the various ethnic groups, the Japanese saw no point in trying to advance their aims by fostering independence movements. Moreover, unlike some of the other countries of Southeast Asia at the time of the Second World War, Malaya had no significant nationalist movement. One group did emerge during the occupation that waged a limited guerrilla war against the Japanese in the name of the ‘Malayan People’. This was a guerrilla force of ethnic Chinese Communists and from 1943 onwards their armed resistance to the Japanese in Malaya was linked with the Allied war effort through the infiltration of a small British military group, Force 136. The significance of these Chinese guerrilla fighters lies more in their later history, when they mounted an insurrection against the post-war government of Malaya, than in their efforts against the Japanese. For the rest, Malaya’s war experience was one of relative ease for the Malay population, considerable cruelty and deprivation for the Chinese, and for the Indian minority a chance, particularly for the less prosperous members of that community, to enjoy a sense of improved status as the Japanese elevated them to positions of authority that they had not held before.

In the closing months of the war Malaya was an exception to the rule in almost every way. The Japanese had not promoted an independence movement and there was little local interest in nationalism. No battles were fought to regain Malaya from the Japanese since the war ended before a planned British invasion took place. Despite these and other factors that made the Malayan experience so different from some other sections of Southeast Asia, the impact of the war years was considerable. The world, as one Malayan observer put it, had been turned upside down during the Japanese occupation and there could never be a return to the pre-war pattern of British colonialism, even if there was no resistance to the return of the British themselves once the war had ended. That return, significantly, was not greeted with flag-decked buildings or by cheering crowds.

In the rest of Southeast Asia change of one kind or another came with the end of the war. Singapore, after a period of military administration, reverted to being a British crown colony separate from the pre-war Straits Settlements’ arrangements that had linked it to Melaka and Penang. These territories, it was now clear, would henceforth be administered as part of

Malaya. In Borneo the unusual arrangements that had existed in Sarawak and Sabah, with the former ruled by the Brooke family and the latter by a chartered company, came to an end and both became British crown colonies. At the same time, the British re-established their protectorate over the Brunei sultanate. In East Timor the Portuguese half-heartedly resumed their colonial control in April 1946 and, as before, treated this distant colonial possession as being good for little more than a dumping ground for political dissidents.

Earlier in this book the argument was put forward that the eighteenth century was a period that could be regarded as the beginning of an historical watershed that stretched across the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. The period of the Second World War may be regarded as the end of this vast watershed. The events of the war and the changes these brought in the attitudes and outlook of Southeast Asians transformed the region. The war revealed the hollowness of many of the claims made by the colonial powers concerning the 'loyalty' of their colonised subjects and it dramatically and sometimes cruelly showed the weakness of the white rulers when faced by a major military challenge. Whatever words are chosen to describe the changes brought about by the war, the vital point to be grasped was that these changes were fundamental. In political terms the years of war ensured that there could never be a return to the way of life that had seemed so permanent in 1939. Yet for much of Southeast Asia independence was still a distant prospect that was only finally gained after a heavy cost in human life. For the last territory to gain independence, East Timor or Timor-Leste, this treasured goal would not come until after Indonesia's withdrawal in 1999.

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[1] Hukbalahap is a shortened version of the Tagalog words meaning 'People's Army Against the Japanese'

## TEN

# Revolution and revolt: Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaya and the Philippines

The emphasis laid on complexity at the beginning of the previous chapter dealing with the Second World War is equally appropriate when attention shifts to the next important phase in Southeast Asia's modern history: the period immediately following the war that ended in August 1945. The experience of each of the countries of Southeast Asia during the first post-war decade was not only complex in itself but also of a character that defies easy regional generalisation. In both Indonesia and Vietnam, for instance, independence from the former colonial power was gained after bitter armed struggle. But the nature of the revolutionary armed struggle in each country and of the politics of those who led it was very different. This point is made apparent when one notes the fact that the Indonesian forces confronting the Dutch had, at one stage, to put down an attempt by their Communist fellow compatriots to seize control of the independence movement. This important event—one that is still clearly remembered by Indonesian army officers, over seventy years later, as an indication of the utter unreliability of the Communists—contrasts dramatically with the situation in Vietnam, where the struggle for independence from the French was led by the Communists.

The points of difference separating the experience of one Southeast Asian country from another in the years immediately after the Second World War can be recorded almost endlessly. Generalisations, if they are to be made, must be at the broadest level, taking account of the fact that each country was facing the problems of achieving independence or of dealing with the reality of independence in its own way. Even Thailand, the country that never experienced colonialism, emerged at the end of the Second World

War having to deal with a very different set of problems from those it had known in the 1920s and 1930s.

Because of the importance of each country's individual experience the next two chapters will concentrate on the history of developments on a country by country basis, with only a restricted attempt to dwell on the comparative dimension. The concern of the present chapter will be with two revolutions, those that took place in Indonesia and Vietnam, and with two revolts: the unsuccessful revolt of the Communist insurgents in Malaya in the period known as the Emergency and the revolt, again unsuccessful, of the Communist Hukbalahap insurgents in the Philippines.

## INDONESIA

The Indonesian revolution has repeatedly held the attention of foreign observers. Reasons for this interest are not hard to find. Indonesia is the largest of all the Southeast Asian states, both in terms of national territory and population, and this fact alone has led to wide interest in the country's battle for independence. But more was involved to spark the interest and concern that was given to the Indonesian revolution between 1945 and 1949 when the Dutch finally gave up their attempt to reimpose colonial rule. In part the external interest in developments in Indonesia stemmed from the spectacle that was provided of an economically poor and militarily weak nation seeking to achieve freedom against formidable odds, for though the Dutch were numerically dwarfed by the Indonesians they were able to make use of much more advanced and powerful weapons and equipment. In part, too, many outside observers were aware that the Indonesians, in fighting for their independence from the Netherlands, were pursuing goals that were the same as those for which the Allies had fought against Germany and Japan—the right of a country to maintain its existence against external interference. Although international interest in the events in Indonesia never equalled the later world interest in the Vietnam war, for many, and not least scholars with an interest in Southeast Asia, the Indonesian revolution and war against the Dutch generated an interest and sense of involvement that has continued to the present day.

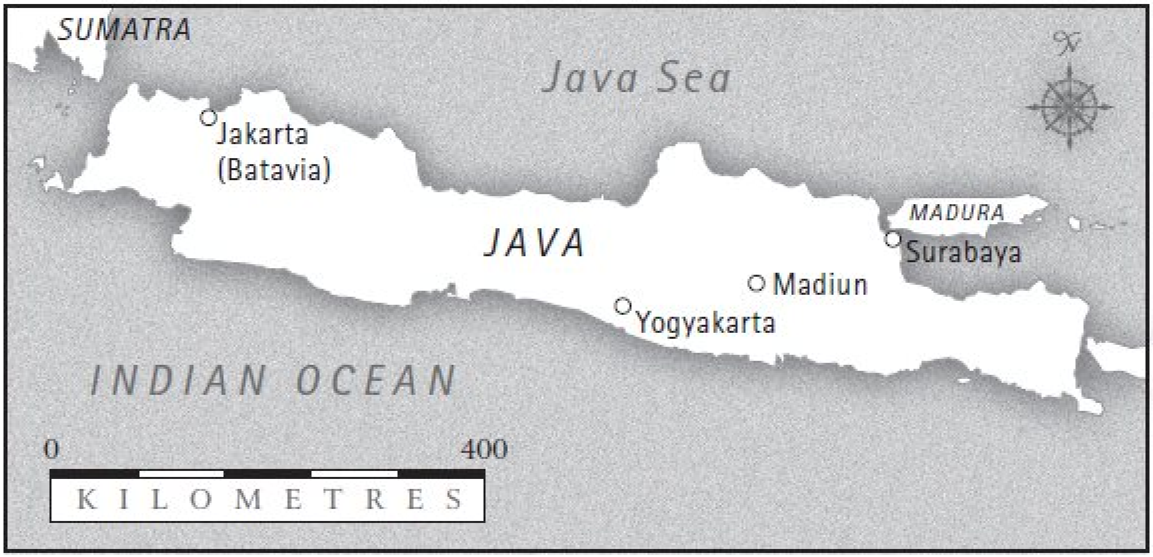
Dutch troops and administrators began returning to Indonesia in late 1945 and by January 1946 were in control of Batavia (Jakarta). They found the nationalists were firmly committed to attaining independence, even if there were significant differences of opinion among the various pro-independence groups as to just what path should be followed to bring this about. Most importantly, there was disagreement between those, many of them from the younger generation that had already fought against the imposition of British army control in the major cities—most notably in Surabaya—who wanted an immediate all-out fight for independence and those who were prepared to pursue their goals through negotiation. The option of negotiation, which initially appealed to most of the established nationalist leaders, offered the possibility of avoiding bloodshed. Moreover, the first impression provided by the returning Dutch was that they accepted the claim of the Indonesians to independence, so long as due attention was paid to residual Dutch interests. Fairly quickly, however, indeed well before the end of 1946, the divergence of views held by the two parties became sharply apparent.

From the Indonesian point of view negotiation was to be concerned with the implementation of independence. This was in direct contrast with the Dutch position, which was that negotiation was to take place so that arrangements might be made to allow Indonesia to achieve full independence at some unspecified later date. Having already proclaimed independence, in August 1945, at the end of the Second World War and before the Dutch had returned, the Indonesians were impatient to match reality to the ideal that had so often been discussed and for which many of their number had suffered long years of imprisonment and exile. The Dutch, by contrast, simply could not shake off the attitudes of the colonial period. Despite vague promises made by their government while hostilities against Japan were still in progress, the Dutch negotiators could not believe that their former colonial subjects were either ready for complete independence or, in fact, really wanted it. Their assessments were not only affected by an unwillingness to face the fact that a Dutch administration was no longer welcome in Indonesia. In addition, resentment of the role played by such men as Sukarno, who had been ready during the war years to work with the Japanese to attain their own nationalist ends, prevented many Dutchmen from looking at the postwar situation in a way that took account of reality rather than out-of-date fantasies based on a Netherlands' vision of the 'White Man's Burden' and the supposed wishes of Indonesia's silent masses.

The opposing Indonesian and Dutch points of view meant that negotiations, when they were undertaken, would inevitably break down. It was simply not sufficient that both sides were ready to negotiate when there was no shared agreement over the essentials of what was under discussion. The two major agreements concluded between the Indonesian and Dutch sides during the course of the struggle for independence—the Linggadjati Agreement of November 1946, and the *Renville* Agreement (named after the naval vessel on which it was negotiated) of January 1948—broke down as the result of basic Dutch unwillingness to think in terms of a truly independent Indonesia existing in the future. Certainly, it was never clear to the Indonesians that the Dutch were ready to accept the nationalists as equal partners who would, with the former colonial power, be co-sponsors of a projected 'United States of Indonesia'. Moreover, the Indonesian nationalists grew increasingly convinced that the Dutch advocacy of a federal Indonesian state made up of various semi-autonomous units was simply another effort to preserve their position. In pursuing this policy the Dutch were taking advantage of the undoubted fact that there was, and still is, suspicion and in some cases deep resentment of Javanese predominance among the inhabitants of other regions of Indonesia—in Sumatra, Bali, Sulawesi and the other eastern outer islands. But however much the Dutch might appeal to the existence of this suspicion and find some response from conservative interests as they did so, it became more and more evident that their attempt to implement a federal solution was, in reality, an effort to maintain Dutch control, or at the very least a Dutch presence, through indirect means.

So the Dutch plans were not only bitterly opposed by the active nationalists who, it should always be remembered, were drawn from regions throughout Indonesia; Dutch policy was ultimately unconvincing for the populations of the various regions where Dutch-supported embryonic federal states were established. Many factors helped to change minds. The Second World War had already had a major impact in spreading and for many firmly establishing the sense of being an Indonesian as well as being an inhabitant of a particular region with its own particular culture. Equally important in changing and forming opinions were the so-called Dutch 'police actions' of mid-1947 and late 1948.

As negotiations bogged down and both sides concluded that their opponents were acting in bad faith, the Dutch launched what they described as a ‘police action’ in July 1947. In military terms, for it was a military and not a police campaign that was undertaken, the Dutch achieved some success. They gained control over vital areas of Java and Sumatra and in doing so were able to deny food supplies to the troops of the Indonesian nationalist side. But the price of this ‘success’ was high, much higher indeed than the Dutch had contemplated it would be. This was only one of the many instances in the post-Second World War history of Southeast Asia, and indeed of other colonised regions as well, of the alien colonial power failing to look beyond immediate military considerations to wider political implications. Although the first Dutch police action gained territory, access to supplies, and to some extent control over population, it also acted as a major factor in rallying yet further support to the nationalist cause. For those who had doubted the estimations of the nationalist leaders when they had argued that the Dutch were not, in fact, ready to grant real independence, the armed advance of the Dutch forces was a convincing proof. In brief, while the Dutch gained ground between July and August 1947 they also raised the level of support given to the nationalists. The former colonial power did more than this, for the decision to use military force excited the opposition of important sections of the international community. From late 1947 onwards international concern about the developing conflict in Indonesia became ever more important until, in the end, it could be argued that international pressure played the decisive part in making the Dutch abandon their efforts to postpone the emergence of an independent Indonesia.



**Four key cities of the Indonesian revolution**
*Jakarta* (Batavia): The Indonesian nationalists proclaimed their country's independence in this city on 17 August 1945.
*Surabaya*: The fledgling Indonesian Republican army fought its first major battle in this city in November 1945.
*Madiun*: Elements of the Indonesian Communist Party based in this central Javanese city attempted to take over leadership of the revolution in September 1948. The attempted coup was crushed by the Indonesian army, which has never forgotten or forgiven this event.
*Yogyakarta*: This ancient royal city in central Java was the capital of the Indonesian Republic as the revolutionaries fought against the Dutch. In December 1948 the Dutch seized Yogyakarta, but this action only reinforced the nationalists' determination to continue their struggle.

International opinion, expressed through the newly created United Nations, was able to bring about an end to the first 'police action' and a return to negotiations. These once again dragged on indecisively from the end of 1947 until late 1948 when, as before, the Dutch opted for an attempted military solution in a second 'police action' that lasted from the middle of December 1948 until early January 1949. The pattern of events during this second military campaign was similar to developments in 1947. The Dutch made military advances but in doing so reinforced the political position of the Indonesian nationalists and undermined the support they received from their Western allies. And by the end of this second 'police action' there was little significant support among the leaders of the outer islands for any further association with the Dutch. The outcome was yet a further effort at negotiations that did, finally, lead to an agreed transfer of sovereignty at the end of 1949. Before surveying that development, however, some account must be taken of developments at the level of internal politics during the Indonesian revolution.

Revolutions are remembered, in general, for their outcomes rather than for the often complex history of developments from their beginnings to their ends. Scholars may be fascinated by the details of politics *within* the history of the French revolution, but in the broader historical sense a non-specialist knows that revolution was important less for the factional fighting between Girondins and Jacobins than for the fundamental political changes that occurred in France in the years following 1789. For the non-specialist looking at the Indonesian revolution, also, the vital point is certainly that independence *was* gained in 1949. But scholars do have some real justification in studying the factional disputes of the French revolutionary period, for these were disputes over issues that were unresolved when the revolution was completed. So, too, were there developments in Indonesian politics during the revolution that were linked to issues that have continued to preoccupy Indonesian politicians until the present day. Two developments are particularly deserving of attention in this regard: the role of the Indonesian Communist Party (often referred to as the PKI from its name in the Indonesian language), and the efforts of the fundamentalist Islamic grouping seeking to establish an Indonesian Islamic state, which was to be known as Darul Islam, from the Arabic meaning ‘Abode of God’.

The point has already been made that in Indonesia the Communists were not the leaders of the struggle against the re-establishment of colonial rule, unlike the situation in Vietnam. The Indonesian Communist Party was only one of the many political parties and groups that joined together on the nationalist side, united in their common opposition to the Dutch but seeking to promote their own political programs at the same time. This concern with their own political interests, as opposed to the interests of the nationalist anti-Dutch movement as a whole, led elements within the Communist Party to attempt a takeover of the revolutionary movement. The attempted coup ended in bitter failure. In less than a month, during September 1948, the Communists operating from their central Javanese base in Madiun experienced brief success and then suffered near total eclipse. The best troops in the Indonesian revolutionary army, led by Colonel A.H. Nasution, were sent in to Madiun to achieve this result. After their defeat of the Communist forces in that town the army followed up this success by ruthlessly mopping up the remnants of those who for a brief time had sided and fought with the Communists.

The Madiun Affair, as this event has been known ever since, left shock waves that are still well remembered by those active in Indonesian politics more than seventy years later. Even before the attempted seizure of power there had been many who had argued that the Communists were not committed to the cause of Indonesian nationalism so much as to the triumph of their particular political creed. This had been the view of important figures in the Indonesian army, and events had now proved them correct. The commander of the troops that defeated the Communists in Madiun, Nasution, was to go on to be a major figure in post-independence Indonesian politics and to hold, like so many of his fellow officers, an unshakeable belief in the error of ever trusting Indonesian Communists to place nationalism before their own political interests and beliefs. At the same time, as many have observed in earlier analyses of this affair, the fact that the Indonesian revolutionary government and its armed forces were ready to suppress the Communist challenge at Madiun robbed the Dutch of any possibility of making capital from the suggestion that their efforts to maintain a position in Indonesia deserved support as part of a world-wide anti-Communist crusade.

The other notable challenge to the evolving Indonesian political leadership—a challenge that has probably not been given sufficient attention in the past—came from the supporters of Darul Islam, the ideal of Indonesia as a fundamentalist Islamic state, a concept that had been decisively rejected by all the leading figures in the nationalist movement. Darul Islam drew its support from those areas of Indonesia in which adherence to Islam was strongest, regions such as West Java, northern Sumatra, and parts of Indonesian Borneo (Kalimantan). At the time of the second Dutch ‘police action’, elements of those committed to Darul Islam tried to gain control of territory through armed force. Although this attempt was unsuccessful, Darul Islam continued to oppose the central government until 1962. And as with the Madiun Affair the memory of Darul Islam’s actions has remained with Indonesian politicians, both civil and military, ever since, not least in very recent years when advocates of the transformation of Indonesia into an Islamic state have begun to be heard again. Yet although it seems correct to argue that there is still a general acceptance that a secular (non-religious) nation is what is required in

Indonesia, at least among most members of the Jakarta-based elite, there is no doubt that Islam plays a greater and growing part in contemporary politics today than was the case in the early post-revolution years.

The challenge and the defeat of the Communists and the supporters of Darul Islam showed that the Indonesian government opposing the Dutch was ready to use harsh measures to maintain its internal position. Of at least equal importance was the way in which Indonesian resistance to the Dutch military, in both the first and second ‘police actions’, gave the lie to those in the ranks of the former colonial power who had argued that a swift series of campaigns would eliminate the nationalist capacity to fight. Certainly the Indonesian forces had no way of resisting the modern weaponry and equipment of the Dutch. But what they could and did do was to engage in constant guerrilla warfare that denied the Dutch control of the population and severely reduced the availability of food or the possibility of exploiting Indonesia’s natural resources. The role of the Indonesian army at this time was vital for the continued existence of the revolutionary government and left the army with a very special place within society, one that recognised the army as the guardian of the state with its own special right to play a political role.

The negotiations that followed the end of the second ‘police action’ took place under substantially different conditions from those that had applied previously. Most importantly, the Dutch were under increasing pressure from the United States to make concessions to the Indonesians. In these circumstances the Indonesian side accepted that it too would have to make concessions—the acceptance of a massive debt, including the costs of Dutch military action in Indonesia, and the postponement of a decision on the status of West New Guinea (later known as Irian Jaya and today the provinces of Central Papua, Highland Papua and Southern Papua). After lengthy discussion the Dutch government finally handed over sovereignty for all areas under its control to the revolutionary government in December 1949. Within a year the semi-independent states away from Java that had been propped up by the Dutch throughout the three years of conflict and negotiation were incorporated into the unitary, secular Indonesian state that had always been the goal of the majority of the nationalists.

Having won independence from the Dutch the nationalists then had to confront Indonesia’s many problems. As they did so the euphoria of success dissipated and the fact and variety of these problems became ever more insistently obvious. ‘Unity in Diversity’, the Indonesian national motto, is an admirable statement of both fact and hope. It is also a reflection of the immense diversity within the Indonesian state that will always pose challenges, some great, some small, to central control and its authority. And the presence of regional and other special interests had by no means been removed because of the revolutionary struggle.

These were problems that were seen as lying ahead in 1949. More important at that time was the fact that independence had been achieved. Success had been the result of many factors and of the work of many millions, some important and many humble. The leadership that held power at the end of the revolution emerged with their previous identity as anti-Dutch nationalists enhanced by their role during the 1945–46 period. Sukarno, in particular, as president of the Indonesian Republic, now occupied a position of considerable power and influence. In the same way, if to a lesser degree, others who played important roles during the revolution, men such as Hatta, Nasution, and the Sultan of Yogyakarta, were assured of prominence in the immediate post-revolutionary years. The revolution had conferred authority on its leaders and it had ensured that the army would be regarded as the protector both of the state and of the revolution’s values. These were political benefits that were to last for many years to come. Conversely, the period of the revolution was for the Communists and for the supporters of the ideal of Darul Islam a time that left them weakened and without either immediate or long-term prospects of achieving their goals. While it may be a case of stating the obvious, the events of the Indonesian revolution and the roles played by the various individuals and groups at the time had a clear and direct importance in shaping the nature of Indonesian politics in the decade that followed the departure of the Dutch.

Despite these clear indications of the importance of the Indonesian revolution scholars continue to debate its character. What, they ask, was revolutionary about the developments between 1945 and 1949? The answers different scholars give vary considerably. Most accept that significant social and political changes took place in addition to the fact that independence from the Dutch was achieved. But there are dissenting voices that argue a different point of view and suggest the degree of true revolution was really quite small, that the vested interests that emerged at the end of the revolutionary period were not seriously interested in achieving the major social changes Indonesian society needed. A judgment concerning this question is, in the final analysis, likely to depend on what an observer thinks ought to have happened rather than an attempt to describe what did happen. Quite clearly a very large number of Indonesians believed that their struggle against the Dutch did involve change that went beyond the basic fact of attaining independence, and assertion of the importance of the revolution remains widespread seventy years after it took place.

## VIETNAM

In Indonesia the experience of nearly four years of negotiation and fighting to complete the struggle for independence left all but the remotest part of the former Dutch East Indies (West New Guinea) in the hands of the nationalists. The history of the Vietnamese struggle against the French in Vietnam was very different, with a very different outcome. The differences did not only lie in the fact that the Communists in Vietnam led the fight against the French. There was a great difference also in terms of the length of time that the struggle lasted and in the intensity of the military conflict that was joined. Moreover, at the time when the French departed from Vietnam and abandoned their attempt to maintain the posture of a colonial power, in 1954, only half of the territory of Vietnam was under the control of the Vietnamese forces that had inflicted a stunning defeat on their French opponents at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu.

As the prelude to the Second Indochinese War, lasting from the late 1950s until 1975, the Vietnamese war against the French between 1946 and 1954 has remained comparatively little known. The events of the period of major American involvement in the 1960s and 1970s have obscured earlier developments. But unless the events of the years between 1946 and 1954 in Vietnam are understood it is impossible to gain a true sense of why the Vietnamese Communists should later have fought for so long to achieve their goals in the years when the French were no longer the enemy.

The Vietnamese August 1945 Revolution and the subsequent proclamation of independence could not prevent the return of the French. In southern Vietnam, British troops prepared the way for the eventual re-establishment of the colonial administration. In the northern half of the country Nationalist Chinese forces acted as the Allies’ representatives until the French were ready to reassert themselves. These occupying forces, in both the southern and northern sections of Vietnam, prevented the Communist-led Viet Minh from pursuing its goal of establishing a normal administration. But throughout the country, and in the north in particular where Communist strength was greatest, the Viet Minh laboured to reinforce its position politically while the first of a long series of negotiations was undertaken with the French.

Because of the long period of bitter fighting that followed, it is often forgotten that much of 1946 was spent in Franco–Vietnamese negotiations. Here, at least, there was a similarity between developments in Indonesia and Vietnam. In both cases the anti-colonialist forces were prepared to undertake negotiations with the former colonial powers. But in both cases the expectations of the Indonesians and the Vietnamese were so different from those of the Dutch and the French that there was never any real possibility of achieving a negotiated solution. Perhaps even more than was the case with the Dutch in relation to Indonesia, the immediate post-Second World War governments in France were determined to reassert their control over the former colonial territories in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Since the Viet Minh was determined to see that the independence that had been proclaimed in 1945 was maintained and with the French still convinced that Vietnam was part of *notre Indochine* (our Indochina), the only possible outcome was war.

The First Indochinese War began as a series of guerrilla engagements, but by its closing phases was a conflict fought at all military levels, from main-force engagements to local skirmishes. It was, particularly from the Vietnamese point of view, a highly political war. Defeating the French was not a goal to be achieved merely through military means but by the mobilisation of all resources that could be used to frustrate the enemy's aims. The Viet Minh worked to undermine the French position in Vietnam at every level, setting up a parallel administration alongside that of the French so that Viet Minh tax collectors levied taxes not only in those zones that were under Viet Minh control, but also clandestinely in those areas that were supposedly the preserve of the French. More than this, the Viet Minh view of the war as only one aspect of a broader political struggle led its leaders to pursue goals that might not have appeared, at first glance, to have had much military value but which, in the long run, were vitally important for overall strategy. Such was the case with the Viet Minh's efforts to promote literacy. The eventual benefits of having a literate population that could read its leaders’ explanations for the pursuit of a particular policy meant that such a program should go forward despite the presence of war.

The general pattern of the war in Vietnam between 1946 and 1954 can be described fairly readily, provided one accepts that such a generalisation disguises the details and qualifications that would emerge in a full-length study. The strength of the Vietnamese forces fighting against the French was greatest in the northern section of the country, and it was in this northern region that most of the major battles were fought. This fact should not be taken to mean that the First Indochina War was simply a matter involving the inhabitants of northern Vietnam and the French. Vietnamese fought against the French throughout the whole of Vietnam, and by the last years of the war the military maps of the French themselves showed much of southern Vietnam in the hands of the Viet Minh. But whereas the initial guerrilla campaigns by the Viet Minh in the north developed into campaigns involving thousands of troops and major battles, this was not the pattern in the south. There, scattered units from both sides clashed in frequent guerrilla and small force actions with ‘control’ over both territory and population often in dispute.

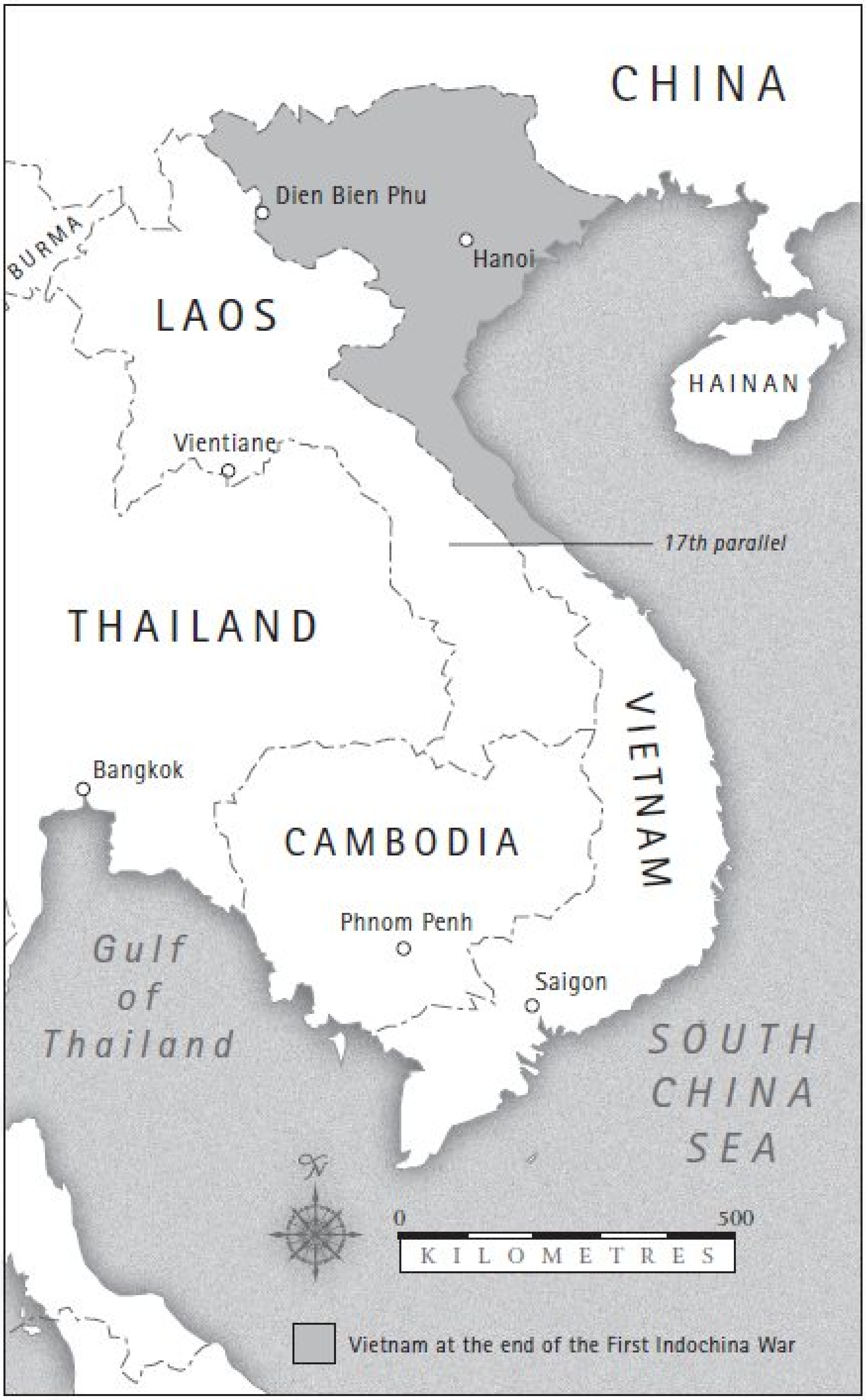
A fundamental problem for the French in waging their war to regain colonial control of Vietnam was that of time. Whereas the Viet Minh were prepared to endure the cost of a long war, accepting that the costs of a prolonged struggle carried with them the possibility of more effective pursuit of political goals, the same point of view could not be accepted by the French. Their leaders in Indochina, both military and civil, recognised that endless prolongation of the war would lead to domestic disillusionment in France. Their efforts, therefore, had to be concentrated on bringing the war to a swift end. But this was exactly what Viet Minh strategy did not permit. The French were able to re-establish themselves in Hanoi and in the Red River delta of northern Vietnam. They could keep many, though not all, of the road and rail links open. And they could ensure that Vietnam’s few cities of any size would not fall to sudden assault. Despite this the French could not inflict a crippling defeat on their Vietnamese enemy, led by General Vo Nguyen Giap, a man who like so many other Communist leaders had been jailed by the colonial administration in the 1930s. Between early 1947 and 1950 Giap’s forces fought a classic guerrilla campaign, with the Viet Minh military leader demonstrating a clear grasp of the essentials of his task. Attacks against the French were mounted only when the Viet

Minh had a clear numerical or tactical superiority. The Viet Minh chose its moments and its locations to attack the French with care to avoid the possibility of swift French reinforcement of its forces or the ready use of air power, a weapon that was never available to the Viet Minh throughout the duration of the war.

By pursuing such a policy the Viet Minh not only cost the French vital time; they were also able to develop both their military and political capacities. Here, indeed, is part of the explanation for General Giap’s rise to military importance. The man who had trained as a lawyer and taught history as a school teacher did not become a general whose campaigns are studied in military academies all over the world by some sudden act of fate. Rather, Giap’s military experience developed in such a fashion that he was able to match the growth of an undoubtedly high degree of talent in military matters to the changing and increasing demands of the strategic situation. Nevertheless, talented though he was, Giap still suffered some significant setbacks in the 1950–51 period as the Viet Minh more and more sought to operate in large-scale units against the French. The fact of these setbacks is well worth emphasis for it draws attention to the intricacies and costs of the Vietnamese revolution. Successful though this Communist revolution was in the final analysis, any account of the post-Second World War history of Vietnam is misleading if it does not take full account of the difficulties along the way and the high costs that were endured for the results that were achieved.

Such a point is particularly worth remembering in relation to the battle that determined the outcome of the First Indochina War, the Battle of Dien Bien Phu that ended in May 1954. The Viet Minh’s success in this battle played a major part in bringing the settlement negotiated at the Geneva Conference in July 1954 that left the northern half of Vietnam under Communist rule and the status of southern Vietnam a disputed issue that was only settled, finally, when the whole of Vietnam passed under the control of the government in Hanoi in 1975. The details of the battle fascinate military historians, not least because of the fundamental errors committed by the French in choosing to seek a major engagement with the Viet Minh in such a remote location—far removed from French headquarters in Hanoi—and poorly sited in local terms to withstand the siege that developed. Both sides recognised the vital importance of the outcome of the battle, and both displayed remarkable courage and endurance under near intolerable conditions. When the Viet Minh forces finally overran the French positions their success had cost them dearly, their casualties being far in excess of those sustained by the French. The cost had borne out Mao Zedong's insistence that a 'revolution is not a tea party'.

The French defeat at Dien Bien Phu heralded the end of the French effort to maintain a position in Vietnam. Ever since 1946 this effort had been pursued on two levels, the military and the political. The military strategies failed, but the outcome of the political policies followed by the French was, in the short term, ambiguous. Although the French had not been successful in their efforts to promote a truly significant political rival to the Viet Minh in southern Vietnam, they were able to maintain the framework of an administration that could be built upon once the First Indochina War came to an end and the United States decided to bolster a state in southern Vietnam as part of a worldwide strategy to contain Communism. There is a continuing scholarly and political debate about this period in 1954 when the fighting came to an end in Vietnam but the political issues remained unsettled. What can be said without contradiction is that once an attempt was undertaken to establish a separate state in southern Vietnam and so to deny to the Communists the victory that they believed entitled them to control over the whole of Vietnam, the prospect ahead was for further war.


CHINA
Dien Bien Phu
Hanoi
BURMA
LAOS
HAINAN
Vientiane
17th parallel
THAILAND
VIETNAM
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KILOMETRES
Vietnam at the end of the First Indochina War

**Vietnam at the end of the First Indochina War**
The French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 sealed the end of France's colonial position in Vietnam. Following the Geneva Conference that ended in July 1954, Ho Chi Minh's Viet-Minh gained control of northern Vietnam down to the 17th parallel and an American-backed state was established in the south.

Revolution in Vietnam in its first anti-French phase entailed by far the highest costs of all the political changes that had taken place in the period immediately after the Second World War in the former colonies of Southeast Asia. But despite these costs, despite the political effort that the Viet Minh had waged alongside their military battles, the Vietnamese Communists were not initially in a position to risk a frontal collision with the southern anti-Communist state that the United States supported from 1954. Most particularly the Communists were unable to consider such an option since their allies, the Chinese and the Russians, had made clear at the Geneva Conference that the interests of the Vietnamese Communists had to be subordinated to those of the major Communist powers. And these major powers, in 1954, were not prepared to risk a wider conflict in order to ensure that the Vietnamese Communists achieved the ultimate success that they believed should be theirs.

In contrast to Indonesia, therefore, the first post-war decade did not settle Vietnam’s post-colonial status and leave it unified under a single government. Instead, two states emerged within the territory of Vietnam, each claiming the right to control the whole of that geographic territory. For the Communists in Vietnam the revolution had only half succeeded. There is little doubt that they were confident full success would eventually be theirs. But there is equally little doubt that neither they nor any other observers of Vietnamese politics in the mid-1950s had gauged just how high the final cost of establishing a unified Communist Vietnam would be.

## THE PHILIPPINES AND MALAYA

The rest of Southeast Asia had its share of revolt and rebellion in the period immediately following the end of the Second World War, but in no other country were there armed revolutionary struggles for independence to match what occurred in Indonesia and Vietnam. To a considerable extent this was the case because in no other Southeast Asian country had the former colonial power been so reluctant to give up control as were the Dutch and the French. Nevertheless, there is need to consider two other significant challenges to established authority that did occur following the Second World War—the Hukbalahap (Huk) insurgency in the Philippines and the Communist challenge to the government in Malaya during the Emergency period.

When the Japanese war ended the Philippines rapidly attained full independence and began to face up to the immense physical damage and social dislocation that had been caused by the war. Among those who expected to play a significant part in the post-war process were members of the Huk movement, the Communist-led group that had waged a limited but successful series of guerrilla campaigns against the Japanese in the central and southern sections of the major island of Luzon. Few if any denied that the role of the Huks during the war was admirable. But just as the French Communists, who had played an important part in the Resistance against the Germans in occupied France, were distrusted by those who had been their wartime allies once peace came, so in the Philippines the largely conservative political elite looked warily at the Huks. This wariness became even sharper when, in the 1946 elections, the Huks successfully contested seven seats in the Philippines Congress. For small though these election successes were, the prospect now existed of an outspoken group working within the parliamentary system with aims that ran totally contrary to the generally shared values of the Philippine elite. The Huks, most importantly, were advocates of a program of ‘land to the tillers’ that would have radically altered the established economic structure of the Philippines’ primary producing industries, particularly the sugar industry. Fearful of change and doubting their capacity to deal with the Huks at the parliamentary level, the other political parties of the Philippine Congress refused to permit the men elected on the Huk ticket to take their seats. This signalled the end of any possibility of an accommodation between conservative and radical interests and the beginning of the Huk rebellion.

In the early phases of their challenge to the government the Huks demonstrated a continuing capacity to rally support among the peasantry as they had done during the war. Within the areas of central and southern Luzon that had been their wartime strongholds the Huks became, in effect, an alternative government. The success that they enjoyed led their leaders to hope that the movement could become a national one, instituting a radical revolution throughout the whole of the Philippines. This estimation failed to take into account the very local factors that had made success possible in central Luzon. In that area of the Philippines, in very considerable contrast to most other sections of the country, the structure of traditional society had already been very weak by the time radical groups first sought to gain power in the 1930s. The Huks had succeeded in this area since there was no real alternative to oppose them. When such an alternative did exist, in the form of long-established and entrenched landowning interests, the Huks found it impossible to rally support. Although it was difficult for the Huks to understand why it should have been so, the fact that a strong social structure existed, linking landowners with tenant farmers and peasants in well-established relationships, was more important than the inequalities that were part of that social system.

So it was that in early 1950 the Huks reached the height of their success but were not able to move from the plateau of achievement that this success represented. By the end of the same year the Philippines government was on the offensive against the Huks and within a further three years the worst of the insurgency was over. The reasons for this remarkable change are readily recounted, even if there is room for debate concerning the importance that should be accorded to the various factors involved. Of great importance was the government's success in capturing almost the entire Huk politburo (political leadership) in a raid carried out in Manila in October 1950. Following information provided by an informer, the government forces were able to seize both personnel and plans in a blow from which the Huks were never able to recover. This success took place at a time when a remarkable Philippines leader, Ramon Magsaysay, was beginning to make his energetic presence felt as Secretary of Defence. Critics of the Philippines and of its relationship with the United States have argued that much of the energy that Magsaysay was able to instil into his forces as they confronted the Huks was the result of American advice and assistance. Such advice and assistance were certainly important, but there seems no reason to diminish the part that Magsaysay played. A guerrilla leader during the Japanese occupation and coming from a non-elite background, his energy and personal bravery can scarcely be questioned and the loyalty he won from his troops seems equally to be beyond dispute. Just as importantly, the policies that he announced, even if their implementation was patchy, gave some promise that the government was genuinely concerned with the problems of rural poverty and inequality.

Magsaysay's success in scaling down the Huk threat to the point where control of the insurgent remnants was a police responsibility played a significant part in his election to the presidency of the Philippines in 1953. His sudden accidental death in 1957 came at a time when much of the program for rural improvement that he advocated still waited to be put into action. But there was no longer any doubt that the Huks were defeated by the time of his death. Remnants of the Huk forces continued to oppose the government and rural insecurity has remained a problem of fluctuating proportions to the present day. But the threat to the unity of the Philippines from the Huks had ended, however much other problems remained to be faced.

The events of the Emergency period in Malaya (the West Malaysia of the later Malaysia Federation) between 1948 and 1960 posed a much longer threat to the government of that country than was ever the case with the Huks, despite the latter's regional success. Having said this, and having noted that the Emergency lasted officially for a twelve-year period, due account should also be taken of the fact of how very different this Communist challenge was from that mounted by the Viet Minh and discussed earlier in this chapter. In fact, both the defeat of the Huks in the Philippines and the defeat of the Communist insurgents in Malaya have all too often been seen as guides to action that might have been taken in Vietnam once the Second Indochinese War was in progress. Such an erroneous view misses several points that are of vital importance for an understanding of the recent history of Southeast Asia. First, there is the failure to recognise how very particular the Huk insurgency, the period of the Emergency in Malaya, and the Communist-led anti-colonial wars in Vietnam each were. If one fails to take account of the great differences that existed from country to country it is all too easy to disregard the different issues that dominated the thinking of those engaged in the various military and political campaigns that took place. And one is likely to be trapped into thinking that insurgencies occur and can be suppressed according to formula.

Several features of the Malayan Emergency period set it sharply apart from developments in Vietnam and the Philippines. In both of these latter cases the men who fought against the established government, whether it was the French in Vietnam or a government of Filipinos in the Philippines, were members of the dominant population group in each country. The Huks, in the one case, were Filipinos fighting Filipinos. The Viet Minh, in the other case, were Vietnamese fighting either the French or Vietnamese supported by the French. In the Emergency, in great contrast, the insurgents were overwhelmingly Chinese in ethnic composition in a country in which the Chinese population was itself a minority and in which acceptance of Malay political dominance was regarded as a matter beyond dispute by all but the smallest group among those who engaged in the country's political life.

Both the Huks, in their period of success, and the Vietnamese throughout their war against the French, could make their appeals for support in terms of their role as nationalists as well as Communists. This was never a convincing possibility for the ethnically Chinese Communist insurgents in Malaya. They claimed to be fighting for the 'Malayan people', and to be leading the struggle against British colonialism. But these claims had to be made against a background in which not only Malay politicians—with Tunku Abdul Rahman at their head—but also Malayan Chinese politicians denounced their activities. What was more, for all their claims to be fighting for the liberation of the population of Malaya, the insurgents could hardly prevent that population from realising that steady progress was being made towards attaining independence from Britain throughout the Emergency.

