

Southeast Asia: One or Many?

Book review of 'The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History. Owen, Norman G., ed. 2005. University of Hawai'i Press, 541 pages. ISBN 0-8248-2890-9

Writing a history of Southeast Asia is a daunting task – the heterogeneity of the region is at odds with broad historical generalization. The authors of this book, eight scholars from the United States and Australia, hedge their bets from the outset. Theirs is not an attempt to provide a single narrative of the region's history. Instead, their book offers the reader a historical menu comprised of five courses, ranging from the early 18th to the last half of the 20th century. It is organised around general chapters that provide synoptic analyses on historical transformations across the region and chronologically structured country-specific chapters. A reader may opt to read the book from beginning to end, but he could as well limit his attention to the thematic chapters or the history of one country.



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The result is a book that does less well in telling a coherent story, but one that provides a valuable study for exploring the region's history. In this, it is particularly useful in alerting its audience – students of the region and the generally interested reader – to the fallacies of focusing excessively on a distinctive set of long- or short-term variables in explaining historical processes and outcomes. The authors leave no doubt that analytical categories such as colonialism, capitalism, nationalism, industrialization,

religion, and demography play crucial roles in defining social actors' interests and actions or, as historical forces, serve to explain why political, economic or social change occurs at a particular moment in time. Yet, by exposing how history is always driven by a confluence of factors – big and small, some predictable, some unexpected – they also demonstrate the limits of any attempt to put history into a single interpretative framework.

This book is a precious case of analytical modesty. Since our understanding of history inevitably shapes our thinking of the present and the future, this is not a minor contribution. What is revealing is how often western observers, social scientists, Asian strongmen, and critical theorists – all of them, more often than not, apologists for their own cause – had it wrong. The authors do not discriminate: from Eurocentric colonial critics to the 'Asian fatalists' of the early independence period and the mid-90s' 'Asian values' debate, from the social pessimists who see nothing in 'modernization' but 'oppressive-history-repeating' to the ideologues of economic orthodoxy, 'The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia' offers discomfiting food for thought.

Unfortunately, the authors missed to serve the dessert in an otherwise well-balanced exercise in chronological history-telling and historical sociology. Leaving behind the search for comprehensive paradigms is no impediment to pointing out common features that manifest themselves in cross-country comparisons. Rather than leaving it up to the reader to identify them throughout the book, the authors would have done well to do so in a more detailed fashion in a summarizing chapter.

One such feature might be the blend of two distinct but inter-related economic systems in the region's economic history – the emergence of a colonial export economy and the parallel development of regional markets in finance, goods, and people. An easily neglected factor of social transformation, systems of credit introduced by Chinese and Indian shop-keepers and money lenders, permeated the Southeast Asian countryside and monetized the rural economy long before the imposition of western colonial capitalism. And while the late 19th century global economy, dominated by the latter, left no scope for the emergence of infant industries to replace the export of raw materials with processed goods, this blend was to return in the post-colonial era in the form of Southeast Asia's family type business organisations and ethnic Chinese capitalism. The new national economies' answer to the challenges posed

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by global economic structures, this coalescence became the foundation of the region's distinctive development trajectory. As the authors explain, 'to compete with multinational capitalism, Southeast Asia at first had to find business realms that were protected, even while depending on foreign ties for technology and markets.' By the last decade of the 20th century, production and finance had reversed roles, and this 'Asian blend' of capitalism was embedded in the global financial system, with well-known consequences.



Another feature is the distinctiveness of the colonial legacy. Colonial governments drew the maps of today's Southeast Asia, but the economic, political and intellectual changes that followed colonial state-building were as important to the region's post-colonial development as the 'gunboats and uniformed troops'. As the authors claim, 'Western colonialism left behind in Southeast Asia, when it departed, small but significant elites, which compared well in creativity with their African, Latin Americas and Middle Eastern counterparts – for reasons that remain to be fully explored'. These elites later determined how the created institutions adopted, responded and interacted with the modern world, and how centralized state authority was exercised.

As in any other region of the world, the history of Southeast Asia is a history of human excesses, foreign and domestic. It shows that growth does not foster social cohesion without policies designed to benefit the poor; that free elections do not mean change in

political power structures of the end of oligarchic rule, and that moving up the global value chain does not reduce the threat of imminent ecological collapse or labour exploitation.

Immense challenges remain, from setting the terms of political authority to the distribution of economic resources, from sustainable development to the social transformations of economic modernization, and finding the balance between traditional values and social liberalism. Southeast Asian societies are still defining their social contracts; coping with adaptation and change remains a fragile process. Previously at the receiving end of political and economic prescriptions and faith-based proselytism, the region today is becoming a laboratory of the modern world in its own right: Southeast Asian societies are at the forefront of the search for solutions to an array of pressing issues, from integrating the national and global economies to reconciling individual rights, nationalism and cultural diversity, and defining relations between politics and religion in society.

Here the book ends. Concerned foremost with the emergence of 'modern' Southeast Asia, the authors seem to run out of steam once the first decades of independence are left behind and a new phase of global economic inter-dependence sets in. Bypassing the evolution of Southeast Asian states' external relations, they miss an opportunity to add a regional perspective to their history. Only one page is reserved to account for what the authors themselves call the 'ASEAN Success Story'. No indication is given why ASEAN has become the most successful regional organisation in the non-western world. The future may hold the irony that, like their former colonial powers, regional integration will enable Southeast Asian nations to establish themselves as agents in the coming global order, and will allow the defining of their relations with the coming world powers on their own terms. As one observes the return to the region of what the authors call the 'Chinese world system' – coinciding with the decline of the manufacturing base of those western industrial economies that replaced it one and a half centuries ago – we may be witnessing the emergence of yet another 'new' history of Southeast Asia. Here, however, we enter the domain of current affairs and speculation – nothing to be expected from a history book.

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