CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The Ends of the Earth

In 1792 the French monarchy collapsed. Between 1799 and 1815, a new Parisian regime improved the efficiency and penetration of the central apparatus, while dramatically extending French military power. Short-lived though France's conquests were, her continental wars precipitated imitative reforms of administrative and military structures across Europe and a permanent reduction in the number of independent states.

Between 1752 and 1786 the Burmese, Siamese, and Vietnamese kingdoms all disintegrated. In each realm, a new, more dynamic leadership then succeeded in quelling the chaos, increasing the resources and local authority of the state, and enlarging its territorial writ. The ensuing wars between reinvigorated empires in the late 18th and early 19th centuries accelerated competitive reform while diminishing the number of independent polities across mainland Southeast Asia.[1]

How shall we explain these parallels between Europe and Southeast Asia? Surely, one is tempted to say, no explanation is needed: the cultural contexts were so different, the interstate and domestic systems so unique, the trajectories so disparate as to render parallels ultimately meaningless. This is historical flotsam, curious but basically random coincidences, like similarities between Meso-American and Egyptian pyramids or between Jewish and Buddhist cosmogonic explanations for the origin of suffering.

---

[1] The mainland is here defined as present-day Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam; while archipelagic Southeast Asia refers to Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context

But closer scrutiny suggests rather more was involved. In fact, in mainland Southeast Asia as well as in France, the late 18th and early 19th centuries ended the third and inaugurated the last of four roughly synchronized cycles of political consolidation that together spanned the better part of a millennium. The first synchronized consolidation, which saw extremely rapid demographic and commercial growth across much of Europe and Southeast Asia, began in the 10th or 11th centuries and concluded with a generalized political and social crisis extending from the late 13th to the late 14th or early 15th centuries. Political integration resumed in the mid- or late 1400s, but between c. 1540 and 1610 new states in Burma, Siam, Vietnam, France, as well as Russia again succumbed, this time to a combination of novel cultural and political tensions, overly rapid territorial extension, and/or renewed ecological strains. Reforms in the early to mid-1600s inaugurated a third phase of consolidation – ending with the late 18th century collapse, the dramatic revivals, and the raging continental wars with which I opened the discussion. Why should distant regions, with no obvious religious or material links, have experienced more or less coordinated cycles? If we discount coincidence, what hitherto invisible ties could have spanned the continents?

Moreover, why did interregna in both mainland Southeast Asia and much of Europe tend to become progressively shorter and less disruptive? In most cases the 13th/15th-century collapse was both longer and more profoundly dislocating – territorially, economically, demographically, institutionally – than subsequent crises (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2).[2] Or to reverse the terms of inquiry so as to pose a yet more fundamental problem: Why during the course of the second millennium did local societies in mainland Southeast Asia as well as Europe become more politically and culturally integrated? Whereas Europe as a whole in 1450 had some 500 political units, by the late 19th century the number was closer to 30. Between 1340 and 1820 some 23 independent Southeast Asian kingdoms collapsed into three. Each 19th-century survivor was more effectively centralized than any local predecessor. At the same time across much of western Europe, northeastern Europe, and mainland Southeast Asia alike – in a pattern that was both symptom and

---

[2] Vietnam is the chief exception insofar as 16th-century fragmentation continued, in essence, to 1802. However, both the northern and southern Vietnamese regimes stabilized in the early 1600s, both owed nominal allegiance to the Le dynasty, and both collapsed in the late 1700s, to be reunited by 1802. See Ch. 4 for discussion.