Yet despite the weakness of their propaganda the Communist insurgents in Malaya gave striking proof of the heavy cost that could be exacted by a determined guerrilla group fighting under geographical conditions that were favourable to them and with the possibility present of gaining the passive support of unprotected civilians. Once the Malayan Communist Party decided to follow an armed strategy in pursuit of its goals, its forces faded into the dense jungle that covered so much of the Malayan Peninsula. From there they were able to mount raids against vulnerable targets, such as isolated police posts, district administrative offices, the bungalows of planters and tin mine managers. Judged against the horrifyingly high cost in human lives that marked the war fought in Vietnam, the casualty figures from the Malayan Emergency appear relatively small. But the number of people killed and wounded was not by itself a satisfactory reflection of the impact that the insurgents achieved. That impact was also felt in the threat they posed to Malaya's economy as it gradually recovered from the dislocation of the Japanese occupation period. The impact of the insurgents was also significant in terms of the possibility that the granting of independence would be delayed because of insecurity.

The response of the British colonial government to the Emergency recognised the broad range of threats that the insurgency posed. Although the colonial government's initial reactions to the problems of the Emergency involved a degree of uncertainty and even confusion, this was soon replaced by carefully constructed military and political effort. The essentials of the effort involved isolating the insurgents from the rest of the civil population and protecting that population from attack or intimidation by the insurgents. At the same time as these essentially military goals were pursued, the need to work for Malayan independence was never forgotten, a fact reflected in the granting of independence in 1957, less than five years after the most serious period of the Emergency.

Isolating the insurgents from the rest of the population was of particular importance in Malaya because of the existence after the Second World War of a substantial squatter population that lived largely outside normal government control. These squatters were almost all Chinese residents of Malaya who had moved into squatter communities in the course of the economically depressed years of the 1930s or during the Japanese occupation. Their importance to the insurgents once the Emergency began lay in their capacity to furnish both recruits and supplies. The total guerrilla force opposed to the colonial government in Malaya never numbered more than around 9000, but many of these were recruited from the squatter communities in which there were young people who were readily persuaded that a revolution could transform their lives. Almost as important as the supply of recruits was the capacity of these isolated squatter communities to pass food supplies to the insurgents, since the latter's jungle retreats were mostly unsuited to food production and access to other food sources was vital.

Once the importance of the squatter community was recognised and the magnitude of the problem they posed appreciated, the British colonial government undertook a resettlement scheme that has become known as one of the most distinctive features of the Emergency. Nearly half a million squatters were resettled or relocated in 'new villages' over a space of two years. Once resettled the squatters became the responsibility of the police forces, leaving the military to pursue the guerrillas in the jungles. This was a slow and tedious business, costly more in terms of time and effort than in terms of lives. Even with an overwhelming superiority of personnel on the government side, the tide did not turn decisively against the Communist guerrillas until 1954. By then, however, there was no doubt that the insurgents would be defeated and that Malaya would gain independence with the capacity to bring the Emergency to a final end. Acting as a minority of a minority, the ethnic Chinese insurgents never succeeded in presenting themselves as bearers of the nationalist banner. Their appeal was strong for a limited group, particularly young Chinese who felt that there was little place for them in existing Malayan society. But for the rest of the Chinese community in Malaya and for the overwhelming bulk of the Malay community, the appeal of Communism launched by guerrillas who were ready to resort to brutal punishment and killings of civilians was limited indeed. The Emergency should not be dismissed as a relatively minor problem because of the way in which, once the initial period of shock and confusion passed, the odds against the insurgents became steadily worse. At the same time, the enormous differences between the problems posed by the insurgency in Malaya and the Second Indochinese War should be firmly recognised. In taking the successful defeat of the Communist guerrillas in Malaya as an indication of what could be achieved in Vietnam later, military planners came close to the hoary old error of comparing a minnow with a whale.

In the four countries of Southeast Asia discussed in this chapter, Indonesia, Malaya, the Philippines and Vietnam, the years after the Second World War were marked by violence. But as has been repeatedly stressed throughout the chapter the nature of the violence, the issues for which men fought and died, and the results of the conflicts that were joined differed greatly from country to country. The differences that have been stressed are a forceful reminder of the individual character of the states of Southeast Asia, whatever generalities are noted at other times. The Indonesian nationalist revolution against Dutch attempts to reimpose some form of colonial control reminds us that revolutions need not be mounted only by Communists. The partial success of the Vietnamese Communists by mid-1954 took place in conditions that had no parallel in the rest of Southeast Asia. The unsuccessful Communist revolts in Malaya and the Philippines demonstrated the futility of groups that sought their ends through armed insurrection but which could not, again for different reasons in each case, make their appeal beyond a limited section of the overall population. Revolution and revolt have been a very significant feature of the history of much of Southeast Asia since the Second World War but for different reasons, in different countries, and at different times.

# ELEVEN

# Other paths to independence

Of the four countries considered in the previous chapter, two achieved independence through revolutionary means—Indonesia and Vietnam. One, Malaysia, prepared for independence while containing and then defeating a major challenge from Communist insurgents drawn from the minority ethnic Chinese community. The case of the Philippines was different again since an independent government defeated the indigenous Huk insurgents. The varied experience of these four countries once again emphasises the diversity of Southeast Asia; an awareness of diversity is reinforced when reviewing the paths followed to independence by the other countries of the region.

The case of Thailand need not detain us long at this stage since it was, as has been noted many times, the only country in Southeast Asia that did not have a history of colonial occupation. As already stated in the chapter dealing with the Second World War, Thailand did for a period have to face the possibility that its association with the losing Japanese side during much of the war might lead to the victorious Allied forces seeking to impose punishment, either economic or political. This did not take place, not least because of skilful Thai diplomacy, and Thailand resumed its status as a free nation at the end of the war—freer, in fact, in some ways since it was no longer encumbered with treaties that had once given special privileges to foreigners in Thailand.

In the decade after the end of the Second World War, we are thus left to consider the cases of Burma (Myanmar) and the other two countries that went to make up French Indochina—Cambodia and Laos. The future status of Singapore in this period was still under discussion, with debate taking place as to whether it would eventually be linked to an independent Malaya. Brunei remained as a British protectorate, and Portuguese Timor, the future Timor-Leste, attracted little attention, either from the metropolitan government in distant Lisbon or from the international community in the early post-war period.

## BURMA (MYANMAR)

In Burma the history of the years following the defeat of the Japanese until the proclamation of independence in 1948 was full of complex and often bitter manoeuvring between the various groups active in Burmese political life. This manoeuvring took place at the same time as frequently acrimonious negotiations between the Burmese and British thrashed out the details of the final steps to independence. The end of the Second World War revealed the deeply factional character of Burmese politics. Some of the factional divisions depended on ideological loyalties, with groups spanning a wide range of political positions from conservatism to support for varying interpretations of Marxism. The fact that it was clear the British *were* leaving Burma did little to minimise these divisions. To the contrary, now that independence seemed assured, the various groups felt a greater need to assert their positions. They saw the situation as one in which there might still be advantage to be gained before the British departure introduced a new and unpredictable state of affairs.

Other divisions resulted from the long-established rivalries between the Burmans (Bamar people) and the other ethnic groups making up the Burmese population, the Shans, Karens, Chins and Kachins, to mention only the most prominent of these minorities. Under British rule special arrangements had been made to govern many of the minority peoples in a fashion separate from the Burman majority. Now that independence was in sight politicians representing sections of the minority peoples strove to ensure that they should continue to enjoy special rights as they had done under the British. To a considerable extent the Burman leadership under General Aung San, the leader of those Burmans who had organised to fight the Japanese in the closing phases of the Second World War, was ready to make concessions to the minorities. Although Aung San and his colleagues were not ready to permit the establishment of independent states delineated on an ethnic basis, they were ready to recognise that a sense of ethnic identity and past administrative practice made it necessary for some alternative to treating areas such as the Shan regions in northern and eastern

Burma as if they were identical with the Burman-populated Irrawaddy valley.

Because history can only tell us what *did* happen in the past, the question of what *might* have happened in Burma if Aung San had been able to continue at the head of the Burmese government after independence cannot be answered. What did happen was that political rivals made the reality of Burmese political factionalism tragically clear when they assassinated Aung San and six of his closest associates. With Aung San's death in July 1947, Burma lost its most able politician, but progress towards independence was not checked. Aung San's place was taken by U Nu, the man who was to become the first prime minister of independent Burma and the dominant figure in Burmese politics throughout the 1950s. But although progress towards independence was maintained it took place in an atmosphere of increasing disunity and rising violence. When independence was proclaimed in January 1948 it was the prelude to a period of grave instability and finally full-scale rebellion against the central government by several of the political and minority groups who were unready to accept the political structure that independence had brought. The fact that Burma had reached the goal of independence without the costly struggles that had marked developments in Indonesia and Vietnam had not proved to be any guarantee against major and costly disorder once the colonial power withdrew.

## CAMBODIA AND LAOS

Of all the countries that had been studied in Southeast Asia few have received such limited examination of their modern history as Cambodia and Laos. In the case of Cambodia the record of this country's magnificent and distant past has tended to obscure the interest of more modern times, though the horrors of the Pol Pot regime in the 1970s have qualified this judgment. In the case of Laos, the small size of the country in terms of population, numbering less than three million in the 1950s, has led to its being treated as little more than a footnote to the dramatic events that have taken place in neighbouring Vietnam since the Second World War. For by comparison with both Cambodia and Laos, Vietnam's history has indeed been a more demanding and apparently more immediately important subject for study. Because of this relative lack of attention to the history of these two countries, there is real difficulty for a casual observer of Southeast Asian affairs to understand why there should have been such momentous changes in such a short span of time since the Second World War. How, both casual and specialist observer alike may well ask, did the apparently sleepy monarchies of Cambodia and Laos become, in the space of less than forty years, Communist states, with Cambodia undergoing one of the most radical revolutions in modern history? Only now, more than seventy years after Cambodia and Laos gained independence, can we begin to see some of the elements in the period before the attainment of that independence that hinted at the possibility of history following the course that it did.

The contrast between the history of Vietnam and that of the other two components of French Indochina, Cambodia and Laos, could not be sharper. In terms of modern political developments, Vietnam was always in advance of its neighbours in opposing the French colonial presence. In the course of the 1920s and 1930s in Vietnam the Vietnamese Communists became a vital if almost constantly persecuted force. The same two decades in Cambodia and Laos saw virtually no nationalist, let alone Communist, agitation against the colonial administration. And as has been noted in an earlier chapter the French returned to Cambodia and Laos at the end of the Second World War after encountering a minimum of opposition. Once again the contrast between the tense period in Vietnam in 1946 before the Franco–Viet Minh War broke out and developments in Cambodia and Laos during the same period is sharp.

Despite this contrast and the richly exotic world of royal courts, sacred elephants, ancient temples, and orange-robed monks to be found in both Laos and Cambodia, the Second World War had wrought its changes in these countries too. In Laos an anti-French group had emerged during the years of war with a royal prince of radical persuasion, Souphanouvong, as one of its most prominent members. When the war ended in 1945, Souphanouvong and a small number of companions refused to accept the option that others of their wartime companions embraced. Rather than agree to the return of the French and to waiting for the eventual granting of self-government and finally independence, Souphanouvong and those who shared his views went into the jungle and linked their goal of independence to the struggle that the neighbouring Vietnamese were just beginning.

Much ink has flowed as writers of various views have debated whether or not the Communist movement in Laos possessed an identity separate from the Vietnamese Communists. The best short answer is that it was a Lao movement first and foremost but that because of Laos’ geographical position and the smallness and weakness of its population the Lao Communists have long been dependent upon their ideological allies in Vietnam. Moreover, it was certainly the case that some of the most prominent of the Lao Communist leaders were married to Vietnamese women who were themselves Communists. During the First Indochinese War, in any event, areas of northeastern Laos were vitally important to the strategy of the Vietnamese Communists, and the Lao Communist forces, the Pathet Lao (‘Land of the Lao’ or ‘Lao Nation’) as they called themselves, worked in close conjunction with, and at times under the immediate direction of, the Vietnamese.

French policy in Laos from 1946 onwards aimed at minimising political difficulties while contending with the strategic problems posed by the Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces in the northeast. Their search for political calm in the most populated area of Laos along the Mekong River was aided by the general inclination of the Lao elite, a tiny proportion of the total population of about three million, to accept the continuing colonial presence without much hesitation. The royal family and the semi-hereditary traditional officials were happy, for the most part, to cooperate in a system that brought them personal rewards for a minimum of effort. Prince Souphanouvong with his political commitment, his knowledge of the West gained in France, and his readiness to accept the rigours of life in the jungle seemed very much the exception to the elite Lao general rule.

The exception represented by Souphanouvong and the other members of the Pathet Lao came to be of vital importance as the First Indochinese War drew to a close. Suffering military defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the French government that negotiated for withdrawal from Vietnam at the Geneva Conference in 1954 no longer had any interest in maintaining control over the weak Kingdom of Laos, which had been theoretically independent since late 1953. But a problem existed. The French wished to transfer power to those conservative Lao who had cooperated with them between 1946 and 1954—the members of the traditional elite. Yet neither the French nor the traditional elite controlled those northern sections of the kingdom in which the Communist Pathet Lao were strongest. A compromise was finally reached. Laos, now fully independent, was to take special account of the Pathet Lao forces and to integrate them, eventually, into the country’s army.

Like many compromises determined on paper this provision failed to work in reality. The independence Laos gained in 1953–54 was flawed from the beginning. The conservative groups in the kingdom had little interest in permitting the left-wing Pathet Lao to gain a legal foothold, while the interests of the Pathet Lao most certainly did not lie in acting as the willing subordinates of their political enemies. Just as Laos gained this flawed independence as a side-effect of more important developments in Vietnam, so too was the next major stage in Lao political history determined by the mounting pressures of the Second Indochinese War.

Unlike Laos, Cambodia did not form a major strategic element in the First Indochinese War. Nor did a clearly defined Cambodian Communist movement emerge between 1946 and 1953, the date when Cambodia was officially declared independent. The important domestic political controversies associated with Cambodia's progress towards independence related, instead, to whether the traditional leadership of the kingdom under the then King Sihanouk would control an independent government or whether power would pass into the hands of men who, while less conservative, wished the king to act as a constitutional monarch. As for relations with the French, once Sihanouk was able to demonstrate his predominance in domestic affairs the task of persuading the French to grant independence was essentially a matter of time. Just as Laos gained independence in conjunction with developments in Vietnam, so was Cambodia under Sihanouk able to press France for independence at a time when the deteriorating situation in Vietnam in 1953 made resistance to Cambodian demands scarcely worthwhile.

By the time Sihanouk was making his demands he had gained the political ascendancy in Cambodia and in doing so set the stage for more than a decade of independence in which he was the chief political actor. Emerging from a timid and sheltered childhood, he gradually moved from cautious interest to full-scale involvement in the political affairs of his kingdom. Once he took the decision to become closely involved in politics and with the benefit of some particularly able older advisers—Penn Nouth and Son Sann notable among them—his status as king made him virtually beyond challenge in the realm of overt politics.

As for clandestine politics before 1953, when Cambodia gained independence, and 1954 when the First Indochinese War ended, there was little to suggest that Cambodia would ever become the site for a full-scale clash between right and left. Despite what has happened subsequently, the Communist movement was not of major importance in Cambodia between the end of the Second World War and the granting of independence in 1953. There were Vietnamese Communist units that used Cambodia for a base and there were, undoubtedly, Cambodians who were associated with these units. But to look back on the years 1946–53 in terms of the clear emergence of a Communist alternative to Sihanouk would be to commit a major historical error.

Individual names have been closely linked with the attainment of independence in various of the countries of Southeast Asia. The name Ho Chi Minh comes first to mind in relation to Vietnam. Aung San's name will continue to dominate discussion of Burma's achievement of independence. When one thinks of independence in Malaya one thinks of Tunku Abdul Rahman. The matching of name to country and independence could go on, sometimes with sharp argument as to which name should be chosen. A case can surely be made, however, for the proposition that in no other Southeast Asia country was one man so crucially important to and identified with the gaining of independence as was Sihanouk in Cambodia. Hesitant to become involved in politics initially and far from always astute once his involvement began, he came by 1953 to dominate the scene. This was his triumph. The years that followed, some would argue, were both his and his country's tragedy.

By the late 1950s almost the whole of Southeast Asia was independent. Thailand had never known formal colonialism. The Philippines had gained independence from the United States at the end of the Second World War, while Burma's path to independence from Britain, gained in 1948, always seemed assured if frequently made difficult by various obstacles along the way. Indonesia's revolution brought Dutch withdrawal by the end of 1949. And the countries of French Indochina saw the departure of the colonial authorities in 1954, leaving two rival Vietnamese states, and Laos and Cambodia.

Britain's departure from Malaya was delayed until 1957, in part because of the lingering problems of the Communist insurgency and in part, too, because of difficulties associated with finding a political formula that would reconcile the expectation of the Malay community of political dominance over a population that included a very large minority of non-Malay (most particularly Chinese) citizens. With a formula assuring Malay dominance achieved, while involving ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indians in the open political process, the granting of independence to Malaya left only a residue of British colonial rule in Southeast Asia. Singapore and the territories of Sarawak and North Borneo (now Sabah) were all that remained of Britain's Southeast Asian empire. These, too, were shortly to end their colonial status when, in 1963, the Federation of Malaysia came into being, uniting independent Malaya with Singapore, Sarawak and Sabah.

With the establishment of Malaysia only Brunei and Portuguese Timor (East Timor, Timor-Leste) remained as non-independent states within Southeast Asia. The last territory to have remained under Dutch control following Indonesian independence in 1949, Dutch New Guinea, had been incorporated into Indonesia in 1963 in controversial circumstances. Brunei was technically a protectorate under Britain, not a colony. Oil rich, Brunei was offered the opportunity to join Malaysia, but declined. The Sultan of Brunei feared that to integrate with Malaysia would lead to the submerging of Brunei's identity and to the loss of a large proportion of his state's revenues—revenues that made it the wealthiest in Southeast Asia. Only in January 1984 did Brunei finally achieve its independent status. As for Portuguese Timor, it remained as a neglected remnant of Portugal's far-flung overseas empire whose unexpected fate was to involve invasion by Indonesia in 1975; incorporation into Indonesia in 1976; and then a bitter war that finally brought the promise of independence in 1999.

For most, and possibly all, of the formerly colonised countries of Southeast Asia the attainment of independence was accompanied by a sense of relief, and in some cases of euphoria. Even in the war-ravaged circumstances of Vietnam, where the Communist administration only gained control over half of the country it had hoped to govern, there was relief that the fighting had ended and an expectation—false, as it proved—that extension of control over the south would not be long delayed. The increasing violence and dissidence that marked the final months leading up to Burma's independence did not make it any less important an occasion. Nor did the fact that the Emergency was still officially in force and the difficulties associated with communal politics in Malaya make *Merdeka* (Independence) seem less desirable in 1957.

Relief and euphoria were natural and readily understood emotions for those who now enjoyed independence. But with that goal achieved the problems as well as the pleasures of independence had to be faced. An attempt to assess those problems and the various ways in which the states of Southeast Asia have confronted them is provided in the next chapters.

# TWELVE

# An end to post-colonial settlements and beyond I: Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos

For those who have never known what it was like to live under colonial rule the importance of achieving independence can only ever be partially understood. Attaining independence for the peoples of all the states of Southeast Asia, with the recurring exception of Thailand, involved more than a simple change of political control and leadership. These things were fundamentally important, but if we, as outsiders, concentrate exclusively on the political changes involved in the attainment of independence we shall fail to appreciate, however imperfectly, the sense of there being an almost magical and certainly spiritual quality associated with gaining independence for many Southeast Asians, leaders and their followers alike, when either willingly or otherwise the colonial rulers departed. For independence was seen by Southeast Asians as involving transformation of all kinds, political, economic and social. But the history of independent Southeast Asia has frequently involved the need to adjust the hopes for change and progress that seemed so readily within reach as the Americans, the British, the Dutch and the French handed over control of government to their former colonial subjects. Even in the case of East Timor, where the hurried departure of the Portuguese in 1975 was rapidly overtaken by the arrival of another colonial power, Indonesia, there were hopes for change and progress. These were hopes that were quickly doused by savage reality.

Southeast Asia in the twenty-first century is not unique in facing major problems, many without clear or easy possibilities for solution. Indeed, the decades since the 1960s have made clearer than ever before the error of any Western observer who dares to look at Southeast Asia as a ‘problem’ area without taking due account of the many and complex difficulties that afflict the so-called developed world. Keeping this fact firmly in mind, the perspective of more than fifty and even seventy years of independence for the countries of Southeast Asia—with Thailand's experience revealing some similar patterns of development despite the lack of a colonial past—has shown that Southeast Asia is a region that has faced, and continues to face, major problems. The persistent presence of these problems goes some way towards explaining a fundamental feature of developments in Southeast Asia's post-independence modern history: the fact that political settlements reached at the end of the colonial period have subsequently been changed, in some cases quite dramatically. This has been a process with great variations from country to country, so that in the case of Burma (Myanmar), for instance, the post-colonial settlement survived for over a decade, while in Vietnam it had come to an end in less than two years.

Some of the problems that have confronted the leaders of Southeast Asia in the years of independence since the end of the Second World War, and which led to the end of post-colonial settlements, are similar to those that have been experienced by other countries in what has come to be known as the Third World. In other parts of Asia, in the Middle East and in Africa, states that once had been colonies emerged into independence, as did the countries of Southeast Asia, with high hopes but frequently limited resources. In almost any field that one chooses to examine the newly independent states faced formidable difficulties. That this was so reflected the fact that the former colonial rulers had failed to tackle major issues that seemed to demand immediate attention from a new, independent leadership. For whatever high-sounding phrases were used to justify colonial rule, it is simply the case that it was *never* introduced or maintained in the interest of the colonised country or people—Rudyard Kipling's famous, or infamous, poem extolling the virtue of taking up 'The White Man's Burden' not withstanding. This basic fact meant colonial regimes had different priorities from the newly independent regimes that followed them. And this fact posed immense difficulties for the new leaders.

A few examples may make the point clearer. Although all the colonial regimes in Southeast Asia paid some attention to the need to provide education for at least part of the population they governed, none, not even the most enlightened, felt it necessary to promote a system of universal education at the primary level on the same basis as that operating in the regime's home country. However one chooses to judge the colonial regimes' policies in education—and different judgments would have to be made for different colonial governments and in different colonised countries—the need to improve and expand educational opportunities were seen as essential steps by all the newly independent governments of Southeast Asia.

At a rather different level, the colonial governments of Southeast Asia were, in general, little concerned to prepare the populations of the countries in the region to play a directing role in the economic life of the community. With the colonies valued for their economic resources, there was a widespread pattern in which European or American companies controlled major international commerce, while internal commerce was shared between the colonisers and immigrant Asian communities, usually ethnically Chinese or Indian. There were variations on this theme and important exceptions to the general rule. Nevertheless, it is correct to note that the leaders of the newly independent Southeast Asian states found all too often that they and their countrymen had only limited control over their own economies. The reference just made to the immigrant communities, which were such a feature of much of Southeast Asia under colonial rule, points to yet another instance of how the assumptions that governed the pre-independent years changed dramatically once independence came. For colonial governments the immigrant communities played a vital role, particularly in commerce and in the provision of labour for plantations and public works. For the independent governments of Southeast Asia the immigrant communities represented something very different, at best a group posing problems of assimilation, at worst a threat to the security and integrity of the state.

The list of problems that confronted the new leaders of independent Southeast Asia and have continued to confront them can only seem lengthy and daunting. Not all of these problems and challenges confronted the newly independent states immediately. In general, unrestrained population growth was not an acute problem in immediate terms, but it was to become so, in some cases sooner rather than later. More immediately the independent states had to decide how to develop their economies once the colonial powers departed. And above all there was the issue of how to achieve and maintain national unity. For in looking at how post-colonial settlements were overtaken by events, whether gradually or in dramatic fashion, the aim of maintaining national unity was central to what took place. Yet central as this issue was throughout the region, the experience from country to country differed greatly and over very different time spans. Once again it is necessary to review developments in terms of the experience of each country.

The aim in this and the immediately following chapter is to show how the first major break with the essential features of the post-colonial settlements took place and the manner in which there was a flow-on from that occurrence. Further departures from those initial settlements are examined in later chapters. While the emphasis in the account that follows is on the political changes that occurred in each country, it should be remembered that social and economic factors always played their part in shaping the nature of political events. In this chapter attention is given to the two countries in which independence followed the conclusion of a revolutionary war—Indonesia and Vietnam—and the two countries—Cambodia and Laos—that gained their independence as part of the settlement France pursued as the colonial power seeking to extricate itself from Vietnam.

## INDONESIA

After their bitter armed struggle against the Dutch, the Indonesian nationalists achieved their goal of independence in December 1949. A new state had come into existence in reality, rather than as an ideal that had been proclaimed but still had to be fought for. The Indonesians had won, but their victory still saw many issues unresolved. The Dutch had ceded sovereignty, but the future character of the Indonesian state was still not certain: was it to be a unitary state or one that took account of separatist feeling in regions such as sections of Sumatra and in the eastern islands, including parts of Kalimantan (Borneo) and Sulawesi, where there was resentment of the dominant and centralising role being played by Javanese politicians? And there was uncertainty as to what would be the role of Islam, for there was a continuing desire on the part of some political groups to overturn that aspect of the 1945 constitution that had proclaimed Indonesia to be a secular state. After a combination of vigorous political and military action to assert central control throughout the archipelago by the newly independent government in Jakarta, the Republic of Indonesia was proclaimed on 17 August 1950. Its writ now ran throughout the former Dutch colony, with one exception. For the moment, the western half of New Guinea—what the Indonesians then called Irian Jaya—was to remain under Dutch rule.

In the aftermath of the achievement of unitary independence the direction of the Indonesian state was in the hands of a cabinet, headed by Sukarno as president. It was intended that elections would take place for a constituent assembly that would consider possible changes to the provisional constitution introduced at this point. But these elections did not take place. Instead, the leading Jakarta power brokers designated who was to form the membership of the People's Representative Council of 232 members which, for the moment, functioned as the Indonesian parliament.

To simplify greatly, the history of the next five years made clear that the many divisions within Indonesian society had not been resolved as the result of gaining independence. No fewer than five prime ministers briefly held sway between 1950 and 1955 as a series of shifting political coalitions endeavoured to take account of the conflicting interests of secularists and those who argued for a greater role to be given to Islam, the religion of the overwhelming majority of Indonesia's population. At the same time, the army, which saw itself as the guardian of the revolution's success, worked to see its interests were not neglected. And the Communists of the PKI struggled, with some success, to overcome the taint attached to their party as the result of the Madiun Affair. All this manoeuvring took place against a background of severe economic difficulty, continuing separatist tendencies in regions away from Java and a determination to find a way to wrest control of Dutch New Guinea (Irian Jaya) from the former colonial power.

When elections were finally held in 1955 no less than twenty-eight parties stood candidates. When the results were tabled, no single party could claim a majority. The largest proportion of the vote, at 22 per cent, went to the Nationalist Party of Indonesia. It was closely followed by the two major Islamic parties, Masjumi, with 21 per cent, and Nahdatul Ulama, with 18 per cent. As a sign of the continuing appeal of the PKI among the urban and rural poor, that party gained 16 per cent of the vote. This result was a recipe for instability and that was what duly occurred. For not only did the results of the election reveal the weakness of the party system, it again emphasised the divisions that existed between politicians linked to Java and those whose power base was in the other islands.

The situation was one that ultimately played into President Sukarno's hands. He had long made clear his distrust of parliamentary government and in 1956, as party jockeying continued at the parliamentary level, he stated his belief that what Indonesia needed was not Western style 'liberal democracy' but instead 'a guided democracy, a democracy with leadership'. Various commentators have suggested that it is far from clear whether Sukarno, at this stage, had thought through these ideas when he first presented them. If this was so, continued political infighting in Jakarta and the outbreak of a separatist rebellion in Sumatra hastened the implementation of his ideas. Faced with these challenges, and backed by the army led by General Nasution, Sukarno declared martial law in March 1957.

The success of the Indonesian army in suppressing the separatist rebellion provided Sukarno with the opportunity to press ahead with his plans for guided democracy. With the fractious constituent assembly still in existence he called on it to vote for a new constitution, in effect the 1945 constitution that, tellingly, gave greater powers to the president than the provisional constitution introduced in 1950. When the assembly failed to vote in favour of the new constitution by the required two-thirds majority, Sukarno, however, was in a strong enough position, in July 1950, to declare that the new constitution—essentially the 1945 constitution—was in force. The period of Guided Democracy had begun and the first major break with the post-colonial settlement had taken place.

Initially, Sukarno seemed beyond challenge. A truly charismatic figure and a spellbinding orator, his personal prestige had been bolstered by the Asian–African Conference held in Bandung in 1955, making him a familiar figure on the international stage. Then, in 1962, he was able to claim credit for the decision, backed by the United Nations, to hand control of Irian Jaya to Indonesia. For the moment it appeared that a new settlement had been achieved, one that left Sukarno triumphant in both domestic and international affairs. Only a few short years were to pass before it became clear how hollow this judgment was.

Essential to Sukarno's survival as Indonesia's leader was the support of the army. Yet even before the successful campaign to gain control of Irian Jaya, an event that had deeply involved the armed forces, Sukarno had embarked on domestic policies that put him at odds with the military. In the international field, and against the inclinations of many of the most powerful figures in the military, Sukarno committed Indonesia to opposing the formation of the new Federation of Malaysia—the amalgamation of Malaya with Singapore and the British territories in Borneo, which is discussed in the next chapter. This policy of ‘Confrontation’ made little sense to many in the civilian elite as well as provoking military opposition. At the same time, and in domestic terms, Sukarno showed himself increasingly ready to seek support from the left of Indonesian politics, including the PKI. That this was a fatal mistake was made clear in 1965. Following an attempted coup in September 1965, the details of which remain obscure to the present day but which Sukarno’s opponents linked to the Communists, the army with then General Suharto at its head moved decisively to gain control of the Indonesian state, making Sukarno merely a figurehead president as in March 1966 Suharto assumed effective authority over the state. In 1968, after assuming the position of acting president the year before, Suharto became president of Indonesia. What was termed the ‘New Order’ had now begun and Suharto was to maintain his control over Indonesia for two decades.

In the immediate aftermath of the failed September 1965 coup, and before Suharto formally took office, Indonesia was racked by terrible violence. As the army tightened its grip on power, tens of thousands of anti-Communists in the population seized the opportunity to strike a devastating blow against their political enemies. With the army either standing by or in some cases both encouraging and participating, the violence began in late 1965 and continued into the following year. Anti-Communist mobs embarked on an orgy of killing, often using the most brutal means to achieve their ends. No certain figure exists for the number of Communists and Communist sympathisers killed at this time. And it seems certain that some, at least, of the killings that took place involved personal as much as political motives. But most foreign observers would now regard the figure of 500 000 killed during the political upheaval of 1965–66 as the most likely estimate of the number of deaths that occurred. Some estimates would be a great deal higher. This was a political legacy that could never be forgotten throughout the long years of the ‘New Order’, and after.

As Indonesia bound up its wounds following the fall of Sukarno and the period of bloodshed that followed, few would have predicted that it would not be long before it would embark on its own colonial adventure. In contrast to the claims made by the independent government of Indonesia to rule over all of what had been the Dutch colonial possessions, it had not made a similar claim to the Portuguese territory of East Timor (Timor-Leste), a long-neglected part of Portugal’s ramshackle overseas empire. But when the Portuguese administration abandoned the territory in the mid-1970s East Timor was seen as a potential threat to Indonesia’s security because of the leftist political positions of some of the groups contending for power in the territory. This led to Indonesia’s invasion of East Timor in 1975 and to the subsequent incorporation of the territory into Indonesia in 1976. It was a development that was followed by a long guerrilla war for independence and a disturbing record of Indonesian incompetence and brutality.

## VIETNAM

Indonesia achieved the reality of independence from the Dutch in 1949. Vietnam’s *de facto* divided independence came five years later. Viewed from the vantage point of the passage of more than sixty years, the events of 1954 and the years immediately following have an almost unreal quality, since we now know that the two Vietnamese governments that did emerge following 1954 were fated to become one in 1975. At the time, the issue was not nearly so clear. This is despite the fact that the Geneva Conference, which was held in July 1954 to bring an end to hostilities, met on the basis that Vietnam was a single country, whatever its politico–military divisions as the result of the First Indochina War, the war fought between the Viet Minh and the French that was discussed in Chapter Ten.

When the Geneva Conference concluded in July 1954 the arrangements agreed to by the participants were explicitly temporary in nature. This was recognised in the Conference’s Final Declaration where it was stated that ‘the essential purpose of the agreement is to settle military questions with a view to ending hostilities and [with agreement] that the military demarcation line is provisional and should not in any way be interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary’. In short, the division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel was not to be regarded as a frontier boundary between two countries. As to what should happen following an end to hostilities in order to resolve outstanding political issues, the Conference further agreed that ‘general elections shall be held in 1956’. Under the Geneva Accords, therefore, and within two years, there was to be an electoral contest between the Communist-led Viet Minh, who now controlled Hanoi, and the State of Vietnam based in Saigon (since 1975 Ho Chi Minh City), which was receiving steadily increasing American support. Opinion remains divided as to whether the Communist leadership believed the elections would take place. Certainly, there are strong arguments to be mounted to suggest that this was the case and that the leadership in Hanoi believed they could gain through an election the spoils of victory they felt had been denied them despite their successes against the French on the battlefield.

The projected elections never took place. Despite some initial reluctance to back a separate southern government, now headed by a long-time anti-Communist nationalist, Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States soon became committed to a policy that was shaped as much by Cold War considerations as by the facts on the ground in Vietnam. In the event, and with American military, political and economic support, Diem made clear his unreadiness to countenance the elections provided for in the Geneva Agreements. Showing considerable personal courage and a readiness to act ruthlessly against his opponents, Diem fended off challenges from sections of the Vietnamese military who had fought with the French, from politico–religious sects who maintained their own private armies, and from brutal gangsters who had run Saigon’s gambling and prostitution rackets during the war between the French and the Viet Minh. With United States support for the southern regime, it was clear by mid-1955, well before the elections mandated for 1956, that the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) was going to ignore the provisions of the Geneva Accords.

For South Vietnam the immediate aim was to rid its territory south of the 17th parallel of any forces linked to the Viet Minh because of the threat they posed to its control. And Diem’s armed forces and police pursued this aim with savage efficiency, arresting and frequently executing those identified as Communists. For North Vietnam (the Democratic Republic of Vietnam), led by the veteran revolutionary Ho Chi Minh, the immediate problems challenging the Hanoi government were possibly even more daunting than those confronting the southern leadership, where American aid underwrote the regime. On the one hand, Hanoi had to put in place an administration over the territory it now controlled but which had suffered devastating damage as a result of the war. On the other hand, it had to plan for the long-term goal that it had never abandoned, control over the whole of Vietnam. As the government in Hanoi went about imposing its will domestically it, too, showed a readiness to achieve its aims through brutal means, seeking to impose its vision of socialism through a program of ‘land reform’ that was achieved at the cost of thousands of lives. Faced with popular resistance to this measure, and with splits over policy within the Communist leadership, Ho Chi Minh was forced to admit that the Communist Party and the government were at fault.

Yet even as Ho Chi Minh made public declarations of error in relation to land reform, he and his colleagues were planning to gain control over the whole of the territory of Vietnam. His early instructions to the Communist guerrilla forces that had remained in the south were to wait patiently, but by 1959 he and his politburo associates had abandoned this strategy. Reorganisation of existing forces in the south and the infiltration of new forces from the north enabled the Communists to begin serious harassment of the Diem regime. With a series of hit-and-run guerrilla raids, small in number but significant in their effect, the Second Indochina War, the *American* war in Vietnam, had begun and with it the post-colonial settlement of 1954 had been swept away forever. The stage was set for the longest and most savage of any conflict that had racked a single country in Southeast Asia. Peace would only come in 1975 after a terrible war and immense loss of life.

## CAMBODIA

When Cambodia gained its independence in November 1953 there was no doubt about who dominated its politics. As both king and the country’s leading politician, Norodom Sihanouk had every right to claim responsibility for Cambodia’s emerging into independence nearly a year before that divided status was conferred on Vietnam. What is more, when the Geneva Conference was held the following year Sihanouk and his conservative advisers were able to prevent any special role being given to the limited number of Communists who had fought as allies of the Viet Minh during the First Indochina War. (This contrasted with what has already been described in relation to Vietnam, with the Communist Vietnamese major participants in the conference and, as will be seen later, with what happened in relation to Laos.)

In theory, at least, independent Cambodia was a highly qualified constitutional monarchy, with the ruler’s power at least in part circumscribed by an elected parliament. In fact, with the weight of tradition behind him and skilful manipulation of constitutional arrangements, Sihanouk had shown in the years leading up to independence that he could circumvent the power of parliament to promote his own political agenda. Yet he still faced a measure of opposition from politicians who argued against a system that they believed continued to place too much power in the king’s hands. Reacting to this situation, Sihanouk in February 1955 held a referendum that sought the Cambodian population’s judgment on the efforts he had undertaken to gain independence, a period he termed the ‘Royal Crusade’—in effect, the referendum was also, in Sihanouk’s eyes, a judgment on his overall political performance. The result was an overwhelming endorsement of his actions, but his pleasure in this result was soon qualified by the evidence that some of the apparent enthusiasm shown by the public for the successful result had been stage-managed. Added to his annoyance was the fact that there were still politicians who were ready to oppose his plans to amend the Cambodian Constitution to ensure that at all times the king’s political wishes would prevail.

It was at this point, in March 1955, that Sihanouk dropped his bombshell; indeed, he later called it his ‘atomic bomb’. Without any prior notice he announced that he was abdicating the throne, which henceforth was to be occupied by his father, Norodom Suramarit. He was now free, he later said, to engage in politics as ‘citizen Sihanouk’, unconstrained by his position as king. His abdication was a brilliant move. It meant that he brought to his new activist role as politician all the traditional respect accorded a Cambodian monarch without his being handicapped by ceremonial duties and limitations on his freedom, which were part and parcel of occupying the throne. His next major decision, in April, was no less bold and, for the moment, no less successful. Tired of the factional nature of Cambodian politics he next announced the formation of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* (People’s Socialist Community), a political *movement*, not a party, to which people of all political persuasions could belong, so long as they pledged loyalty to the throne and to Sihanouk’s policies. In the space of two months Sihanouk had rewritten the rules of Cambodian politics and set in place arrangements that defined the parameters of Cambodian politics for the next decade. These were the essential domestic political arrangements that were still in place in 1970 when Sihanouk's right-wing opponents tipped him out of office and set in train the tragic events that led to the triumph and terrible tyranny of the Pol Pot regime.

## LAOS

Somewhat surprisingly, given its character as the smallest of the countries that once formed French Indochina, the post-independence history of Laos was notably more complex than was the case for Cambodia, or even for Vietnam. In Vietnam's case, and once it was clear that the elections proposed in the Geneva Accords were not going to take place, the central issue of Vietnamese politics was clear: would the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) under its Communist leadership succeed in extending its control over the whole of Vietnam and in so doing defeat the United States-backed Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)? In Cambodia, Sihanouk's pre-emptive political decision to abdicate, and so to become a committed actor in his country's politics, set the direction of his country's politics for more than a decade. Nothing nearly so straightforward may be said about the immediate post-colonial developments in Laos, where politics and hostilities intersected in a bewildering fashion. Some hint of the complexity of the problems that existed in Laos is gained through knowledge of the fact that two royal half-brothers assumed opposing political positions in the politico–military history of Laos after the Second World War and into the years after 1953: Prince Souvanna Phouma as a neutralist, Prince Souphanouvong as a Communist.

As noted in an earlier chapter, the independence Laos gained in 1953 was flawed from the start, so that the very concept of a post-colonial settlement is, perhaps, not really applicable in this case. At the Geneva Conference, and in notable contrast to what happened in relation to Cambodia, recognition was given to the right of the Lao Communists to play a part in the political life of independent Laos. This reflected the fact that, with the vital backing of the Viet Minh forces, the Lao Communists' military arm controlled two key provinces, Phongsali and Sam Neua, in northern Laos, though their actual numbers were small, perhaps 2000 troops in all. Tellingly, these were two provinces that bordered North Vietnam.

In the agreements negotiated at the Geneva Conference, the intention was that the Royal Lao Government in Vientiane and the Communists should strike a *modus vivendi* that would result in a unified government for the whole of Laos. At the political level this briefly appeared to be achieved, with representatives of the Lao Communists contesting an election held in 1957, and gaining seats in the national parliament. But Laos could not escape the pressures of the Cold War and the steadily deteriorating security situation in South Vietnam. On the one hand, the United States made clear its intention to back those conservative Lao politicians opposing a role for the Communists. On the other, with North Vietnam's backing, the Lao Communists refused to surrender their military control over the northern provinces and to integrate with the rest of the Lao army. The result was a situation in which little was done for the well-being of the bulk of the Lao population as successive governments in Vientiane manoeuvred for personal and political advantage.

The pattern was broken for a short period in 1960 when a young Lao army captain, Kong Le, mounted a *coup d'état* with the aim of making Laos a truly neutral state. This was a critical moment for all the external parties with an interest in Laos and resulted in another Geneva Conference that, once again, had the proclaimed aim of establishing a neutral Laos. It was not to be. None of the parties, with the exception of a few individuals genuinely dedicated to a neutral solution, were ready to abandon the goal of defeating their opponents. The conservative Lao politicians, who were mostly drawn from aristocratic official families and whose views were set along very traditional lines, saw their political and material interests as linked to the United States, while the Lao Communists, with the support of the North Vietnamese, were equally unready to compromise. Increasingly the civil war in Laos became linked to the larger war taking place in Vietnam as the political contest in Vientiane steadily tipped in the Communists' favour.

In each of the four countries considered in this chapter the weaknesses of the post-colonial settlements were exposed within a relatively short time after independence was achieved. The next chapter examines how the achievement of independence without hostilities and the pursuit of political aims through parliamentary systems in Burma, Malaya, the Philippines and Singapore resulted in equally important changes to the post-colonial settlements in each country.

# THIRTEEN

# An end to post-colonial settlements and beyond II: Burma (Myanmar), Malaya, Singapore, the Philippines and the Thai exception

The end of the post-colonial settlements in the four countries considered in the previous chapter came in circumstances in which a system of government based on anything approaching Western democratic parliamentary forms was either never instituted (Vietnam), was so weak that it could be subverted, as was done by Sukarno and Sihanouk (Indonesia and Cambodia), or never really functioned separate from great power politics (Laos). Circumstances were different in Burma, Malaya, Singapore and the Philippines. In the case of each of these countries it appeared that the various post-colonial settlements, which were broadly parliamentary in character, would continue to function, despite the sometimes difficult problems faced by successive governments. For it was certainly not the case that the parliamentary systems instituted in these countries after the Second World War operated in perfect circumstances. As has already been described, there was the Emergency period in Malaya and the Huk rebellion in the Philippines. Yet in each country's case, though in very different ways, the post-colonial settlements came to an end or were substantially altered.

