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Excerpt

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Introduction: conceptualizing an early modern history of Southeast Asia





Southeast Asia as a region

It is now nearly seventy years since “Southeast Asia” was first conceptualized as a geographic area worthy of academic study. During much of this time there has been an ongoing debate about the extent to which the modern states of Southeast Asia comprise a coherent region or are simply located in a residual area between China and India. Today Southeast Asia as it is generally defined includes eleven countries, categorized as “mainland” (Myanmar [Burma], Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos) and “island” (the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia and most recently East Timor [Timor Leste/Timor Lorosae]). This contemporary configuration, however, has taken many years to evolve, and the occasional nineteenth-century mention of “Southeast Asia” even included “Hindustan” and China. Although the term appeared more frequently during the first half of the twentieth century, there was no effort to standardize what were still rather arbitrary geographic borders. During the Second World War the identification of “southeast” Asia as a theater of Allied military action incorporated places now considered part of South Asia, such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives, while excluding the Philippines and until 1945 even the Indonesian archipelago east of Sumatra.

By the 1950s, when Southeast Asian studies was developing as an academic field, there was therefore little agreement about regional boundaries. Some authorities argued that it was better to think in terms of a larger “Monsoon Asia” encompassing not only the countries of Southeast Asia, but southern China, eastern India and Sri Lanka. This entire area, they said, displayed significant ethnic and linguistic similarities as well as shared cultural features that arose as local societies responded to the seasonal changes in rainfall and temperature associated with the cycle of the monsoon winds. Other scholars, favoring different criteria, proposed their own regional boundaries. In 1944 George Coedès, regarded as the doyen of early Southeast Asian studies, wrote a history of the region before the fifteenth century without attempting to delineate its physical boundaries. Rather, he identified commonalities among what he termed “the Hinduized states of the Far East,” where elite cultures were shaped by contact with India. In the mainland this focus thus excluded northern Vietnam, which Coedès viewed as Sincized, while the Philippines and the eastern Indonesian archipelago were considered too distant to have been affected by Hindu ideas. Ten years later D. G. E. Hall’s pioneering *History of South-East Asia*, which stretched from early times to the twentieth century, included Vietnam and all of Indonesia but also omitted the Philippines, which he deemed to lie “outside the main stream of historical developments.”¹ However, in reversing this view, his second edition of 1964 recognized the long-standing maritime links between the Philippines and its neighbors and provided further evidence that the countries lying between India and

¹ D. G. E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia* (London: Macmillan, 1955), 3.



China had maintained an interactive relationship for centuries, despite linguistic, religious and cultural differences. Indeed, in 1959 the Vietnamese scholar Le Thanh Khoi had introduced his short history of Southeast Asia by invoking “unity in diversity” – the motto of the new Indonesian state – as a regional hallmark.² In the early 1960s even Coedès began to speak of “Southeast Asia,” while the strategic interests of the region’s new nation-states encouraged greater collaboration, notably through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), founded in 1967. By 1999 ASEAN had expanded to incorporate all ten nations that officially made up the region, and Timor Leste’s application to become the eleventh member (following its independence from Indonesia in 2002) is currently under review.

If anything, this long-standing historical debate on what constitutes “Southeast Asia” has highlighted the difficulties of writing a regional history. In the first place, the national borders by which Southeast Asia is differentiated from China, Bangladesh, India, and the islands of the Pacific Ocean are of relatively recent origin. Determined by European colonialists through Western-style agreements or by diplomatic collusion, these borders frequently imposed an artificial division between communities that have long been linked by ties of family, history, and culture. As this study will show, the contemporary political landscape can be misleading if applied retroactively to the early modern period, when the boundaries of modern nation-states did not exist, when populations could be highly mobile, and when ethnic identities were fluid and evolving. Second, even when the concept of “Southeast Asia” is accepted in principle, generalizations are difficult because differing religious beliefs, political systems, and historical experiences further complicate the linguistic and ethnic diversity that is said to be the defining feature of the region.