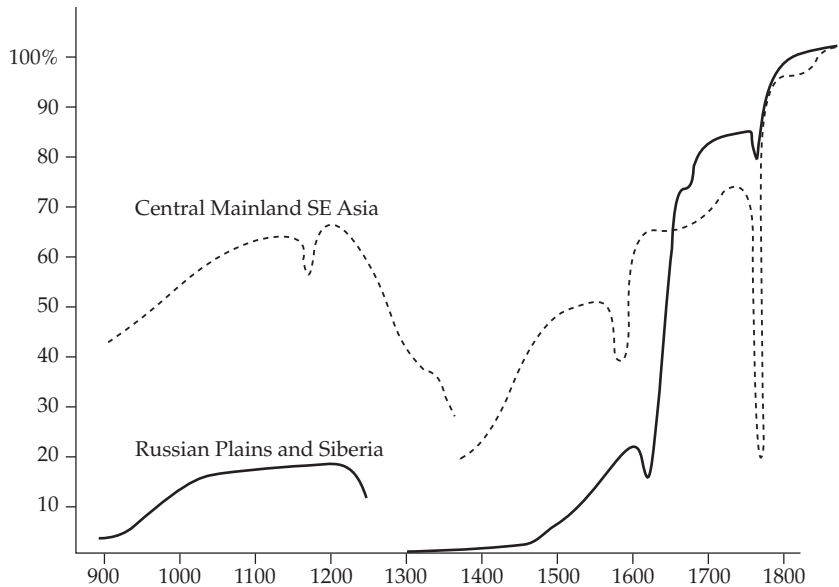*Introduction: The Ends of the Earth*

Figure 1.1. Territorial consolidation in central mainland Southeast Asia and in the Russian Plains and Siberia. This chart shows the amount of territory controlled by the dominant power in each region between c. 900 and 1825 C.E. The number of square miles held by the chief regional power in 1825 defines the 100-percent level on the vertical axis, with earlier formations presented as a proportion of that 1825 figure. Thus, for example, since the Russian empire in 1825 controlled roughly 7,000,000 square miles and its Russian predecessor (the Kievan federation) in 1200 controlled in the order of 1,400,000 square miles, in 1200 the graph for the "Russian Plains and Siberia" registers at 20 percent. The 13th-century gap corresponds to the interregnum between the collapse of Kiev and the rise of Moscow, while the late 14th-century gap in the line for "Central Mainland SE Asia" identifies the period separating the decline of Angkor and the early success of Ayudhya. Especially in earlier eras, fluid overlapping frontier loyalties make precise territorial calculations problematic. As a relatively short-lived empire whose center of gravity lay outside the Russian heartland, the Mongol polity is excluded.

Sources: Jan Pluvier, *Historical Atlas of South-East Asia* (Leiden, 1995); David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (Boulder, CO: 1992); David Wyatt, *A History of Thailand* (New Haven, 1984); idem, "Relics, Oaths and Politics in Thirteenth-Century Siam," *JSEAS* 32 (2001): 3–66; Jerome Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia* (Princeton, 1961); John Cannon, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Russia* (London, 1995); Janet Martin, *Medieval Russia 980–1584* (Cambridge, 1995).
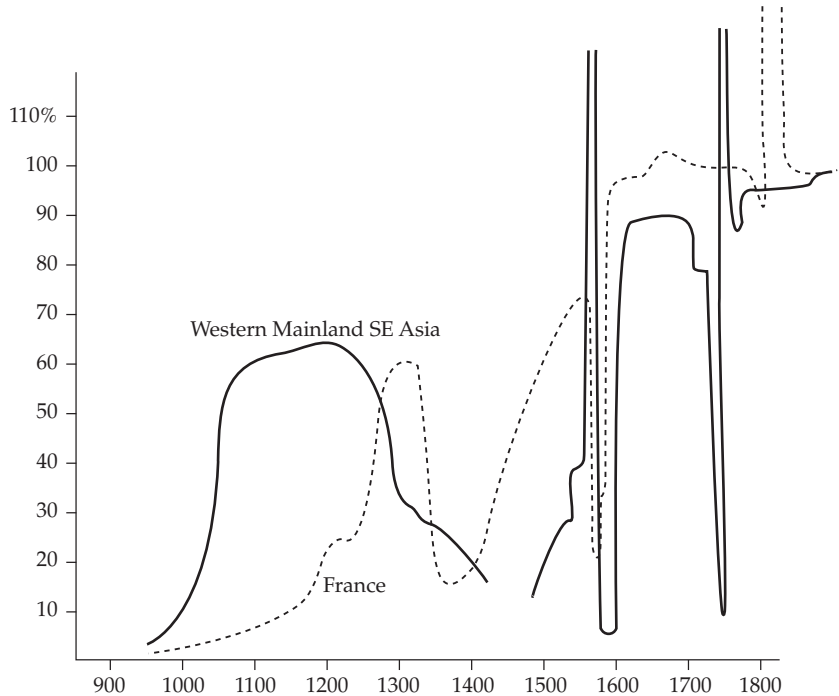
3