## BURMA (MYANMAR)

The events in the period immediately following the end of the Second World War have already been discussed. With the defeat of the Japanese there was no doubt that Burma was going to become independent. The

British government had been hesitant to address the demands for independence made by Burmese nationalists in the 1930s, but a very different atmosphere prevailed following the end to the Second World War. Not least, the newly elected Labour government in London was committed to decolonisation in India and, by extension, in Burma, where there was an almost universal commitment to independence on the part of the Burman (Bamar people) ethnic majority (the attitude of the various minority ethnic groups was another matter). Yet within the existence of this commitment on the part of Burman politicians there were intense factional divisions among the political parties as they planned for independence, while other political divisions resulted from the long-established rivalries between the Burmans and the various ethnic groups making up the rest of the Burmese population: the Shans, Karens, Chins and Kachins, to mention the most prominent of these minorities.

As recounted previously, political rivals made the reality of Burmese factionalism tragically clear through the assassination of Aung San and six of his associates. With Aung San’s death in July 1947, Burma lost its most able politician, but progress towards independence was not checked and his place was taken by U Nu, who became Burma’s first prime minister.

Despite serious separatist challenges to Rangoon’s authority, the government survived throughout the 1950s, to a considerable extent because those opposing it were divided in their aims. But there was also division at the heart of the central government. The prime minister, U Nu, was disposed to introduce policies that took some account of Burma’s ethnic diversity. He was, for instance, ready to sanction some degree of autonomy for the Shans. Thinking along these lines flew in the face of the policies advocated by the Burmese army. Its leaders were committed to a firmly centralised state and believed that their view should be accepted since they had borne the brunt of combating the separatists’ armed challenges. With continuing political squabbling among civilian politicians and the ongoing threats posed by demands for autonomy from the minorities, the army, led by General Ne Win, took matters into their own hands and deposed U Nu and his government in March 1962.

The coup was almost bloodless—only one person was killed—but the death of parliamentary government was profoundly important and an event of long-lasting significance. As U Nu was sent into exile, the military established a Revolutionary Council that was to rule by decree for the next twelve years. The introduction of a new constitution in 1974 did not mean the end of rule dominated by the military. In the 1980s it briefly appeared that the military leadership was prepared to relax its control over Burmese life, but throughout the 1990s, and despite a degree of economic liberalisation, the army continued to hold power. In part it justified its actions in light of continuing challenges to central authority from the still-powerful minorities.

Developments in the first decade of the present century, and the persistence of democratic campaigners associated with Aung San Suu Kyi (General Aung San's daughter), finally saw the introduction of a new constitution in 2008 which paved the way for a civilian government in 2011. Elections in 2012 were marked by Aung San Suu Kyi's participation and her taking a seat in parliament. Then, and following the elections of November 2015, the sweeping victory of the National League for Democracy led by Aung San Suu Kyi appeared to have transformed Myanmar's political landscape. Subsequent events have shown that expecting the military would defer to civilian politicians because of their election success and limit their activities was both overly optimistic and failed to recognise core underlying features of the country's political challenges. Despite the evidence of popular feeling in favour of a democratic form of government, the military showed it was determined to remain a major influence in the country. Most particularly this was reflected in its actions in 2016 and 2017 of brutally forcing large numbers of minority Rohingya people out of Myanmar and into neighbouring Bangladesh. To the dismay of much of the international community Aung San Suu Kyi defended the military's actions. Nevertheless, internally she remained highly popular and led the National League for Democracy to a resounding electoral victory in 2020. Claiming electoral fraud, the military did not accept the result and in February 2021 mounted a coup led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.

The immediate and continuing result was the outbreak of a brutal civil war within Myanmar's boundaries which at the time of writing shows no sign of reaching a conclusion. From an historical point of view it seems proper to reflect that the high hopes that were held by many Burmese for the success of an independent Burma, given its natural wealth and the widespread literacy of its population, vanished with the military takeover of

1962. That event dealt a deathblow to the concept of the primacy of democratic institutions from which the state has never really recovered.

## MALAYA

When Malaya gained its independence in August 1957 it did so on the basis of a series of understandings between the political leaders of the two most important ethnic groups within the country, the majority Malays and the biggest ethnic minority group, the Chinese—understandings reached with the concurrence of the smaller Indian ethnic minority, which was less important politically and economically. To a considerable extent the nature of these understandings reflected the amicable personal relationships between the Malay and Chinese leaders of the time, Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tan Cheng Lok respectively. Written into the constitution was an acceptance of Malay privilege as a result of their being the 'sons of the soil' or 'people of the country', *bumiputra* or *bumiputera* in the Malay language. In practice this meant that Malays were reserved positions within the civil service and given special access to educational scholarships. The religion of the Malays was also recognised by the constitution's enshrining Islam as the state religion, though the right of citizens to practise other religions was also recognised. The traditional rulers of the Malay states, the sultans, continued to play an important part within the new constitutional arrangements so far as state, rather than federal, responsibilities were concerned. Moreover, one of their number was to occupy the essentially ceremonial position of King of Malaya on a rotating basis.

The essentials of these arrangements could be summed up in the following fashion: Malays were to be dominant in the field of politics while the commercially powerful Chinese were to continue as the privileged group in the economic sector. Together, the leading Malay and Chinese political parties—the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) respectively—dominated Malaya's parliament and were known as the Alliance.

The first break from the constitutional arrangements of 1957 came in September 1963 with the establishment of the new Federation of Malaysia, composed of Malaya, the two British territories in Borneo, Sarawak and Sabah, and Singapore. The idea of forming this new federation came from Tunku Abdul Rahman, the prime minister of Malaya, but it was a concept eagerly embraced by Britain, which still had imperial responsibilities in the Borneo territories and in Singapore and was anxious to be rid of them. Although Singapore enthusiastically joined the new federation its leaders appear, at the time, not to have recognised the extent to which their participation, as a majority ethnic Chinese state, was unsettling for many in the Malay political establishment based in Kuala Lumpur. For these Malays Singapore was seen as a potential Chinese fifth column, likely to undermine Malaysia's identity with its privileged position for ethnic Malays and a commitment to Islam as the state religion. When it became clear that Singapore leaders believed that they had as much right as the Malay leadership to aspire to the highest offices in the federation and actively campaigned with this belief in mind, Tunku Abdul Rahman and his colleagues decided to expel Singapore from the federation. This they did in August 1965, leaving Singapore to pursue its own future as an independent country.

This separation of Singapore from the Malaysian federation was an event of great importance, but it may be argued that the most profound break with the post-colonial settlement came four years later. By 1969 there was growing discontent within both Malay and Chinese circles with the terms of the understandings that had been behind the terms of the 1957 constitution. It became increasingly clear that from the point of view of many Malays an arrangement that effectively ceded economic power to the Chinese in return for political dominance was no longer an acceptable bargain. From the point of view of some Malays the ruling Malay party, UMNO, was both insufficiently attuned to the interests of its ethnic constituency and was failing to promote Islamic values in a sufficiently vigorous fashion. Views of this kind lay behind the slowly growing importance of a Malay party—known as PAS from its Malay name—committed to the goal of making Malaysia an Islamic state. At the same time there was a growing resentment among younger Chinese at what they saw as their second-class status by comparison with the Malays. For some ethnic Chinese it was no longer enough to be allowed to prosper but to be forever prevented from holding true political power. With the presence of criticisms and concerns of the kind just noted, electoral backing for the main Malay and Chinese political parties that had supported the 1957 constitution began to flag. When elections were held in May 1969 Chinese voters deserted the Alliance in favour of opposition candidates linked to new parties that were overwhelmingly Chinese in ethnic character. At the same time, PAS succeeded in winning parliamentary seats that had previously been held by UMNO politicians. So while the Alliance continued in control of parliament it did so with sharply reduced numbers and with the sudden rise to importance of the new Chinese-dominated parties.

The flashpoint came immediately after the elections when supporters of the new Chinese opposition parties celebrated their success in gaining seats in parliament with a victory parade in the capital, Kuala Lumpur. This provoked a counter-demonstration on 13 May by supporters of the governing Malay party that was followed by four days of savage communal rioting that pitched predominantly young Malays and Chinese against each other and led to an admitted death toll of over two hundred—unofficial estimates of the death toll were considerably higher. The immediate results of these events were the proclamation of a state of emergency and the suspension of parliament, with all essential executive powers placed in the hands of a National Operations Council.

The longer-term effects of the communal rioting that took place on 13 May involved the reshaping of the understandings that lay behind the 1957 constitution. With Malay opinion deeply disturbed about what had taken place and already worried that their special position within Malaysian society was being eroded, a series of changes was introduced to amend the constitution. These changes reinforced the privileged position of the Malays by, for instance, making their special rights an issue that could not be debated, including in parliament. Regulations were introduced to increase, by quota, the number of Malays who entered university. And, perhaps most importantly of all, changes were made to the way in which Malaysia’s economy was regulated under what was known as the New Economic Policy—usually referred to by its initials as the NEP. This policy sought to redress the situation in which commercial success was seen as the essential preserve of the country’s ethnic Chinese. Malay ownership of commercial enterprises, including those run by the state, was to be encouraged and assisted by government intervention.

No mention of this vital period in Malaysia’s modern history following the events of May 1969 can fail to make reference to Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who as a member of the ruling Malay party lost his seat in parliament at the time to a candidate from the Islamic PAS party. Still relatively unknown at this point, the medical doctor turned politician sprang into prominence by writing to Prime Minister Abdul Rahman accusing him and his colleagues of failing to stand up for Malay rights. In the short term this led to Dr Mahathir's being expelled from UMNO, the ruling Malay party. In the longer term it was one important step along the route that took him to the prime ministership of Malaysia in 1981 and to a remarkable career as leader of his country for twenty-two years.

## SINGAPORE

As has just been noted, Singapore was expelled from Malaysia in August 1965. This climactic event should be seen as the final step in a long-running and complex political debate that had at its core the difficulty of deciding just what place Singapore, with its ethnic Chinese majority, should occupy in relation to the Malay Peninsula, where power was in the hands of its ethnic Malay majority. Earlier in this book Singapore's remarkable rise to become Southeast Asia's key commercial entrepôt was charted, with the observation that from early in its modern existence Singapore was closely linked economically with Johore, the Malay state just across the narrow straits that lay between the two. By the interwar period Singapore was administered as part of the Straits Settlements that linked it with Malacca (Melaka) and Penang, but it had close commercial links with the rest of Malaya. Moreover, from the point of view of the colonial power, Britain, the Straits Settlements and the states that made up Malaya were essentially a single political unit, whatever the differences in the ways in which parts of this unit were administered. Before the Second World War and without any pressing calls for independence, either in the Straits Settlements or in the Malay states, there seemed little reason for Britain to think about Singapore's future status or to reflect on the fact that it was an entity with a majority ethnic Chinese entity in a region that was dominated, in terms of population, by Malays and Indonesians.

As was the case in so many other ways, the Second World War changed this situation. With peace achieved in 1945, the newly elected Labour government in London was determined to embark on a program of decolonisation. Plans in this early post-Second World War period to include Singapore in a scheme that would have joined it to Malaya were rejected by Malay leaders. As a result, and as Malaya steadily moved towards the independence it achieved in 1957, Singapore occupied an uncertain position as a British colony with a majority ethnic Chinese population and with its emerging political leaders apparently firmly left-wing in character. By this stage there was no longer an entity called the Straits Settlement, since Malacca and Penang had been absorbed into the Malayan Federation.

The image of Singapore as a colony with a dangerously left-wing character was to change as the People's Action Party (PAP) under Lee Kuan Yew and his lieutenants came to dominate the island's politics and as they vigorously embraced the view that Singapore's future lay in merger with Malaysia. Moreover, by the late 1950s, the Singapore government was increasingly showing its readiness to combat its domestic left-wing opponents, some of whom undoubtedly were Communists, including through their detention without trial. In September 1962 Lee's government won a referendum on the desirability of joining a future Federation of Malaysia. Then, having proclaimed that Singapore was independent, on 31 August 1963, fifteen days before the new Federation of Malaysia came into being, Singapore joined with Malaya and the British Borneo territories to be part of this newly established state. This, for Singapore, was the post-colonial settlement that its leaders had most earnestly desired. To add gloss to what they believed was their triumph, the PAP won a resounding victory in the domestic elections held on 21 September 1963. Taken together, these developments represented Singapore's post-colonial settlement.

The fact that the end to this settlement came so rapidly, in just under two years from the date of the establishment of the Federation of Malaysia, reflected a series of fundamental misunderstandings and misjudgments on both sides of the causeway linking Singapore to peninsular Malaysia. As already recounted, the Malay leadership of the new federation believed that Singapore politicians would not seek to play a role outside their own territory until after elections due in Malaysia in April 1964. Indeed, members of the Singapore government had suggested that this would be the case as late as the end of 1963. But Lee Kuan Yew and his colleagues changed their minds, for at least two main reasons. First, they had been disturbed for some time by a concern that the MCA, the Chinese component of the Alliance in the federal Malaysian parliament, might seek to make political inroads into their control of Singapore. Second, and more importantly, the PAP leaders came to believe that they could play an important part at the federal level in Malaysia, perhaps even as ministers. Against a background of tensions caused by Indonesia's policy of

‘Confrontation’ and Lee Kuan Yew’s efforts to spearhead a united opposition to the ruling Alliance at the federal level, the Malaysian leadership headed by Tunku Abdul Rahman decided that there was no place in Malaysia for Singapore. The expulsion took place on 9 August after Lee Kuan Yew had unsuccessfully pleaded with the disillusioned Tunku in Kuala Lumpur not to take this action.

By any standards Singapore began its renewed independence existence facing great difficulties. It was a state without natural resources, dependent on water piped in from the Malayan peninsula. Its entrepôt trade was important but it desperately needed to diversify its economic base. Nearly sixty years later these handicaps have been overcome. Hard though it is for a visitor in the third decade of the twenty-first century to believe, much of Singapore’s population in the 1960s was housed in what can only be described as a tropical slum. The modern city a visitor sees today reflects the skills and the commitment of three political generations of extremely able leaders who have never hesitated to make clear their view that the interests of the population in general frequently require limitations on the exercise of individual freedom.

## PHILIPPINES

The fact that the Philippines gained its long-promised independence shortly after the Second World War ended has already been noted in relation to the challenge posed to the country’s independent government by the Hukbalahap movement (Chapter Ten). At one level the emergence of an independent government took place with remarkably little constitutional difficulty. The United States had promised independence in 1935 so that the formal event, celebrated on 4 July 1946, was a foregone conclusion to America’s colonial endeavour. Just as the date echoed Independence Day in the United States—Philippines *National Day* celebrated on 12 June refers to the country’s earlier struggle against the Spanish—so, too, the constitutional arrangements adopted reflected the American legislative model. The independent Philippines was ruled by an elected president who shared power with a bicameral legislature consisting of a House of Representatives and a Senate. As with the United States, the president was the dominant figure in post-Second World War political life. But in contrast to the United States, the Philippines Senate was elected on a nationwide basis, a fact that led to the Senate's becoming the natural launching pad for politicians aspiring to the presidency. It was also a constitutional arrangement that made the relatively stable basis of party politics, to be found in countries such as the United States, Britain and Australia, foreign to the Philippines. Party allegiances were weak and politicians were ready to switch from one party to another if it appeared to be in their personal interest.

Note has been taken already of the manner in which the issue of collaboration with the Japanese was handled after the Second World War in the Philippines. In essence, too many of the elite had cooperated with the Japanese for the political class to engage in protracted trials and subsequent punishment to expunge that memory. Bolstering this approach was a fundamental fact of Philippines political life that only recently has become open to question. For much of the period since the Second World War politics in the Philippines has been the preserve of the elite, notwithstanding the role played by a limited number of individuals who enter politics from a non-elite background. The elite are mostly members of, or connected to, the large landowning families whose interests spread into every sphere of life, whether political, economic or social. And in 1945–46, as manoeuvring for both presidential and later legislative elections took place, it is not an overstatement to say that there was scarcely a single elite politician who, even if he had not collaborated with the Japanese himself, did not have a relative or other close connection who had done so. This, as recounted earlier, contrasted with the role that had been played by the Huks during the war. They had fought against the Japanese and their peasant support represented a political and social challenge to the elite. This was why the Huks who were elected to the Philippines Congress were denied the opportunity to take up their seats in the elections held in 1946 by their elite opponents.

The first president to be elected in the independent Philippines was Manuel Roxas. A quintessential member of the elite, with strong links to the country's powerful sugar interests, he had been prominent in the pre-war Commonwealth period and was associated with the 'independence' granted by Japan to the Philippines in 1943. The negative implications of this latter association were neutralised by the support he received from General Douglas MacArthur, the American commander-in-chief in the Pacific, who played the role of proconsul in the Philippines in the months immediately after the defeat of the Japanese.

In the years immediately following Roxas' election to the presidency in 1946—he died in 1948—Philippines politics followed a familiar but depressing course, recalling the elite struggles of the 1930s but without the political buffer that the United States' colonial presence had provided. Indeed, most historians would argue that at this period, and subsequently, American support for the country's essentially elite political structure stood in the way of reform. The Huks remained a dangerous challenge to the central government's authority, particularly in Luzon, and bribery and corruption were accepted as a normal part of political life in the post-colonial settlement.

The challenge to congressional politics as usual came from an unexpected quarter, from Ramon Magsaysay, a distinctly non-elite figure. In contrast to so many in Philippines politics, Magsaysay had been an active guerrilla fighting against the Japanese during the war. Perhaps even more strikingly, he was the son of a teacher who had turned to blacksmithing to earn a living. Capitalising on his wartime record, he entered politics and was named as Secretary of Defence in President Quirino's cabinet following the 1949 elections. In this position he revitalised the fight against the Huks and then went on to win the presidential election in 1953.

For a period it appeared that the grip of the elite on Philippines politics might be broken as President Magsaysay promoted men of talent to government positions. It was not to be. When Magsaysay died in a plane crash in 1957, much of the spirit of change that he had tried to inject into politics died with him. Very importantly, and despite his success in neutralising the challenge of the Huks, most of the land reform he promised had not been instituted. Without change in this vital area of social and economic life, control of politics remained in the hands of an elite that drew both its wealth and power from connections with great landed estates. Nevertheless, important change did begin to take place in other sectors of the Philippines economy from Magsaysay's presidency onwards. With multinational companies seizing opportunities to invest in the Philippines and working with the established elite there was a surge in construction in urban areas and in particular in Manila. At the same time, as relative stability replaced the chaotic years of the war, an increasing number of young men and women went on to tertiary education following high school.

The event that was eventually to lead to the end of the post-colonial settlement in the Philippines took place in 1963. In that year Ferdinand

Marcos, an ambitious lawyer who falsely claimed to have been a prominent guerrilla leader during the war, won election to the presidency of the senate. Using this position as a base to campaign for the presidency of the nation, he gained that post in 1965 with the proclaimed aims of rejuvenating the Philippines. During his first term in office it appeared that Marcos might achieve his stated goal of transforming the body politic. Despite the fact that little changed fundamentally and the old elite continued to dominate the country's economy, the financial spinoffs the Philippines received from the Vietnam War as the result of the major American bases sited in Luzon provided a cushion of prosperity, even if the amount of benefit that trickled down to the poor was very limited. Marcos' promises of better government combined with judicious pork-barrelling were enough to ensure his re-election as president in 1969 and so to be the first president to serve a second term. His claims to wartime heroism were still unchallenged and his flamboyant wife, Imelda, successfully projected an image of concern for the disadvantaged in society while living a life of indulgent luxury herself.

The break with the post-colonial settlement came in the third year of Marcos' second term. Until then, and despite the vicissitudes of Philippines politics, the essentials of the constitutional arrangements introduced in 1946 had remained in place. Then, in September 1972, Marcos broke with this established pattern and declared martial law in order, he said, to preserve democracy and in the face of what he claimed to be a threatening Communist-led revolution. The reality was very different. He was a year away from the end of his second term as president and the constitution forbade him from running a third time. He had convinced himself that he was indispensable to the future of the Philippines and to this end he was ready to jail thousands of his opponents without giving them recourse to the courts to challenge their imprisonment. He knew that many in the elite had grown critical of his policies and his lifestyle, but he also knew that other sections of the elite, particularly those with connections to the business community, and conservatively inclined members of the army officer corps were sympathetic to his views. Middle-class opinion gave some support to his decision, and even those who campaigned on a better deal for the urban and rural poor drew hope from his apparent readiness to introduce reform, particularly land reform. Moreover, with President Richard Nixon in the White House, Marcos' strongly avowed anti-Communism assured him of support from the United States.

The apparently positive aspects of the introduction of martial law were soon shown to be fragile, even ephemeral. As Marcos became ever more firmly entrenched in the presidency his claimed commitment to reform was increasingly called into question. Bold ideas of land reform stalled at the same time as Marcos dispensed benefits to his close associates in a style that came to be known as ‘crony capitalism’. Imelda Marcos, with her flamboyant personal indulgences and unfettered spending of state funds on pretentiously grand buildings, such as hotels and cultural centres, that were supposed to add to the regime’s prestige, epitomised all that was politically hollow about the Marcos period. And while corrupt indulgence and crony capitalism was a way of life in the capital, developments in the countryside were eating away at the government’s authority.

By the early 1980s a resurgent Communist party was gaining recruits and asserting increasing regional power through its armed wing, the New People’s Army. At the same time, the difficulties that had always existed between the Catholic-dominated government in Manila and the minority Muslim community in the southern islands of the country, particularly in the large island of Mindanao, were growing more intense. The army’s response to these challenges more often than not appeared to involve ruthless, indiscriminate violence that made little if any effort to distinguish between the state’s enemies and guiltless peasants who lived in areas where the army was operating. Meanwhile, the economy was faltering and Marcos was increasingly affected by chronic disease. Nevertheless, he was able in 1981 to lift martial law temporarily and to stage a corrupt presidential election that entrenched him in power for a further four years.

The period from 1981 to 1985 was one of the darkest in the history of the modern Philippines. As the economy lurched into further disarray and security in the provinces was increasingly compromised, political life in Manila became ever more bizarre and corrupt. With Imelda Marcos continuing her indulgent lifestyle, still claiming to be the voice of the ‘little people’, Marcos himself was absent for long periods as he underwent medical treatment. Key members of the military continued to support Marcos in return for the favours that this support brought them, led by General Fabian Ver, Marcos’ right-hand man, a Marcos cousin who had risen to his elevated rank from a lowly beginning through unstinted loyalty.

The whole fragile house of cards began to fall apart in the wake of a ruthless assassination. In 1983 Benigno Aquino, an avowed political enemy of Marcos, returned from exile in the United States with the aim of challenging the president. As he left his aircraft at Manila airport a gunman linked to the military shot him down. This was the beginning of the end for Marcos. Aquino's murder mobilised a broad coalition against Marcos including, very importantly, both disaffected members of the military and outspoken members of the broad Catholic community, including many, but initially far from all, of its powerful bishops. At the head of this coalition was Aquino's wife, Corazon Aquino. Like her dead husband, and emphasising the extent to which some essential features of Philippines politics remained unchanged, she was a member of the powerful Cojuanco family, a *mestizo* family with large landholdings in Pampanga province north of Manila.

An unlikely candidate to lead a political revolution, Mrs Aquino was named as the opposition candidate to run against Marcos in the election held in February 1986. There is no doubt that on a fair counting of the votes she won the election, but an increasingly ill Marcos and his supporters refused to admit this was the case. The result was an extraordinary outpouring of popular resentment against Marcos and his regime, with former Marcos allies, hundreds of thousands of Manila's population and, of the greatest importance, large numbers of religious, both priests and nuns, surging onto the streets to protest against the proclaimed election result and calling for Marcos' departure. After some initial hesitation, the Catholic Archbishop of Manila, Jaime Cardinal Sin, lent his voice to these demands at the same time as most of the military refused to confront the demonstrators. By the end of February Marcos had fled the country and Mrs Aquino was installed as president. In one sense the post-colonial settlement had been restored, but the period of martial law under Marcos had shown how fragile Philippines politics had become before 1972. This fragility has far from disappeared in the years that have followed the triumph of the 'People Power' revolution of February 1986. For some observers the election to the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte, a regional strongman from Mindanao, in 2016 represented a break with the past elite pattern of Philippines politics. Other commentators are less sure, seeing in the Duterte presidency a widening of the past oligarchic pattern of leadership rather than its rejection. This judgment was ultimately boosted by the election to the presidency, in 2022, of Ferdinand Marcos Junior, known widely by his nickname, Bongbong, a quintessential elite figure and son of the disgraced former president. His striking electoral victory suggested that his father's name and the claimed value of his policies, rather than the reality, were more important than the critical attitudes that were manifest in the remarkable 1986 period of People Power.

## THAILAND

As repeatedly emphasised, Thailand is the only country in Southeast Asia that did not experience colonial rule. So to look for a 'colonial settlement' and to make judgments about when there were departures from it, as has been done with other countries in the region in this and the previous chapter, is not an option. But it is possible to chart the broad outline of developments affecting Thailand's constitutional history since the 1932 coup that ended the system of absolute monarchy existing up to that date. In doing so, it is necessary to concentrate on the essentials of a period of great complexity in which rival political groups, almost all of them elite in character until very recently, have struggled to shape the character of the Thai state. While the events described are distinctively Thai, they have some general similarities with what occurred in other Southeast Asian states, particularly after the Second World War, as individuals and groups manoeuvred to find new political answers to changing times.

Despite the quite radical aims of some of those who played a part in the 1932 coup—a group led by an academic lawyer, Pridi Phanomyong, and that even extended to considering the possibility of establishing a republic—the men who held power in Thailand during the 1930s continued to be deeply conservative in outlook. The power of the monarchy had been constrained, but the traditional respect for the institution did not disappear. A system of government was instituted that had an electoral element, but ultimate power lay with the military and their civilian associates. Conservative though they were, they did make some progressive changes, including the introduction of compulsory, universal primary education and a reduction of taxes at the village level.

The accession to power of a prominent military man, Phibun Songkhram, in 1938 reflected a swing back to even more conservative politics. This was apparent both in domestic politics and in the sphere of international relations. Under Phibun, Thai values were promoted as superior to those of Western nations and there was admiration for the aggressive nationalism of

Japan. (This was also the time when the name ‘Thailand’ was introduced to replace ‘Siam’ as the name of the country.) With France defeated in Europe, Phibun seized the opportunity afforded by French weakness to attack French forces in Indochina and gain control over frontier regions of Cambodia and Laos. This boosted Thai pride, but it was a result that had involved mediation by the Japanese, who by 1941 were the controlling power in French Indochina. When, in December 1941, the Japanese used Thai territory to mount their attack against British Malaya, Phibun’s government could only acquiesce in their actions and subsequently, at Japanese urgings, declare war on the Allies. For the moment and in the light of Japan’s apparently unstoppable advance in the rest of Southeast Asia, Thailand appeared firmly in the Japanese camp. It was not, nevertheless, ready to fight on the side of the Japanese. As it had shown in its previous dealings with the West, when it made concessions to preserve its independence, Thailand once again was ready to ‘bend with the wind’ when no other course of action seemed possible.

Three years later, as the war drew towards an end and the defeat of Japan appeared inevitable, Thai policy changed again. Through skilful diplomacy and as the victorious Allies faced major preoccupations elsewhere, Thailand paid only minimal costs at the end of the war for its dalliance with Japan. It had to give back the territory it had gained in Cambodia and Laos, but its success in putting the past behind it was reflected in the country’s admission to the United Nations in 1946. By the time this occurred the revolving door quality of Thai national politics had seen Pridi once again become prime minister, only to lose power after the mysterious death of the young King Ananda in June 1946. In 1948, with the military continuing to occupy an important place in Thai politics, Phibun, by now with the rank of field marshal, again became prime minister. In a pattern emphasising underlying elite instability, there were no fewer than four failed coup attempts led by military men between 1948 and 1951. Phibun and his government survived these attempted coups and he continued to rule until 1957 when, after narrowly winning a general election for a new parliament, he was deposed in yet another coup by a long-time rival, General Sarit Thanarit.

Sarit had little patience with the parliament elected in 1957 and dissolved it in 1958. His authoritarian bent and determined assault on the influence of the Communist Party of Thailand was softened by his readiness to promote men of talent within the civil service and to bolster the role of the Thai king. At the same time, Sarit presided over the development of ever-closer ties with the United States. His policies were inspired by security concerns over developments in the former states of French Indochina but led, as a major side benefit, to increased American investment in Thailand. When Sarit died in 1963, to be succeeded by Thanom Kittikachorn, military-dominated rule continued and ties with the United States became even closer. A brief flirtation with parliamentary rule at the end of the 1960s ended in 1971 when Thanom, backed by conservative elements in the military, again took power. In doing so he set the stage for an eruption of anger from those in Thai society who were no longer ready to accept that the military and their allies had an inherent right to dominate Thai politics.

Resentment against these arrangements boiled over in October 1973, with violent demonstrations against Thanom and his associates that led to his going into exile and to new parliamentary elections. The events of this time were testimony to the emergence of a new element in the equation of Thai politics: the educated urban young who were either the children of the growing middle class or aspired to become part of that group. Many were university students who enthusiastically, if not always practically, sought to widen democratic participation among previously unrepresented groups such as urban workers and the rural poor. In this time of social ferment and the uncertain international situation following the Communist victories throughout Indochina, it briefly seemed that a vigorous Thai parliamentary system would be entrenched. But in October 1976 the still powerful right-wing and conservative elements linked to the police and sections of the military struck back. They savagely attacked students at Bangkok’s Thammasat University, claiming the students were promoting extreme radical politics. In the chaos of this period, and as many dissident students fled into exile in remote rural areas, the military again took charge, appointing a civilian, Thanin Kraivichien, as prime minister. Within a year the military acted again, pushing Thanin aside to install one of their own, General Kriangsak Chomanand, as prime minister.

Although it was far from clear at the time, the appointment of Kriangsak, who was succeeded in the 1980s by another military man, General Prem Tinsulanonda, marked a real turning point in Thai politics, one that might reasonably be termed the equivalent of the fundamental breaks with the post-colonial settlements that occurred in other Southeast Asian states. At the beginning of the 1980s there seemed no certainty that a parliamentary democracy would emerge in Thailand. Yet this was what eventually happened as Kriangsak and, more particularly, Prem successfully shepherded the country through both political and economic challenges. Dissidents in the countryside were encouraged back to mainstream politics by offers of amnesty and, where this did not work, by harsh military action. Increasingly the Bangkok government showed itself ready to take account of the interests of farmers, particularly those living in the poor provinces of the northeast of the country. But following elections in 1992 there were widespread and violent protests in Bangkok when it appeared that the military was again planning to seize power. This tested the secular trend towards democratisation that appeared to have become established, but the decisive intervention of the king ensured the continuation of parliamentary rule.

Given this politically complex background, only a supreme optimist would have suggested that what had taken place in the 1980s and 1990s had satisfactorily addressed Thailand's problems, though the institution of a new constitution in 1997 was hailed by many as offering a 'new beginning'. Subsequent events have qualified the hopes engendered by the fairly brief period of relative stability that followed 1997. And with uncertainties still present at the time of writing, following the elections held in 2023, it may be too early to judge what the prospects are for a measure of stability to be achieved in Thailand.

By the beginning of the 1980s there were eight clearly independent states in Southeast Asia. Cambodia's claim to independence was gravely compromised as the result of the Vietnamese invasion that had driven Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime from power in 1979—a development considered in the next chapter. But elsewhere, for better or worse, independent governments ruled with a widely varied set of constitutional arrangements. Brunei, never technically a colony, was to end its status as a British protectorate in 1984. This left East Timor (Timor-Leste) as the only territory in which the inhabitants' claim to independence was denied by an occupying power, Indonesia. More than a decade was to pass before Cambodia could again be classed as genuinely independent. In East Timor's case it was not until the passage of more than two decades that the treasured goal of independence was finally achieved.

## FOURTEEN

# The challenges of independence in Southeast Asia

As will be clear from the previous two chapters, the way in which the various post-colonial settlements in Southeast Asia came to an end varied greatly from country to country. Consider two of the instances that were discussed that underline this point. The sweeping aside of the assumptions that lay behind the Geneva Accords led into the bitter years of the Vietnam War with its terrible loss of life. In great contrast, Singapore's brief post-colonial association with Malaysia and its subsequent expulsion from that federation did not lead to hostilities between the two countries, however robust some of the verbal exchanges between them since 1965. So while it is possible to discuss the challenges posed by independence in a general fashion for Southeast Asia as a whole, it is also essential to recognise the very particular and different experiences of each country as its leaders have endeavoured to come to terms with a wide range of problems. This chapter offers a review of some of the most important regional and country-specific challenges.

Mention has already been made of the problems associated with rapid population growth and the difficulty this poses for the governments of Southeast Asia. Larger populations mean greater demands on governments for the provision of services and the maintenance of security—demands faced by some countries in which services are already stretched to their limits. Whenever the issue of population growth is discussed developments in Indonesia, and most particularly on the island of Java, take centre stage. For not only does Indonesia have the largest population in Southeast Asia, with more than half of the country's population concentrated in Java, it is estimated that the current population of 280 million will increase to over 300 million by 2035. So while past estimates have suggested that

Indonesia's population might not stabilise until it reaches 400 million in 2100, the slowing rate of population growth is now suggesting a substantially lower figure. Even so, the country's population will be very large indeed, posing a large range of challenges.

Indonesia is not alone in having to deal with the consequences that flow from an increase in the size of its population. The old image of Thailand as a country with open frontiers is no longer valid as the demand for agricultural land continues to grow as the size of the population increases. Population pressure is already a major problem in the Philippines, where the pervasive role of the Catholic Church, with its opposition to contraceptive measures, has meant that the country's population could possibly rise from its current size of around 114 million to 130 million by 2035. Rapid population growth is also taking place in smaller Southeast Asian states. Despite its terrible experiences in the 1970s and 1980s, which are discussed later in this chapter, Cambodia's population, which was about eight million when Pol Pot was overthrown in 1979, seems set to increase to around 20 million by about 2035.

Expansion of education, containing the challenges posed by rapid growth of the population, the need to provide adequate health care—all these are social goals that have been proclaimed by the independent governments of Southeast Asia. But such goals are costly and place heavy demands on national budgets that have frequently been sharply and adversely affected by changing patterns in the world economic situation and by the difficulties involved in transforming a colonial economy into a national economy. A country such as Indonesia is staggeringly rich in resources that range from oil and copper to rubber and tin. Finding a way of exploiting these resources and developing an economy that can balance the costs of administering and defending a population of some 280 million spread over a vast distance from Sumatra to the provinces of Papua (formerly Irian Jaya) has proved to be a daunting task. And what applies in Indonesia applies elsewhere in the region, if on a smaller scale, as governments have had to establish a set of priorities for economic development, find the personnel able to manage the programs that have been decided upon, and find the finance to change plans into reality. In pursuit of their development goals the role of foreign aid has been important for countries throughout the region. Foreign assistance should not, however, be accorded an importance that it does not deserve. In the final analysis, success or failure in confronting the problems of Southeast Asia's economic development is a matter that will be decided by the governments and populations of the region rather than by outsiders.

The determination to make its own decisions, no matter what the economic cost, was the philosophy behind the policies followed by the Burmese government for much of that country's independent existence, with relaxation in a policy that stressed self-reliance and the limitation of foreign economic activity in the country only coming in the 1990s. The cost in terms of economic growth has been considerable and none of the non-Communist states of the region have sought to follow Myanmar's example.

Against this background of demanding economic problems and of costly but essential social programs in the fields of health and education there is another set of problems facing the independent governments of Southeast Asia that is the most serious of all: the problems associated with achieving and maintaining national unity. No exaggeration is involved in the observation that without a significant degree of national unity all the other goals of the independent states are in jeopardy, if they can ever be attained. Working to attain national unity has, for all the countries of the region, been the prime concern since the gaining of independence.

The problem of achieving and maintaining national unity has existed on two levels in most of Southeast Asia. On the one hand there has been the problem of arriving at an agreed form of national government—a basic issue concerned with such matters as which group or groups in the community should hold power and under what limitations. On the other hand, there have been the problems associated with the interests of regions and minorities. In this latter case the issue of whether or not a central government's interests should override those of a group or region within the state has been at the heart of extended debate and in some cases prolonged armed struggle. For an outsider the latter type of problem—that connected with the clash of interests between the majority group and the minority, or minorities, in the population, or between a central power and a region—may be easier to comprehend. The extent to which regional and minority interests have not disappeared in Western Europe and, even more strikingly, in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, is an aid to our understanding. Even as recently as forty years ago there was a tendency to discount the importance of regional and minority interests within the developed states of Western Europe, but in the third decade of the twenty-first century no student of politics can take such a position. In Britain, one of the most fundamentally stable of all Western democracies, the policies pursued by Scottish and Welsh nationalists have shown that the special interests of their regions within a governmentally unified state can no longer be met solely by the central parliament in London. The importance of regional interests has been even more strikingly demonstrated in Spain, following the end of the Franco dictatorship. Consider the aspirations and demands of Catalonia and the Basque regions in this regard. That the Balkans should once again have been a theatre for war is a salutary reminder that conflict linked to ethnic and religious identification is not the sole preserve of the less-developed world.

There should not be much surprise, therefore, that regionalism and the interests of minority groups are also a part of contemporary Southeast Asia, and have been major problems for the countries that gained independence since the Second World War. The 2021 military coup in Myanmar—discussed later in this book—has transformed that country's political life but it has not eliminated the underlying challenges posed by the existence of a population divided by a range of ethnic identities. The fact that there are substantial ethnic minority groups in Myanmar who wish to live independently, or at least semi-autonomously, rather than be controlled by the central government in Yangon (formerly Rangoon) is essentially a continuation of a long historical fact of life. The history of Myanmar for many centuries has had as one of its dominant characteristics the clash between the efforts of the Burmans (Bamar people) to impose their control over the non-Burman elements in the population and resistance to these efforts. At best, in the past, the Burmans have succeeded in establishing a tenuous control over the Shans, Kachins, Karens and other minority groups that make up Myanmar's diverse population. With British colonial rule removed, the old tensions between the dominant Burmans and the other ethnic groups within the state re-emerged and continue to pose a problem of real significance more than seventy years after independence.

Regional problems are a continuing feature of the contemporary history of the Philippines. This fact provides another example of the way in which an independent Southeast Asian state has had to face a challenge that has developed from clear historical antecedents but has assumed new and more challenging characteristics in the post-colonial period. Under both Spanish and American colonialism the southern islands of the Philippines were a world apart. In the northern Philippines the impact of the Catholic Spanish rulers was considerable, making the Philippines the only area in Southeast Asia in which Christianity is the dominant religion. To the south, however, a different world existed, and indeed still exists today. For in the southern islands of the Philippines Islam was already established when the Spanish arrived. The Islamic faith—the religion of about 5–6 per cent of the contemporary population overall, but upwards of 24 per cent in Mindanao—sustained the population of large sections of the southern Philippines in their sense of separateness from their northern Catholic compatriots. This sense of separate identity was a cause of some problems, but as long as the government based in Manila, whether Spanish, American or most recently Filipino, did not seek to impose too strict a rule, means could be found to balance the interests of the central government and those of the Islamic southerners. The independent government of the Philippines *has* been concerned to impose its authority in the southern Islamic regions. Moreover, with the increasing population a growing number of Catholic Filipinos have settled in southern areas that once had a majority Muslim population. The result has been an episodic armed struggle between the Manila government and separatist Muslim groups. An agreement reached in 2014 with the most powerful of the Islamic groups in the southern Philippines—the Moro National Liberation Front—led to the establishment of an autonomous area, Bangsamoro, covering the southwestern region of the island of Mindanao in 2019. That this region is controlled by an Islamic administration is a major step forward in finding a long-term solution to the separatist issue. But tensions still remain and instances of armed resistance to the Manila government still occur. Put in the simplest terms, this has been a clash between those at the centre who believe that the integrity of the state requires a strong central government and those outsiders who do not share the interests, religion or identity of those holding power at the centre. Those in the southern Philippines who have resisted the central government have not felt part of the complex web of interests and shared obligations of those who look to Manila for leadership.

This lack of a sense of shared identity is to be found in other regions of Southeast Asia. The Islamic minority of southern Thailand provides a parallel example. In years gone by these ethnic Malay followers of Islam lived in a buffer state region. It was a region in which the rulers of Thailand claimed authority but seldom exercised it. Following the territorial adjustments that accompanied the British colonial advance into Malaya a substantial number of ethnic Malays, followers of Islam, found themselves under the control of a Thai state that was increasingly concerned to see an administrative unity prevailing within the kingdom. The proportion of the population involved in the case of the Thai Islamic minority is, like the Philippines, about 6 per cent of the total. But their presence is even more concentrated, so that in Thailand’s four southern provinces followers of Islam represent about 75 per cent of the population overall. And the fundamental nature of the problem their presence poses is remarkably similar. From their point of view the Thai government in Bangkok—ethnically Thai, Buddhist in religion, and centralist in its aims—cannot easily be seen as *their* government. From the point of view of the rulers in Bangkok, the followers of Islam within the territories of the state have a right to freedom of religion but not to any other special privileges. Simmering tension has led to continuing violence, with 7000 people killed and twice that number injured between 2004 and 2022.

Lesser problems have faced the Thai state in its dealings with the tribal minorities in the north of the country where, until recent times, the Meo, Karen, Akha and other hill peoples had only the most limited contact with the central administration based in Bangkok. With the passage of time and the expansion of the ethnic Thai population, the government has increasingly impinged on peoples and areas that had previously been little touched by modern administration. Mostly this increase in contact has been peaceful but it has, nevertheless, posed challenges on both sides of the changing relationship.

A different challenge to the Thai government in Bangkok emerged in recent decades. This has involved the emergence of political activism based on regional, historical and linguistic identification. Most particularly, this activism has been associated with a section of the Thai population living in the northeast of the country, or *Isan* in Thai usage, and the northern region around Chiang Mai. This activism has been linked with the ‘Red Shirt’ movement that emerged in the first decade of the present century. This is not the place to describe the complex political developments involving the Red Shirts. Rather, it is important to note that what occurred reflects the fact that much of Thailand’s population in the north and northeast of the country see themselves, and are seen by others, as a distinctive group. There are historical reasons for this since many are the descendants of ethnic Thais who once were linked to rulers in Laos but who were incorporated into the Bangkok-dominated Thai state in the nineteenth century. Their dialect is different from that of Bangkok and the central plain and, at least in popular culture dominated by the capital, they are seen as rather ‘bucolic’ in character. To a lesser extent, the population of northern Thailand, and in particular those living in and around Chiang Mai, also see themselves as distinct in many ways when compared with their central compatriots. At the time of the most active Red Shirt protests against Bangkok policies Chiang Mai, too, was a centre of regional activism that had links with the fact that it was not until the early part of last century that the region was fully integrated into the Thai state.