To a considerable degree this diversity was a response to differences in the geographic environment. Though virtually the entire region lies within the tropics, “mainland” Southeast Asia is an extension of the Asian continent. Bordered to the north and northeast by highlands dissected by river valleys, the lowlands of mainland Southeast Asia are characterized by extensive plains areas through which flow long river systems, creating conditions that are highly suited to the cultivation of rice through irrigation. This higher-yielding “wet-rice” agriculture encouraged the demographic growth that enabled lowland polities to extend their political and cultural authority into more accessible and less populated upland areas. By contrast, the appropriately named “island” Southeast Asia consists of thousands of islands, some minuscule, some very extensive, but areas suitable for irrigation and agricultural expansion are limited, with the notable exception of Java. Though the seas are important highways of communication, some islands and coastal areas are seasonally isolated by rough seas and adverse winds and ocean currents. Efforts to extend control over territory and populations thus faced significant obstacles.

² Le Thanh Khoi, *L’histoire de l’Asie de Sud-Est* (Paris: University Press of France, 1959), 8.



These physical variations were compounded by historical experiences and the influence of different belief systems. While the form of Buddhism now termed “Theravada” became dominant on most of the mainland, Vietnam was the exception, being more influenced by the religious and intellectual traditions of China, including those associated with Confucian teachings, Daoist ideas, and Mahayana Buddhism. In the island areas, however, the major religious streams were Islam and Christianity (the latter becoming the majority faith in the Philippines, East Timor, and parts of the eastern Indonesian archipelago), with Bali retaining a localized form of Hinduism. From the early sixteenth century to the early nineteenth century the extent of European influence in island Southeast Asia also represents a marked contrast with its relatively low profile on the mainland.

In responding to these issues, we recognize that basic differences between mainland and island Southeast Asia have contributed to diverging histories, most notably in regard to political and economic developments. On the other hand, regional connectivities continue to surface, whether we are speaking of language links between central Vietnam and northern Sumatra, trading relationships between southern Myanmar and the Malay world, or the activities of Makassarese mercenaries in Siam. Even more striking is the fact that outsiders have long seen regional similarities among Southeast Asian societies, especially when compared with the Arab world, China, and the Hindu Indian subcontinent. Although the political boundaries that now demarcate Southeast Asia were largely non-existent until modern times, the highlands reaching from Vietnam across Laos, northern Thailand, and Myanmar did act as a buffer against control from centers in India and China. Nevertheless, mountain paths and river systems facilitated migration from southwest China into upland Southeast Asia. Connected by overland trade routes, the communities in these border areas were part of a shared cultural world that resisted incorporation into larger political entities. For the island world, the seas created border-like zones of a somewhat different kind. In the distant past the Pacific was peopled by groups moving out from island Southeast Asia, but the prevailing wind system and extensive stretches of open sea impeded the creation and maintenance of regular maritime routes that would have linked Southeast Asian societies with their Pacific cousins. To the south, Indonesian ships made regular voyages to northern Australia from the eighteenth century or earlier, but sustained interaction between Southeast Asia and Oceania did not extend beyond the eastern Indonesian archipelago and the coasts of western New Guinea.

The regional similarities that outsiders observed were the result of several factors, foremost of which was the geographic environment. Despite differences in mainland-island topography, Southeast Asia’s tropical climate and widespread access to rivers, lakes, and seas helped shape lifestyles that relied heavily on rice-growing and fishing, while the vast forested lands and extensive hill areas provided a livelihood for collectors of forest and mountain products. In turn, this dependency on the natural environment fostered a deep respect for the forces of nature and the protective influences of the ancestors, which was reflected in indigenous cosmologies and was incorporated into local understandings

of incoming religious teachings, notably Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. The nature of the Southeast Asian land and seascapes limited the growth of large empires, allowing for the proliferation of numerous small and largely independent polities. The fragility of life in a tropical environment and generally low populations meant a high value was placed on human resources, both men and women. Combined with socio-cultural traditions and economic patterns that encouraged male–female complementarity, the relative autonomy of women helped lessen the gap in gender status. Finally, while the unique flora and fauna found in Southeast Asia’s seas and forests were a magnet to international traders, the region’s location athwart the busiest maritime east–west trade routes enabled local inhabitants to become active and dynamic participants in the increasing connectivities that typify the early modern world.