Figure 1.2. Territorial consolidation in Western mainland Southeast Asia and in France. This figure employs the same format as Figure 1.1, with lands held by the chief regional power in 1825 defining the 100-percent level on the vertical axis and with pre-1825 formations presented as a proportion of that 1825 figure. The 15th-century gap in the line for "Western Mainland SE Asia" corresponds to the period between the decline of Ava and the rise of Toungoo. Pre-1700 French territory refers not to the boundaries of the titular kingdom, but of the French royal domain. The same caveat about fluid frontier loyalties applies here as in Figure 1.1.

Sources: G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma* (rpt., London, 1967); Victor Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Cycles* (Princeton, 1984); Elizabeth Hallam, *Capetian France 987–1328* (London, 1980); Xavier de Planhol, *An Historical Geography of France* (Cambridge, 1994); Louis Bergeron et al., *Histoire de la France. L'espace francais* (Paris, 1989); Roland Mousnier, *The Institutions of France under the Absolute Monarchy 1598–1789, Volume II. The Organs of State and Society* (Chicago, 1984); personal communications, Robin Briggs and Paul Hanson, Oct. 2001.

cause of political integration – the dialect, religion, social conventions, and ethnicity of elites in each capital entered into more sustained dialogue with provincial and popular traditions. Everywhere literacy grew more widespread, vernacular literatures more profuse; cultural as well

4

Introduction: The Ends of the Earth

as commercial circuits denser, more inclusive, and more specialized. In varying degrees in Burma, Siam, Vietnam, France, and Russia alike, centrally-defined cultural norms became a marker of political inclusion.

Why, then, these parallel consolidations between lands at the extremities of Eurasia – in effect, the ends of the earth? Why not uninterrupted construction in one region, permanent collapse in another, and random, directionless oscillations in yet another? Why too should Japan have exhibited some of these same synchronized patterns, including growing cultural unity and an unprecedentedly successful political re-integration from the 17th to 19th centuries? How widespread across Eurasia were such parallels? French consolidation finds obvious echoes elsewhere in Western Europe, but surely as the devolutionary histories of much of archipelagic Southeast Asia and of Mughal India (not to mention the Holy Roman Empire) show, linear outcomes were hardly inevitable. The fact that French, Russian, Japanese, and mainland Southeast Asian states varied considerably in population and size, operated in distinctive physical environments, embraced idiosyncratic religious traditions, and consistently exhibited very different levels of administrative and cultural coherence only deepens the puzzle of their gross convergence. What features linked mainland Southeast Asia to much of Europe and Japan but distinguished the mainland from nearby South Asia and island Southeast Asia? In Europe "early modern" is conventionally used to identify the period c. 1400–c. 1750. Can this same term – with its hint of inexorable progress to full modernity – be shifted from Western Europe to describe areas that proved incapable of generating by themselves some of the core features of true modernity, including industrialization? Conversely, can Asian parallels reshape hitherto encapsulated explanations of European dynamics? Finally, in using analytic models derived from one region, be it Europe or Asia, to examine another, can we avoid contaminating our inquiries at the source?

Potentially, Southeast Asia promises rich insights into such questions, precisely because this region lay at an enormous physical and cultural distance from Europe, and because parallels between mainland Southeast Asia and parts of Europe appear, at first glance, exceptionally striking. The systematic neglect of Southeast Asia in world histories only adds to its allure.