For all the problems posed by its various minority groups, Thailand’s experience since the Second World War has never matched the threat to the state that occurred in Indonesia in the late 1950s. Very early in this book one of the great differences between the mainland states of Southeast Asia and those of the maritime regions was noted. While mainland Southeast Asia states have, very generally, a dominant population group and a varying number of minorities, the states of maritime Southeast Asia, and most particularly Indonesia, are composed of a whole series of ethnic groups, so that no single group is as clearly dominant as is the case, for instance, with the Thais in Thailand. This contrast needs to be borne in mind when one looks at the threat to national unity that was posed by regional interests in Indonesia in the late 1950s. What was involved was not an attempted rebellion against one dominant ethnic group, as has been the case with the Shans and Karens in Myanmar when they have confronted the Burman majority. Instead, military and political leaders with regional interests in islands away from Java sought to challenge the authority of a central government in Jakarta that was supported by Indonesians of diverse ethnic background. The rebels were proclaiming through action their belief that regional interests—the interests of those in Sumatra and Sulawesi, particularly—were more important than the national interests embodied in strong central control from Jakarta. Despite clandestine backing from outside forces, the rebels failed and the unitary character of Indonesia was maintained. The rebellion showed, nevertheless, that regional interests were an important feature of Indonesia’s society and presented an ever-present risk of division and disunity.

The truth of this judgment was underlined by the reemergence of a ‘Free Aceh’ movement in northern Sumatra in the 1990s that posed a major challenge to the authority of the Jakarta-based government. This movement received considerable support from the population of Aceh, where the deep commitment to Islam in the province has led to its being known as ‘the verandah of Mecca’. By 2004, with increasing clashes between government forces and the armed followers of the Free Aceh movement, and despite efforts at international mediation, there seemed to be little prospect of a settlement that would bring peace to the province. Change came following the devastating *tsunami* that ravaged Sumatra generally and Aceh in particular in the last days of 2004. The loss of life and massive destruction proved a circuit breaker that led to renewed efforts to find a solution that would take account of Aceh’s particular character while preserving the overall authority of the Indonesia state, by this time led by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. The passage of a new law governing Aceh and elections held in the province in December 2006 together formed a solution that took account of both provincial and central government interests, including meeting Aceh’s long-held grievance that it was gaining insufficient benefit from its major oil resources. And Aceh is not the only region of Indonesia where separatists have questioned the right of a government in Jakarta to make decisions on their behalf. This is the case in the provinces of Papua, the western part of the island of New Guinea, while developments in East Timor (Timor-Leste) have shown that it is possible for even a weak but determined population to demand and gain independence from the Indonesian state.

The search for ways to achieve national unity has led to a wide range of political formulas being tried and followed or rejected by the various states of Southeast Asia in their efforts to find a system of government to meet each independent state’s individual needs. Given the very different background that the states of Southeast Asia have from the Western world, with different histories and different pressures operating on the governments of the region, the fact that close adherence to Western models is mostly absent should not be a matter for great surprise. Western parliamentary systems have evolved over centuries. The history of the twentieth century alone has shown how fragile democratic parliamentary systems can be in many states of Europe. And universal suffrage is, with the rarest exceptions, a twentieth-century phenomenon in the West.

These facts need to be kept firmly in mind when looking at the different choices that have been made by the states of Southeast Asia as to how they should be governed. In three of the non-Communist states of modern Southeast Asia the military has been closely associated with government for lengthy periods—Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia. In the Philippines President Marcos' declaration of martial law in the early 1970s depended for its effectiveness on the close support of the military. In each of these cases the military has seen its role in society as very different from the traditional role assigned to it in many Western democracies. In those Southeast Asian states where the military has played and plays an important political role, this is undertaken with the conviction that the armed forces alone can be trusted to place national before sectional interests.

Although the end of the Suharto regime in the late 1990s has qualified the point, the army in Indonesia has continued to see itself as the guardian of the revolution that gained independence from the Dutch, and while the army itself is no longer directly involved in politics, retired senior officers continue to play a visible part in contemporary political life. During the years of Sukarno's rule, or misrule, the army became more and more disillusioned with the factional fighting of the political parties and ever more concerned with the growth of support for the Indonesian Communist Party, the PKI. As recounted earlier, this led to Sukarno's downfall and the installation one of their own, General Suharto, as president of Indonesia. The terrible events of the year that followed the army's assumption of power in 1965 strikingly illustrate the extent to which politics in modern Southeast Asia can excite passions and violence. While the Indonesian army ensured that it gained a tight control over the administration, tens of thousands of anti-Communists within the population seized the opportunity to strike a devastating blow against their political enemies.

Those events in Indonesia underline the extent to which political developments and decisions as to where power should lie and how it should be exercised often have little to do with the parliamentary patterns of the West. The 'rules' that are accepted in Western countries often do not appear to Southeast Asians as valid for their own situation. The ballot box may indeed be used, and parliamentary forms adhered to, but usually in a system that allows the party or group that holds power to ensure that it retains that power. In Thailand, for instance, the military remains a vital feature of contemporary political life despite the increasing importance of a party system linked to a growing range of interest groups. This fact was given sharp emphasis by the military coup that toppled the government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's government in September 2006. Despite the return of civilian government in 2011, after four years of considerable political turmoil, the military again overturned the civilian government led by Thaksin's sister, Yingluck, in 2014. And the military has remained politically powerful following the elections of 2019 and 2023 through major representation in the country's senate.

The Malay politicians who have dominated the politics of Malaysia since independence have had no intention of altering the system that allows members of the Chinese and Indian minorities within the country to participate in politics—and indeed to hold high office—but not to play the role of equal partner. And in Brunei, after it became fully independent in 1984, the ruler, in association with members of the royal family, has exercised autocratic power without showing any intention of introducing a participatory form of government.

So long as the challenges that the established governments of Southeast Asia face include extra-parliamentary action such as insurgency, as well as opposition of a legal character, then so long should an outside observer expect that these governments in their search for ways to achieve their goals will pursue the means that seem best suited in their judgment rather than in accord with any model from the West.

One of the most important challenges to confront the various governments of Southeast Asia since the end of the Second World War has come from the political left, from Communism, with the ideas of Marx and Lenin taken as a guide to action. Given the instability that has plagued much of the Southeast Asian region and the immense problems of social inequality that have existed and still exist, the fact that there should have been a radical left-wing challenge to governments that have often been conservative in character is hardly surprising. But despite the immense importance of the Vietnam War it would be wrong to assume that Communism has been an equally powerful force throughout Southeast Asia. So while Communists have played a part in the politics of much of modern Southeast Asia, only in

Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos have Communist governments come to power.

No single chapter in a general introduction to the history of Southeast Asia can do justice to the almost endless series of issues raised by any discussion of Communism in Vietnam. For Cambodia and Laos, by contrast, another problem arises. For Cambodia, in particular, we are still groping towards an understanding of the deeper history of developments over the past fifty years. Gaps in our knowledge of the history of the Communist movement in Cambodia, both before and after independence was gained in 1953, are slowly being filled, but it is still the case that explanations as to why a shockingly radical Communist movement finally gained power in 1975 remain incomplete. What we do know for each of the three countries of Indochina is that their historical experience from the middle 1950s onwards has been singularly different from that of the other countries of Southeast Asia. In brief, the fact that Communist governments came to power in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam tells us little about the nature of left-wing politics elsewhere in the region, whether in terms of the past or for assessments of the future.

The ultimate success of the Vietnamese Communists in establishing a government over the whole of Vietnam reflects a long history of struggle and effective organisation. Of all the groups that sought to play a political role during French colonial times and to oppose colonial rule, only the Communists were able both to survive severe French repression and to show that they had a coherent program relevant to the facts of Vietnam’s colonial situation. To make these observations does not involve endorsement of the goals the Vietnamese Communists pursued. But history, as has been observed before in this book, is about what happened, not about what *might* have happened. In Vietnam the Communists, through a combination of outstanding leadership, political skills that sometimes included ruthless suppression of their Vietnamese rivals, and adherence to a political program that offered clear, if not always successful, answers to problems posed by French colonialism, became the dominant political group in Vietnam by the end of the Second World War. The experience of the First Indochina War only served to reinforce that position.

The subsequent American attempt to develop a rival Vietnamese government in southern Vietnam after 1954 failed to take account of the fact that however much an outside power might be able to provide great quantities of material aid, and ultimately massive military assistance, no other movement existed in the Vietnam of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s that could challenge the Communists in the political field.

It is true, of course, that the Vietnamese Communists won their final battle through military means, but those military means would never have been successful if there had not been political cohesion in northern Vietnam. As for the southern region of the country in which war raged for so many years, argument may be joined as to how successful the Communists were in establishing a political grip on the population as the war continued. There is little room for debate, however, about the fact that none of the many governments in Saigon between 1954 and 1975 was able to demonstrate a capacity for associating the mass of the population with the goals they pursued. In contrast to the national goals pursued by the Communists, non-Communist politics in southern Vietnam were marked by squabbles between special interest groups, and by an incapacity to forge a sense of national purpose such as was achieved by the Communists.

This sense of national purpose did not vanish with the end of the war. But peace in a united Vietnam quickly made it clear that the Communist leadership, which for so long had been geared for war, lacked the economic managerial skills demanded by the new situation. The costs of the long and bitter separation of southern from northern Vietnam brought their own special problem, shown most starkly and tragically in the flood of refugees, mainly from the south, seeking to escape from a society in which they felt there was no place for them. Vietnamese Communist leaders have repeatedly said that they value independence above all else, and this they did, indeed, gain in 1975. In the years that followed, it sometimes seemed that there was little else beyond independence that the Hanoi leadership was able to offer its people, as the policies that leadership pursued led to a regime of severe austerity. It was only in the late 1980s that the government in Hanoi began to embark on a program of economic liberalisation that has proceeded with stops and starts to the present day and is particularly evident in Ho Chi Minh City. But this liberalisation has not been matched by a relaxation of political control.

The final success of the Communists in Vietnam came only after thirty years of war and more than forty years of political action. No comparable experience is to be found anywhere else in the history of modern Southeast Asia. Events in Laos after the Second World War did, it is true, have a certain parallel, inasmuch as the Communist-led Pathet Lao forces were engaged in a political and military struggle that began with the end of the Second World War and continued until the Communist victory in Vietnam ensured that there would be a Communist victory in Laos also. To make this observation is not to dismiss the importance of the Lao element in the developments that took place in Laos. But it would be foolish not to take note of the extent to which Lao military manoeuvring was closely linked to developments in Vietnam. For here indeed was an important example of historical continuity. Laos has traditionally occupied a role as a buffer state between the two powerful states of Vietnam and Thailand. In seeking to ensure the victory of the Lao Communist forces the Vietnamese were also pursuing what had long been historical policy, that of ensuring that no other hostile state could play a significant role in Laos, and in particular in those regions of Laos that border Vietnam.

But if the accession to power of a Communist government in Laos—a form of government that remains in power—was to some extent a footnote to developments in Vietnam, the same cannot be said with any accuracy of Cambodia. How then does one explain the dramatic change involved in Cambodia's history from the mid-1950s, when a king still ruled over the country, to the installation of a radical revolutionary government in the mid-1970s? Gaps still remain in our knowledge of what happened in Cambodia in the 1960s when Prince Norodom Sihanouk appeared to dominate political life while, it is now clear, a small group of men and women were preparing to fight for a Communist revolution once conditions were favourable. And while our knowledge of developments after Prince Sihanouk was overthrown in a right-wing coup in 1970 is also incomplete, we know enough to sketch a rough outline of the most important developments.

It appeared to many outside observers of Prince Sihanouk's rule during the 1950s and 1960s that he had been remarkably successful in finding a governmental formula that guaranteed control of domestic politics and achievement of his foreign policy aims. Much of this success now appears to have been an illusion. Internally Sihanouk provided no place in his state for those who disagreed with his policies. For those who had embraced left-wing politics this increasingly meant that there were only two alternatives. Either one could remain silent or one could fade into the countryside and join the small but growing band of those who were waiting for a time when changed circumstances might make it possible to attempt a seizure of power. As it happened, it was the politicians of the right who finally turned Sihanouk out of office in 1970 and in so doing set the stage for one of the bitterest armed struggles by a left-wing group to gain power in all of recent Southeast Asian history.

The coup by men of the right was followed by Cambodia's involvement in the war in Vietnam as the United States sought to buy time for the withdrawal of its troops from that country. The American invasion of Cambodia in 1970 brought a Vietnamese response, so that the new government in Phnom Penh found it was facing the challenge of Vietnamese Communist forces as well as the left-wing Cambodians who now emerged to fight for their goal of controlling the country. By the end of 1972 the role of the Vietnamese Communists in fighting against the right-wing government in Phnom Penh was limited to supply and training assistance for the Khmer Rouge, or Red Khmer (Cambodians). The Cambodian civil war settled into a bloody pattern in which the government in Phnom Penh, with massive American assistance—including bombing strikes of unparalleled intensity—confronted a much smaller but remarkably dedicated left-wing enemy. If numbers and massive military and economic assistance could win wars, then the regime in Phnom Penh should have won. Its army vastly outnumbered that of the left, which probably never had more than 60 000 troops fighting for their cause. But the outcome of wars depends on other things as well. The Cambodian left-wing forces were able to sustain their efforts in the face of tremendous odds—just how is still not really clear. The right-wing forces under Phnom Penh's leadership, on the contrary (and with some notable exceptions), lacked effective direction and a general conviction of the worth of what they were doing.

As the war continued so did it become clear that widespread brutality by those fighting on both sides of the conflict was the norm and not the exception. Perhaps the left-wing forces saw the use of harshly violent tactics against civilians as well as soldiers as the necessary weapon of the numerically weak. Possibly too their use of violence was not only to match the violence of the Phnom Penh forces but also a response to the ferocity of the bombing by United States aircraft. Whatever the reasons, the level of political violence and of atrocities against both combatants and civilians by both sides accelerated as the war continued. It seems clear that the leaders of the left-wing forces were reinforced by the experience of these desperate times in their conviction that once the war ended there could be no place for half measures. Cambodia was to be transformed completely, and at whatever cost in human lives and suffering.

Total transformation of society was, indeed, what the new radical government in Phnom Penh worked for after it gained power in April 1975. Led by Pol Pot, the government of Democratic Kampuchea pursued a series of policies that had as their justification the need to remove the corrupting influences of foreign and capitalist societies and the goal of making Cambodia agriculturally self-sufficient. The means by which these goals were to be achieved only slowly became known to the outside world, as Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge victory was largely sealed off from foreign visitors. It gradually became clear, however, that Pol Pot and his associates were prepared to use shocking means in pursuit of their ends. The mass forced evacuation of Phnom Penh in circumstances that involved great cruelty and suffering was only the start of a pattern of governmentally sponsored actions that were marked by brutality and a disregard for human life. Herded into vast agricultural cooperatives, the bulk of the Cambodian population was forced to work in inhuman conditions, risking sudden punishment including execution for even minor infraction of the harsh rules that now governed their behaviour.

More research remains to be done on the period when Pol Pot’s regime governed Cambodia. There do seem to have been some variations between the degree of brutality shown from one administrative region to another within the country. And it may never be satisfactorily possible to determine whether or not some, or indeed many, of the executions that took place were the result of government directive or the result of individual decisions in a society that placed absolute loyalty to the state above all other moral standards. Whatever may have been the case, the cost in human lives was staggering. It will never be clear exactly how many Cambodians were executed during the years of Pol Pot’s rule. Nor will it be possible to determine with any absolute certainty the loss of life that took place between 1975 and 1979 as the result of the terrible conditions under which the Cambodian population was forced to live. Informed observers now suggest that upwards of two million Cambodians died as a result of the policies followed by the government of Democratic Kampuchea. Of that two million, more than half a million may have been executed. This loss of life means that between 1975 and 1979 close to a quarter of the pre-1975 population of Cambodia perished who otherwise would have lived.

How long Pol Pot and his associates might have continued their bloody rule of Cambodia is another of the many alternatives to what *did* happen that have been raised in this book. The disturbing possibility is that the rule of Pol Pot's government might have continued its horrific course for some considerable time. The reality is that the decision Pol Pot and his colleagues took to challenge Vietnam's control of areas of southern Vietnam brought an eventual Vietnamese decision, in late 1978, to invade Cambodia and to place their Cambodian protégés in government in Phnom Penh. The Vietnamese invasion was a tragic deliverance for Cambodia that led to the Indochinese region becoming ever more sharply embroiled in the Sino–Soviet dispute, for Vietnam was backed by the Soviet Union while China had been a supporter of Pol Pot's government. This fact was underlined by China's punitive invasion of northern Vietnam in February 1979 and the Soviet Union's subsequent close support for its Indochinese clients.

Once the course of recent Cambodian history has been charted the questions remain. How did a somnolent kingdom, even if it did contain much more social inequality than was widely recognised, become the arena for such a bitter struggle? Would the course of events have been different if the United States government of the time had not acted to ensure Cambodia's total involvement in the Second Indochinese War? Was the bitterness of the years of combat responsible for the new Cambodian leadership's absolute determination to introduce its radical program regardless of cost? The fact that these questions have to be posed and for the moment cannot be answered with any absolute certainty is clear testimony to the existence of areas of knowledge in the history of modern Southeast Asia that remain quite outside our grasp. If nothing else, what we do know about Cambodia's recent history sets it apart from the rest of the region. The way in which Communism came to Cambodia has little to tell us of the possible success or failure of the advocates of Communism elsewhere.

One direct consequence of the Communist victories in the three countries of Indochina, in 1975, was the strengthening of the shared interests of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the effective division between the ASEAN states of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, and the Communist states of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. ASEAN had been formed in 1967, with the essential purpose of promoting economic cooperation among its member states. But it was not until 1976 that ASEAN held its first summit meeting of leaders. By this stage the Communist victories in Indochina lent a new impetus to ASEAN leaders' desire to develop a more coordinated political response to the changing strategic situation in Southeast Asia. Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, beginning in late 1978, further solidified ASEAN's interest in a coordinated political approach to what was seen as a shared interest in dealing with a common problem: the emergence of a Vietnamese-dominated Indochina. At this stage, in the late 1970s, Myanmar was the only non-Communist state in Southeast Asia that was not a member of ASEAN—it had not sought membership as it followed its established policy of eschewing alliances with any power group in the region. In contrast, Brunei joined ASEAN on attaining its independence in 1984.

Yet as an index of the rapid pace of events in Southeast Asia in the 1990s, not only Myanmar but also Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia had become members of the organisation before the end of the decade. This was a reflection most notably of the end to rivalry between China and the Soviet Union as the collapse of the latter forced the Communist states of the region to realign their foreign policies, both with their Southeast Asian neighbours and with China. For a period, and contrary to the hopes of the founding members of ASEAN, Myanmar's admission to the organisation in 1997 initially did little to alter the repressive policies of that country's military leadership. Subsequently, however, it seems correct to judge that pressure from Myanmar's ASEAN colleagues did play a part in the changes that saw a measure of liberalisation within the country, including the introduction of a new constitution, a transition to civilian rule, and parliamentary elections in 2012 and 2015. Despite these developments the military remained a powerful political force, indeed, probably the most powerful as it showed when it unleashed its coup in 2021.

The nearer we come to the present day the more complex Southeast Asia's history becomes, or at any rate appears to become. The difficulties of working with too many facts seem at least equal to the difficulties associated with trying to work with too little information. Certainly, consideration of independent Southeast Asia suggests that whatever broad similarities one may find throughout the region, such as the problem of assuring national unity, the details of developments in the individual countries of the region often differ greatly. Yet the need to recognise the general features of modern Southeast Asia remains. In a region where the countries share many common features of the historical past, so too is there value in recognising that the broad patterns of their recent experience are often very similar, whatever differences may be seen in the details of that experience.

For all the countries of Southeast Asia the modern period has been a time, whether consciously or not, during which governments have attempted to strike a balance between the demands of the present and the values of the past. This, a sceptical observer might comment, is true of other, indeed all, regions of the world. There is a difference, however, since in Southeast Asia’s case the road to the present for the countries of the region, with Thailand as the one partial exception, has not always been travelled at a Southeast Asian pace. The pace of many developments in Southeast Asia during much of the nineteenth century and for the first half of the twentieth century was largely influenced and sometimes almost totally controlled by alien forces. This is not an argument in favour of the view that Southeast Asians are an unimportant part of their own history. Quite to the contrary, it is simply a recognition of the fact that the impact of European and American colonialism was of immense importance in some areas of life. But with the end of the era of colonial control Southeast Asians have, for the most part, been able to make their own decisions and to determine how much they should rely on their own values and the lessons they draw from history. The results of this situation have not always been what Southeast Asians themselves, let alone outside observers, have expected.

In the following chapter there is both a brief survey of some very recent developments in Southeast Asia’s history and an attempt to reflect on a final question: what have been the essentials of Southeast Asia’s modern history?

# FIFTEEN

# Past and present

> The past is never dead. It's not even the past.
>
> —William Faulkner

Looking back over the history of Southeast Asia from the perspective of the third decade of the twenty-first century, the rapid changes that have occurred in the region since the Second World War remind us again of the need to judge the relative importance of change as opposed to continuity in determining the course of events and the roles of key participants. At first glance a predominant emphasis on change seems appropriate. Indonesia's hard-fought achievement of independence from the Dutch and the political events that followed demand our attention as sharp breaks with the past. But another issue deserves our attention when we look at Indonesia's post-independence history: the role of the nation's first president, Sukarno, viewed in cultural terms. Sukarno, for all of his remarkable mastery of Western political theory and his highly skilled contemporary political manoeuvring, gained much of his success through presenting himself to the Indonesian public as a contemporary embodiment of a traditional Javanese ruler. In his enshrining past traditions with contemporary politics he was not alone. Both Norodom Sihanouk in Cambodia and Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, two leaders from very different political traditions, also gained political advantage from representing the culture of traditional leadership—Sihanouk as a royal leader who had been the king of his country; Ho as a reflection of Confucian austerity and literary capability. Of vital importance, of course, was the fact that both Sihanouk and Ho were promoting fundamentally non-traditional policies.

So assessments of the past, and of the present, need to look at both continuity and change rather than to see them as necessarily exclusive of each other. And this is important because otherwise we may fail to recognise the extent to which even very current events can have important links to the distant past. A few examples make the point. Perhaps the most obvious example of past history continuing to play a major part in the contemporary political history of a Southeast Asian country is to be found in Myanmar. As has been noted repeatedly throughout this book, the composition of this country's population is characterised by substantial ethnic division. This fact has affected its history over many centuries and has continued into the country's post-independence existence. The fact of Myanmar's ethnic diversity has been central to the military's determination to play a critical role in domestic politics. Its leaders see themselves as upholders of the primacy of central government control as well as demonstrating their distaste for democratic government.

But this striking example of the past's significance for what is happening in the present is far from the only one to be found in contemporary Southeast Asia. Difficult relations between China and Vietnam may have been marked most recently in relation to conflicting claims over maritime sovereignty, and not so long ago by China's invasion of northern Vietnam in 1979 as 'punishment' for challenging China's interests in Cambodia. But the history of antagonism between the two countries dates back more than a thousand years. And it is not surprising that the patriotic poetry of the fifteenth-century scholar-general Nguyen Trai, who wrote of defeating the Chinese in 1427, is still taught in Vietnamese schools today, particularly his ringing affirmation that Vietnam 'has never lacked for heroes'. Neither is it by chance that every Vietnamese city celebrates the heroic, if doomed, rebellion against Chinese domination of the two Trung sisters in the first century CE with a street named after them. And, to reinforce the point while turning elsewhere in the region, attention has already been drawn to the fact that recent civil unrest in Thailand reflected, in part, the distinctive identity of those in the country's population who live in the northeast and north of the country.

A brief recounting of very recent political developments in Indonesia, Myanmar, Cambodia and Thailand—some of which have already been broached in earlier chapters—reminds us of the manner in which both past history and present concerns play their part in determining events. This review of recent events provides entry into an extended discussion of the broad themes that characterise Southeast Asia's modern history.

## MAJOR POLITICAL CHANGES IN THE VERY RECENT PAST

In terms of Southeast Asia's very recent history, few developments have been more important than the changes that have occurred in Indonesia—by far the region's largest state—following the collapse of the Suharto regime in 1998 and the country's transition to democracy. By the mid-1990s it had become clear that major problems lay beneath the prosperity that Suharto's government had engineered. His regime's increasingly authoritarian style of government, which was marked by state brutality, was resented by a growing middle class. And this resentment was particularly felt by the large number of students who found that their education offered no guarantee of a future job. As revelations of corruption circulated amid the Asia-wide financial crisis that developed in 1997, some of Suharto's key associates distanced themselves from the president. Then, in the face of widespread demonstrations against his rule and the withdrawal of support from the army, Suharto was forced to resign.

With new laws introduced to make the Indonesian political system more democratic, five presidents have held office following Suharto's resignation—first Suharto's former vice-president, B.J. Habibie; then Abdurraham Wahid; next Sukarno's daughter Megawati Sukarnoputri; followed by Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who was the first-ever directly elected president in 2004 and who was re-elected in 2009. He was succeeded by the former mayor of both Solo (Surakarta) and Jakarta, Joko Widodo, known popularly as Jokowi, who was elected in 2013 and re-elected in 2019. In terms of past Indonesian political and cultural values, President Jokowi represents a striking departure from his predecessors. He is, it is true, Javanese and so from Indonesia's dominant regional power base. But he is neither a former military officer nor a member of the established political class, having his personal origins as a relatively small-scale businessman. That this should be so is a reflection of change indeed.

Indonesia's transition to a democratic parliamentary system in the years following Suharto's departure has not meant that problems existing in the 1990s have vanished in the third decade of the twenty-first century. While separatism appears to have been contained in Aceh, it remains a continuing issue in Papua. Terrorism linked to extremist Islam, such as the Bali bombings of 2002 and 2005, has also been largely contained by sophisticated security operations.

One gauge of the accuracy of the view that Suharto’s passing marked an important milestone in Indonesia’s modern history lies in the manner in which the government has come to terms with its loss of control over Timor-Leste. In the face of international pressure to change its policies and a continuing guerrilla war in that territory, President Habibie announced in 1999 that he would allow the East Timorese population to vote on the issue of independence. Despite brutal Indonesian intimidation the East Timorese voted overwhelmingly for independence, a vote that led to further violence by Indonesian troops and their local supporters in East Timor. Following the pro-independence vote and the installation of a temporary United Nations authority, independence was finally achieved in May 2002. In the years that have followed both senior Indonesian and East Timorese politicians have established a working relationship that puts the antagonisms of the past behind them despite lingering resentments among some politicians.

In Myanmar, the country in Southeast Asia with the most complex ethnically divided population, it appeared that slow but promising change had begun to take place after 2008 with the introduction of a new constitution, the inauguration of a civilian government and elections in 2012 that saw the long-time democracy advocate, Aung San Suu Kyi, gain a seat in parliament. Then, following the general elections held in November 2015, when Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League of Democracy gained a sweeping electoral victory, there were expectations that Myanmar’s politics would be transformed. But while many foreign commentators thought that economic liberalisation would be accompanied by comparable and fundamental political change, this was not the case and the Burmese military continued to play a major role within the state. Expectations that Aung San Suu Kyi would become a leader promoting liberal values proved misplaced and relations between the majority Burman (Bamar people) and minority ethnic groups remained at best uncertain. At the same time, state-sponsored violence in Rakhine state (the former Arakan region), with the crucial involvement of the military, led to a mass exodus of members of the Rohingya minority, deeply staining the government’s reputation.

This was the background to the military coup against the civilian government in February 2021, led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. The coup resulted in an increasingly bitter struggle between the organised ranks of the army and a loose coalition of civil society and ethically linked resistance forces. For the moment the outcome of this civil war remains far from certain but the cost in lives and economic disruption has already been high.

In the 1990s, before what had seemed to be promising developments in Myanmar, a settlement that brought a shaky peace in Cambodia was negotiated. The settlement was reached following the spectacular collapse of the Soviet Union, which had previously sustained Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. Few would have predicted before 1990 that Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia would be followed by United Nations-sponsored elections in that country and the slow but steady decline of the Khmer Rouge as a political and military force. Thirty years on from those elections Cambodia has steadily moved away from any hopes that were held that it would embrace democracy. Its long-serving prime minister, Hun Sen—who has retired in favour of his eldest son, Hun Manet—has used his undoubted skills as a politician to neuter his opponents while presiding over an increasingly authoritarian state with the sometimes heavy-handed support of the forces of order and a complaisant judiciary. The fact that he has been supported by China, both politically and economically, has been vital to his continuing tenure. Yet for all of the contemporary importance of this relationship with China it is striking that in his leadership role Hun Sen has sought to bolster his position by comparing himself with a near-legendary figure from the distant Cambodian past, the usurper king Sdech Kan, who briefly ruled in the sixteenth century.

Given the events of the Vietnam War and ASEAN's opposition to Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia during the 1980s, the fact that Vietnam became a member of the Southeast Asian organisation in 1995 is another index of the rapid changes that have taken place in the region following the end of the Cold War. (To repeat, Myanmar joined the organisation in 1997, as did Laos; Cambodia became a member in 1999.) The Soviet Union's collapse and its effect in relation to Vietnam alerts us to the steady growth of China's role in relation to Southeast Asia, an issue addressed later in this chapter.

Urban riots and demonstrations in Thailand in the early 1990s were followed by what appeared to be an entrenchment of a democratic parliamentary system under the 1997 Constitution. Yet that system was shunted aside by the military coup of September 2006 in an action that emphasised continuing deep divisions between Bangkok middle-class opinion—backing the military’s action—and rural support for the populist policies of Prime Minister Thaksin. The return to parliamentary government in 2007 was followed by a rising degree of political agitation, symbolised by the actions of the pro-royalist ‘Yellow Shirts’ and the ‘Red Shirt’ supporters of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin. This agitation culminated in the events of May 2010, when the military dispersed the Red Shirt supporters massed in Bangkok with the loss of many lives. A return to calm, marked by elections in 2011 that saw Thaksin’s sister becoming prime minister, was followed by yet another military coup in 2014. Further elections held in 2019 appear to have assured parties linked to the military of a continuing role in Thai politics. Following the 2019 elections there were widespread demonstrations in Bangkok that not only criticised the election results but also, in a striking departure from the past, explicitly called for reform of the monarchy. In doing so the youthful protestors appear to have foreshadowed the result of the 2023 election which saw new, younger politicians win the most seats in the elected lower house of the Thai parliament. But they were not able to nullify the opposition of the conservative forces linked to the military in the upper house, the senate, which opposed a leader from the Move Forward party as prime minister. At the time of writing a prime minster with links to the military, Srettha Thavisin, has finally been elected. But the outlook for the near future of Thai politics looks uncertain following the return from exile of former prime minister Thaksin, who was due to serve a sentence of eight years for corruption offences. The Thai king has now granted Thaksin a pardon that reduces his sentence to one year, raising the question of whether this will lead to the still popular Thaksin seeking to return to national politics. In short, Thai domestic politics are very far from settled.

Singling out Indonesia, Myanmar, Cambodia and Thailand for particular attention does not mean that developments in the other countries of Southeast Asia have been lacking in importance. Rather, it is to note that established patterns of government have continued from the 1990s onwards: Vietnam and Laos have remained firmly governed by their Communist parties, even as they have become economically more liberal; Singapore’s PAP government continues to direct the state as it has done since 1963; and the presidential system of government in the Philippines has remained in place, as has the absolute monarchy in the sultanate of Brunei.

In notable contrast, conforming to a past pattern of political behaviour is not a description that applies to Malaysia over the past decade. There the fundamental facts of political life, until very recently, were determined by the dominant role of an UMNO-led coalition as described earlier in this book. This coalition, in which the principal leadership roles were held by ethnic Malays, had held office uninterruptedly since independence in 1957. The possibility that this political paradigm might no longer represent the interests of an increasingly large proportion of the national electorate became apparent in the general election of 2013. At that time the government was returned despite receiving a notably diminished share of the popular vote. By the time of the 2018 elections it became apparent that a new multiracial political alliance, Patakan Harapan (the Alliance of Hope) headed by Anwar Ibrahim, was gaining traction through its criticisms of Prime Minister Najib Razak and of his government's policies and actions, particularly in terms of allegations linked to a complex financial scandal. Since 2018 there have been four governments in office, with Anwar Ibrahim still in office at the time of writing. In these circumstances the future of Malaysian politics is unclear, except for the likelihood that ethnic Malay interests will prevail above all other considerations. That said, there is a lack of unity among ethnic Malay political parties, with opposition to the present arrangements from PAS, a party that advocates the institution of strict Islamic *sharia* law.

## ECONOMIC CRISIS

No overview of the very recent past can ignore the economic crisis that gripped the Asian region in 1997. Its impact in Indonesia was particularly devastating. From a state that was economically broken-backed in 1965, with perhaps as much as 50 per cent of the population living in poverty, Indonesia by the mid-1990s appeared economically secure with the proportion of its citizens who lived in poverty reduced to less than 20 per cent. But, as shortly became apparent, much of the country's prosperity had the character of a house of cards and when Southeast Asia's economic fortunes began to come under threat, that house of cards rapidly collapsed.

The economic crisis of which Indonesia was such a prominent victim is now recognised to have started in Thailand, where both the country's national bank and its commercial associates were found to have been burdened by a host of non-performing loans and by severely depleted reserves. But the experience was much wider, with the effects felt throughout Southeast Asia marked by similar features. What has been termed ‘crony capitalism’ was revealed to have been widespread, a situation in which politicians in government were closely associated with commercial interests, favouring their supporters in the granting of business contracts and licences, often without regard for the economic viability of the businesses that were being promoted. These practices, combined with routine corruption and the investment of large sums of money in unproductive ventures (the most notable example being golf courses), could not be sustained indefinitely. Once the flow of capital began to be restricted, business after business foundered.

Yet for all of the serious effects that flowed from the Asian economic crisis, it is salutary to recognise that the resilience of the region has been demonstrated in the extent to which, more than two decades after it began, most of its effects have dissipated. Although much of the recovery that has taken place is fragile in nature, and while it would be wrong to suggest that there will not be further periods of economic difficulty, the predictions that suggested Southeast Asia would languish in a depressed state for many years have proved to be far too pessimistic. One index of this fact is the reduction in the percentage of people living in poverty in the countries of Southeast Asia. Although in the early 1990s rates of poverty in most of the countries of the region were above 30 per cent, and even of the order of 50 per cent, there have been some dramatic improvements since then with, for instance, Indonesia recording a poverty rate among its population in 2018 of 9.2 per cent; Vietnam 9.8 per cent; and Malaysia an extraordinarily low rate of around 1 per cent. It is important to note that these figures do not take account of the persistence of considerable income inequality.

These statistics relate to developments before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, which had a sharp and deeply negative effect throughout Southeast Asia, pushing many millions of people back into poverty. Yet the preliminary assessment of the Asian Development Bank at the time of writing is of a rapid bounce back to pre-Covid circumstances despite nearly 370,000 deaths throughout the region as a direct result of the pandemic.

## DEMOGRAPHY, URBANISATION AND EDUCATION

The intersection of social and economic developments in contemporary Southeast Asia also alert students of the region to the great changes that have taken place over the decades since the Second World War, and more particularly since each of the region's countries has achieved independence. Old images of the region as inhabited by populations with poor life expectancy living and labouring for the most part in rural areas need substantial adjustment. A few statistics made this clear. Overall, in the period 1950–55, the average life expectancy throughout Southeast Asia was a disturbingly low 41 years. The situation today is dramatically different, even in countries that have suffered severe disruption through war and political conflict, so that life expectancy in Cambodia today is 72 years, and in Laos is 68 years. In Thailand, the geographical neighbour to both these countries, life expectancy is 75 years, a significant difference. Not surprisingly in terms of its very special urban character with a high standard of living, life expectancy at birth in Singapore is now 84 years. And as an index of general political stability and a long period of steady economic growth, both during and after the long period of Suharto's rule, life expectancy in Indonesia is now 70 years.

Equally striking for the emphasis they give to Southeast Asia's changing character are the statistics that show the extent to which urbanisation has rendered any mental image of Southeast Asia as an overwhelmingly rural, peasant-based region seriously inaccurate. While some 80 per cent of Cambodia's population still lives outside cities, the percentage for Laos, perhaps surprisingly, is lower, with 62 per cent of the country's population being rural dwellers. The figures for Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand tell a very different story. In Malaysia, no less than 74 per cent of the population lives in urban areas; the figure for the Philippines is lower at 66 per cent; while in Thailand the figure is 49 per cent. And in the largest of all the countries of Southeast Asia, Indonesia, over 50 per cent of the population now lives in urban centres.

The political implications of these demographic changes, particularly when combined with growing sizes and youthful character of the region's populations, are profound. In the most basic fashion, and even allowing for the fact that many of those who have moved from rural areas to the cities live in less than satisfactory housing, increased urbanisation means that more children go to school, and for longer. An increase in education carries with it the prospect of greater political awareness. What is more, the spread of education in both urban and rural areas has made for a population that has a greater knowledge of political and economic developments. And this situation has been greatly enhanced by the rapid spread of the digital revolution and the extraordinarily pervasive role of social media.

This greater awareness of the world in which they live is of particular interest in relation to those who continue to live in rural areas and who continue to be described as ‘peasants’. To take the example of Thailand, it is clearly inaccurate to think of those who live in rural villages as cut off from the outside world. As the American scholar, Charles Keyes, has described the inhabitants of Thailand’s northeast, they are ‘cosmopolitan peasants’, people who are in touch with the world of Bangkok through the many features of modern communications, notably nowadays through their mobile or cell phones. Or, as a more colloquial description has it, a typical rural supporter of the ‘Red Shirt’ movement in northeast Thailand is an individual with ‘some high school education and drives a pickup truck’.

Events in Cambodia in the 2013 general election offer another insight into the changed world of modern Southeast Asian politics in conjunction with the growth of urbanisation. Modern Phnom Penh, Cambodia’s capital, is ringed by garment factories, the source of the country’s main export earnings. Young men and women, overwhelmingly the latter, have come to work in these factories, which offer a better income than can be gained in the countryside. At one level these factory workers might be described as politically unsophisticated, but they are aware of the benefits of modern technology and as the users of mobile phones they are in touch with and alert to political developments as has never before been the case. Without doubt the increased vote against the ruling government in that election reflected the impact of social media among the youthful population, who previously were not expected to take an interest in their country’s politics. Subsequently, the Cambodian government’s policies, not least through intimidation of its opponents, have been sufficient to counter criticism levelled against it on social media.

## INDIVIDUAL IDENTITIES, LOCAL VALUES: HOW MUCH CHANGE?

Just because so much change has occurred and just because there is so much evidence of modernity in Southeast Asia’s burgeoning capitals this does not mean that the countries and peoples that make up the region have lost their individual identities and succumbed to Western or global norms. A fascination—especially among the urban young—with Western popular music and international fast-food chains—and the digital revolution just discussed—coupled with the ability of members of the elite to speak and understand English should not blind outsiders to the continuing strength of tradition.

Of necessity the areas and the peoples discussed in this book have been, for the most part, the better-known examples. So there has been reference to the Javanese and Java, rather than to the Sumbanese, the people living on Sumba, one of the ‘outer’ islands of eastern Indonesia. It has been the lowland Vietnamese and the Thais, rather than the hill-dwelling Rhade of Vietnam’s central highlands or the Yao of Nan province in northern Thailand, who have received the greater part of our attention. Among these better-known peoples of Southeast Asia and in the better-known regions that they inhabit the degree of change has been greatest. These peoples and regions have, after all, had the longest contact with the change-inducing ideas and forces of both their own and the non-Southeast Asian world. A city-dwelling office worker in a Kuala Lumpur travel agency, for instance, is clearly more likely to have adopted a way of life that involves a significant departure from traditional Malay patterns of behaviour than will be the case for a village-dwelling rice cultivator in some distant, up-river region of the northern Malaysian state of Kelantan.

But if this contrast between life in the cities and life in the more remote regions of the countryside of Southeast Asia is obvious, it can also be misleading. To return to our imaginary office worker, whether he or she is in Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Manila or in one of the host of other cities that have grown so rapidly, how much of this person’s life has really changed as the result of adopting an apparently modern style of life? The answer, despite the taste for modern dress, for modern music, may be a great deal less than it seems upon first impressions. Behind the appearance of modernity and great change in the bustling, crowded cities of Southeast Asia, where the impact of the West nowadays seems so strong, there is another side to life that is seldom glimpsed by the casual visitor. It is made apparent when one suddenly hears a Balinese *gamelan* orchestra beating out a staccato rhythm in a back street of Jakarta, the players having come to the capital from Bali in search of jobs. If one shuts one’s eyes one is momentarily transported from a dusty, painfully crowded suburb in Indonesia’s capital to a temple courtyard in Bali, where the members of a rajah’s orchestra are decked in rich fabrics to play their gongs and xylophones as they accompany one of the dramatic episodes from the Balinese rendering of the Indian epic, the *Ramayana*. And the same point may be made in relation to the continuing great popularity of traditional *wayang kulit* shadow puppet plays in Java. Watched by vast crowds, the plays blend Hindu epics with astute and often satirical references to contemporary issues and individuals.

In Bangkok a different experience can offer the same insight. Away from the plush hotels that cater for wealthy foreigners and Thais alike are the more modest places of entertainment for the less privileged. Go to one of these restaurants and you find that apart from the modern electronics of the microphones and loudspeakers, usually booming forth at ear-splitting level, the entertainment provided still smacks of the traditional world of the country. The Thais from the agriculturally poor northeastern regions of the kingdom who have migrated to the capital in such numbers meet to drink their ice-cold beer and savour fiery curries, to join in the singing or dance traditional circular dances as if they were in a minor provincial centre or perhaps at a celebration in their home village. Apart from the constant background sound of Bangkok’s traffic, the scene that a visitor witnesses has little to do with the superficially dominant modern world.

The further a visitor travels away from the urban centres the more superficial the impact of the modern world becomes. The presence of motorcycles and nowadays of pickup trucks, of electricity, of telephones, increasingly in the form of mobile units, of omnipresent transistor radios and of television sets, powered if necessary by generators—all these are signs of change. But remarkable continuity remains in the strength of village festivals and entertainments. Even more importantly, throughout much of contemporary Southeast Asia continuity is represented in the disposition of power and influence at the sub-national level. Here is an instance of continuity that belies so much of the change associated with such superficial matters as dress styles and musical tastes. While there are great variations from region to region, and while the circumstances in the two remaining Communist states of the region, Laos and Vietnam, as well as in Cambodia, are clearly different, the power and influence of traditional leaders at the district and village level remain notably strong. But the picture is not nearly so clear when one considers developments at the national level.

## LEADERSHIP AND ADMINISTRATION

In assessing developments at the national level, it is most useful to consider the transformation that has occurred in the nature of government in Southeast Asia from the period of increasing change that began in the eighteenth century. In that century the major states of the region were still ruled by kings and the lesser states by men who took a variety of titles. These rulers and their courts embodied tradition. Contrast this situation with that existing at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Only in Cambodia, Thailand and Brunei do hereditary monarchs remain as the chief of state—and the Cambodia king, however much admired as the symbolic head of the nation, is a strictly constitutional monarch. A king is the chief of state of Malaysia, but his is an elective office with strictly limited power. Even more importantly, the disappearance of the traditional rulers has been accompanied by the end of a system of government that linked administration to the ruler's court. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw instead the slow establishment of administrative systems largely based on Western models that not only represented a sharp break with the past but which, in addition, brought the increasing involvement of the state in the day-to-day affairs of the people.

So, in this regard, it is probably the case that there is as much value to be gained from discussing the forms of administration that have come into being in Southeast Asia as there is in discussing whether Prince Sihanouk should have been regarded as a 'god-king' or President Sukarno as an example of a traditional Javanese leader. The point is not that there are no worthwhile insights to be gained from a discussion of the elements of tradition associated with both Sihanouk and Sukarno. Rather, what is worthy of attention is that no matter how modern or how traditional the leader of an individual Southeast Asian state may be, that leader functions as part of an administrative system infinitely different in form from the government systems of traditional times.

Certainly, a Sukarno or a Sihanouk could come close to crippling the capacity of an administration to play its supposed role. Nevertheless, and however inefficient some of the bureaucracies of Southeast Asia may be for a variety of reasons, the governments of the region work through administrative systems that are the product of dramatic innovation over the past one hundred or one hundred and fifty years. And here it is not just the *fact* of change but the *nature* of that change that is important. The presence of these administrative systems goes some way towards explaining why increasingly it appears that leadership is either in the hands of politicians who fit into a general, Westernised intellectual mould, or who are served by such men and women acting as close advisers. This is a generalisation that, more than most, requires amplification and qualification. One of the first qualifications that should be made is that leadership of the most important Communist state in Southeast Asia should not be excluded from the general comment. Vietnam's leaders must be regarded as having had a rather special exposure to Western influence, but Marxist thought still must be reckoned, in part at the very least, a Western product. Vietnam's socialist planning, before its slow change of direction to permit a more open economic system, owed much to Marxist and so to a very particular set of Western ideas. It scarcely needs emphasis that importance must also be given to Vietnamese traditional influences and to models borrowed from China.

A more important qualification is that while it is possible to discuss a generalised pattern in the nature of leadership in modern Southeast Asia, there are still important variations from country to country and from period to period. At any one time since the Second World War and the achievement of independence by the countries of Southeast Asia, the style and character of leadership has varied greatly. But what one is discussing is a broad trend. Although leaders whose style may hark back to the past will undoubtedly remain important in Southeast Asia for many years, the ever-increasing complexities of economic and political life in the first two decades of the twenty-first century seem likely to confirm the pattern that has developed through the century.

Perhaps there is place for yet one further qualification. The pattern that has been identified as a general trend seems least likely to continue should a time of severe crisis arise in one or other of the states of Southeast Asia. But whatever the variations and qualifications it is the West (the former Soviet Union included in this case) that has provided the administrative models. Even in the very special case of Myanmar, where for nearly forty years there was a determined effort to find a 'Burmese Way to Socialism', the leadership and the bureaucracy did not totally turn their backs on basic Western models of how an administration should be constructed.

In brief, the twentieth century and after saw the rise to prominence and influence of the technocrat in Southeast Asia as well as elsewhere in the non-Western world. At times these ‘new men’ and ‘new women’ dominate the political system and on other occasions they work in uneasy balance with traditional leaders. But only in very special circumstances can they be ignored. And these ‘new’ men and women are not merely new in terms of training. It is certainly the case that throughout Southeast Asia those who have risen to power in the post-Second World War period have frequently been members of the traditional existing elite. But this has not been the case exclusively, and slowly but surely men and women from non-elite backgrounds have come to play prominent parts in the government of even the most traditionally oriented societies. To some extent what has taken place involves the replacement of one form of elite (the traditional) by another (the elite of merit). The fact that it is possible to make this observation should not diminish the great importance of the change.

Changed political conditions and improved educational opportunities do not guarantee the success of talent in modern Southeast Asia, but the barriers are significantly lower than once was the case. Most particularly is this true in Singapore, where the long-serving prime minister, the late Lee Kuan Yew, made intellectual ability the key qualification for advancement in the administration of his state. Administrative changes and the increasing importance of ‘new’ men and women playing a role in the governance of the states of Southeast Asia do not mean, it should be emphasised, that Western-style democracy was adopted throughout the region once independence was achieved. Far from it, as what happened in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam most clearly illustrates. Or consider the example of Indonesia and the manner in which it has been governed for much of its independent existence. It was not until after the accession of the Suharto regime to power in the late 1960s that the Indonesian government vigorously embraced economic policies devised by advisers with strong links to market-oriented American university faculties. And these advisers were often not part of the traditional elite. Indeed, they were individuals who had made a sharp break with the past, both in terms of the policies that had been followed under President Sukarno and, even more dramatically, the values associated with traditional Indonesian statecraft. Yet the pursuit of modern economic policies did not in any sense mean that the Suharto regime was ready to embrace Western concepts of democracy. Only with the sudden fall of that regime in 1998 did Indonesia undergo a political sea change that saw the first president to come to power as the result of a democratic election.

## BOUNDARIES FIRMLY IN PLACE

Emphasis on the great changes in the nature of administration that have taken place in Southeast Asia over the past century should not divert our attention from other quite fundamental developments. Although the point has been made at various times through this book, it may be easy to forget that several of the modern Southeast Asian states only achieved their present territorial existence in very recent times. To recapitulate: Laos was a cluster of principalities and even smaller petty states when the French imposed colonial control at the end of the nineteenth century; the Federation of Malaysia is made up of sultanates that had no shared unity a century ago, and of territories in Borneo that owed disputed loyalty to at least two sultanates. The Indonesia of today was forged from the colonial empire of the Dutch East Indies, which itself only achieved overall control over the islands it claimed to govern at the beginning of the twentieth century. And the Philippines, although regarded as a single entity by the Spaniards when they were the colonial power, could not have been said to have become an administrative unity under one central government before the period of American rule, and perhaps not even then.

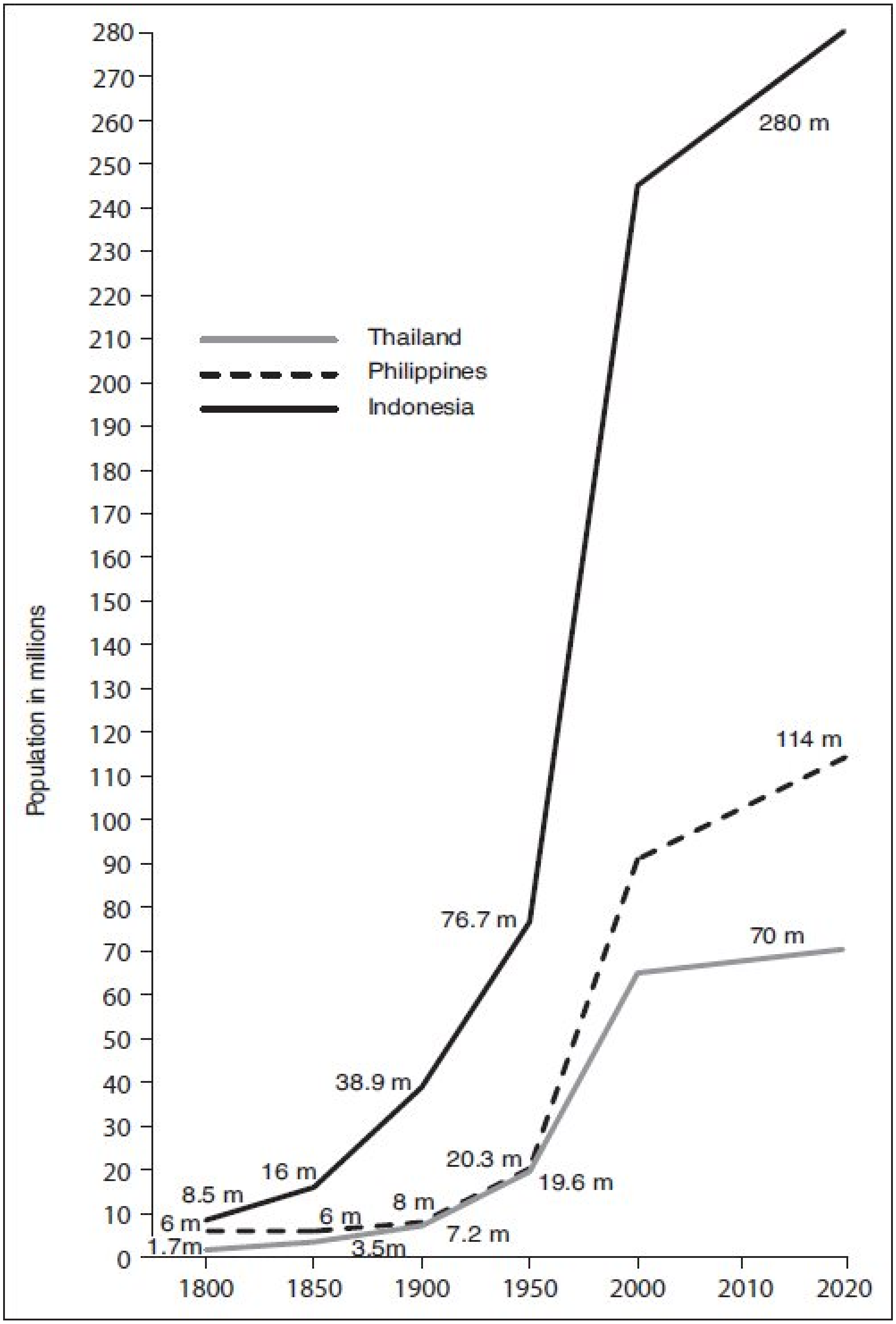
In short, one distinctive feature of modern Southeast Asia’s history has been the extent to which over the past one hundred and fifty years the old loose boundaries and administrative arrangements have become tighter, confirming the existence of old states and defining the territorial existence of new states. Indonesia, Malaysia and Laos are quite clearly modern creations, whatever long historical traditions may be discerned to show that these modern states had important precursors. Southeast Asia’s modern history, in both colonial times and otherwise, has confirmed the boundaries of Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, and given emphasis to the existence of the Philippines as a governmental entity. Singapore, in its present form, is a creation of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though recognition should be given to the existence of *Singapura* as a distant predecessor state that existed in the same location for much of the fourteenth century. Brunei’s contemporary territorial existence has links to the pre-colonial past but its current territory is the result of boundaries instituted in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

There have been instances of disputes over the exact location of boundaries, with the case of the temple on Preah Vihear on the Cambodian-Thai border being, perhaps, the most notable example—the issue being whether or not this Angkorian period temple was located in Cambodia or Thailand and has been resolved in Cambodia’s favour. And the exact location of Cambodia’s eastern boundary with Vietnam has been the basis of domestic political squabbling among the politicians of Phnom Penh. But, over all, boundaries settled in colonial times have remained. What has become an increasingly worrying and complex issue is the disputes that exist over maritime boundaries in the East and South China Seas where China now claims sovereignty. The fact this should be so is also a reflection of the greatly changed role of China in its dealings with Southeast Asia. China’s rise to become an economic and political powerhouse in East Asia has transformed its relations with Southeast Asia, and this has not only affected those countries that have a border with China—Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam—but the Southeast Asian region as a whole as China has increasingly made clear the view that its interests cannot be ignored, not least because of its direct economic interaction with the region. This is not to suggest China has plans to invade any of the countries of Southeast Asia, though it is worth mentioning that there has been an increased immigration of Chinese immigrants into Laos, a development that has been taking place over many years in Myanmar.

## CLASS, ECONOMICS AND POWER: WHAT WILL DRIVE THE FUTURE?

The emergence of new states of Southeast Asia or the ‘solidification’ of old states, particularly on the mainland, has set the scene, again following the changes brought by the past one hundred or two hundred years, for the contemporary political process that varies so greatly from country to country. If we look at the West the generalisation can probably be made that the essence of modern politics is the continuing debate over class and economics. Class may be defined by different factors in different Western countries: by wealth, inheritance, ascribed status due to merit or position, or a combination of some or all of these. But by and large the central issues of Western domestic politics relate to how national wealth shall be distributed and what policies shall be followed to ensure the future creation of further wealth that will benefit both the state and individuals.

One must not think, however, that this debate is always the central issue for many of the politicians of Southeast Asia, or that a common central thread links the politics of all the countries in the region other than that most fundamental of considerations, the desire to gain or retain power. Although economic issues cannot be ignored by any of the states of the region, there are clearly many instances in which economic considerations have been, at very least, secondary to other concerns. The case of Myanmar is a striking example of this situation. The search for a ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’ was proclaimed as the chief concern of the state, but the old concerns of ethnic rivalry have been as important, if not more important, a component in contemporary Burmese political life. A very real concern for economic development is without doubt a feature of Malaysian political life, but the constant need to be preoccupied with the facts of Malaysia’s multi-ethnic society means that politics and political discussion in that country have a very special, ethnically-oriented character. The problems associated with ethnic minorities that lack a sense of identity with the central government have already been noted several times in relation to Thailand and the Philippines. Ethnic or communal politics therefore inject a very special element into the character of modern Southeast Asia. The great changes that have been such a feature of Southeast Asia’s history over the past one hundred or two hundred years have not, for parts of the region, been of an order to move politics to the point where there is a common set of assumptions about the interests of the state or of the general right of all to participate in the discussion and determination of those interests.



**Population growth in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, 1800–2020**
Population growth in Southeast Asia has been dramatic during the twentieth century. Even with government-supported efforts to limit population growth in Indonesia, that country's population had already reached an estimated 280 million in the year 2020.

Is this situation likely to change? Some commentators would argue that change, if it is to come, will depend as much on economic considerations as on more narrowly political factors. One reason for taking this position is the fact that Southeast Asia still remains so dependent on foreign capital so that, the arguments runs, it will only be when Southeast Asian governments control their own economic destinies that it will be possible to achieve both greater economic equality and a more egalitarian political process. This is to put the argument in excessively simple terms, but even its more sophisticated versions are far from fully convincing. The role of external capital in Southeast Asia has been vital over the period surveyed in this book and the vast transformations that have taken place since the eighteenth century owe much to that foreign input. Here, in the economic field, has been an affirmation of a feature that has been so much part of the history of Southeast Asia, not just during the past two hundred years but since the very earliest times. Without discounting the presence of their own cultural identity, or identities, the countries of Southeast Asia have been receivers of ideas, of external forms of government, and of capital. Indonesia's vast riches might, in an ideal world, be exploited by Indonesians alone, without the need for foreign capital. But in a less than ideal world that prospect has little possibility for success. Indeed, both for those countries of the region that do not have Communist governments, and for the Communist states of Laos and Vietnam as well, a continuing reliance on external capital seems certain for the foreseeable future. And even in Vietnam and Laos, while this reliance may be tempered by the existence of their Communist leaderships, it has not by any means been removed. If the West no longer exerts colonial control in Southeast Asia the power of Western, and nowadays increasingly Japanese, capital is vital to the region's modern history. Perhaps surprisingly, Chinese direct investment in the countries of Southeast Asia has until recently been relatively limited, though in the case of Cambodia its direct aid is of the first importance for that country's infrastructure. And China's Belt and Road initiatives are having a major effect in Laos, marked very recently by the completion of a rail link that runs between Kunming in China's Yunnan province and the Lao capital of Vientiane.

Economic development, or the lack of it; the difficulties associated with ethnic or communal politics; the transformation of administrative systems and the emergence of a new type of leader or administrator—all these are features of the course that Southeast Asian history has followed over the past two centuries. But there is another feature, or set of features, that must not be ignored. This is the turbulent presence of revolt and rebellion, and on occasion of revolution, that has demonstrated at a whole range of levels the resentments and dissatisfactions of groups ranging from ethnic minorities to forces reflecting national interests, as was the case with the anti-colonial revolutions that followed the Second World War.

The fact that there has been such a long record of revolt, rebellion and revolution in Southeast Asia focuses attention once again on the extent to which governments in the region, before, during and after the colonial period, have had difficulty in providing leadership that has been either acceptable or meaningful for *all* of the population within their borders. For the outside observer there is little difficulty in understanding at least part of the motivation that led to men taking up arms to fight against colonial governments. And with only a little more difficulty one may sense the frustrations involved in ethnic or regional minorities' feeling that, on occasion, their lack of identity with the central authorities has left them no alternative to armed dissidence.

Most outsiders will, however, have greater difficulty in understanding the forces that have operated to bring into being a long record of peasant protests and rebellions, particularly since the odds have generally seemed so heavily weighted against the success of such movements. In a concluding summary chapter there is no room for an attempt to analyse the always complex factors that have lain behind such manifestations of peasant politics. Rather, the point to be absorbed is that discontent at the peasant level has frequently been of such a deep and desperate nature that men and women have seen no alternative to revolt. And this fact alerts us to the continuing great divide that separates the 'haves' of Southeast Asia from the 'have-nots'. For the gloomy possibility, indeed probability, is that in some parts of Southeast Asia one of the most important features of the region's history since the 1920s has been the progressive impoverishment of rural communities even though poverty rates overrall have declined. Few areas of Southeast Asia match the problems of agricultural poverty associated with central and eastern Java, but impoverishment of a less dramatic sort is a feature of many other regions, and will grow as a problem so long as population increases continue to outstrip resources in those disadvantaged regions.

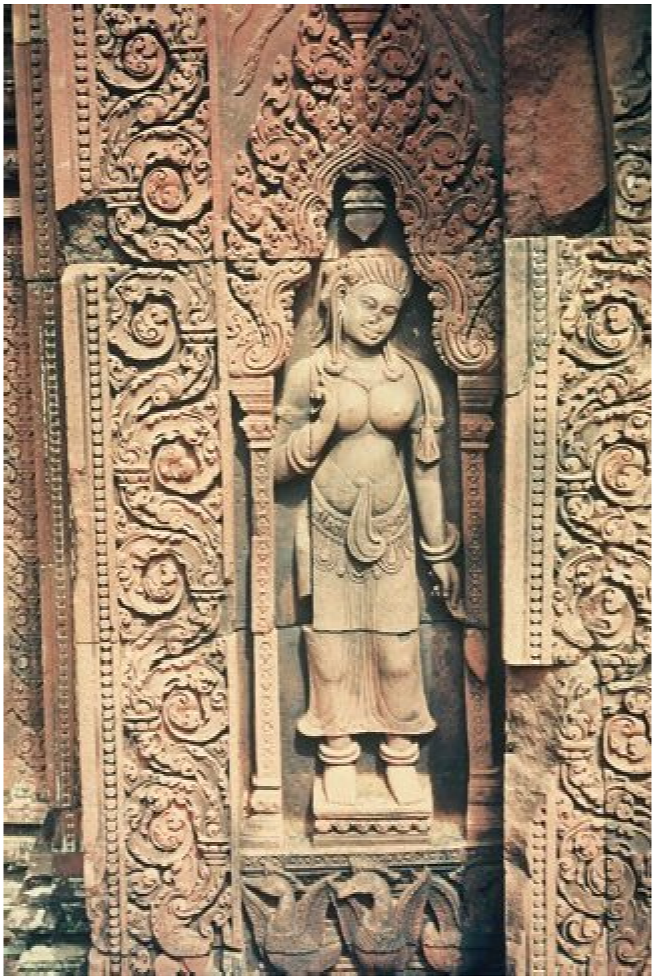
A new element, still difficult to analyse in satisfactory detail in the third decade of the twenty-first century, is the presence within Southeast Asia of shadowy extremist terrorist organisations linked to al-Qaeda and other extremist groups—including, most recently, the self-proclaimed Islamic State—pursuing their aims in the name of a radical vision of Islam. The presence of these organisations has been linked conclusively to the tragic bombings that took place in Bali in October 2002 and 2005, and to other successful or attempted attacks elsewhere in the region. For the moment, it is difficult to do little more than note the existence of these organisations and the fact that they proclaim a version of Islam that is rejected by the overwhelming majority of Southeast Asia's Muslim population.

The history of modern Southeast Asia has been, for many of the inhabitants of the region, a record of bitter disappointment rather than of promise. The events that occurred in the region during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries involved change and transformation of a momentous form, often of a very different kind from the changes that accompanied the industrial revolution in the Western world, but no less significant because of this fact. At the same time the changes and transformations that have been sketched throughout this book have left the countries of Southeast Asia still facing problems that are, in their essential character, of a separate order from those facing the states of the developed world.

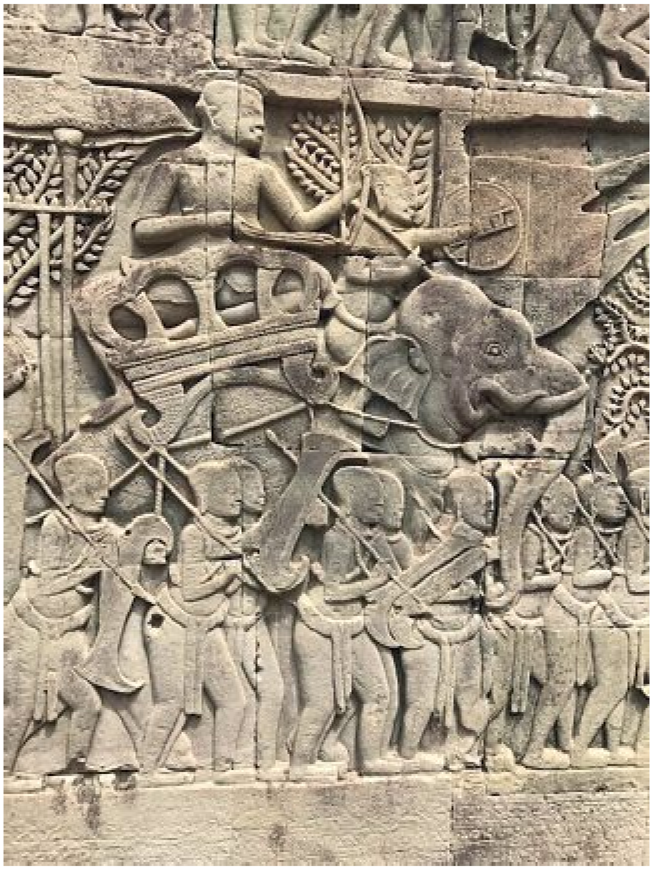
Physical resources, or the lack of them, will also be an increasing problem in wide areas of Southeast Asia as the region moves towards the third decade of the twenty-first century. Deforestation, for instance, has had a dramatic effect in both mainland and maritime Southeast Asia, with reliable estimates that Southeast Asia lost at least 23 million hectares of forest in the 1990s alone. The area of forests lost in this single decade approximates the size of the entire land territory of the United Kingdom. Nowhere has deforestation been more striking than in the Philippines. There, the 30 million hectares of hardwood forests that existed in 1946 had been reduced to less than a million hectares in 1990. In Vietnam, the cost to the environment as a result of the Second Indochina War was the destruction of 2.2 million hectares of forest and farmland. Even more forest has been destroyed since 1975 when the war ended: in the course of post-war reconstruction, Vietnam has been using up about 200 000 hectares of forest each year. In Cambodia, the country that suffered the unmatched horrors of Pol Pot's tyranny as part of its particular post-colonial legacy, the results of illegal logging in the 1990s have been devastating—so much so that in 1998 the Asian Development Bank warned that if an end was not made to illegal logging, Cambodia’s resources of tropical hardwood would be exhausted in as little as five years. Since that warning was made there has been some reduction in the pace, but the practice has far from disappeared. Looking at the Greater Mekong Region (GMS), which includes some parts of southern China as well as the Southeast Asia countries bordering the Mekong, between 1973 and 2009 this area lost 43 per cent of existing forest cover. It is in this region that environmental issues linked to the river itself have become a cause for concern as the result of a rapid program of dam construction in China, that began in the 1980s, and in Laos in the second decade of the present century. The alteration to the Mekong’s flow pattern as the result of these dams with yet to be fully assessed effects on fish stocks are a worrying development, for fish are a vital source of protein for the populations of the countries downstream of China. And already there is concern that the dams that have been built in China are restricting the flow of sediment down the river, sediment that contains vital nutrients vital to agricultural production, most particularly in the Mekong delta of southern Vietnam.

Because of the course that Southeast Asia’s history has followed over the past two centuries the region will remain subject to many stresses, with each state concerned above all to maintain national unity. A sense of identification between those who govern and those who are governed will remain an elusive goal for some states of the region, so that the problem of separatist dissidence is unlikely to vanish from the future Southeast Asian scene. Yet when all the region’s problems are catalogued, there are good reasons to inject an important degree of optimism into any discussion. The improvements of life expectancy noted earlier in this chapter are a reflection of notable advances that have occurred in the standard of living throughout much of the region. Government services extend into regions where they were unknown only decades ago and many more Southeast Asians are now gaining an education that goes beyond primary school level. This, indeed, is one of the most hopeful aspects of contemporary Southeast Asia. In no less than five countries—Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam—two-thirds of school-age children attend secondary schools. This is considerably more than is the case in India (50 per cent) and almost as many as in China (68 per cent). Note should be taken, nevertheless, of the negative impact of the Covid pandemic on these figures, and of the high cost of the Myanmar military coup in limiting school attendance. In much of Southeast Asia poverty remains a continuing problem, but this fact must be placed against the steady growth of a middle class. It would be quite misleading not to recognise that there are reasons for hope as well as for concern as Southeast Asians look at their own future.

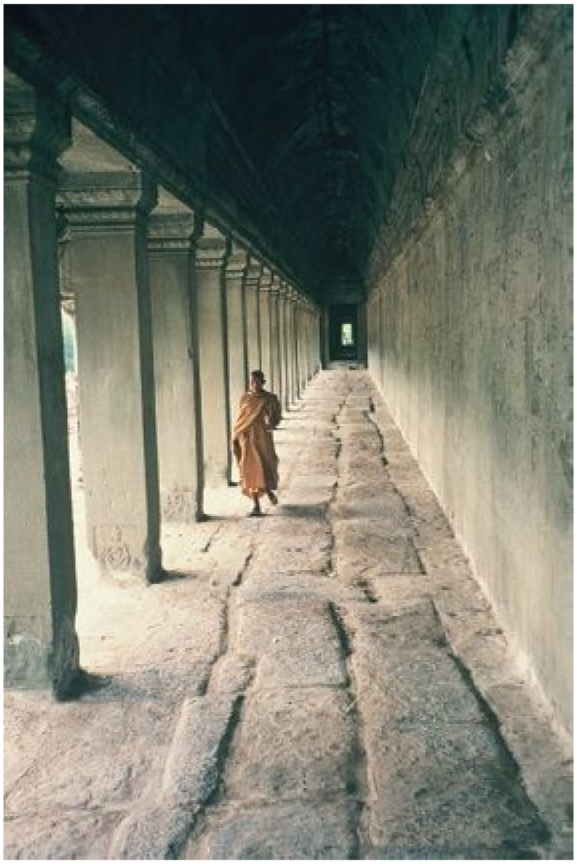
That future will be remarkably different from the Southeast Asia of one hundred years ago, let alone from the ‘classical’ world when the great monuments of Angkor, Pagan and the Borobudur were built. Just as importantly, Southeast Asia in the future will continue to retain its own distinctive character, or more correctly the character of the individual states that make up the region as a whole. For if there is one feature of Southeast Asia’s history about which there can be general agreement, it is that change and transformation have not turned the countries of Southeast Asia into some pale copy of any other part of the world. The countries of Southeast Asia retain their individual identities, the products of a rich and complex history. It is a history that has only recently begun to be explored in depth so that scholars, students and specialists alike still have the prospect before them of new insights and greater understanding. Whatever the history of Southeast Asia may be in the future the study of its past involves an intellectual journey through a world full of interest and fascination. It is a world that deserves to be better known.



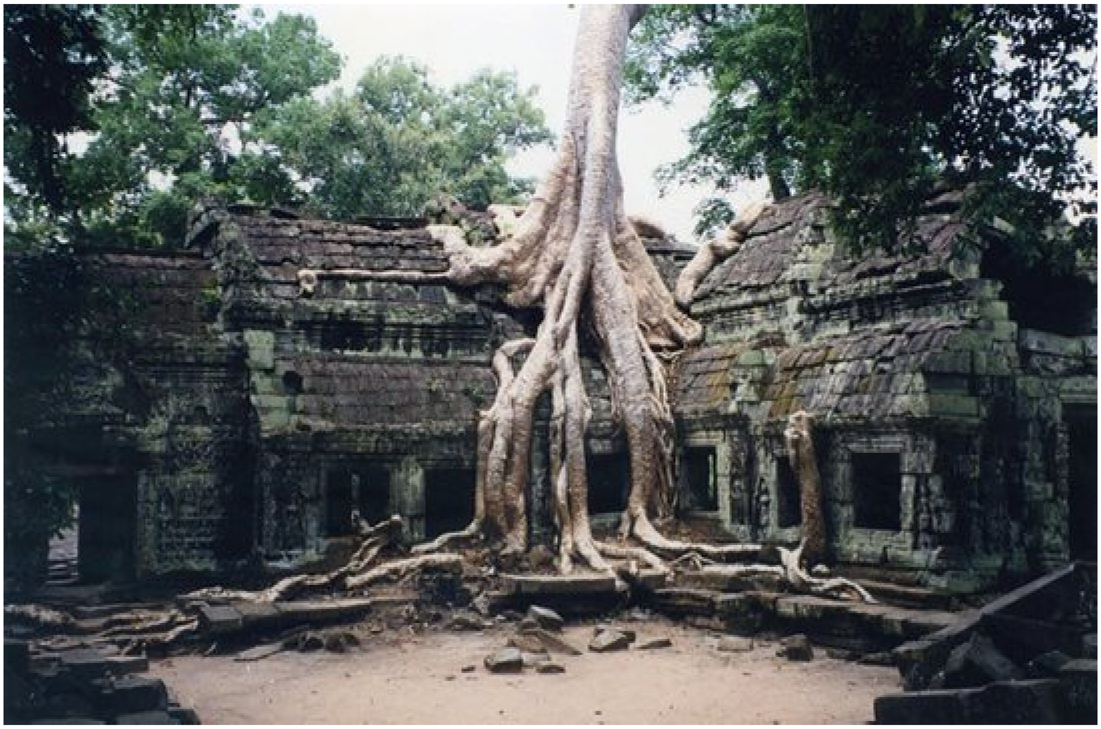
An *Apsara* or ‘Heavenly Being’ at the Banteay Srei temple in the Angkor archaeological complex, founded 967. The temples of Angkor are noted for their rich and plentiful carvings.



Many of the low-relief carvings that decorate the temples at Angkor depict scenes linked to battles as shown in this image of a king going to war on an elephant flanked by marching soldiers at the Baphuon temple, founded 1060. *(Credit Fiona Templin)*

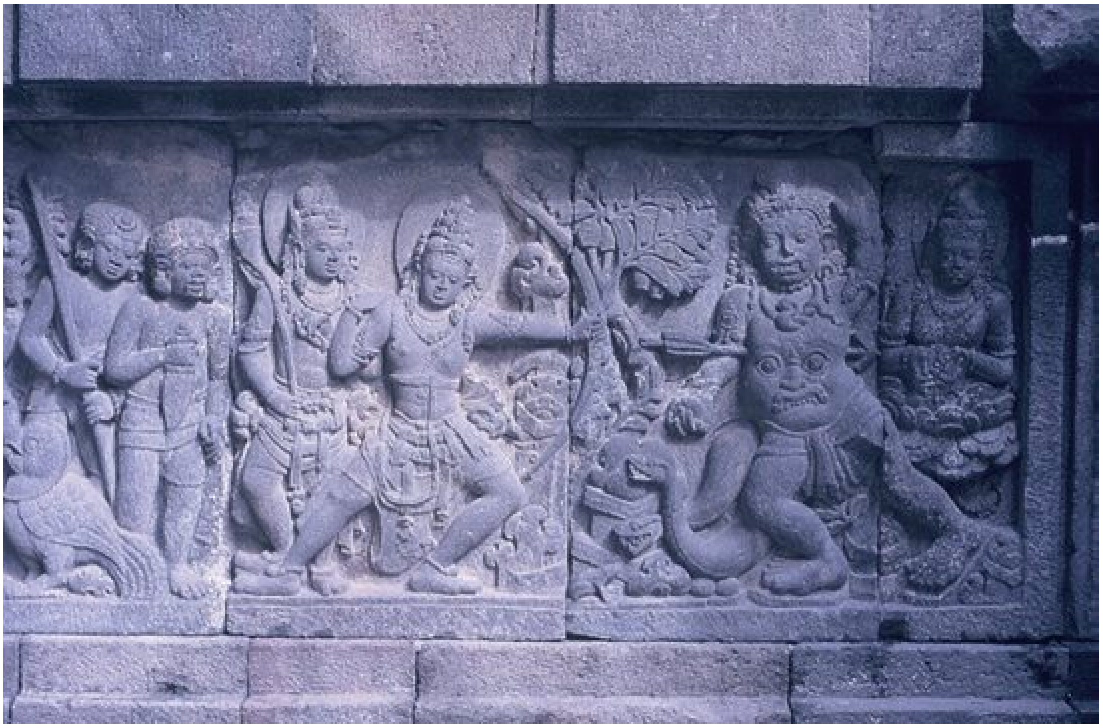


A solitary monk walks through the eastern outer gallery of Angkor Wat, the largest religious building ever constructed, which dates from the first half of the 12th century. In the era of mass tourism such a scene would be rare today as visitors crowd the temple sites.



The Ta Prohm temple in the Angkor archaeological complex founded in 1186 during the reign of Jayavarman VII. This temple has been left with the encroaching forest uncleared so that visitors can gain a sense of what the archaeologists found when they began to study the temples after their ‘rediscovery’ in the 19th century.

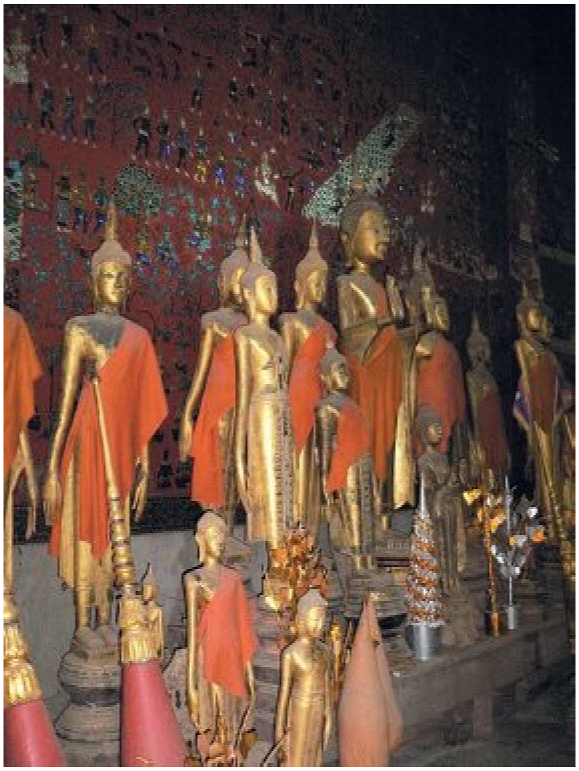
A view of some of the thousands of Buddhist temples at Bagan in Central Myanmar. Between the 9th and 13th centuries Bagan was the capital of the first kingdom to unite the territories that later became the state of Myanmar.



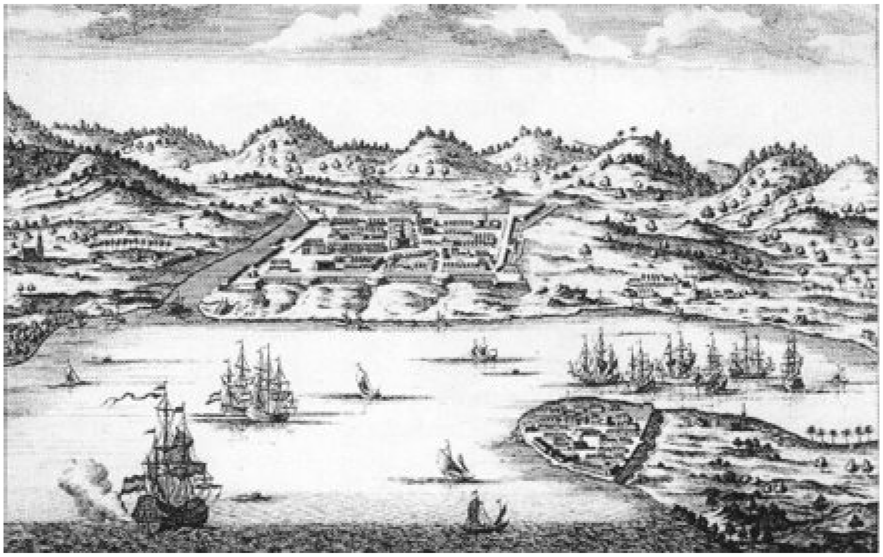
Low relief carving at the Borobudur, the great Buddhist monument in Central Java, not far from modern Yogyakarta. Constructed in the form of a holy mountain topped by a Buddhist stupa in the 9th century, it is richly decorated with carvings depicting scenes from the great Indian epics, in this case Arjuna with his bow from the *Mahabharata*.

Wat Sri Sawai located in the city of Sukhothai in Central Thailand and founded around the end of the 12th or early 13th centuries. Even before the Cambodian royal family abandoned the capital at

Angkor in the 15th century, Thai states to the west were challenging its power and building temples in their own distinctive style.

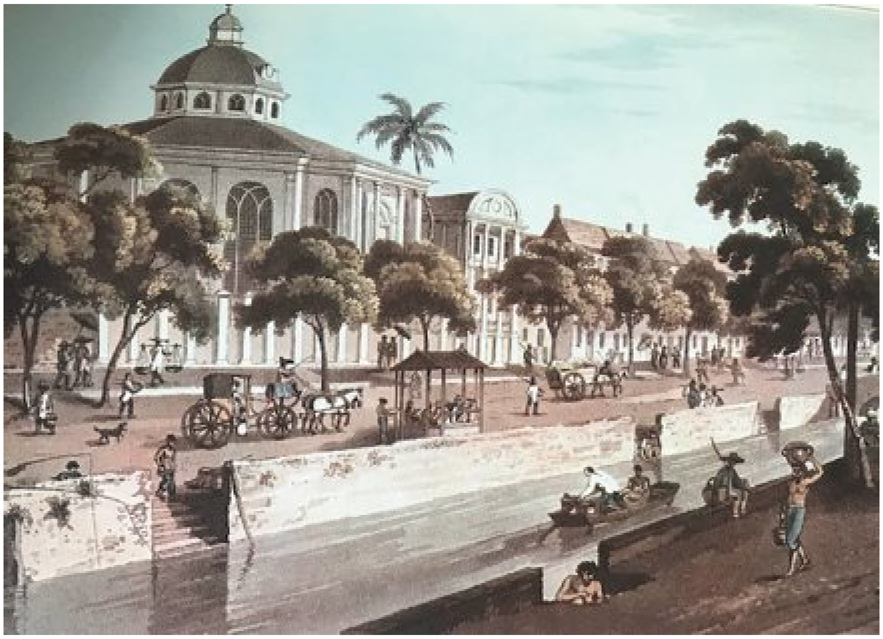


Buddha images stored in a building linked to Wat Xieng Thong temple in Luang Prabang, the former royal capital of Laos. Theravada Buddhism is the national religion of Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand, and the dominant religion in Laos.

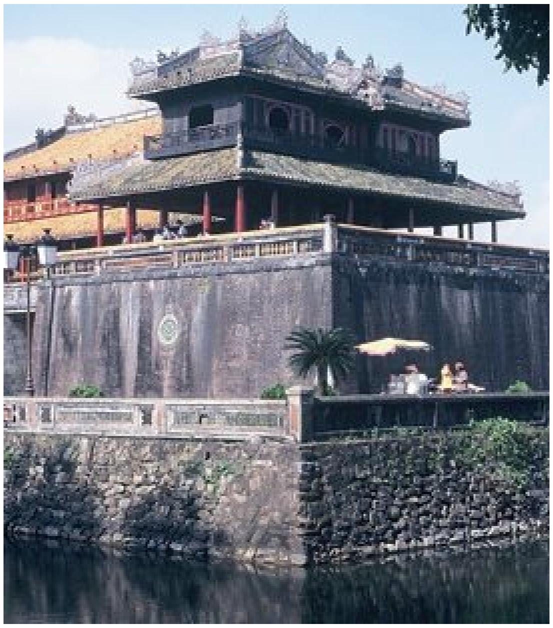


The Spanish established their colonial headquarters in the Philippines at Manila in 1571. As seen in this engraving, by the mid-17th century Manila was a substantial town. Trade was its lifeblood, with commerce handled by the large resident Chinese population. Power, however, was firmly in the hands of the Spanish, with the State and the Catholic Church working hand-in-hand.

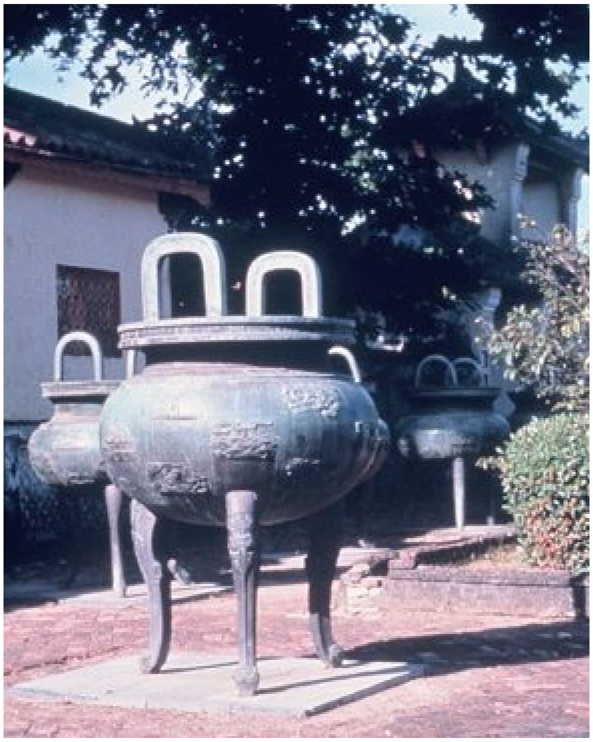
Christ Church Melaka, dating from the 18th century and now an Anglican church. The building was constructed while Melaka was under the control of Dutch colonialists. Along with the town hall, which also dates from the Dutch period, the church is painted in the distinctive orange colour favoured by settlers from the Netherlands. *(Credit Shutterstock)*



Dutch colonial architecture in Batavia (modern Jakarta) in the late 18th century. The colonial power sought to reproduce the architecture and canal system of its homeland, even though the canals, such as the one seen here, were breeding places for disease. From John Barrow, *A Voyage to Cochinchina*, 1806.