To realize this potential, however, Southeast Asian historiography must be recast. At present there is no way to connect Southeast Asia to other Eurasian regions, because we lack either an overview of regional development during the second millennium or a plausible model of

regional dynamics. To be sure, we have country histories, but these are usually encapsulated. We also have one attempt at a regional synthesis for the era 1450–1680, but I shall argue shortly that this does not answer our most pressing needs. This project therefore has two goals which I approach sequentially but which in fact are interdependent. First and most basic, I seek to reconceptualize the history of mainland Southeast Asia during a thousand years, c. 800–1830 C.E. Second, during this same period I compare trajectories and dynamics in mainland Southeast Asia with those in Russia, France, and Japan, in China and South Asia to a lesser extent, and in the archipelago so as to rethink both Southeast Asian marginalization and European exceptionalism. Accordingly, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830* is divided into two volumes, *Integration on the Mainland*, followed by *Mainland Mirrors: Russia, France, Japan, and the Islands*.

This chapter, which serves as an introduction to the entire study, begins with a review of Southeast Asian historiography in an effort to show why new paradigms are needed. The chapter concludes by suggesting how those paradigms connect to the wider world.

PART A: RETHINKING SOUTHEAST ASIA

"Externalist" Historiography

Our understanding of precolonial Southeast Asia has passed through three phases whose successive emphases display a contrapuntal logic.

The earliest historiographic tradition – which was certainly Eurocentric, but for which I believe "externalist" offers a broader, more accurate label – did not articulate its underlying assumptions, both because it lacked an earlier historiography against which to define itself, and because it embraced the positivist assumption that diligence and goodwill alone would eliminate bias and produce history whose truth was self-evident. Nor, in an era when colonial divisions loomed large, was there much concern for the coherence of what academics now treat as a distinctive region. In essence, this historiography reflected the intuitive understandings – joined often to formidable linguistic expertise – of French, British, Dutch, and Indian scholars, many unaware of one another's work, who attempted to write histories of Southeast Asia's several parts. Yet in retrospect we can see that, along with scholars of other parts of Asia, these historians shared certain basic tenets, chief among which was a tendency to explain the astounding East-West power

Introduction: The Ends of the Earth

inequalities of their own day with essentialist definitions of culture. Early achievements in India and China were recognized, of course, but these only rendered more stark Asia's subsequent immobility, whose root cause was the despotism, obscurantism, and servile equality of Asian society. With innovation prey to tyranny, history had become cyclic rather than linear. The real goal of European intervention therefore was not to make money, but to liberate Asia from its own past by introducing notions of liberty and progress.[3]

These interpretive approaches were applied to Southeast Asia with a peculiar twist. Here the trope "indigenous incapacity/external benefaction" gained added force from the belief that Southeast Asia, unlike India, China, or the Mideast, had never engendered its own civilization. So dramatic was evidence of Indian architectural and religious influence in Burma, Siam, Cambodia, and Java, and of Chinese influence in Vietnam, that the first Western observers could hardly avoid seeing these civilizations as fundamentally derivative – especially if the observers had been trained in Indology or Sinology. The terms "Farther India" and "Indo-China" were sufficiently emblematic. A preoccupation with external actors, whether Indian, Chinese, or European – hence my term "externalist" – therefore characterized most historiography written in the first half of the 20th century, and to these actors all significant innovation was attributed. Thus, for example, "Indianization" – the process whereby early Indian religious, architectural, and scriptural traditions were transferred to Southeast Asia during the first millennium C.E. – was portrayed by Hendrik Kern, N. J. Krom, G. Coedes, and other leading scholars as primarily the fruit of Indian, rather than Southeast Asian, initiatives. Either Indian traders had provided an indispensable spur, or Indian warriors had established colonies.[4]

Historians of the era after Indianization necessarily examined local dynasties, but with the arrival of European ships at the great regional emporium of Melaka in 1511, once again "the view . . . turned a hundred

[3] Cf. Thomas Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley, 1997), 129.

[4] C. C. Berg, "Javanese Historiography – A Synopsis of Its Evolution," idem, "The Work of Professor Krom," and J. G. de Casparis, "Historical Writing on Indonesia (Early Period)" in D. G. E. Hall, ed., *Historians of South-East Asia* (London, 1961), 13–23, 121–71, esp. 127 n. 38; G. Coedes, *Les Etats hindouises d'Indochine et d'Indonesie* (Paris, 1948), translated as *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, Walter Vella, ed. (Honolulu, 1968); J. D. Legge, "The Writing of Southeast Asian History," in *CHSEA*, esp. 3–15. On Southeast Asian historiography, see too Hall, *Historians*; Anthony Reid and David Marr, eds., *Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia* (Singapore, 1979); Nicholas Tarling, *Southeast Asia: A Modern History* (Oxford, 2001), 503–27.

eighty degrees and from then on the Indies are observed from the deck of the ship, the ramparts of the fortress, the high gallery of the trading-house."[5] The history of archipelagic Southeast Asia became a history of Portuguese, Dutch, Englishmen, and Spaniards in Asian waters – their wars and trade, their refashioning of local societies – with indigenous peoples reduced to European foils.[6]

On the mainland the indisputably marginal role of Europeans before 1824 rendered indigenous actors more prominent than in the islands. Yet here too histories by Europeans remained "kings and battles" narratives rather than analyses of indigenous social change, in part because colonial scholars felt obliged to establish basic chronologies, but more fundamentally because they too embraced what I term "the law of Southeast Asian inertia": unless acted upon by external forces, native societies remained at rest. "Their ideas remained in the nineteenth century what they had been in the ninth," wrote G. E. Harvey, the doyen of English historians of Burma. "To build pagodas, to collect daughters from tributary chiefs, to sally forth on slave raids, to make wars for white elephants – these conceptions had had their day, and a monarchy which failed to get beyond them was doomed."[7] So a French historian observed of Vietnam: "[After separating from China in 939] the Annamites, throughout the centuries, made no progress on Chinese civilization. Their arts and sciences always remained inferior to those of China.... Peoples, like individuals, progress only when provided with the necessary stimulus: they require contact with people of a more refined culture."[8]

My point is not to disparage colonial-era archeologists and historians, who heroically laid the foundations for all subsequent scholarship.

---

[5] J. C. van Leur, *Indonesian Trade and Society* (The Hague, 1955), 261.

[6] See for example R. O. Winstedt, *History of Malaya* (Singapore, 1935, rpt., 1962); F. W. Stapel, ed., *Geschiedenis van Nederlandsch-Indie* (1938–1940), analyzed in de Casparis, "Historical Writing," 145; and the first edition (London, 1955) of D. G. E. Hall's *A History of South-East Asia,* which divided pre-20th century material into "The Pre-European Period" (to 1511), "South-East Asia during the Earlier Phase of European Expansion," and "The Period of European Territorial Expansion."

[7] G. E. Harvey, *A History of Burma* (London, 1925, rpt. 1967), 249. For similar perspectives, see D. G. E. Hall, *Early English Intercourse with Burma, 1587–1743* (1928; rpt., London, 1968), 11–12; W. A. R. Wood, *A History of Siam* (London, 1926); Etienne Aymonier, *Le Cambodge,* 3 vols. (Paris, 1900–1904), I, pt. 2.

[8] A. Schreiner, *Les institutions annamites en Basse-Cochinchine avant la conquete francaise*, 3 vols. (Saigon, 1900–1902), I, 53–54. Cf. C. B. Maybon, *Histoire moderne du Pays d'Annam* (Paris, 1920), P. Pasquier, *L'Annam d'autrefois* (Paris, 1907); and discussion in Nola Cooke, "Colonial Political Myth and the Problem of the Other: French and Vietnamese in the Protectorate of Annam" (Australian National Univ. Ph.D. diss., 1991).

Introduction: The Ends of the Earth

Their research became increasingly sophisticated, and much of it, no doubt, will survive gerontophagy better than the present study. Rather, I seek to identify the assumptions and perspectives animating much of their writing and persisting in many quarters well into the 1970s. First, without external stimuli, Southeast Asian societies existed in space but not in time. Second, with the partial exception of Coedes' *Les Etats hindouises d'Indochine et d'Indonesie* (1948), these writings had no vision of Southeast Asia as a coherent region. Coedes defined pre-1300 Southeast Asia in terms of Indian influence, and for that reason omitted the Philippines and northern Vietnam.[9] But usually the criteria of regional identity, potential or actual, were not discussed. Thus, notwithstanding its title, D. G. E. Hall's authoritative *A History of South-East Asia* (first edition, 1955) remained smaller than the sum of its parts: after a chapter based on Coedes, it became a collection of country histories, without interest in synthesis or regional themes.[10] Third, insofar as colonial-era historiography treated indigenous society, it focused on the courts to the exclusion of villagers and lower social groups. Finally, an ontological difference separated Southeast Asian and European mentalities and ensured that the histories of Europe and precolonial Asia were fundamentally dichotomous.