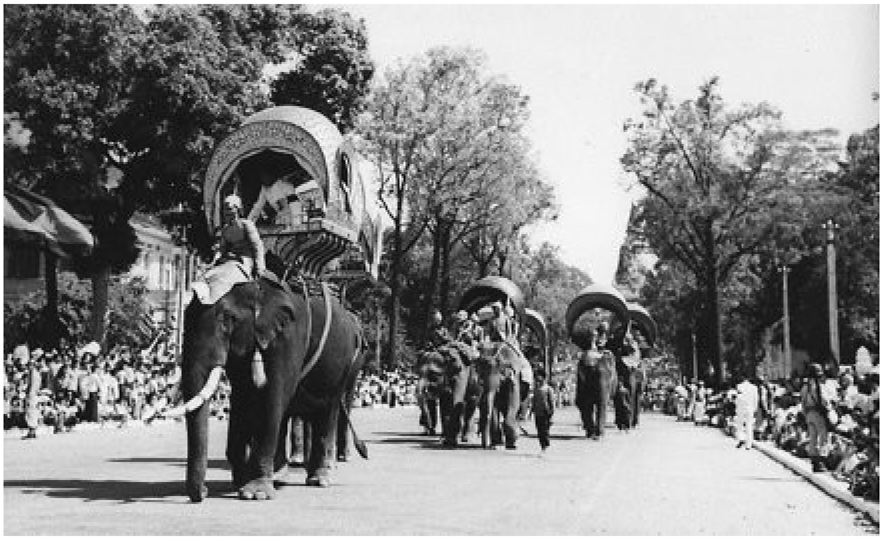


The Ngo Mon (Noontime Gate) entrance to Vietnam's former Imperial City in Hue. When Emperor Gia Long came to power in 1802, unifying Vietnam after a long period of division, he ordered the construction of a city that followed the principles of the Chinese Imperial City in Beijing, if on a smaller scale. Entrance through the centre of this gate was reserved for the emperor alone.

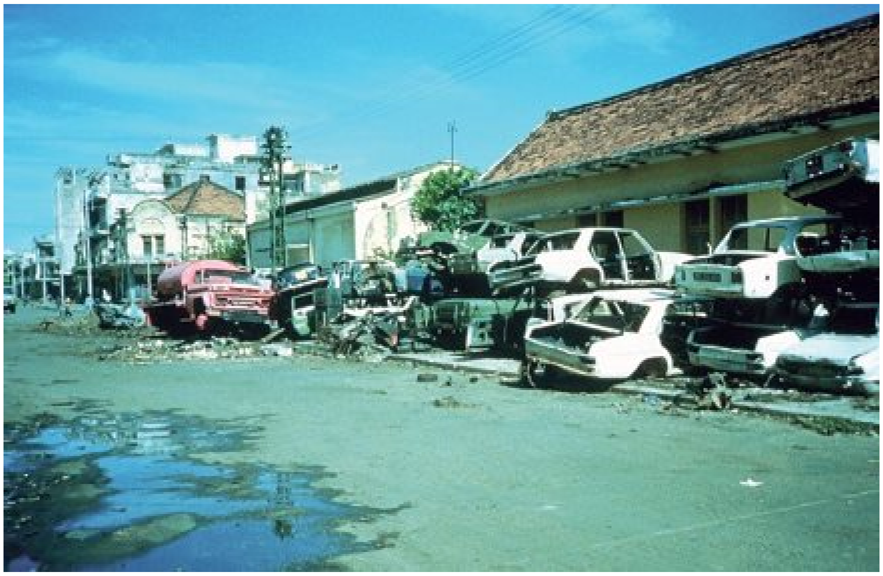


Nguyen Dynasty urns in the Imperial City, Hue, Vietnam. Cast on the orders of Emperor Minh Mang (reigned 1820–41), they draw on Chinese concepts of the power of the state and celebrate the unification of Vietnam in 1802 under Emperor Gia Long.

The Town Hall in Penang, Malaysia, dating from 1903, is a striking example of official colonial architecture on the island that became Britain's first colonial possession in the Malay world in 1786.



The funeral procession of King Suramarit of Cambodia in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in August 1960. With thirty elephants bearing members of the royal dance troupe, this image is a reminder of the importance that tradition continues to play within a modern state.

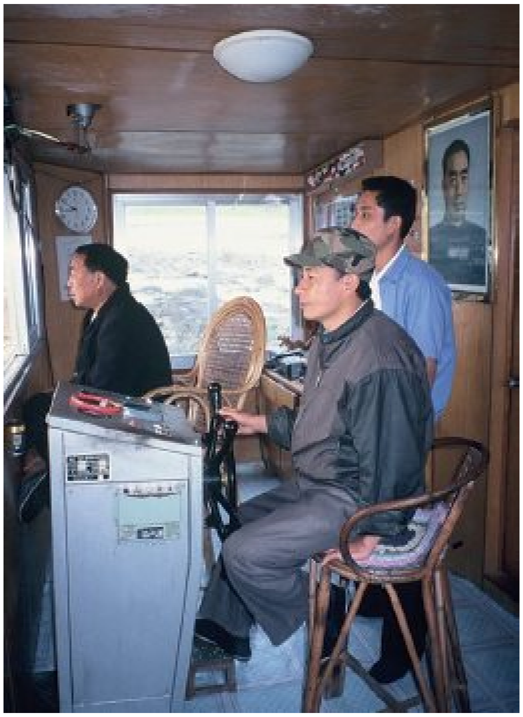


Wrecked cars in central Phnom Penh, photographed in August 1981. The Pol Pot regime, 1975–79, is widely known for its terrible cost in human lives, upwards of two million. However, it also turned its back on many aspects of modern life as seen in these cars that were destroyed as symbols of a corrupt society.

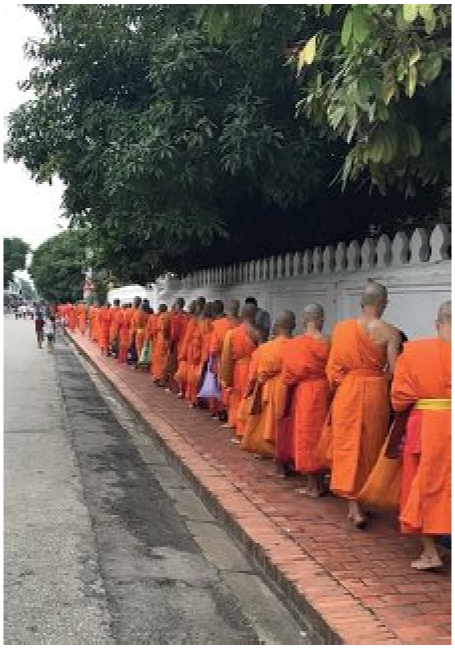
The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in early 1979 ended the Pol Pot tyranny. Cambodia became an occupied country, but the Vietnamese communist forces were left with a new enemy: Cambodian resistance forces. These Vietnamese conscripts are seen training in Kompong Chhnang in late 1981.

Soviet sailors photographed with a Vietnamese woman in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) in 1981. Following its victory in the Vietnam War in 1975, the unified government of Vietnam was in need of foreign economic assistance that was mainly supplied by the then Soviet Union.

Early morning on the Mekong at Luang Prabang, the old royal capital of Laos. Fishers have been central to the life of communities throughout the river’s course in Southeast Asia and they now worry that dams built in China will badly affect the stocks of fish on which they rely.



Almost all the river trade along the Mekong between China and Thailand is in the hands of Chinese vessels such as this. Captains Yao and Zhu conn their vessel through rapids and whirlpools in 2003. Note the portrait of Zhou Enlai behind them.



Despite the efforts of the communist government in Laos after coming to power in 1975 to suppress Buddhism, the religion thrives in contemporary times with the morning circulation by monks to receive alms a feature of daily life throughout the country and seen here in Luang Prabang. *(Credit Fiona Templin)*

Even with the transformation of Southeast Asia’s primate cities, such as Jakarta and Bangkok, with their modern shopping malls, life in smaller urban settlements still has a pattern that has little changed as is seen here in a street market in Luang Prabang.

A rice spirit shrine in Bali. Rice cultivation has been an essential feature of life in Southeast Asia for millennia and nowhere more importantly than in Bali where traditional society was organised around the cooperative cultivation of the rice crop. Despite Bali’s fame as a tourist destination, this scene remains both familiar and typical of rural life.

The built environment of Southeast Asia has been transformed over the past fifty years with dramatic new architecture. At a height of 451 metres the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, were the tallest buildings in the world when they were completed in 1998.

The Canadia Bank Tower in Phnom Penh, Cambodia’s capital, was the first high-rise building to be constructed in the city. Completed in 2009, it heralded the dramatic change to the city’s appearance and character as by 2020 there were over 40 buildings more than 150 metres in height in Central Phnom Penh.

POLICE
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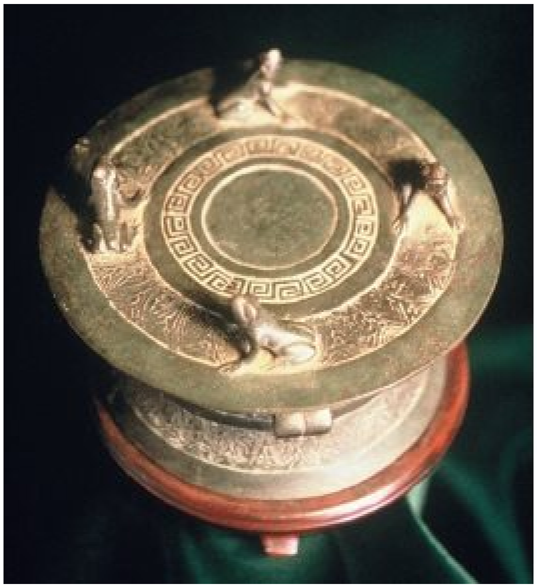
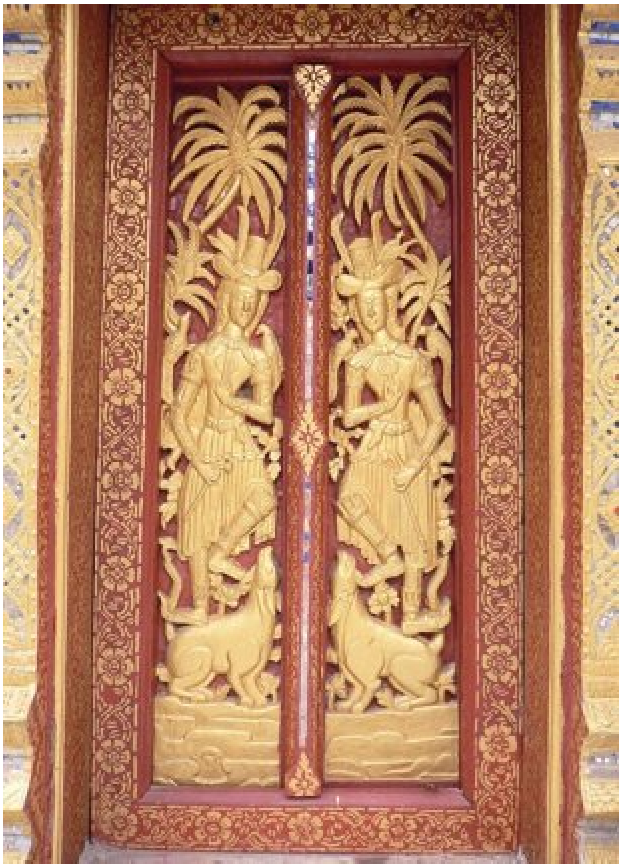
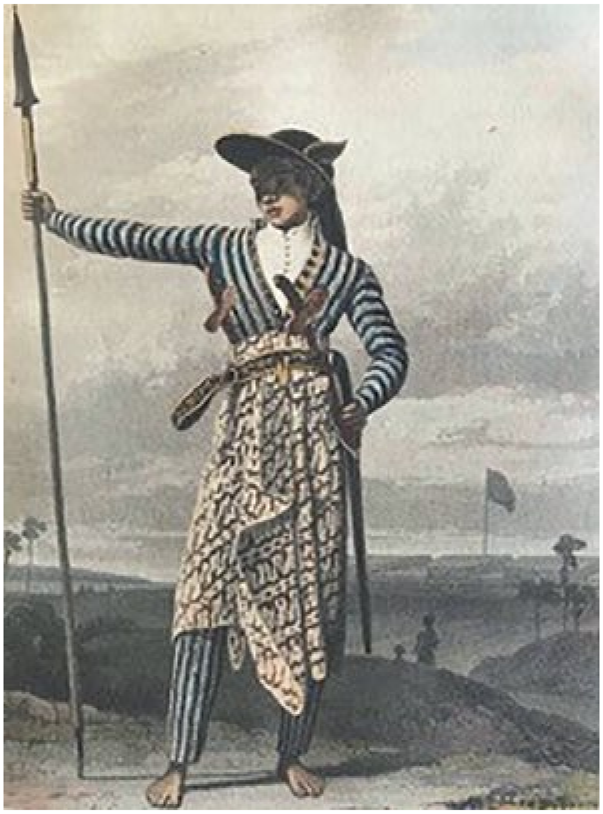
Bangkok, Thailand’s capital, has been the site of frequent urban unrest over the past fifty years with loss of life and destruction of buildings. This was notably the case in 2009 when police and troops were called out to patrol the centre of the city.



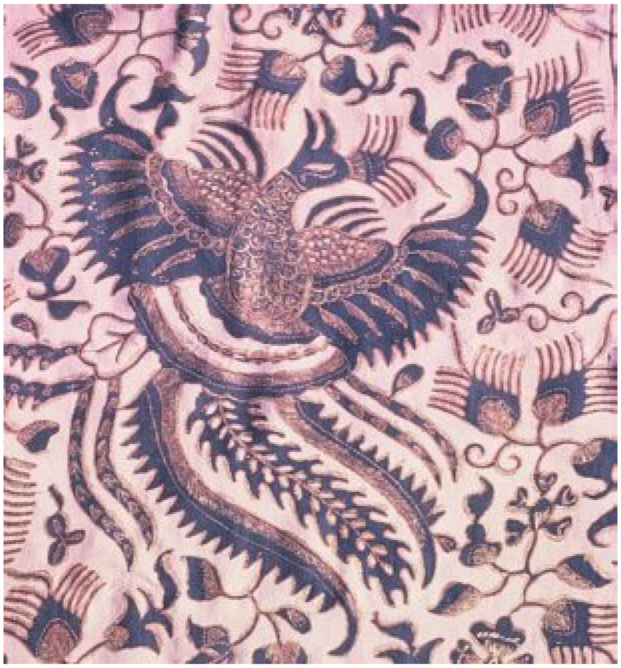
A miniature bronze drum, *klo*, linked to the Karen people of modern Myanmar and probably dating from the 18th century. Bronze drums frequently decorated with frogs, and sometimes massive in size, have been found all over Southeast Asia. With some dating from pre-historic periods, it is thought that one of their functions was to be used in rituals calling for rain.



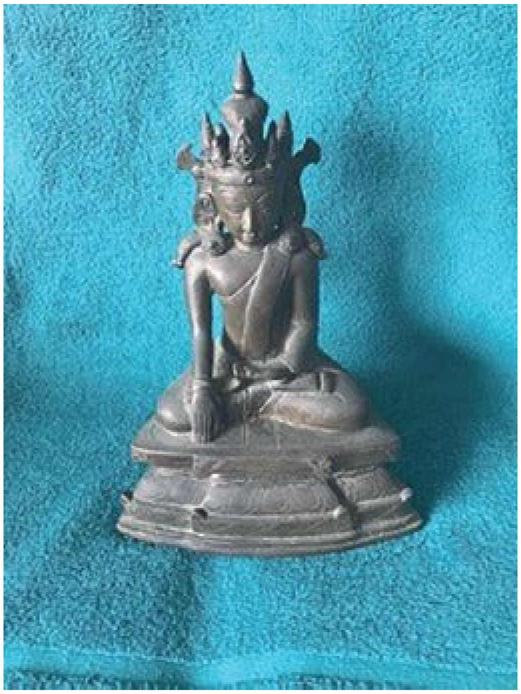
Decorated doors at Wat Pa Khe, Luang Prabang, the former royal capital of Laos. The European figures on the doors are sometimes identified as Dutchmen linked to a visit to Laos in the 17th century by a Dutch East India Company embassy. But the embassy did not visit Luang Prabang and it is more likely that the figures are based on an engraving.



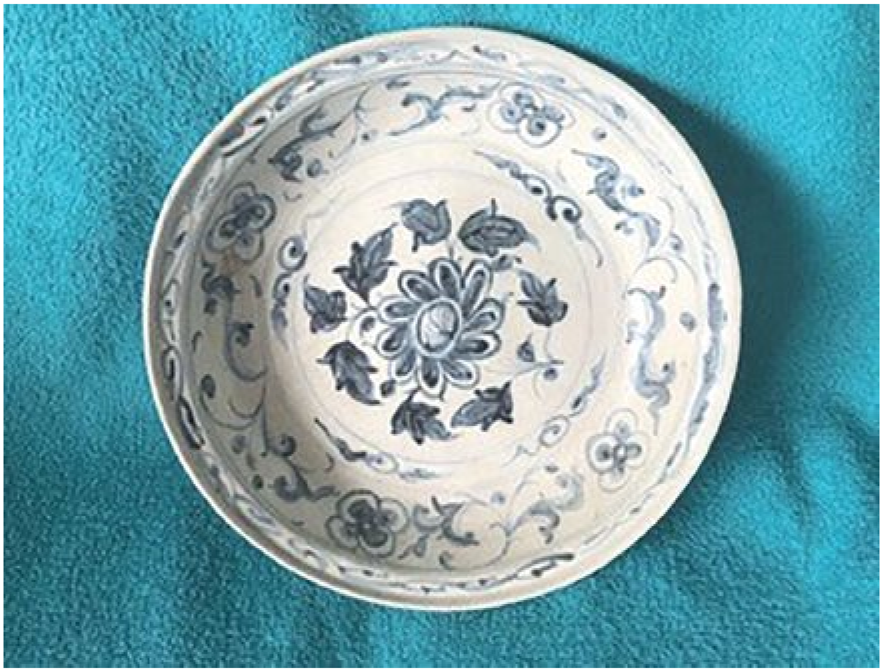
An illustration of ‘A Javan in War Dress’, from Thomas Stamford Raffles, *The History of Java*, 1817, showing the typical batik pattern on the warrior’s sarong found in Central Java both then and in the present day.



Detail from a silk *slendang*, shoulder shawl, showing a phoenix in dark blue dye, highlighted in gold leaf. Batiks of this kind were manufactured in northern Java and were very popular in Bali. The batik in the image is about 80 years old.



A fine example of a Crowned Buddha image from the Arakan (modern Rakhine) area of Western Myanmar, cast in bronze with traces of gold leaf gilding. Dating from the late 17th century, and in the 'Calling the Earth to Witness' posture, it shows Chinese influence in its ornamentation.



A Vietnamese ceramic dish. Dating from the late 15th–early 16th centuries, this dish is decorated in blue-black underglaze with a central peony design (diameter 26 cm).

# APPENDIX

# Discovering Southeast Asia through art and literature

In any effort to understand Southeast Asia's past, an awareness of the region's rich artistic heritage helps add cultural flesh to history's analytic bones. Similarly, a sampling of fictional writing, by both Southeast Asian and Western writers, can provide a sense of time and place that is sometimes lacking from conventional history. With these considerations in mind, this appendix presents, in a very cursory fashion, a review of some important aspects of Southeast Asian art history. It also offers a selective survey of fictional writing on Southeast Asia that may help readers to gain some sense of the human aspects of the region's history, though mostly in terms of the way in which non-indigenous and mostly Western outsiders have looked at the region. In relation to both the art and literature discussed in this Appendix the fact that the writer is not a Southeast Asian must be kept firmly in mind.

## SOUTHEAST ASIA'S ART

Surprising though it may seem today, many of the first Europeans to come in contact with Southeast Asia's grandest 'classical' architectural monuments either ignored them or denigrated them for failing to approximate European aesthetics. During the eighteenth century, for example, Dutch merchants regularly journeyed from Batavia (Jakarta) to the central Javanese courts at Yogyakarta and Surakarta (Solo). In doing so they passed close to the mighty monuments of the Borobudur and Prambanan. Yet they appear to have made no mention of these striking temples in their records. Trade was the merchants' preoccupation and the exotic aesthetics of Javanese art did not bear on their commercial concerns.

In the case of these central Javanese monuments, it was left to Thomas Stamford Raffles to commission the first modern survey of the Borobudur during his years as lieutenant-governor of Java between 1811 and 1816. Father Bouillevaux, one of the first Europeans to visit Angkor in the nineteenth century, was willing to admit the grandeur of the temples he saw, particularly Angkor Wat. But this approval did not carry over to the statuary he saw in the temples. With all of the sense of superiority of a mid-nineteenth-century man and priest, he declared that attempts by Angkorian artists to render the human form were 'grotesque'.

But although virtually unknown or unappreciated until the latter half of the nineteenth century, Southeast Asian art in its many forms is now recognised both for its aesthetic worth and as evidence that helps historians to chart the political, cultural and technological characteristics of earlier societies. As interest and appreciation have developed over the years, the range of art receiving attention by scholars and collectors has grown greatly. While early research, particularly by some outstanding scholar–administrators in Indochina and Indonesia, concentrated on monuments and sculpture, today a much wider range of objects receives attention. Most particularly, the last five decades have witnessed a greatly increased interest in ceramics and textiles.

## Monumental art

By their very size, the great temple complexes of Angkor in Cambodia, Bagan in Myanmar, and the temples of Prambanam and the Borobudur monument in central Java have been a focus for scholarly and tourist interest throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. But impressive and culturally important as they are, these monuments are only the best known of a wealth of individual temples and complexes scattered throughout the major settled areas of Southeast Asia and built before the impact of the European advance. In eastern Java, for instance, there are important temple remains near Malang and Blitar. After decades of being inaccessible to foreigners, it is again possible to visit a major temple site dating from Angkorian times located in southern Laos. This is Wat Phu, set on a feature overlooking the Mekong River but hundreds of kilometres distant from the Angkor complex near the Cambodian provincial town of Siem Reap. Along the coast of central modern Vietnam, Cham temples recall a vanished kingdom that was able in its heyday to challenge the power of the Khmer kings at Angkor. In Thailand there are major temple remains from Angkorian times, but there are, too, the important early Thai city and temple complexes at Ayuthia, Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai, as well as lesser-known complexes such as the northern site of Chiang Saen.

These monumental remains excite interest for many reasons. Even to those with little knowledge of the history of Southeast Asia or of the symbolism embodied in the monuments, the physical presence and the extent of the temple complexes at Angkor (ninth to fifteenth centuries) and Bagan (ninth to thirteenth centuries) command respect. In the case of Angkor, dozens of temples are scattered over an area of about 500 square kilometres (200 square miles). Among them is Angkor Wat, the largest religious monument in the world. Despite its great size, Angkor Wat, as already noted earlier in this book, was constructed in the amazingly short time of around fifty years. The number of temples at Pagan almost staggers the imagination. Some two thousand temples constructed from brick dot the vast central Burmese plain. The Borobudur near the central Javanese city of Yogyakarta provides a different impression. This massive stupa towers over modern visitors as they approach it just as it would have towered over the Buddhist pilgrims who came to the monument following its completion around 800 CE. Circumambulating the stupa and ‘reading’ the Buddhist birth stories from the low reliefs carved on the terraces, the pilgrims slowly ascended to the top of the monument where, surrounded by partially hidden Buddha images, they could gaze at distant sacred mountains. To repeat this experience in modern times gives a visitor some sense, at least, of the power this monument would have exerted over its devotees a thousand years ago.

Whether large or small, the pre-modern monumental remains scattered throughout Southeast Asia share certain common characteristics, as well as being individually marked by the time and place of their construction. Often sited in locations that had links with the local religions that pre-dated the arrival of Indian cultural influence, the monuments we can still see today were inspired by Hinduism and Buddhism, sometimes singly, sometimes as a syncretic combination. But inspired by Indian religions, and drawing on architectural and artistic styles from India, the monuments that were erected in Southeast Asia were never mere copies of the temples and shrines to be found on the subcontinent. Whatever the similarities in the way in which temples were sited or the basic form of the architectural layout with symbolic representations of the Hindu and Buddhist universes, even an unskilled observer immediately recognises that the temples of Angkor or Prambanan in central Java are different from those found in, say, an Indian site such as Orissa. Just as clearly, the temple styles of one country of Southeast Asia are different from those of another.

Here, of course, is where the interests of the cultural historian intersect with those of the scholar more concerned with political issues. Thailand’s history, for instance, is not only recorded in chronicles. Just as importantly, its transformation from a region on the periphery of the Cambodian empire to an independent state was reflected in its development of architectural styles that held echoes of earlier Cambodian models but which were distinctively Thai in character.

One of the most striking features of the monuments of pre-modern Southeast Asia is the richness of their decoration. Much of the decoration has suffered the ravages of time, war and vandalism. This is particularly true of those monuments, such as some temples at Sukhothai in Thailand, that were decorated in stucco, and those at Bagan decorated externally with stucco and internally with paintings. Elsewhere, and notably in the case of the temples at Angkor, low and high relief carving still adorns the walls, pillars and lintels of temples with a sharpness little affected by the passing of centuries. The range of subjects treated in pictorial reliefs and the inventiveness of the decorators is breathtaking. At Angkor the low relief carvings depict scenes from the Hindu epics, representations of massed Cambodian armies marching in processions, possibly to war, and ‘snapshots’ of everyday life. At Angkor Wat alone, the low reliefs along the walls of the outer gallery of this vast monument—the largest religious monument ever constructed—cover a linear distance of 520 metres (568 yards). The energy and organisation that would have been necessary for work of this kind at Angkor, or on the walls of the Borobudur in Java, underline the vital part played by religion in the societies of pre-modern Southeast Asia. For these great temples to have been built, decorated and then maintained required a major concentration of resources, in a fashion similar to the effort required to construct and maintain the great monastic foundations of medieval Europe. Although not entirely satisfactory as an analogy, the image of Southeast Asia’s temples having an importance within their societies similar to that of Europe’s great cathedrals and monasteries emphasises their centrality to the times in which they were built.

## Sculpture

Attention has just been given to the low and high relief carving as a feature of the decoration that was so important a part of the monuments of pre-modern Southeast Asia. Just as important an aspect of Southeast Asia's artistic heritage are the free-standing sculptures in stone, bronze and wood that are now recognised as enshrining aesthetic qualities of grace and form equal to those of any other cultures. But it must always be remembered that what an outside observer sees as striking aesthetic qualities enshrine religious qualities and characteristics deeply important to a Buddhist or Hindu believer. The range of Southeast Asian sculpture is enormous, whether categorised in terms of chronology, subject matter or the materials used. In pre-Angkorian Cambodia sculpture in stone has been found dating back to the sixth or seventh century CE. Although sculpture in stone continued to have a widespread presence throughout large areas of Southeast Asia, casting in bronze, which has even earlier antecedents, grew to be more important, particularly in the years following the decline of the great early kingdoms both on the mainland and in Sumatra and Java. Wood was also used as a sculptural medium, with some of the most notable examples coming from Burma.

As with the temple complexes of pre-modern Southeast Asia, sculpture drew its inspiration and iconography from Indian religions—Hinduism and Buddhism—and then transformed these Indian models into local and national Southeast Asian artistic statements. Southeast Asian image makers did not only draw their inspiration from India. Not just in Vietnam, where Chinese influence on art was extremely strong, but also in Myanmar, there is artistic evidence that Chinese models influenced sculptors. Although sculpture in bronze is found throughout Southeast Asia, the richest tradition, in terms of numbers of images and, in the opinion of many observers, in aesthetic terms also, is found in the Buddha images of Myanmar, Thailand and Laos. To make this assertion is not to dismiss the monumental bronzes of Angkorian Cambodia or the small but beautifully sculptured statuettes of Java. But in Myanmar, Thailand and Laos unknown artists working within a rigid canon of iconography were able over the centuries to produce a range of images that are outstanding in their aesthetic quality. The most impressive of them blend a sense of authority with the quality of serenity. The images of the Sukhothai period (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries CE) are particularly notable in this regard, but images from other centres also deserve attention. Buddha images from Arakan (modern Rahkine State) in the west of Burma are, at their finest, notably successful both as interpretations of Buddhist iconographic requirements and as universally appealing works of art. Indeed, it is the universality of these images' aesthetic qualities that has led to their being such an object of interest in recent years among non-Southeast Asian collectors.

Buddhism and Hinduism are not the only religions to have held sway in Southeast Asia. Uniquely, in the Philippines, Christianity became entrenched in the northern and central islands of that archipelagic country. Since it was the Spaniards who brought Christianity to the Philippines, Spanish forms of worship and Spanish religious art dominated the expansion of the church through the islands. A notable example of the sub-branch of Iberian art that took root in the Philippines were the *santos* or saints' figures carved in wood and ivory that adorned the altars of churches and religious foundations and the private shrines of worshippers. At their finest, these *santos* with their fluid carving match the best examples of religious art in the Iberian peninsula.

## Ceramics

No other category of Southeast Asian art has enjoyed such a growth in interest over the past several decades as has the study of the region's ceramics. For many years the existence of a range of Southeast Asian ceramics was known to specialists, but fine Chinese ceramics, particularly porcelain, dominated the interests of both scholars and collectors. From the 1960s onwards, and more particularly from the 1970s, there has been a change in attitude resulting from a realisation that ceramics from a range of Southeast Asian sources are both worthy of aesthetic approval and of vital importance in tracing the course of the region's history.

Many factors contributed to the growing interest. Of considerable importance was the discovery in the mid-1960s of a major archaeological site at Ban Chiang, in northeast Thailand, in which ceramics and bronzes dating back to 3600 BCE revealed the presence of an indigenous Southeast Asian culture of an earlier date than had previously been known to exist. While scholars began to assess the implications of the articles found at Ban

Chiang, others became aware of a mass of ceramics from much later periods that had suddenly become available for purchase in Southeast Asia and which were not Chinese in origin. Excavated from sites in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand were ceramic items of enormous variety that had been produced in Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar and Thailand. Their appearance on the market acted as a spur to research that has not only left us with a much richer understanding of the range of ceramics produced in Southeast Asia, but also with a better knowledge of the course of historical developments in particular regions. Analysis of kilns found in central Thailand, for instance, has raised the possibility that Thai states may have emerged at an earlier date than has previously been supposed. In sum, the finds and research of the past several decades have underlined the fact that, in addition to the widespread circulation of Chinese export ceramics through much of Southeast Asia in pre-modern times, there were also important production centres of local ceramics in mainland Southeast Asia over the same period. It is now clear that the products of these centres also circulated widely through the region.

The types of Southeast Asian ceramic objects dating from pre-modern times are extremely diverse. In terms of size, the objects can range from tiny jarlets produced in Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand to large stoneware jars standing upwards of a metre tall that were produced in Burma and are known under the generic title of Martaban jars. The forms in which ceramics were produced were equally varied, with jars, bowls, vases and plates being the most common varieties. But there were other distinctive items; among Cambodian ceramics zoomorphic items (covered jars and water dispensers in the shape of animals and birds) were relatively common. From the kilns of central Thailand around Sawankalok came ceramic votive figures to ensure female fertility and ceramic elephants that recall the part played by these animals in various episodes in the life of the Buddha.

The processes used in the manufacture of Southeast Asian ceramics have an interest that goes beyond efforts to understand the degree of technical expertise that was required to produce particular results. Scholars are seeking to establish where this expertise came from and to what extent particular technical skills were developed locally or imported from other areas. Although it seems likely that Chinese potters played a part in the initial establishment of some, if not all, of the Southeast Asian production centres of the classical period, it is equally clear that local potters were quickly able to adapt whatever techniques were imported. The interplay between local and imported skills may have been quite complex. In Thailand, for instance, some scholars believe it may have been Vietnamese potters who first carried their skills to the sites that became important for the production of distinctive celadons. These Vietnamese in their turn almost certainly would have learnt some of their skills from China.

Even where there is no doubt about the origin of particular forms of design and ceramic technique, the ability of Southeast Asian craftsmen to produce distinctively national objects stands out quite clearly. Vietnam's long association with China ensured that there was strong Chinese influence on the development of Vietnamese ceramics. In particular, the period of Chinese reoccupation during the Ming dynasty, between 1407 and 1428 CE, led to the production of blue and white wares that in their early forms had direct echoes of contemporary Chinese objects. Later, although Chinese influences could still be identified in the products of Vietnamese potters' kilns, the local craftsmen injected their own local personality into the forms and the decoration of their ceramic works. Most strikingly, the Vietnamese decorators adopted styles that were freer and less stereotyped than those dominant in China.

## Textiles and other craft objects

The increased scholarly attention given to ceramics reflects a general broadening of interest in the culture of Southeast Asia that has extended the definition of 'art' to include items previously relegated to a presumed lesser category of 'crafts'. Few would now discuss ceramics in terms of 'crafts'. Similarly, growing interest in Southeast Asian textiles has, at the very least, moved these items into a category in which they are treated as part of the region's general artistic heritage, if not as part of Southeast Asia's 'high art', characterised by sculpture and monumental remains.

Without question the best known of Southeast Asia's textiles are the batiks of Indonesia, cloth decorated by a process of repeated dyeing controlled by the application of wax to the fabric. Now widely known outside Indonesia, batik cloths bought by tourists are often of a mass-produced kind, where the painstaking work of applying the design by hand has been abandoned in favour of printing by blocks or even machines. While there are still batik makers who work in the traditional fashion, the slow and precise work required to produce batik in this manner means that their product risks becoming increasingly rare.

Seen together, there is no comparison between batik produced in the traditional manner and that printed by modern means. The traditional methods allow an infinitely greater variety of designs to be applied to the cloth, many of them full of symbolism for the Indonesian inhabitants of Java, where the bulk of batik cloth has always been produced. Certain designs and favoured combinations of colours are associated with geographical localities. Both Yogyakarta and Surakarta (Solo) in central Java are known for batiks that are dark in colour and restrained in design, characteristics that echo the norms of public behaviour associated with their traditional courts. Batiks from Ceribon and Pekalongan on the north coast of Java, by contrast, are much more colourful, almost certainly as a reflection of the strong Chinese influence that has long been present in that region.

Fine woven textiles are also produced in Indonesia and they are the predominant cloth craft in the rest of Southeast Asia. The variety of these woven cloths was and is great, ranging from the silks of Burma, Thailand and Cambodia to the fibre cloths of the Dyaks of Borneo and the hill peoples of northern Luzon in the Philippines. In their wide-ranging variety, textiles alert us to a general feature of Southeast Asian material culture. Despite the broad underlying similarities that scholars of various disciplines perceive throughout the region, regional and national characteristics have been and still remain a feature of Southeast Asia’s artistic heritage. This observation is true whether one is discussing woodcarving or the metal work associated with weaponry. In this latter category the *kris* of Indonesia and Malaysia with their intricately worked serpentine blades are distinctively different from the straight-bladed swords of the mainland kingdoms.

Change is just as much a feature of contemporary Southeast Asia as of any other region of the world, so that the rich artistic and craft traditions that may have been so much a part of the region’s history are in many cases slowly being eroded. The period of monumental building came to an end centuries ago, though it has left an echo in the temples of Bali, where an immensely rich artistic and cultural tradition has survived with a vigour unmatched anywhere else in the region. Traditional textiles have continued as a major feature of contemporary life despite the inroads of mass-produced substitutes. And ceramic production has received a new lease of life, particularly in Thailand. The work of silversmiths has never been lost from northern Thailand and has been revived in the east coast states of modern Malaysia. But whatever the changes that have taken place and those still to come, Southeast Asia’s artistic heritage is rich and varied, a testimony to past greatness and continuing cultural energy.

## SOUTHEAST ASIA IN FICTION AND LITERATURE: A PERSONAL SELECTION

The body of fictional writing on Southeast Asia, particularly during the period of modern history treated in this book, is enormous in size. In the late 1920s, for instance, a French writer estimated that over the preceding eighty years his compatriots had published nearly one thousand novels on Indochinese subjects. Taking into account only those novels and shorter fictional writings that deal with Southeast Asia since the mid-nineteenth century, a student would face an impossible task in seeking to review those items available in the English language alone. And much of the effort would be misplaced, for a very large number of the novels written with Southeast Asian settings have deservedly been forgotten as offering neither literary nor historical interest.

Yet if the daunting undertaking of reviewing the whole body of fictional writing can be justifiably put aside, there is reward to be gained from a selective examination of some of the most readily available, most influential, and most evocative novels, short stories and memoirs with Southeast Asia as their setting. Suggesting some of the books and stories that students of Southeast Asia might read is what is attempted in this, the book’s final section. The selection is personal and heterogeneous and the writer is very much aware that the bulk of the novels examined were written by Europeans and about Europeans in Southeast Asia. This means they are marked by the attitudes and prejudices of the times when they were written. The number of novels by Southeast Asian authors about their own world that are readily available to be read in English is sadly limited.

### The novel as political statement

The use of the novel to make a political statement about Southeast Asia has not been restricted to more recent times, when many of the fictional works taking the Vietnam War as their subject have been written with a clear position in favour of, or against, the conflict. What is without doubt the most famous Dutch novel with Indonesia as its setting, *Max Havelaar*, was written with the deliberate aim of changing the way in which the Netherlands Indies were administered.

First published in 1859, the novel's author was Eduard Douwes Dekker (pseudonym Multatuli), a Dutchman who had served in Indonesia for eighteen years. During that time he had grown disillusioned with the character of colonial rule, which he saw as corrupting of the Dutch and disregarding of the interests of the Indonesians. Largely autobiographical, the book remains a powerful indictment of the colonial system. Although there is debate about the extent of the novel's influence in the decades that followed its publication, most commentators credit Dekker with having touched the conscience of many of the officials who came to Indonesia in the latter part of the nineteenth century and who believed that more 'liberal' policies should be followed by the colonial power. For some this attitude reflected a genuine shift towards the idea that colonial administrations had a responsibility to improve the lives of those whom they administered. For others the need for change was seen as a necessary practical response to the risks that would follow from a failure to change the abuses described in *Max Havelaar*. Whatever their motivations, these officials were reacting to the spectre of colonial revolt that Dekker raised when he asked, 'Must not the bent spring eventually recoil? Must not the long-suppressed discontent—suppressed so that the government can deny its existence—finally turn to rage, desperation, madness?'

A much more complex novel about colonial Indonesia is Louis Couperus' *The Hidden Force*, first published in 1900. As in *Max Havelaar*, the hero of Couperus' novel is a colonial official. But unlike Dekker's principal character, Couperus' protagonist, Van Oudijek, is less a questioner of the colonial system than a victim of its innate inequities and of the gulf that separated the Dutch rulers from their Indonesian subjects. Although not conceived as a polemic, *The Hidden Force* carries a strong political message and may be profitably read alongside *Max Havelaar*.

Two other novels deserve mention in this brief review of writing that was both conceived with political intent and succeeded in that aim. The outstanding figure of the Philippine nationalist movement against the Spaniards was José Rizal. A man of extraordinarily wide-ranging talents, Rizal was the author of two polemical novels that helped shape the course of the aborted Philippine revolution against Spanish rule at the end of the nineteenth century. *Noli me tangere* (first published in 1886 and published in English as *The Social Cancer*, 1912) and *El filibusterismo* (first published in 1891 and published in English as *The Reign of Greed* in 1912) were devastating critiques of the colonial system in the Philippines and in particular of the part played by the Catholic friars as the instruments of Spanish policy. Still required reading in contemporary Philippines schools, Rizal's works have continued to enjoy a loyal general readership.

## Exoticism and the romance of Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia has stirred the imagination of many Western writers through its exoticism, its physical and cultural character that was so different from the West. This exoticism or 'romance' is a recurring feature of fictional writing taking Southeast Asia as its setting and is reflected in the four novels, one collection of short stories and a collection of 'sketches' briefly noted here.

Few novelists have attempted to write of Southeast Asia in the early historical period, and fewer still have succeeded in that endeavour. One of those few was Maurice Collis, who in his novel *She Was a Queen* writes of Myanmar in the thirteenth century. Based loosely on a court chronicle, the novel tells the story of Queen Saw, a woman of powerful character who lived through one of the most turbulent periods in Burmese history. Collis was certainly not one of the greats of English fictional writing, though his better-known popular histories repay attention, but in *She Was a Queen* he provides a convincing sense of the folly and decadence of an inbred oriental court facing challenges to which it was not equal. As a portrayal of intrigue, treachery and the clash of two cultures, Burmese and Chinese, this novel offers a rare insight into a Southeast Asian world centuries before it was touched by the European interlopers.

A very recent novel by a distinguished historian of the region, Anthony Reid, who writes as Tony Reid, is *Mataram: A Novel of Love, Faith and Power in Early Java*. It is of particular interest for the manner in which the novel focuses on the very early period of the European advance into the region. An ambitious work, it combines Reid's deep understanding of Indonesia's complex history at the beginning of the seventeenth century with the story of an adventurous Englishman who finds both love and political challenges in the newly powerful state of Mataram in central Java.

Another writer who sought to portray the world of precolonial Southeast Asia was Sir Hugh Clifford, one of the notable examples among those scholar–administrators who worked in Malaya in the early years of the British expansion into that country. Clifford was a prolific writer, a fact that is the more remarkable when it is remembered that writing was for him a part-time activity. His output was uneven, but in his collection of short stories, *The Further Side of Silence*, he provides an outsider's insight—however much marked by the prejudices of his own time—into the character of traditional Malay society in the late nineteenth century. Clifford's stories in this collection were, he claimed, based on personal experience, and there is no reason to doubt this for it is widely accepted that he had warm relations with the Malays with whom he worked and socialised. His accounts of pre-colonial Malaya have the ring of truth to them, even though that truth was recorded with a clear and non-literary goal in mind. For Clifford makes no secret of the fact that his aim in writing is to celebrate the way in which, under British colonialism, the Malays emerged 'from the dark shadow in which their days were passed, into the daylight of a personal freedom such as white men prize above most mundane things'.