"Autonomous" Historiography

Despite the externalist orientation of much prewar scholarship, it was from the ranks of colonial historians that an anti-externalist – what I call an "autonomous" – approach began to emerge in the 1930s and 1940s. Some Europeans reacted against the tendency of Indian scholars to overemphasize Indian elements in Indonesian culture. Others, attuned to Southeast Asian political aspirations, grew weary of White Man's Burden ideology. Yet others sought merely to correct what they saw as the simplistic claims of their predecessors.[11] The resultant historiography tended to be both more nuanced and more sympathetic to indigenous agency.

---

[9] Coedes, *Les Etats hindouises*; cf. idem, *Indianized States*, v, xv. A more inclusive geographic vision of "Monsoon Asia" stretching from southern China across Indo-China to southern India inspired Paul Mus, "Cultes indiens et indigenes au Champa," *BEFEO* 33 (1933): 367–410.

[10] This edition also omitted the Philippines. On the evolution of the concept of Southeast Asia, Donald K. Emmerson, "Southeast Asia: What's in a Name?", *JSEAS* 15 (1984): 1–21.

[11] De Casparis, "Historical Writing," 136–40; van Leur, *Trade and Society*, vi–vii.

In analyzing the transfer of Indian culture, for example, the pioneering French scholar Paul Mus and such Dutch researchers as W. F. Stutterheim and J. C. van Leur drew attention away from Indian origins to argue that much Southeast Asian art and architecture revealed quintessentially indigenous conceptions of sanctity. Indianization, they suggested, should be seen as a process by which local rulers themselves took the initiative to summon brahmin priests and artificers for the express purpose of enhancing royal dignity.[12] But van Leur, supported in various contexts by B. Schrieke, systematically extended this emphasis on the autonomy of Indonesian history. Van Leur argued that during the period of Islamization c. 1300–1600, and also more surprisingly during the early Dutch era c. 1600–1830, the basic rhythms of Indonesian economic life continued to reflect internal rather than external forces. Likewise, the deep structures of Javanese culture and psychology resisted Indian, Muslim, and European contacts. In van Leur's memorable dictum, "The sheen of the world religions and foreign cultural forms is a thin and flaking glaze; underneath it the whole of the old indigenous forms has continued to exist . . ."[13] "[A]s long as the magic poison of modern capitalism had not yet enchanted Europe . . . to produce steam, mechanics, and grooved cannon," two equal civilizations coexisted, with the Asian quantitatively superior.[14]

The translation into English in the 1950s of van Leur's and Schrieke's writings helped to popularize this perspective, but its growing influence reflected, above all, shifts in the political and academic climate during the third quarter of the century. The collapse of European imperial ideologies favored a more celebratory, empowering view of the region's past. The view of Southeast Asians as continuously "in charge" of their own destiny appealed to Westerners who sympathized with Southeast Asian nationalism. In American universities the Cold War expansion of area-studies programs, with their emphasis on local languages and cultures as suitable subjects in their own right, also encouraged autonomous at the expense of Sinological or Indological approaches. During the 1960s and 1970s, and lingering into the 1980s, bitter academic hostility to American intervention in Vietnam and to the Domino Theory on which that intervention rested, had much the same effect. Since the

---

[12] Mus, "Cultes indiens," 367–410; van Leur, *Trade and Society*, esp. 89–110; historiograhic discussion at de Casparis, "Historical Writing," 138–40; B. Schrieke, *Indonesian Sociological Studies*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1955, 1957).

[13] *Trade and Society*, 95.

[14] *Trade and Society*, 284–85. See also Schrieke, *Studies*, I, 7–36, and II, 3–4, 97–101, 230–67.