It is interesting to compare Clifford's stories with the writings of one of his contemporaries, Sir Frank Swettenham. Like Clifford, Swettenham was an extremely able scholar–administrator, though everything suggests that he was a much less attractive individual. His *Malay Sketches* is, as he puts it in the preface to the book, 'a series of sketches of Malay scenery and Malay character drawn by one who has spent the best part of his life in the scenes and amongst the people described'. Yet despite this disclaimer Swettenham's writings, which today might be described as 'faction', are rich in a sense of exotic atmosphere.

Clifford corresponded with the great Anglo-Polish writer Joseph Conrad to discuss his writing and it is to one of Conrad's most notable works that we now turn. If Collis' novel is interesting and Clifford's short stories contain a mix of historical and cultural interest, Conrad's *Lord Jim* is one of the towering novels of the twentieth century. In a work concerned with the flawed character of a merchant marine officer who becomes a power in the imaginary Malay or Indonesian sultanate of Patusan, Conrad partly modelled his protagonist on James Brooke, the celebrated 'White Rajah' whose exploits as the ruler of Sarawak in the nineteenth century were well known in Europe. But the resemblance is superficial, and Jim of the title dies tragically, even futilely, rather than founding a dynasty, as James Brooke did. Yet in his masterly fashion Conrad captures the sense of what one man—a Westerner, it's true—could do in a world that was still open to adventurers. At the same time, and drawing on his own experience of Southeast Asia in the late nineteenth century, Conrad in *Lord Jim*, and in his other novels set in the eastern seas, offers wonderful literary portraits of the men who were to be found in the trading ports and settlements of the region. Given Conrad's literary skill it is not surprising that he has attracted much detailed commentary, including Norman Sherry's *Conrad's Eastern World* (London, 1966) and, much more recently, Robert Hampson's *Cross-cultural Encounters in Joseph Conrad's Malay Fiction* (Basingstoke, 2000). This latter book takes Conrad's literary achievements seriously while drawing interesting conclusions from his writings in relation to the nature of Indonesian–Malay society and how that society was viewed by Westerners in the late nineteenth century.

The exotic is even more powerfully a feature of André Malraux's novel *The Royal Way* (originally published in French in 1930 as *La Voie royale*). Partly based on Malraux's own attempt to steal statuary from the Angkorian temple of Banteay Srei in the 1920s, *The Royal Way* combines criticism of the oppressive political system of French Indochina with a powerful adventure story. Searching for antiquities in the still-unknown interior of Indochina, the protagonist Claude, and his older companion Perken, move steadily deeper into a fictionalised area somewhere to the north of the real ruins of Angkor. In this distant region, where aspects of Thailand, Laos and Cambodia combine, the adventurers become entangled in a revolt of hill people against lowlanders. The book closes with Perken dying and Claude's fate unclear. Dense, evocative, and revealing of its author as well as the time about which he wrote, *The Royal Way* is a minor classic.

It is rare to find contemporary writing that wholeheartedly embraces the romance of the exotic in the colonial period of Southeast Asia's history, but a recent example of the genre is Daniel Mason's *The Piano Tuner* (2002). The presumption of the plot is exotic in itself: an English piano tuner, Edgar Drake, is commissioned by the War Office to go to Burma in 1886 to tune the Erhard piano of an eccentric British army surgeon, Anthony Carroll. With historical elements that blend fact and fancy, the novel offers the author the opportunity to dwell on the truly exotic of the upcountry Burmese world he has entered even if, as is the case with *The Royal Way*, the reader is left wondering whether the world could ever have been as the author describes it.

## Colonial society in the inter-war period

European colonial life forms the basis of the largest body of Western fictional writing on Southeast Asia. Much is unflattering to the individuals portrayed and the world within which they moved. Foremost among those who wrote with their pens dipped in acid was Somerset Maugham. Although Maugham spent only a limited time in the region in the 1920s, he wrote both on the basis of his own experiences and with an eye alert for past and present scandal. Probably the most famous of Maugham's short stories with Southeast Asian settings are 'The Letter' and 'The Yellow Streak'. The first was devised from an actual and infamous marital scandal and murder in Malaya. The second drew on Maugham's own experience in a boating accident in Sarawak. In these, and in other stories, Maugham captures the flavour of the times so well that he was regarded as an unwelcome visitor in Singapore and Malaya years after he published his stories.

George Orwell (Eric Blair) was no less a critical observer of Southeast Asian colonial life. With a much longer experience of living in the region, he wrote an outstanding short novel based on his work as a British colonial official in Myanmar—Burma, of course, when he served there. This novel, *Burmese Days*, and two of his essays drawing directly on his own duties in Burma, 'Shooting an Elephant' and 'The Hanging', probably have no match in terms of twentieth-century writing in English for capturing the boredom of colonial life and the inseparable divide between ruler and ruled.

Much more recently Indian writer Amitav Ghosh chose Burma as a key location for his novel *The Glass Palace*, which covers a lengthy period from the Third Burma War in the 1880s to the end of last century and within which the interwar period and its colonial inequities are vividly evoked. Frequently described as 'sweeping' in reviews, it is both a series of family dramas and an account of economic exploitation.

Beginning in Singapore just before the entry of Japan into the Second World War, *The Singapore Grip*, is notable for a similar ironic examination of colonial life just before and during the fall of Singapore. Written by a highly accomplished novelist, J.G. Farrell, this is an entertaining and complex book that, in addition, is characterised by the author's meticulous attention to historical accuracy.

An encouraging development is the fact that a number of novels written during the years of colonial control and previously only available in Southeast Asian languages are becoming available in English translations. A very recent Vietnamese example is *Dumb Luck*, by Vu Trong Phung. Originally published in 1936, it is a sharp satire on colonial life in the 1930s that presents a critical view of both the colonised and the colonisers in a period when independence for Vietnam seemed very distant. Well known by Vietnamese despite his tragically short life—he died aged twenty-seven—Vu Trong Phung offers insights into colonial Vietnam that are difficult to find elsewhere.

Highly acclaimed by literary critics, and of interest to historians as a reflection of the final years of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia, is the quartet of novels by the Javanese writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer, published under the general title 'The Buru Quartet', a name reflecting the fact that the stories were composed in the author's mind while he was a political prisoner on the island of Buru. The works were long banned from publication in his home country because of their author's association with the Indonesian Communist Party's cultural arm. The novels are now available in English translation. Many, including the present writer, recognise the importance of these novels without finding them easy to read.

## Plantation life

Novels taking life on the rubber plantations of Southeast Asia as their subject form an interesting sub-group within the broader category of books dealing with the colonial period. Two pre-Second World War novels and one that spans the period before and after that war offer a clear, if rather depressing, insight into the closed and monotonous world of the great rubber plantations that were developed in Sumatra and Malaya. Madelon Székely-Lulofs and her husband Laszlo Székely both wrote powerful novels that focused on the iniquities of the plantation system, in which the white managers could ill-treat their Indonesian workers with impunity. Both wrote from personal experience in Sumatra, and *Tropic Fever*, by Laszlo Székely, and *Rubber*, by Székely-Lulofs, played a part in arousing Dutch public opinion against the abuses they described. The interest attaching to these two books does not just lie in their account of the arrogant and sometimes cruel behaviour of the European colonisers towards their indigenous workers. In both *Rubber* and *Tropic Fever* the boredom and the hardships of plantation life are vividly evoked.

Writing about a later period, Pierre Boulle, best known for his novel of the Second World War in Southeast Asia *The Bridge Over the River Kwai*, also dwells on the boredom of plantation life in his *Sacrilege in Malaya*. Boulle, too, wrote on the basis of personal experience, having worked on a French-owned plantation in Malaya for ten years. With a sharp satiric eye he mocks the way in which the senior managers enslave themselves to a rigid set of rules that govern every element of their lives and those of the workers they employ. A keen observer of colonial life, Boulle is particularly successful in depicting the divided world of pre-war Malaya in which an individual's race so often determined occupation; there were European managers, Tamil rubber tappers, Chinese merchants and storekeepers, and Malay aristocrats or small holders.

That not all was grim or open to mockery for those associated with the rubber industry is made clear in another, justly famous autobiographical novel about plantation life. Henri Fauconnier's *The Soul of Malaya* is based on the author's experiences in the 1920s. Fauconnier is not uncritical of the colonial life he observed, but the more optimistic picture he provides needs to be put against the almost unrelieved gloom of *Rubber* and *Tropic Fever*.

## The Second World War

Perhaps a little surprisingly, the Second World War in Southeast Asia did not generate a notable body of fictional writing. Possibly the reason lies in the fact that the war did result in the publication of many outstanding non-fictional accounts of events. Spenser Chapman's *The Jungle is Neutral*, for instance, which recounts the exploits of the British-led guerrilla group Force 136, is as exciting as any fictional portrayal of the war could hope to be.

As with the overwhelming bulk of the novels cited so far, the fictional literature of the Second World War tells the story of the Europeans in the region rather than providing an account of the war as it was seen by the indigenous people of Southeast Asia. Among the most powerful of the novels to emerge from the wartime years was James Clavell's *King Rat*. Based on Clavell's own experience of life as a prisoner in Changi jail in

Singapore, *King Rat* provides a chilling picture of men struggling to come to terms with sometimes brutal imprisonment. While Clavell is better known for his later historical epics, his first novel still repays reading for its success in portraying men under stress, their weakness and their courage.

Two novels inspired by the Burma campaign—its designation at the time—deserve mention. Often described as the 'forgotten war', the Burma campaign was marked by a bitter British withdrawal and then, under General Slim, a dogged return that finally brought the defeat of the Japanese. Some of the perils of the Burma campaign are effectively captured in the novels noted here, one by a famous author, the other by a man whose name is scarcely remembered today. The famous writer H.E. Bates tells the story of three Englishmen struggling to survive in the Burmese dry zone following the crash of the aircraft in which they had been flying. Like almost all of Bates' writing, *The Purple Plain* is a professionally crafted book, convincing in its detail. A similar sense of the accuracy of detail emerges in Sidney Butterworth's *Three Rivers to Glory*. This novel is a fictional account of the fighting that took place in western Burma, where troops of the West Africa Frontier Force were pitched against not only the Japanese but also elements of the Indian National Army, Indian troops who fought on the side of the Japanese in the hope of gaining independence from Britain. In depicting the clash between African soldiers and those of the 'rebel' Indian forces, Butterworth's novel, published over sixty years ago, foreshadows contemporary discussion of Britain's reliance on its colonial possessions to bolster its armies during the Second World War.

Yet, in a manner that reinforces the comment made earlier, these two novels about the war in Burma/Myanmar are probably correctly seen as less impressive than two nonfictional accounts of the same period. Both were written by men who were to have very successful careers as novelists. The first, *The Road Past Mandalay* by John Masters, is one of the finest pieces of writing to have come out of the war in Southeast Asia. Less well known is an account of his wartime experiences in Burma by George MacDonald Fraser, the creator of the 'Flashman' series of satiric novels. Where Masters served as a senior British officer, Fraser was a ranker in the Border Regiment. His *Quartered Safe Out Here: A Recollection of the War in Burma* is a moving account of war in Burma's jungles from the point of view of an individual foot soldier. Yet there is need for a further word of caution in relation to both these writers: they wrote as men of their time with overt and not-so-hidden prejudices present in their writings.

One further novel should be mentioned in a review of writing inspired by the Second World War, for its high literary quality. Widely acclaimed for his fiction set in India, Paul Scott also numbers among his novels a book set in Malaya at the end of the war. *The Chinese Love Pavilion* is one of his lesser-known books, but it possesses the same high literary quality that marks his other novels.

## The post-war world

If there is a relative drought of quality novels dealing with the Second World War in Southeast Asia, the post-war years by comparison brought forth a flood of titles, many both readable and effective in their capacity to provide a sense of time and place. To list and discuss even a small proportion of the novels set in the post-war period would be a major exercise. What follows is a very selective account of some of the more interesting books that deal with the years after 1945.

As noted in earlier chapters of this book, the years after the Second World War were marked by turmoil. This is reflected in some of the best novels of the period, of which Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* must rank among the finest. Set in Vietnam around 1952, *The Quiet American* is in part a political statement—the French were always fated to lose *their* Indochina War, and so was any other Western power that sought to shape the course of Asian history. It captures wonderfully the tone of life in the expatriate community in Vietnam. A reader is able to sense the tension of daily life in Saigon (modern Ho Chi Minh City), where a visit to a bar or a cafe meant being exposed to the risk of a grenade attack. The book has two marvellous set-piece descriptions in Greene's account of the Roman Catholic bishopric of Phat Diem under siege and the visit by the novel's narrator, Fowler, to the Cao Dai temple at Tay Ninh. Spare, cynical and realistic, *The Quiet American* repays many readings.

Of a quite different literary quality, but nonetheless effective in capturing the atmosphere of the First Indochina War from the point of view of the French soldier, is Jean Lartéguy's *The Centurions*. This novel records the bitter disillusionment of the French officer corps as they fought the 'dirty war' only, in their judgment, to be betrayed by their political leaders in France. As a fictional account of the factors that played such a part in bringing about the French army's revolt in Algeria (the subject of Lartéguy's later novel *The Praetorians*), *The Centurions* deserves mention in any review of fiction dealing with the First Indochina War. It is worth comparing with the non-fiction reportage contained in Lucien Bodard's *The Quicksand War: Prelude to Vietnam*, which covers the French army's fruitless efforts to re-establish colonial control of Vietnam between 1945 and 1954.

Another novel that takes post-war conflict as its central theme is Han Suyin's *… and the Rain my Drink*. Set in the Malayan Emergency, this novel makes no pretence of being a balanced account of the issues involved in that struggle. Yet although the author writes as a partisan for the ethnic Chinese point of view, including those Malayan Chinese who went into the jungle as guerrillas to fight against the colonial government, her portrayal of other races in Malaya does not lack sympathy. Han Suyin's passion for the plight of the ethnic Chinese underdog gives her readers an insight into why it was that the Emergency took place, lasted so long and had such a profound effect in shaping opinions in independent Malaysia. Anthony Burgess' three novels set in post-Second World War Malaya and later published in a single volume as *The Malayan Trilogy* are a bitterly satirical commentary on the late colonial scene. Few will deny Burgess' capacity for mordant wit, but many may find his clever writing borders on stereotyped racism at the same time as it excoriates the British in Malaya.

Turmoil of a different kind provides the background for the novels of the Indonesian writer Mochtar Lubis and the Australian Christopher Koch. In one of the more important novels by a Southeast Asian writer to be translated into English, Mochtar Lubis offers a pessimistic view of Indonesian society in his *Twilight in Djakarta*. Set in the 1950s, Lubis offers a highly critical view of the Sukarno era. Corruption is portrayed as endemic; hopelessness and poverty are the lot of the masses. Most of those who appear in the novel are flawed in character—few attract the reader's sympathy. Yet despite the didactic tone of much of Lubis' writing, *Twilight in Djakarta* is a forceful account in an elegant translation of a city in political and social decay. How the Sukarno era came to an end forms the central theme of Christopher Koch's novel *The Year of Living Dangerously*. Written from the viewpoint of an outsider, Koch's novel provides a fictional counterpoint to the world so vividly evoked by Lubis. Another novel to take the closing stages of Sukarno's rule over Indonesia as its setting is Blanche d’Alpuget’s *Monkeys in the Dark*. Like Koch, d’Alpuget is concerned to present the personal dilemmas of an expatriate confronting a climactic period in Indonesian politics. (This theme of non-Southeast Asians beset by personal problems in an exotic locale recurs in d’Alpuget’s later, and perhaps more accomplished, *Turtle Beach*, which is set principally in Malaysia. Criticism of this latter novel for presumed racist overtones appears to miss the fact that few of those portrayed emerge as lacking in prejudice of one kind or another.)

Another Southeast Asian writer whose theme is the inequities of the society in which he lives is the Filipino novelist Francis (‘Frankie’) José. In his novel *Mass* he presents a convincing portrait of a young man’s flirtation with the Communist movement. As he struggles to come to terms with the need for political choice, the novel’s protagonist reflects on the nature of Philippines society, the corruption it breeds and the apparent impossibility of achieving change without resorting to violence. An outsider’s look at the same society is found in Robert Drewe’s *A Cry in the Jungle Bar*. Written with an irony that at times borders on satire, Drewe’s account of an Australian aid expert’s experiences in the Philippines has a serious purpose, in particular the difficulty even the best-intentioned foreigners have in penetrating another society.

While Singapore has been taken as a locale by many expatriate writers, of fiction—Paul Theroux is one example—the 1980s and 1990s have seen the development of a lively school of local writers producing fictional works dealing with both historical and contemporary themes. Probably the best known of these writers is Catherine Lim, whose novels and short stories have focused on the role of women in Singaporean Chinese society, particularly the role of the less privileged within that society. Her early work, exemplified in *Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore*, received much local attention, but more recently *The Bondmaid* has brought her international attention. Among younger writers, the lawyer and novelist Philip Jeyaretnam is prominent, with his work concerned both with local cultural values and politics. Probably his best-known work is *Abraham’s Promise*, which is regarded by most commentators as a sceptical commentary on Singapore’s politics both before and after independence.

In introducing this review of fictional writing on Southeast Asia, the present writer stressed the personal nature of the selection being made. For each item cited another commentator might well choose to offer an alternative, or make a different judgment about the items that have been selected. And as one draws nearer to the present day the greater will be the disagreements over which books should be included and which should not. The task of selection is made the more difficult by the still growing number of fictional accounts of the Second Indochina War (the American War in Vietnam) that are being published.

At the risk of being criticised for making too limited a selection from the growing canon of fiction based in the countries of Indochina during the 'American' period, the final citations in this section are of six fine and very different novels, Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*, Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, John M. Del Vecchio's *The 13th Valley*, James Webb's *Fields of Fire,* Christopher Koch's *Highways to a War*, and John le Carré's *The Honourable Schoolboy*. Bao Ninh's bitter novel gives a view of the war from the 'winning' side, for which he fought as a soldier. He presents a view full of pain and anguish that has led some to compare it with Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Del Vecchio's novel is brutally realistic, the war being seen from the foot soldier's perspective and based on the bitter fighting that took place in the valleys running up to the central highlands of southern Vietnam in 1970. O'Brien's book by contrast mixes reality with fantasy. It is a complex novel that commands the reader's attention from its simple opening sentence, 'It was a bad time'. Soldier, author and politician, James Webb's *Fields of Fire* has been hailed as one of the most savagely realistic of the novels to emerge from the Vietnam War, encapsulating the perspective of the American foot soldier. Koch's novel, set largely in Cambodia, portrays the life of a combat photographer realistically and in a manner that evokes the sights and smells of a country in a time of war. Set in a world apart from his novels linked to European espionage, Le Carré's protagonist, Gerald Westerby, the honourable schoolboy of the title, flies into Phnom Penh, 'the last of the true Conrad river ports', to observe Cambodia and Laos as the communist forces are coming close to victory.

In the years since the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge or Pol Pot regime at the beginning of 1979 a host of memoirs has emerged describing life under that tyrannical regime. One of the most interesting is the quite recent publication by the renowned Cambodian film-maker Rithy Panh, *The Elimination*: *A Survivor of the Khmer Rouge Confronts his Past and the*

*Commandant of the Killing Fields*. One of the first, if not the first, novel—as opposed to a memoir—written in English to be based on personal experience of the Khmer Rouge period is Vaddey Ratner's impressive *In the Shadow of the Banyan Tree*. Worth reading, too, as a fictional attempt to recreate Pol Pot's early life in Phnom Penh is Peter Froberg Idling's *Song for an Approaching Storm*.

A rare fictional insight into the world of working-class Cambodia in the 1950s and 1960s, the period when Prince Sihanouk was in power, is provided in the recently published novel in translation, *A New Sun Rises Over the Old Land: A Novel of Sihanouk's Cambodia*, by Suon Sorin, in a translation by Roger Nelson. Popular in its own time and the winner of an award bestowed by Sihanouk himself, Suon Sorin's novel portrays the harsh realities of a provincial Cambodian family who depend on the earnings of a bicycle rickshaw rider and yet who come to see hope in the world of Sihanouk's independent Cambodia. First published in 1961, it is a telling comment on Cambodia's tragic history. We know nothing of the author's later fate, although it is presumed he died during the terrible period of Khmer Rouge rule.

Fiction can only ever be one route into an understanding of Southeast Asia, and for the most part a route limited by the bulk of the authors' perspectives being those of non-Southeast Asian outsiders. Yet, with an area of study both as diverse and in many regions and disciplines still awaiting thorough exploration as Southeast Asia is, to ignore any route to knowledge and understanding would be a mistake. Whatever their limitations, the books and stories reviewed here can form one more piece in each person's mosaic of the immensely diverse study that is the history of Southeast Asia.

## Notes

The brief review of fictional writing on Southeast Asia contained in the preceding chapter touches upon only some of the best known of the books and stories that take the region as their geographical setting. A more detailed examination of the body of fiction on a country by country and region by region basis is now available in a symposium edited by Robin W. Winks and James Rush, *Asia in Western Fiction*, published in Manchester and Honolulu, 1990. An anthology of writing about Southeast Asia, including work by Southeast Asians, has been published in the 'Traveller's Literary Companion' series: Alastair Dingwall, ed., *South-East Asia*, London 1994, Chicago, 1995. A particularly valuable recent survey of novels in the Malay language is Virginia Matheson Hooker's *Writing a New Society: Social Change Through the Malay Novel*, published in Sydney in 2000. A recently published series of essays on fictional writing in the region is Teri Shaffer Yamada, ed., *Modern Short Fiction of Southeast Asia*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2009.

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# Suggested readings

Despite the substantial number of items in this list of suggested readings, the books cited should, like the rest of this book, be regarded only as an *introduction* to the ever-increasing body of literature dealing with Southeast Asia's history. Much of the important writing related to Southeast Asian history that has appeared since the Second World War has been published in the form of articles, and anyone wanting to go deeper into the subject will need to consult a wide range of journals as well as the many books that are available. The following listing does not include material published in European languages other than English, though readers should be aware of the very large body of material that exists in Dutch (for Indonesia in particular) and French (for the countries that formerly made up French Indochina). Moreover, there is a growing amount of writing dealing with the history of Southeast Asia in the languages of the region.

For readers wishing to pursue their interest in Southeast Asia at a deeper level there is now a wide range of bibliographic aids available. For the period covered by the present book valuable additional bibliographic guidance for material published up to 2010 may be found in the 'Recommended Readings' and the extensive 'Bibliography' provided in M.C. Ricklefs, ed., *A New History of Southeast Asia*, Basingstoke, 2010.

A note on citation procedure: once a title has been cited in the 'Suggested Readings', full publication details (date and place of publication) are not provided in subsequent citations.

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## THE POST-WAR PERIOD

The period following the Second World War with its record of successful bids for independence, of revolts and revolutions, of successes and failures, has prompted a truly massive amount of writing and publication. Any attempt to provide a comprehensive list of suggested readings for this turbulent and exciting period would go far beyond the purpose of this present book. The following suggested readings aim at providing a basic introduction to the region in general and to the post-war history of the individual countries of Southeast Asia. The selections reflect the author's own view that a stimulating and controversial book is as valuable as one judged to be safe and solid.

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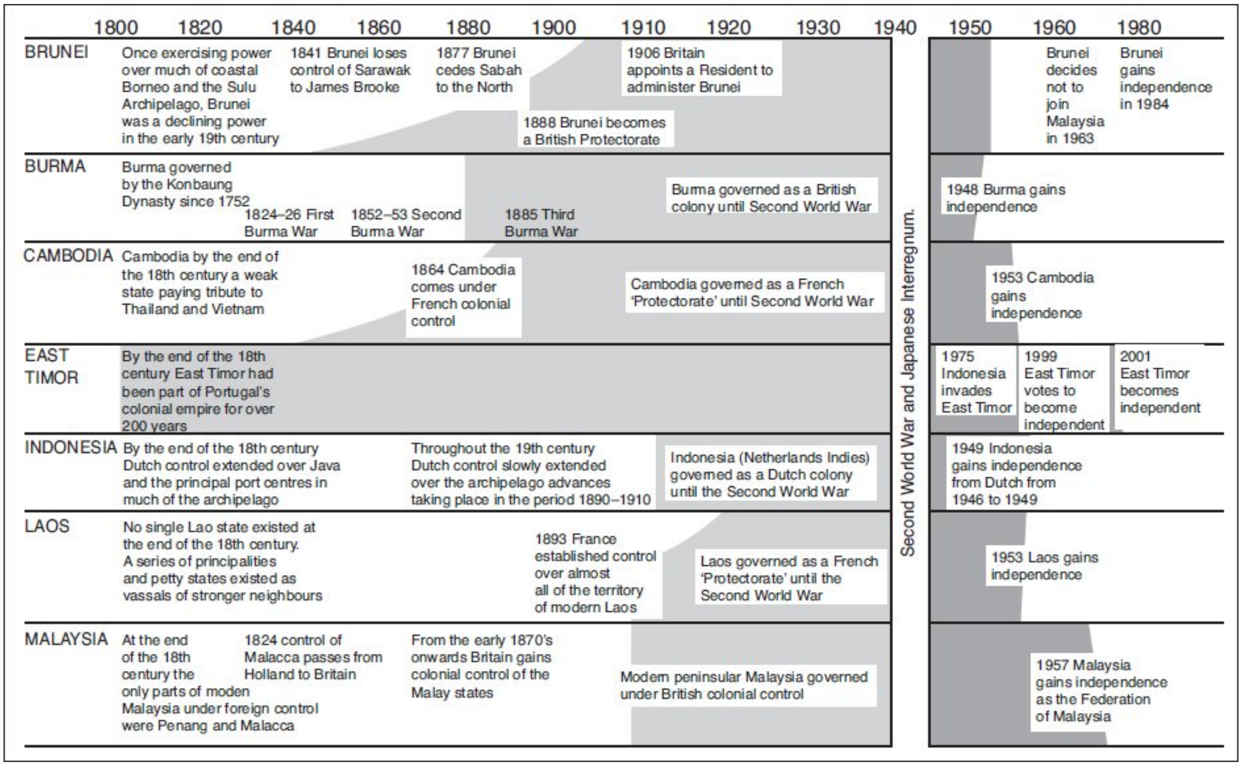


**BRUNEI**

Once exercising power over much of coastal Borneo and the Sulu Archipelago, Brunei was a declining power in the early 19th century

1841 Brunei loses control of Sarawak to James Brooke

1877 Brunei cedes Sabah to the North

1888 Brunei becomes a British Protectorate

1906 Britain appoints a Resident to administer Brunei

Brunei decides not to join Malaysia in 1963

Brunei gains independence in 1984

**BURMA**

Burma governed by the Konbaung Dynasty since 1752

1824–26 First Burma War

1852–53 Second Burma War

1885 Third Burma War

Burma governed as a British colony until Second World War

1948 Burma gains independence

**CAMBODIA**

Cambodia by the end of the 18th century a weak state paying tribute to Thailand and Vietnam

1864 Cambodia comes under French colonial control

Cambodia governed as a French 'Protectorate' until Second World War

1953 Cambodia gains independence

**EAST TIMOR**

By the end of the 18th century East Timor had been part of Portugal's colonial empire for over 200 years

1975 Indonesia invades East Timor

1999 East Timor votes to become independent

2001 East Timor becomes independent

**INDONESIA**

By the end of the 18th century Dutch control extended over Java and the principal port centres in much of the archipelago

Throughout the 19th century Dutch control slowly extended over the archipelago advances taking place in the period 1890–1910

Indonesia (Netherlands Indies) governed as a Dutch colony until the Second World War

1949 Indonesia gains independence from Dutch from 1946 to 1949

**LAOS**

No single Lao state existed at the end of the 18th century. A series of principalities and petty states existed as vassals of stronger neighbours

1893 France established control over almost all of the territory of modern Laos

Laos governed as a French 'Protectorate' until the Second World War

1953 Laos gains independence

**MALAYSIA**

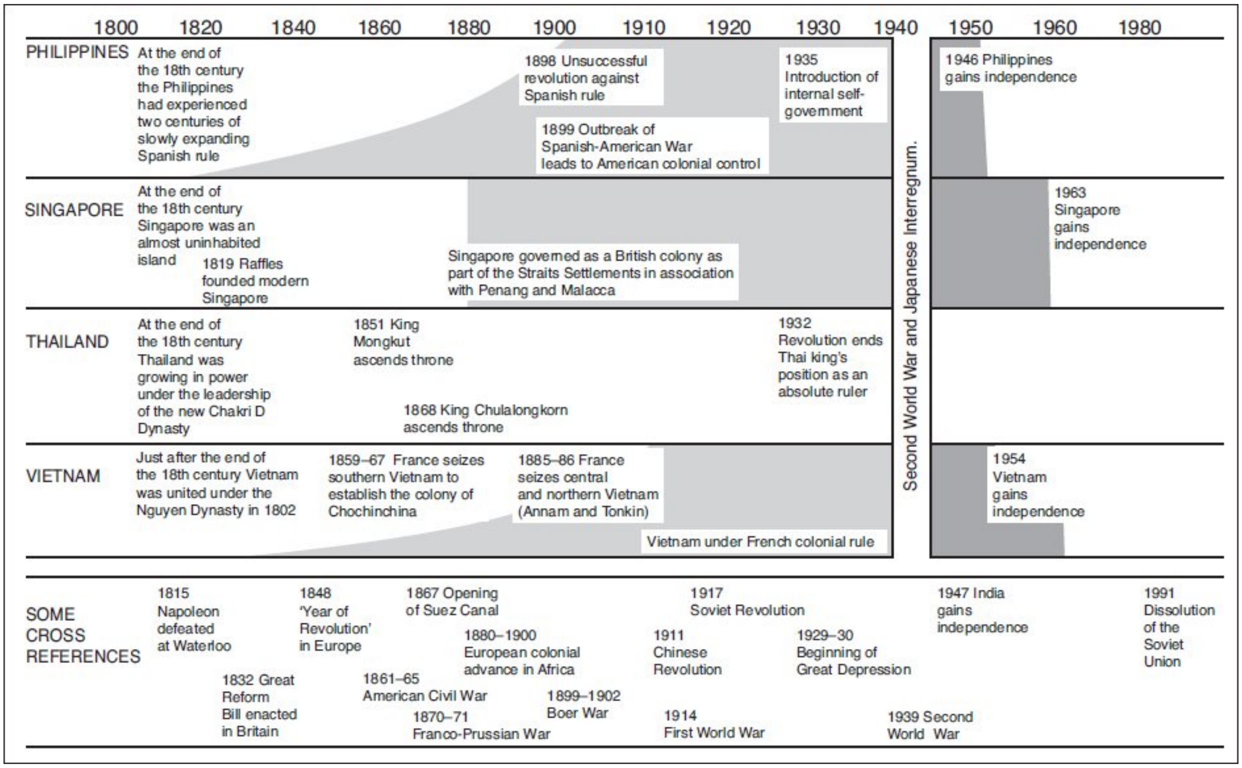
At the end of the 18th century the only parts of moden Malaysia under foreign control were Penang and Malacca

1824 control of Malacca passes from Holland to Britain

From the early 1870's onwards Britain gains colonial control of the Malay states

Modern peninsular Malaysia governed under British colonial control

1957 Malaysia gains independence as the Federation of Malaysia



**PHILIPPINES**

At the end of the 18th century the Philippines had experienced two centuries of slowly expanding Spanish rule

1898 Unsuccessful revolution against Spanish rule

1899 Outbreak of Spanish-American War leads to American colonial control

1935 Introduction of internal self-government

1946 Philippines gains independence

**SINGAPORE**

At the end of the 18th century Singapore was an almost uninhabited island

1819 Raffles founded modern Singapore

Singapore governed as a British colony as part of the Straits Settlements in association with Penang and Malacca

1963 Singapore gains independence

**THAILAND**

At the end of the 18th century Thailand was growing in power under the leadership of the new Chakri D Dynasty

1851 King Mongkut ascends throne

1868 King Chulalongkorn ascends throne

1932 Revolution ends Thai king's position as an absolute ruler

**VIETNAM**

Just after the end of the 18th century Vietnam was united under the Nguyen Dynasty in 1802

1859–67 France seizes southern Vietnam to establish the colony of Chochinchina

1885–86 France seizes central and northern Vietnam (Annam and Tonkin)

Vietnam under French colonial rule

1954 Vietnam gains independence

**SOME CROSS REFERENCES**

1815 Napoleon defeated at Waterloo

1832 Great Reform Bill enacted in Britain

1848 'Year of Revolution' in Europe

1861–65 American Civil War

1867 Opening of Suez Canal

1870–71 Franco-Prussian War

1880–1900 European colonial advance in Africa

1899–1902 Boer War

1911 Chinese Revolution

1914 First World War

1917 Soviet Revolution

1929–30 Beginning of Great Depression

1939 Second World War

1947 India gains independence

1991 Dissolution of the Soviet Union

# Index

*The 13thValley* 367

*Abraham's promise* 367
Aceh 94, 294, 312
Aceh War 153
administration 49, 325–9
agricultural involution 122
agriculture 13–16, 26, 31, 108, 135
  irrigation 30–1, 63
  peasant farmers 65–6, 115–19
  slash and burn techniques 68
Airlangga (Javanese king) 40
Akha hill people 292
Alaungpaya (Burmese king) 82
al-Qaeda 336
*All Quiet on the Western Front* 367
Ambon 94
America *see* United States of America
Ananda (Thai king) 281
… *and the Rain my Drink* 364
Ang Duang 22
Angkor 3–4, 8, 21, 22, 26, 29–35, 39, 46, 107, 339
  Champa challenging 42
  Chinese immigrants 130, 131
  decline of 33–5, 44
  fictional writing about 357
  hydraulic engineering 30–1, 44
  temples 22, 31, 32, 330, 341–4, 357
  wealth and grandeur 32–3
Angkor Wat 22, 31, 32, 339, 341–4

animistic beliefs 18, 66
Aquino, Benigno 278
Aquino, Corazon 132, 278
Arakan *see* Rakhine State
architecture 340–51
  temples *see* temples
art 8, 340–51
  ceramics 347–9
  craft 349–51
  monuments 340–5
  sculpture 345–7
  textiles 349–51
artisans 40, 63, 76
‘Asia of the Monsoons’ 5
Asian–African Conference (1955) 250
‘Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere’ 183
Asian financial crisis 312, 317–19
Assam 82, 83
Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) 6, 306, 315
Ataturk, Kemal 172
August Revolution 199, 216
Aung San, General 189, 234, 240, 262
Aung San Suu Kyi 263–4, 313
‘Austronesian’ 10
Ava 83
Ayuthia 131, 342

Ba Maw 188
Baba Chinese 132
Bagan (Pagan) 4, 34–5, 43, 46
  architecture 4, 8, 22, 339, 342–3
  downfall 43
Bagyidaw (Burmese king) 83
Bahnar people 69
Bali 18, 94, 207
  artistic and cultural tradition 351
  gamelan 323

- terrorist bombings 312, 336

Bamar people *see* Burman (Bamar people)
Ban Chiang 347
Bangkok 14–16, 123, 283, 292, 293, 316, 321, 323, 324
Bangsamoro 291
banking system 125
Banteay Srei 357
Bao Dai (Vietnamese emperor) 198
Bao Ninh 367
Batavia *see* Jakarta
Bates, H.E. 362
batik 350
Bay of Bengal 5
Bayon temple 40
Bengal 83
Blitar 342
Bodard, Lucien 364
Bodawpaya (Burmese king) 82
*The Bondmaid* 366
Borneo 95, 98, 150, 247, 266
- British territories 266, 270
- Brunei *see* Brunei
- Dyak tribesmen 74
- Federation of Malaysia 251, 266
- Japanese in 182
- Kalimantan 212, 247
- Malaysian states *see* Sabah, Sarawak
- oil production 120
- post-war 202, 251, 270
- sultanates 329

Borobudur 23, 24, 46, 81, 339, 341, 343, 344
Boulle, Pierre 360–1
boundaries 149–51, 329–31
Bouillevaux, Father 341
Brahmans 29
*The Bridge Over the River Kwai* 360
British colonial rule 241

  - Burma 80, 82–5, 89, 91, 118, 150, 152, 170, 178, 233, 262, 289
  - frontier zones 82, 83
  - India 82, 83, 118, 158
  - Laos, rivalry with France over 88, 89
  - Malaya 80, 92, 96, 113, 114, 135, 136, 148, 160, 166, 173, 201, 228–30, 241, 266, 269, 270
  - rubber growing 111
  - Second World War, impact of 181–2, 269–70
  - Singapore 96, 123, 241, 269–70
- British East India Company 82–3, 150
- bronze sculptures 345, 347
- Brooke family 150, 202
- Brooke, James 98, 356
- Brunei 6, 98, 202
  - absolute monarchy 297, 316
  - ASEAN, and 306
  - boundaries 330
  - British protectorate 98, 233, 241, 284
  - independence 241, 284, 297, 306
  - language 10
  - oil production 120
  - Sultan of 241
  - sultanate 98, 202, 316, 325, 329
- Buddha images 8, 142, 343, 346
- Buddhism 18, 26, 28, 51–7, 66, 76
  - art and architecture 8, 343, 345, 346, 348
  - Burma 18, 49, 57, 165, 167–8, 346
  - Cambodia 49, 141
  - Chinese immigrants 141
  - Japanese 189
  - Mahayana 28, 44
  - nationalism and 165, 167
  - temples 343 *see also* temples
  - Thailand 8, 49, 52, 141, 164, 291, 346
  - Theravada 18, 43, 44
- Buddhist rulers 51–6
  - European rulers compared 53–4

- semi-divine status 53, 55
- Buddhist states 24, 50–6, 76
  - power structures 54
- Bugis seafarers 74
- Bunnag family 131–2
- Burgess, Anthony 365
- Burma (Myanmar) 6, 57, 310
  - 2021 military coup 289, 307, 314, 339
  - administration 49
  - art 345, 346
  - ASEAN, and 306, 307, 315
  - Bagan empire *see* Bagan (Pagan)
  - boundaries 330, 331
  - British colonial rule 80, 82–5, 89, 91, 110, 118, 150, 152, 171, 173, 178, 289
  - British departure 233–5, 240, 262
  - Buddhism 18, 49, 57, 140, 165, 167–8
  - bureaucracy 49
  - ceramics 347, 348
  - Chinese immigrants 331
  - civil war 264
  - economic development 287, 332
  - elections 263–4
  - ethnic groups 71, 72, 234, 310
  - fictional writing about 354–5, 358, 359, 362, 363
  - foreign ideas, adoption of 8
  - geography 15
  - history 22, 26, 34
  - immigrants 140, 144, 145, 146
  - independence 167, 173, 188, 195, 233–5, 240, 242, 289
  - Indian influence 26–9, 50
  - Japan and 182, 183, 187–9, 194–5, 234
  - language 10
  - leadership 327
  - major political changes 313–14
  - military 263–4, 295, 306, 314
  - minority groups 71–3, 289, 293, 310

  nationalism 167–8, 173, 195, 262
  oil production 120
  ‘pacification’ program 152
  population 1
  post-colonial politics 244, 262–4
  regionalism 289
  rice growing 116–19
  Saya San rising 171
  school attendance 339
  Second World War 182, 183, 187–9, 194–5, 233, 234
  socialism 327, 332
  textiles 350
Burma Independence Army (BIA) 183
Burman (Bamar people) 10, 72, 188, 234, 262, 289, 314
*Burmese Days* 359
‘Burmese Way to Socialism’ 327, 332
The Buru Quartet 360
Butterworth, Sidney 362

Cambodia 3, 6
  2013 general election 321–2
  administration 49
  American invasion 302, 305
  Angkorian empire *see* Angkor
  ASEAN, and 306, 315
  boundaries 330
  bureaucracy 49
  ceramics 347, 348
  China and 314–15, 334
  Chinese immigrants 140, 141–2
civil war 302–3
Communism 236, 239, 240, 256, 298, 301–5
deforestation 337
Democratic Kampuchea 303–4
digital technology 321–2
early history 21–3, 26, 29–35, 43–4
economic changes 122–3

ethnic groups 72, 73
fictional writing about 368–9
foreign ideas, adoption of 8
French colonial rule 22, 87–8, 122–3, 150, 168–9, 173, 240–1
immigration 129, 130, 143
independence 200, 235–6, 238–41, 247, 255, 284
Indian influence 26–9, 50
infrastructure 125
Japan and 181, 191, 194
Khmer Rouge 71, 284, 302, 314, 368, 369
language 9–10, 69
life expectancy 320
major political changes 314–15
monarchy 21, 22, 26, 39, 40, 70–2, 168, 169, 310, 325
nationalism 168–9, 173, 236
Pol Pot regime *see* Pol Pot
population 3, 286, 320
post-colonial politics 255–7, 261, 328
protest demonstrations 123
religion 18, 44
rubber cultivation 112
sculpture 345
Second World War 181, 191, 194
social divisions 69–72
temples 22, 31, 32, 339, 341–4
textiles 350
Thailand and 87–8, 280, 281
traditional leaders 324
  urbanisation 320, 321
  Vietnam and 34, 87, 284, 301–2, 305, 315
  water 30–1, 33–4
Canton (Guangzhou) 83
Cao Dai religion 18
cash economy 121, 126, 139–40
caste system 8, 28, 144
Catholicism 101, 102, 141, 277, 278, 286, 290
*The Centurions* 364

ceramics 347–9
Ceribon 350
Chakri dynasty (Thailand) 64–5
Cham people 26, 42
Cham temples 342
Champa 26, 42, 43, 131
change and transformation 309, 337, 339, 351
Chao Phraya (Menam) River delta 116, 118
Chapman, Spencer 361
Chartered Company of North Borneo 98
Chiang Mai 292, 293
Chiang Saen 342
China 5–9, 306
  art, influence on 346
  Belt and Road initiatives 334
  boundaries 330–1
  Cambodia and 314–15
  ceramics 347–9
  Communism 137, 160
  dam building 338
  early involvement in Southeast Asia 26, 36–7
  economic influence 330
  French trade with 86
  immigrants from *see* Chinese immigrants
  influence of 5–9, 36–9, 41
  invasion of Vietnam 305, 310
  language 10
  maritime boundaries 329
  People’s Republic, establishment of 143
  political involvement 315, 330–1
  population 1, 2
  Revolution 164–5
  rice production 117, 119
  school attendance 339
  textiles 350
  tin mining 114
  trade with 23, 25, 35–9, 89

  Vietnam and 5, 6, 8, 26, 27, 34, 36, 41–2, 49–50, 117, 131, 216, 305, 310
Chinese immigrants 96, 98, 121, 127–43, 145, 331
  assimilation 140–3, 246
  commercial success 138, 140, 145
  economic role 143
  Japanese treatment of 184, 201
  Malaya 98, 128, 133–8, 140–1, 145, 167
  post-colonial 246
  resentment towards 140–1, 145–6
  Second World War, impact 137, 143
  secret societies 136
*The Chinese Love Pavilion* 363
Chins 72, 234, 262
Cholon 117
Christianity 18, 61, 66, 107 art 346–7
  ‘divine right’ of kings 53
  Indonesia 94
  Philippines 18, 61, 101, 141, 277, 290, 346
  Spanish colonies 61, 290
Chulalongkorn (Thai king) 91, 163
Churchill, Winston 180
cities, development of 14, 16, 123–4
  *see also* urbanisation
class and economics 331–9
Clavell, James 362
Clifford, Sir Hugh 355–6
coffee 108, 120
Cojuanco family 278
Cold War 254, 259, 315
Collis, Maurice 354, 356
colonialism 9, 17–18, 47, 78–102, 110, 148–77, 243–6, 307–8
  *see also* by country
  American 79, 102, 150, 170, 174, 272, 290
  anti-colonial movements 151–5, 335
  British *see* British colonial rule
  Chinese immigrants and 140
  colonial lifestyle 158–9

  - Dutch *see* Dutch colonial rule
  - European view 110
  - fictional writing about 352–63
  - French *see* French colonial rule
  - independence struggles *see* independence
  - interwar period 148–77
  - kingship and 88
  - nostalgic view 148–9
  - political map 48
  - Portuguese *see* Portuguese colonial rule
  - post-colonial politics *see* post-colonial politics
  - resistance to 149, 151–77
  - Second World War, impact of 178–202, 207, 272–3
  - social inequality, awareness of 158, 176
  - Spanish *see* Spanish colonial rule
  - territorial boundaries 149–51
  - trade and commerce 107–9, 245–6
- communications 16, 124–5, 126
- Communism 18, 155, 159–65, 297–305
  - anti-colonialism and 159–65, 172, 177
  - ASEAN, and 306, 315
  - Cambodia 236, 239, 240, 256, 298, 301–5
  - China 137, 146, 160
  - Communist insurgents 204, 223–32, 241
  - independence struggles and 203–32, 236–42
  - Indonesia 146, 160–3, 203, 210–14, 248–9, 251, 296
  - Laos 236, 237, 258–9, 298, 300–1, 316, 324, 334
  - Malaya 160, 201, 204, 227–31, 241
  - Philippines 160, 195, 224, 231, 276–7
  - religion and 164–5
  - Thailand 163–4, 282
  - Vietnam 18, 158, 159–62, 171, 172, 192–3, 199, 203, 216–23, 228, 231, 236–7, 253–5, 298–301, 316, 324, 334
- Confucianism 18, 36, 49, 66, 162, 310
- Conrad, Joseph 356–7
- consumer goods 121
- continuity and change 310

coolies 138, 180, 189
copper 287
copra 111, 120
corruption 159, 274, 277, 303, 312, 316, 318, 365
country–city contrast 15–16
Couperus, Louis 353
Covid-19 pandemic 319, 339
craft 349–51
crony capitalism 276, 318
*A Cry in the Jungle Bar* 366

d'Alpuget, Blanche 365–6
Darul Islam 210, 212, 213, 215
de Gaulle, Charles 180
de Jonge, Governor-General 173
debt bondsmen 75
Decoux, Admiral 181, 192
deforestation 337–8
Dekker, Eduard Douwes 353
Del Vecchio, John M. 367
democracy 155, 264, 296–7, 314
  guided (Indonesia) 249, 250
  parliamentary 261, 283, 312, 315
  Western-style 328, 329
demography 319–22
Dien Bien Phu, Battle of 216, 220–2, 238
digital revolution 321, 322
Dili 99
Drewe, Robert 366
*Dumb Luck* 359
Dutch colonial rule 108–9, 148, 152, 161, 171, 353
  fictional writing about 352–4, 359–60
  Indonesia 59, 79–81, 92–5, 99, 108–9, 152, 160–3, 168, 197, 203, 241, 329
  resistance to 152, 159–63, 171–2
  Second World War, effect of 182, 184–5
  Timor-Leste and 99–100

  trade 92–4, 108–9, 111
  war of independence 160, 204–15, 247
Dutch East India Company 81, 93, 94
Dutch East Indies *see* Indonesia
Dutch New Guinea *see* Papua (Irian Jaya)
Duterte, Rodrigo 279
Dyak tribesman 74, 350
East Timor *see* Timor-Leste
economics 331–9
  class, power and 331–9
  colonial rule, resistance to 158–9
  crises 175, 312, 317–19
  expansion 151–2
  exports 110–20, 125–6
  foreign aid 287
  foreign capital 334
  history in Southeast Asia 105–7
  impact of changes 120–5
  modern 328–9
  post-colonial 245–6, 286–7
  social goals and 286–7
  transformation 104–25
education 156–7, 177, 286, 287, 328, 338–9
  Malay privilege 265
  post-colonial 245, 265
  urbanisation and 320–1
  Western, exposure to 157, 168, 169

*El filibusterismo* (*The Reign of Greed*) 354
*The Elimination: A Survivor of the Khmer Rouge Confronts his Past and the Commandant of the Killing Fields* 368
ethnic populations 72–5, 127, 241, 322–4
  Chinese 241, 265–8, 297
  diversity 18, 127, 214, 310
  Indians 241, 265, 297
  Malays 227, 241, 265, 268, 317

  minorities 72–5, 262, 314, 332
  regionalism *see* regionalism
‘Eurocentric’ history 78–81
Europe
  cathedrals and monasteries 345
  colonialism *see* colonialism
  historical, Southeast Asia compared 3–4, 68
  influence of 47–8, 78–102, 308, 326
  modern political configuration 155
  regional and minority interests 288–9
exoticism 354–8
export commodities 110–20, 151, 175
family 6, 9
famine 176
farmers 57–8, 62–6, 67, 76, 140
  *see also* peasants
  government considering interests of 283
  nomadic 68, 74
  tenant 225
Farrell, J.G. 359
Fauconnier, Henri 361
Federation of Malaysia 241, 250, 266, 270, 329
fictional writing 351–71
*Fields of Fire* 367, 368
First Indochinese War 216–22, 227–8, 237–9, 253, 256, 299
  Battle of Dien Bien Phu 216, 220–2, 238
  fictional writing about 364
First Opium War 83
First World War 96, 112, 122
  political changes following 151–3
fishermen 63–4, 74, 76, 133
foreign aid 287
Fraser, George MacDonald 363
Free Aceh movement 294
French colonial rule 110, 161, 168, 197, 329
  Cambodia 87–8, 150, 168–9, 173, 236
  fictional writing about 357

  - Laos 88–90, 150, 168, 173, 236
  - Vietnam 61, 80, 85–7, 89, 106, 139, 150, 152, 158, 160–2, 172–3, 215–23, 236, 298–9

French Indochina 89, 110, 148, 150, 197, 217, 236–40
  - *see also* Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam
  - colonies *see* French colonial rule
  - Communism 298
  - Japan and 181, 182, 191–3, 198
  - post-independence 257–8
  - Thailand and 280–2

'Further India' 5
*The Further Side of Silence* 355

Gadjah Mada 40
gambier 135
Garnier, Francis 110
Geneva Accords 253, 254, 257, 285
Geneva Conference
  - 1954 220, 222, 238, 253, 256, 258
  - 1962 259

geographical character 12–16
Ghosh, Amitav 359
Giap, General Vo Nguyen 161, 219–20
*The Glass Palace* 359
global village 68
*Going After Cacciato* 367
Great Depression 118, 175
Greene, Graham 364
Guided Democracy 249, 250

Habibie, B.J. 312
Hainan 141, 142
Hampson, Robert 357
Han Suyin 364–5
Hanoi 219, 220, 253, 254, 300
Hatta, Mohammad 157, 161, 172, 197, 214
  - Japanese, collaboration with 184, 185

health care 286–7
*The Hidden Force* 353–4
*Highways to a War* 367, 368
hill–valley division 67–73
Hinduism 18, 26, 28–9, 44, 66
  art and architecture 343–6
  caste system 8, 28
  influence on culture 323
  kingship and 53
Ho Chi Minh 157–8, 161, 162, 192, 199, 222, 240, 254–5
  cultural traditions and politics 309–10
Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) 13, 16, 117, 123, 139, 253, 300, 364
*The Honourable Schoolboy* 367
Hue (Vietnam) 85, 86
Huks (Hukbalahap) 195–6, 223–8, 272–4
  insurgency 223–8, 232, 261
Hun Manet 314
Hun Sen 314, 315

Ibrahim, Anwar 317
Idling, Peter Froberg 368
illegal logging 337–8
immigrants 67, 127–47, 246
  Chinese 96, 98, 121, 127–43, 145–6, 331
  European, to America and Australia 146–7
  Indian 96, 118, 121, 127, 128, 143–6
  Middle Eastern 131, 143
  post-colonial 246
  prehistoric 129–30
  resentment towards 140–1, 145–6
  Tai 130
  Vietnamese 131, 143
*In the Shadow of the Banyan Tree* 368
independence 17, 19, 170–5, 204–43
  Brunei 241, 284, 297, 306
  Burma (Myanmar) 167, 173, 188, 195, 233–5, 240, 242, 289
  Cambodia 200, 235–6, 238–40, 247, 255, 284

  - Indonesia 153–4, 160, 174, 197–8, 203, 204–15, 217, 231, 232, 241, 247, 296
  - international pressure 209
  - Laos 200, 235–8, 247, 257
  - Malaya 200–1, 226–32, 241, 242, 264
  - Philippines 189–90, 196, 223–6, 231, 232, 272
  - post-colonial settlements 243–84
  - revolutions 160, 204–32, 335
  - Singapore 270, 271
  - Timor-Leste 202, 242, 284, 294, 313
  - Vietnam 34, 42, 160, 174, 192, 198, 198–9, 203, 215–23, 227–8, 231, 232, 242
- India 5–9
  - art and architecture 8, 343, 345
  - British colonial rule 82, 83, 118, 158
  - caste system 8, 28, 144
  - indentured labour from 113
  - influence of 5–9, 26–9, 343
  - languages 28
  - moneylenders 118
  - population 1, 2
  - religion 8, 18, 26
  - school attendance 339
  - trade with 23, 26, 27, 35
- Indian immigrants 96, 118, 121, 127, 128, 143–6
  - deportation from Burma 146
  - Japanese treatment of 187
  - post-colonial 246
- Indian National Army 187, 362
- ‘Indianisation’ 26–9, 41
- Indochina *see* French Indochina
  - *see also* Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam
- Indochina Wars
  - First (French) *see* First Indochinese War
  - Second (American) *see* Vietnam War
- Indonesia 6
  - 1965 coup 251–2, 296

  anti-Communist mobs 251–2, 296
  anti-Dutch protests 171–2
  ASEAN, and 306
  Chinese immigrants 140–1, 146
Communism 146, 160–3, 171, 203, 210–14, 248–9, 251, 296
‘Confrontation’ policy 251, 271
customary (*adat*) law 140
democracy 312, 328
diversity 154, 214
Dutch colonial rule 59, 79–81, 92–5, 108–9, 150, 152, 160–3, 168–9, 171–2, 329, 353
Dutch ‘police actions’ 208–10, 212
economic crisis 317–18
elections (1955) 249
fictional writing about 352–4, 355, 359–60, 365
foreign ideas, adoption of 8
guided democracy 249, 250
history 22–3, 330
independence 153–4, 160, 174, 197–8, 203, 204–15, 217, 231, 232, 240, 247, 296
Islam 56, 141, 165–6, 210, 212–13, 248, 294
Japanese occupation 182, 184–6
language 10–11
life expectancy 320
major political changes 311–13, 328
martial law 249–50
migration 64, 129
military 185, 250–1, 295, 296
minority populations 293–5
national flag 185
national motto 11, 154, 214
nationalism 153–4, 161–3, 184–5, 197, 205, 209, 212
New Order 251–2
oil production 120, 287
*panca sila* 197
parliament 248
population 1, 14, 286, 333

post-colonial politics 248–52, 261, 328
  poverty rate 319
  Republic of 95, 248
  resources 120, 287, 334
  revolution 204–15, 231, 232, 240
  rubber cultivation 112, 113
  Second World War 182, 184–6
  separatists 247, 249–50, 293–5
  spice trade 108–9
  textiles 350
  Timor-Leste and 242, 244, 252, 313
  tin mining 110
  traditional culture 323
  urbanisation 14, 320
  war of independence 160
Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) 210, 211, 248–9, 251, 296, 360
industrialisation 109–11, 124
infrastructure 120, 124–5
intelligentsia 156–7
Ipoh 137
Irian Jaya *see* Papua (Irian Jaya)
Irrawaddy River delta 116
irrigation 30–1, 33, 63
Isanavarman 39
Islam 18, 43, 56, 66, 76, 165–7, 336
  Chinese immigrants 140–1
  Indonesia 163, 165–6, 210, 212–13, 248, 294, 312
  Malaysia 165, 166–7, 265, 267, 317
  nationalist politics and 165–7
  Philippines 60, 100, 277, 290
  sharia law 317
  terrorism linked to 312, 336
  Thailand 291–2
Islamic State 336

Jakarta 123, 169, 205, 248, 294, 312, 323, 341
  Chinese immigrants 132–3

  Dutch influence 59, 80
  Indonesian revolution 208
  urban growth 14, 16
Japan
  Burma and 182, 187–9, 234
  Cambodia and 181, 191, 194
  Chinese, treatment of 184, 187, 201
  East Timor and 182
  Indonesia and 182, 184–6
  interregnum 184–94
  Laos and 181, 191, 194
  Malaya and 181, 187, 200–1, 229
  Philippines and 182–3, 187, 189–91, 194, 272–3
  Russo–Japanese War 164, 165
  Second World War 178–202
  Singapore and 181, 182, 187, 200
  Thailand and 182, 194, 280–1
  victories (Second World War) 180–3
  Vietnam and 181, 191–3
Jarai sorcerers 70
Java 39, 40, 43, 46, 64, 73, 322, 323, 336
  anti-Dutch protests 171–2
  art and architecture 341, 342, 345, 346
  Dutch in 59, 81, 92–5, 108–9
  Dutch ‘police actions’ 208–10, 212
  early history 23–5
  economic development, impact of 122
  European presence 48, 59
  Japanese occupation 186
  population 15, 286
  rubber cultivation 112
  rulers 56
  spice trade 109
  sugar production 120
  temples and shrines 8, 23, 24, 341, 342
  textiles 350
  traditions 309, 323, 325

Java Sea, Battle of 182
Java War 153
Jayavarman II 32
Jayavarman VII 21, 40, 107
Jeyaretnam, Philip 367
Johore 96, 97, 135, 269
Jokowi 312
José, Francis (Frankie) 366
*The Jungle is Neutral* 361
Kachins 72, 234, 262, 289
Kalimantan 212, 247 *see also* Borneo
Kampot 141
Kampuchea *see* Cambodia
Karens 72, 73, 234, 262, 289, 292, 293
Kedah 91, 97
Kelantan 91, 323
Kertanagara (Javanese king) 40
Keyes, Charles 321
Khmer (language) 9–10
Khmer Rouge 71, 284, 302, 314, 368, 369
Kim Van Kieu 65
*King Rat* 362
kingship/monarchies 51–7, 325
  Brunei sultans 316, 325
  Buddhist kingdoms 51–7, 91
  Burma 57, 88
  Cambodia 22, 26, 39, 40, 70–2, 168, 169, 239, 310, 325
  hereditary monarchs 325
  Laos 169, 237
  Malay sultans 169, 184, 265, 325
  Thailand 52, 55, 64–5, 91, 163–4, 281, 325
  Vietnam 50, 53, 70
Kipling, Rudyard 69, 245
Koch, Christopher 365, 367, 368
Konbaung (Burmese rulers) 82
Kong Le, Captain 259
Korean War 179

Kriangsak Chomanand, General 283
kris 351
Kuala Lumpur 137, 266, 267, 323
land ownership 62–3
land reform
  Philippines 274, 276
  Vietnam 255
language 9–11, 28, 35, 80, 130
  hill–valley separation 68–9
  linguistic links 9–11, 69–9
  maritime regions 73
Laos 6
  1960 coup 259
  administration 49, 329, 330
  Angkor empire, part of 21, 33
  art and architecture 342, 346
  ASEAN, and 306, 315
  boundaries 329, 331
  British–French rivalry over 88, 89
  China and 334
  Chinese immigrants 331
  Communism 236, 237, 258–9, 300–1, 316, 324, 334
  deforestation 338
  economic liberalisation 316
  ethnic groups 72
  French colonial rule 88–90, 150, 240–1, 329
  geography 15
  government 316
  immigration 130, 143
  independence 200, 235–8, 241, 247
  Indian influence 50
  Japan and 181, 191, 194
  kings 169
  language 10
  life expectancy 320
  nationalism 168, 173, 236
  post-colonial politics 257–9, 261, 328

  religion 18
  Second World War 181, 191, 194
  social divisions 69
  Thailand and 280, 281, 292
  traditional leaders 324
  urbanisation 320
  Vietnam and 300–1
Lartéguy, Jean 364
le Carré, John 367, 368
Le family 49
leadership 325–9
Lee Kuan Yew 270, 271, 328
Lenin/Leninism 158, 162, 297
Lifau 99
life expectancy 319–20, 338
‘lightning of Indra’ 71
Lim, Catherine 366
Linggadjati Agreement 207
literacy 218, 264
literature 65
  about Southeast Asia 351–71
*Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore* 366
Lombok 18
*Lord Jim* 356–7
Lubis, Mochtar 365
Luzon 195, 224, 225, 274, 275, 350

MacArthur, General Douglas 196, 273
Madagascar 129
Madiun 208, 211
Madiun Affair 211–12, 249
Magsaysay, Ramon 225–6, 274–5
Mahathir Mohamad, Dr 268
Mahayana Buddhism 28–9, 44
Mahendraparvata 32
Majapahit 73
Malacca *see* Melaka (Malacca)

Malacca Straits 37
Malang 342
malaria 33, 44
Malay sailors 4, 35–6
*Malay Sketches* 356
Malay sultans 169, 184, 265, 325
Malaya *see also* Malaysia
  anti-British protests 172
  British colonial rule 80, 92, 95–9, 110–14, 135, 150, 169, 201, 228–30
  British departure 241
  Chinese immigrants 98, 128, 133–8, 140–1, 145, 167
  Chinese insurgents 227–32, 241
  communal riots 267–8
  Communism 160, 201, 204, 227–31
  ethnic groups 73, 227, 241, 265, 297, 332
  fictional writing about 355–6, 364–5
  independence 200–1, 226–32, 241, 242, 264
  Indian immigrants 144, 145, 167
  Indian influence 56
  Islam 56, 165, 166–7, 265, 267, 317
  Japan and 181, 182, 184, 187, 200–1, 229
  language 10–11
  major political changes 264–8
  nationalism 167, 200, 230
  post-colonial politics 261, 264–8
  resettlement scheme 230
  rubber cultivation 112, 113
  Second World War 181, 182, 184, 187, 200–1
  squatter population 229–30
  states ceded to Britain 91
  tin mining 110, 114–15, 135–6
Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) 265, 271
Malayan Communist Party 228
Malayan Emergency 204, 223, 226–31, 242, 261, 364
‘Malayan People’ 201
*The Malayan Trilogy* 365
Malaysia 6 *see also* Malaya

  administration 329, 330
  ASEAN, and 306
  Chinese ethnic minority 241, 265–8, 297
  colonial rule *see* Malaya
  economic development 268, 332
  ethnic groups 73, 227, 241, 265, 297, 332
  Federation of 241, 250, 266, 270, 329
  geography 15, 38, 97
  government 265, 297, 316–17
  independence 200–1, 226–32, 241, 242, 264
  Indian ethnic minority 241, 265, 297
  infrastructure 124–5
  Islam 56, 165, 166–7, 265, 267, 317
  major political changes 264–8, 316–17
  Malay dominance 227, 241, 265
  New Economic Policy (NEP) 268
  poverty rate 319
  school attendance 338
  Singapore, relationship with 266, 269, 285
  sultans 169, 184, 265, 325
  urbanisation 320
Malraux, André 357
Mandalay 84–5
Manila 60, 123, 132, 133, 275, 277, 323
Manipur 82, 83
Mao Zedong 221
Marcos, Ferdinand 132, 275–9, 295
Marcos, Ferdinand Jr 279
Marcos, Imelda 275, 276, 277
maritime regions
  boundaries 330
  ethnic pattern 73–4
  migration 129–30
  trading empires 24–5
Martaban jars 348
martial law
  Indonesia 249–50

  - Philippines 276–7, 295
- Marx/Marxism 157, 162, 233, 297, 326
- Masjumi 249
- Mason, Daniel 358
- *Mass* 366
- Masters, John 363
- Mataram 56, 93
- *Mataram: A Novel of Love, Faith and Power in Early Java* 355
- Maugham, Somerset 148, 358
- *Max Havelaar* 352–4
- Mekong River 42, 91, 237, 342
  - delta 13, 86, 106, 116, 118, 338
  - environmental issues 337–8
  - rice growing 116, 118
- Melaka (Malacca) 38, 59, 107, 202, 269
  - British rule 134, 269, 270
  - immigrants 131, 132, 133
  - Portuguese rule 59, 95, 99, 107
- Meo hill people 292
- mestizo community 132
- metalwork 351
- military
  - Burma (Myanmar) 263–4, 295, 306, 314
  - Indonesia 185, 250–1, 295, 296
  - Thailand 280–3, 295, 296–7, 315
- Min Aung Hlaing, General 264, 314
- Mindanao 277, 279, 290, 291
- Ming dynasty 36
- Minh Huong 132
- modernity and tradition 322–5
- monarchies *see* kingship/monarchies
- moneylenders 118, 144
- Mongkut (Thai king) 91, 163
- Mongols 36, 43
- *Monkeys in the Dark* 365
- monumental art 340–5
  - *see also* temples

Moro National Liberation Front 290
mountain communities 68–70
Mountbatten, Lord Louis 195
Move Forward party (Thailand) 316
Multatuli 353
Muslims *see* Islam
Myanmar *see* Burma (Myanmar)

*Nagarakertagama* 40
Nahdatul Ulama 249
*nam-tien* 131
Nan province 322
*Nanyang* Chinese 138
*Nanyang* region 36
Nasution, General A.H. 211, 214, 249
national identity 63, 335
  Burma 168, 234
  Indonesia 95, 154, 162, 185
  Malaya 167
  Philippines 102
  Vietnam 155
National League for Democracy 263–4
national unity 288–95, 307, 338
nationalism 102, 125, 152–4, 173–7
  Burma 167–8, 173, 195, 262
  Cambodia 168, 173, 236
  Communism and 160–3
  Indonesia 153–4, 161–3, 184–5, 197, 205, 209, 212
  Laos 168, 173, 236
  Malaya 166–7, 200, 230
  Philippines 169–70, 174
  regional and minority interests 288–95
  religion and 165–7
  Second World War, impact of 178, 180, 183
  Thailand 155
  Vietnam 155, 162, 173–4, 299
Nationalist Party of Indonesia 249

‘native’ stereotypes 149
Ne Win, General 263
Negritos 74
Nelson, Roger 368
Netherlands Indies 148, 150, 171, 173, 182
    *see also* Indonesia
New Guinea, Western *see* Papua (Irian Jaya)
New People’s Army (Philippines) 277
*A New Sun Rises Over the Old Land: A Novel of Sihanouk’s Cambodia* 368–9
Nghe-Tinh Soviets 172–3
Ngo Dinh Diem 254, 255
Nguyen Du 65
Nguyen family 49
Nguyen Trai 311
Nixon, Richard 276
*Noli me tangere* (*The Social Cancer*) 354
Norodom Sihanouk 22, 55, 88, 200, 255–8, 301–2, 325–6
    Cambodian independence 200, 239–40, 255–7, 261
    cultural traditions and politics 309–10
    fictional writing about period of rule 368–9
    traditional leadership 325–6
Norodom Suramarit 257
North Borneo *see* Sabah
Nusantara 95

O’Brien, Tim 367
Oecusse region 99
oil 120, 287
opium 140
Opium Wars 83
Orissa 343
Orwell, George 358–9

‘pacification’ (Burma) 152
Paderi Wars 153
Pagan *see* Bagan (Pagan)

palace servants 76
Palembang 24, 37
Panh, Rithy 368
Papua (Irian Jaya) 15, 213, 216, 287
  Dutch rule 94, 241, 248, 249
  incorporation into Indonesia 241, 250
  separatism 294, 312
parliamentary systems 295–7
PAS (Malay political party) 266–8, 317
Patakan Harapan (Alliance of Hope) 317
Pathet Lao 237–8, 300
Pear (Por) hill people 70
Pearl Harbor 181
peasants 40, 56–8, 62–6, 93, 195, 321
  *see also* farmers
  economic development, impact of 122–5
  headmen 57–8
  Indianisation, less affected by 28
  Indonesia 93
  migration 41, 63, 64
  protests and rebellions 171–2, 335
  rice farming 115–19
  spiritual world 65–6
  urbanisation 320–1
Pekalongan 350
Penang 96, 97, 133, 134, 202, 269, 270
Penn Nouth 239
People Power Revolution (Philippines) 132, 279
People's Action Party (PAP) 270, 271, 316
People's Socialist Community (Cambodia) 257
pepper 108, 135
Perlis 91, 97
Persian immigrants 131–2
Pham Van Dong 161
Phanomyong, Pridi 280, 281
Phibun Songkhram, 280–1
Philippine Congress 224

Philippines 6, 24, 26, 27
  administration 329, 330
  American rule 79, 102, 150, 170, 174, 272, 290
  art 346–7
  ASEAN, and 306
  boundaries 330
  Catholicism 101, 102, 141, 277, 278, 286, 290
  ceramics 347
  Chinese immigrants 132, 133, 140
  Communism 160, 195, 224, 231, 276–7
  deforestation 337
  ethnic groups 73, 332
  European influence 5, 48, 59, 60–2
  fictional writing about 354, 366
  geography 15
  government 316
  Huk insurgency 223–8, 232, 261
  independence 189–90, 196, 223–6, 231, 232, 240, 272, 273
  Islam 60, 100, 277, 290
  Japan and 182, 187, 189–91, 194, 272–3
  language 10
  martial law 276–7, 295
  nationalism 169–70, 174
  population 1, 333
  post-colonial politics 261, 272–9
  regionalism 290–1
  religion 18, 61, 101, 277, 290
  revolution 62, 132, 172, 223–6, 232, 279, 354
  school attendance 338
  Second World War 182, 187, 189–91, 194, 272–3
  separatists 290–1
  Spanish colonial rule 60–2, 79, 100–2, 108, 110, 150, 169, 189, 290, 329
  sugar production 120, 224
  textiles 350
  urbanisation 320
Phnom Penh 13, 16, 302–3, 321, 330, 368
Phongsali 258

*The Piano Tuner* 358
PKI *see* Indonesian Communist Party (PKI)
plantation life, novels about 360–1 Pol Pot 71, 235, 257, 284, 286, 303–5, 337, 368
political instability 17
political map 48
politics 7, 17–18, 48
  *see also* by country
  ethnic 332
  novels as political statements 352–4
  Western political ideas 157
population 1–2, 12, 320
  Burma (Myanmar) 1
  Cambodia 3, 286
  cities 14, 16, 123
  growth 246, 285–6, 333
  Indonesia 1, 286, 333
  movement 129
  overpopulation 176
  Philippines 1, 333
  Singapore 133
  Thailand 1, 16, 286, 333
  urban vs rural 320
  Vietnam 1
Portuguese colonial rule
  East Timor 80, 94, 99–100, 150, 182, 202, 233, 241, 252
  Melaka 59, 95, 99, 107
  trade 107–8
post-colonial politics 243–84
  Burma 244, 261, 262–4
  Cambodia 255–7, 261
  Indonesia 248–52, 261
  Laos 257–9, 261
  Malaya 261, 264–8
  Philippines 261, 272–9
  Singapore 261, 266–7, 269–71
  Vietnam 244, 252–5, 261

post-war world, fictional writing 363–9
poverty 16, 122, 317, 319, 336, 339
power 2
  Buddhist states 51–7
  class, economics and 331–9
  colonial 47
  kingship *see* kingship/monarchies
  size and 2
  structures, comparison of 49–58
  village leaders 57–8
Prajadhipok (Thai king) 164
Prambanan 24, 341, 342, 343
Preah Khan temple 107
Preah Vihear temple 330
Prem Tinsulanonda, General 282
priests 27, 29, 50, 61, 129, 278
*Prince of Wales* sinking 181
prisoners of war 31, 75, 131, 362
*The Purple Plain* 362

Qing (Ch'ing) refugees 132
*Quartered Safe Out Here: A Recollection of the War in Burma* 363
Queen Saw 354–5
*The Quicksand War: Prelude to Vietnam* 364
*The Quiet American* 364
Quirino (Philippine president) 274

Raffles, Thomas Stamford 133, 341
Rahman, Tunku Abdul 228, 240, 265, 266, 268, 271
Rakhine State (Arakan) 82, 83, 314, 346
Rama I (*Chakri ruler*) *65*
*Ramayana* 323
Rangoon (Yangon) 83, 262, 289
Ratner, Vaddey 368
Razal, Najib 317
Red Khmer *see* Khmer Rouge
Red River delta 13, 26, 219

Red Shirt movement 292, 293, 315, 321
Reformed Islam 166
refugees 90, 132, 182, 300
regional and minority interests 288–95
  Burma 289, 293
  Indonesia 293–5
  national unity and 288–95
  Philippines 290–1
  Thailand 291–3
Reid, Anthony (Tony) 355
religion 8, 18, 26, 291
  architectural contrasts 127
  Buddhism *see* Buddhism
  Christianity *see* Christianity
  Communism and 164–5
  ethnic diversity and 127
  Hinduism *see* Hinduism
  Islam *see* Islam
  migration and 140–1
  nationalism and 165–7
  spirituality of peasants 65–6
Remarque, Erich Maria 367
Renville Agreement 207
*Repulse* sinking 181
resources 287, 334
  export commodities 110–20, 151, 175
  lack of 336
Rhade hill-dwellers 322
rice 3, 13, 31, 105, 106, 115–19, 151
  export 119
  role of indigenous peasants 115–19
  wet cultivation 28, 63, 68
Rizal, José 354
*The Road Past Mandalay* 363
Rohingya 264, 314
romance of Southeast Asia 354–8
Roxas, Manuel 273, 274

*The Royal Way* (*La Voie royale*) 357, 358
rubber 105, 110, 111–14, 124, 151, 287
  export 119, 175
  imported labour 113, 115
  plantation life, novels about 360–1
*Rubber* 360, 361
rural discontent 122, 171–3
Russian Revolution 159, 164
Russo–Japanese War (1905) 164, 165

Sabah 98, 99, 150, 202, 241, 266
*Sacrilege in Malaya* 361
Saigon *see* Ho Chi Minh City
Sakdalist peasant movement 172
Sam Neua 258
Sanskrit 28, 45
Sarawak 98, 99, 120, 150, 202, 241, 266
Sarekat Islam 166
Sarit Thanarit, General 281–2
Sawankalok 348
Saya San rising 170
Scott, Paul 363
sculpture 345–7
Sdech Kan (Cambodian king) 315
Second Burma War 84
Second Indochinese War *see* Vietnam War
Second World War 5–7, 12, 115, 175, 176, 178–202
  changes since 269, 319, 327
  Chinese immigration, impact on 137, 143
  colonialism, impact on 178–80, 183, 193, 202, 207, 269
  fictional writing about 361–3
  Japanese in *see* Japan
  rebellion after 207, 223, 234, 335
secret societies 136
Sedang people 69
Semaun 161
separatists 338

  - Burma 262
  - Indonesia 247, 249–50, 293–5, 312
  - Philippines 290–1
- Seremban 137
- servants, hereditary 75–6
- Shans 10, 72, 73, 234, 262–3, 289, 293
- *She Was a Queen* 354–5
- Sherry, Norman 357
- Si Satchanalai 342
- Siem Reap 342
- Sihanouk *see* Norodom Sihanouk
- Sin, Cardinal Jaime 278
- Singapore 6, 38, 123–4, 133–6, 328, 330
  - ASEAN, and 306
  - British colonial rule 96, 123, 134, 201, 241, 269–70
  - ethnic Chinese majority 266, 269
  - ethnic diversity 127
  - expulsion from Malaysia 266, 269, 285
  - Federation of Malaysia 251, 266, 285
  - fictional writing about 359, 366–7
  - government 316
  - immigrants 133–6, 144, 145, 146, 147
  - independence 270, 271
  - Japan and 181, 182, 187, 200
  - life expectancy 320
  - post-colonial politics 261, 266–7, 269–71
  - school attendance 338
  - Second World War 181, 182, 187
- *The Singapore Grip* 359
- Singasari 40
- Sjahrir, Sutan 161, 172
- slavery 31, 68, 70, 75–6
- Slim, General 362
- social division 69–70
- social media 321, 322
- socialism 155, 255, 327, 332
- Son Sann 239

*Song for an Approaching Storm* 368
sorcerers 70
*The Sorrow of War* 367
*The Soul of Malaya* 361
Souphanouvong (Laotian prince) 236–8, 258
Southeast Asia
  concept of 1–19
  early history 20–45, 130
  economic transformation 104–25
  ‘Eurocentric’ history 78–81
  European influence 47–8, 78–102
  history 3–5, 12, 20–66
  industrialisation and 109–11
  international relations 7, 19
  interwar period 148–77
  linguistic unity 9–11
  political map 48
  population 1–2
  power 2
  territorial boundaries 149–51, 329–31
  urban growth 14
  Western influence 65, 76
  world awareness of 2–4, 22
Souvanna Phouma (Laotian prince) 258
Soviet Union 305, 306, 314, 327
Spanish colonial rule 59, 60–2, 108
  art 346–7
  Catholicism 101, 102, 141, 277, 278, 286, 290
  fictional writing about 354
  Philippines 60–2, 79, 100–2, 110, 150, 169, 189, 272, 290, 329
  trade 108
spice trade 108–9, 111
Srettha Thavisin 316
Sri Lanka (Ceylon) 5, 113, 127
Srivijaya 4, 23, 24–5, 29, 35–9, 73, 107
Straits Settlements 96, 98, 201–2, 269
  immigration 133–8

Suez Canal 124
sugar industry 120, 224
Suharto 251, 296, 320, 326, 328, 329
  end of regime 311–12
Sukarno 153, 161, 163, 172, 197, 214, 261, 296
  Japanese, collaboration with 184, 185, 206
  presidency 248–52, 365
  traditional leadership 309, 325–6, 328
Sukarnoputri, Megawati 312
Sukhothai temples 342, 344, 346
Sulawesi 64, 74, 207, 247, 294
Sulu Archipelago 98, 100
Sumatra 38, 43, 64, 95, 247, 287, 360
  anti-Dutch protests 171–2
  art 345
  Dutch control 94, 153, 207, 208
  history 24–5, 29, 35–9
  oil production 120
  rubber cultivation 112
  separatists 247, 249–50, 294, 312
  tsunami 294
Sumbanese 322
Sundanese 74
Suon Sorin 368
Surabaya 198, 205, 208
Surakarta (Solo) 93, 312, 341, 350
Suryavarman II 21
suzerainty 23, 39, 90, 91
Swettenham, Sir Frank 356
Székely, Laszlo 360
Székely-Lulofs, Madelon 360

Tai ethnic group 69, 130
Tai language 10–11, 69, 130
Tamils 127, 361
Tan Cheng Lok 265
Tan Malaka 161

Taoism 18
tax collectors 58, 93, 140, 217
Tay-Son rebellion 49, 64
technocrats 327–8
technological revolution 109–10
temples 4, 8, 22–4, 26, 30–2, 340–5, 351
  Angkor Wat 22, 31, 32, 339, 341–4
  Banteay Srei 357
  Bayon 40
  Borobudur 23, 24, 46, 81, 339, 341, 343, 344
  Prambanan 24, 341, 342, 343
  Preah Khan 107
  Preah Vihear 330
  Wat Phu 342
Tenasserim 83
territorial boundaries 149–51, 329–31
terrorism 312, 336
textiles 109, 349–51
Thailand 6
  1932 coup 279, 280
  2006 coup 296–7
  Angkor empire, part of 21, 33–5
  art and architecture 342, 344, 346
  ASEAN, and 306
  boundaries 330
  Buddhism 8, 52, 141, 291, 346
  bureaucracy 49
  Burma and 82
  ceramics 347–8, 349
  Chinese immigration 140, 141
  colonial rule, never under 17, 55, 64, 89, 90–2, 119, 149, 155, 204, 232, 240, 279
  Communism 163–4, 282
  economic crisis 318
  ethnic groups 72, 73, 130, 292–3, 332
  failed coup attempts 281
  geography 15

  - history 17, 26, 33–5, 44, 90–2, 344
  - immigration 130, 131–2
  - Indian influence 26–9, 50
  - invasion of Angkor 44
  - Islam 291–2
  - Japan, relations with 182, 194, 232, 280–1
  - language 10–11, 35
  - life expectancy 320
  - major political change 279–84, 311, 315–16
  - metalworking 351
  - military 280–3, 295, 296–7, 315
  - monarchy 52–3, 55, 64–5, 91, 163–4, 281–2, 325
  - nationalism 155
  - parliamentary democracy 283, 315
  - population 1, 14, 16, 286, 333
  - post-1932 politics 279–84
  - regionalism 291–3
  - religion 18, 291
  - revolution 163–4, 280–2
  - rice growing 116, 118–19
  - school attendance 338
  - Second World War 182, 194, 232, 280–1
  - student politics 282
  - textiles 350
  - tribal minorities 292
  - United States, ties with 282
  - urbanisation 14, 320, 321
- Thaksin Shinawatra 296–7, 315, 316
- Thammasat University 283
- Thanin Kraivichien 282
- Thanom Kittikachorn 282
- Theravada Buddhism 18, 43, 44
- Theroux, Paul 366
- Thibaw (Burmese king) 84
- Third Burma War 84
- *Three Rivers to Glory* 362
- Timor-Leste 6, 48, 233, 241–2, 252, 284, 294, 313

  - ASEAN membership 6
  - departure of Portuguese 243
  - independence 202, 242, 284, 294, 313
  - Indonesian control 242, 244, 252, 313
  - Japan and 182
  - language 10
  - Portuguese colonial rule 80, 94, 99–100, 150, 182, 202, 241–2, 252
  - UN authority 313
- tin mining 110, 114–15, 119, 124, 135–6, 151, 175, 287
- Toba highlands 94
- tobacco 120
- Toer, Pramoedya Ananta 360
- Tonle Sap River 42
- trade 7, 107–9
  - Angkor empire 31, 33
  - art, in 341
  - Dutch 92–4, 108–9
  - immigration and 130–6
  - Indian culture, spread of 27
  - itinerant traders 64
  - Srivijaya 35–9
- tradition and modernity 322–5
- Treaty of Yandabo 83
- Trengganu 91, 97
- tribute to rulers 70
- Trinh family 49
- *Tropic Fever* 360, 361
- Tu Duc (Vietnamese emperor) 86
- *Turtle Beach* 366
- *Twilight in Djakarta* 365
- U Nu 234, 262–3
- United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) 265–8, 317
- United Nations 209, 250, 281, 313, 314
- United States of America
  - Cambodia and 302, 305

  Indonesia and 328
  Laos and 259
  Pearl Harbor 181
  Philippines, in 79, 102, 150, 170, 174, 196, 226, 240, 272–6
  Thailand and 282
  Vietnam and 254, 299
  Vietnam War *see* Vietnam War
urbanisation 14, 16, 123, 320–1

Ver, General Fabian 277
Vientiane 258, 259, 334
Viet Minh 192, 199, 216–21, 227, 236, 253, 256, 258
Vietnam 6, 7
  administration 49–52, 326
  America and 254, 299 *see also* Vietnam War
  Angkor empire, part of 21, 33
  art 346
  ASEAN and 306, 315
  August Revolution 199, 216
  boundaries 330, 331
  Cambodia and 34, 87, 284, 301–2, 305, 315
  ceramics 347, 348, 349
  China and 6, 8, 26, 27, 34, 41–2, 49–50, 131, 216, 221, 310–11, 331
  Chinese immigrants 131, 139
  Chinese invasion 305
  Communism 18, 158–62, 171, 172, 192–3, 199, 203, 216–23, 228, 231, 236–7, 253, 298–301, 316, 324, 334
  deforestation 337
  division, post-war 220–2, 252–5, 257–8, 300
  early history 26, 34
  economic liberalisation 300, 316
  elections 253–4
  ethnic groups 72, 73
  famine 176
  fictional writing about 359, 364, 367
  French colonial rule 80, 85–7, 89, 105, 110, 139, 150, 152, 158–62, 172–3, 298–9

  geography 13, 15
  government 49–52, 85, 316
  immigration 131, 139, 143
  independence 34, 42, 160, 174, 192, 197, 198–9, 203, 215–23, 227–8, 231, 232, 235, 242, 300
  infrastructure 125
  intelligentsia 156
  Japan and 181, 191–3
  kings 50, 53, 70
  language 9–10, 41, 80
  Laos and 300–1
  law 50
  leadership 326
  national identity 155, 162
  nationalism 155, 156, 162, 173–4, 228, 299–300
  peasant/village society 57–8
  political divisions 49–50
  population 1, 13
  post-colonial politics 244, 252–5, 257–8, 261, 328
  poverty rate 319
  power structures 49–58, 64
  refugees 300
  revolution 215–23, 232
  rice growing 116–19
  rise to power 42
  rubber cultivation 112, 115
  school attendance 338
  Second World War 181, 191–3
  social divisions 69
  southern anti-Communist state 221
  Tay-Son rebellion 49, 64
  traditional leaders 324
Vietnam War 179, 205, 216, 230, 238, 255, 285, 315, 337
  Communism and 298
  environmental consequences 337
  fictional writing about 367–8
  financial spinoffs to Philippines 275

Vietnamese Communist Party 161, 162, 172
village life 57–8, 63–4, 121, 323–33
Vu Trong Phung 359

wage labour 120, 121, 123
Wahid, Abdurraham 312
Wat Phu 342
‘watersheds’ 46–8
wayang kulit 323
wealth distribution 324, 331
weaponry 351
Webb, James 367, 368
West New Guinea *see* Papua
Western influences 322
wet rice cultivation *see* rice
white supremacy 193
Widodo, Joko (Jokowi) 312
women 9, 39–41

Yao people 322
*The Year of Living Dangerously* 365
Yellow Shirts 315
Yingluck Shinawatra 297, 315
Yogyakarta 24, 81, 93, 123, 208, 341, 343, 350
  Sultan of 214
Yuan dynasty 36, 43
Yudhoyono, Susilo Bambang 294, 312

Zhou Daguan (Chou Ta-kuan) 32–3, 107, 130, 131