The “early modern” period

The division of human experience into a chronological sequence as a tool for organizing information and interpretations about the past has been a particular feature of Western historiography, but the use of the term “early modern” to characterize a period of history is a twentieth-century phenomenon. Its first application in 1926 by a historian of Europe represented an effort to bridge the long time gap in European history between the Renaissance and the Modern. Although European historians initially found little use for this new periodization, it was more readily accepted by Americans, possibly because the time frame – c. 1500–c. 1800 – coincided with the early history of the United States. The year 1970, which saw the publication of Eugene Rice’s *Foundations of Early Modern Europe, 1460–1559* and the launch of the *Cambridge Studies of Early Modern History*, can thus be said to mark the formal inauguration of “early modern” as a historical period. The newly designated timeframe was then intended only for European and American studies, and even among European scholars was regarded merely as a transition from the medieval to the modern period. Since that time, however, “early modern” has become deeply entrenched in European historiography, and although not bounded by precise dates, the period is generally perceived as beginning around the mid-fifteenth century and ending in a transitional phase from 1780 to around 1830 that marks the move into “modern” history.

The general acceptance of an “early modern” period in Europe and America has influenced historiography in other world areas, and the last fifty years have witnessed a growing trend to adopt a similar periodization. Accordingly, it is not uncommon to substitute “early modern China” for Ming and early Qing China, “early modern” for Tokugawa Japan, or even “early modern India” for the Mughal period. Often such labels have been applied without serious reflection about the term’s applicability or whether “early modern” features identified in European history are relevant to other contexts. It is

therefore pleasing to note that recent years have seen the emergence of more thoughtful scholarship which addresses questions such as the meaning of modernity, the validity of the concept “early modern,” whether such a period can be identified by addressing specific features in different regions, and the degree to which there are shared global characteristics.

Prominent in these exchanges are scholars of world systems and the growing field of world history. They have been at the forefront of proposing and debating “early modern” characteristics that can be globally applicable, and in discussing the terminology best suited to the changes so evident in this period. A useful distinction, for instance, has been made between the interlinked ideas of “modernization” – the material and technological transformations of culture contact – and “modernity,” which gives more attention to intellectual and spiritual developments. Social science interest in the public sphere has also pushed scholars to reflect on the manner and the extent to which the changes thus introduced have transformed the mental attitudes (*mentalité*) of different societies.

Among world historians there is a general consensus that from the late fourteenth century the growth of long-distance trade, especially via sea passages, became a critical factor in linking all parts of the globe. The early modern period is consequently distinguished by an unprecedented increase in cross-cultural encounters that resulted from expanding communications and trade patterns. At the same time, international commerce remained polycentric, with overlapping but distinct economic regions connected through the movement of goods and people. In contrast to the global networks that began to develop in the nineteenth century, early modern commerce did not constitute a comprehensive world system.³ Nonetheless, global economic demands opened up new pathways for the transmission of goods and ideas (technological and philosophical), flora, fauna, and pathogens. Across the world the same demands encouraged shifts in resource use, readjustments in social hierarchy, and increasing mobility of populations, both forced and voluntary. Although the impact of these developments was most pronounced at the major nodes of global exchange, their ramifications touched an ever-increasing number of peoples and societies and thus drew them into the ambit of “world history.”

This discussion is highly relevant to Southeast Asia because periodization here has undergone significant changes. In the nineteenth century, for instance, colonial scholar-officials saw only two significant epochs: the indigenous classical civilizations (symbolized by great monuments such as Angkor in Cambodia and Borobodur in Java), and their “heirs,” the enlightened administrations of the colonial states, together with the independent but still progressive Siam. From this viewpoint, the intervening centuries seemed to be characterized by constant wars, dynastic upheaval, and interpolity squabbling, with a fragmented historical narrative punctuated by the occasional emergence of powerful

³ Charles H. Parker, *Global Interactions in the Early Modern Age, 1400–1800* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 69, 106.



rulers. At best, this period represented merely a transition between past glories and the reconstitution of good government and economic development under European tutelage. During the early decades of the twentieth century an emerging cohort of local but Western-educated historians rejected the idea that colonialism had introduced beneficial government and civilizing advancement. However, they were still inclined to look back to a “golden age,” from which time a steady downward trend had made local societies vulnerable to European imperialism. The attainment of independence would mean not only political freedom and economic progress, but a cultural confidence based on a renewed awareness of past achievements.

Similar views were held by the first generation of regional historians of Southeast Asia after the Second World War, and the periodization they developed has exercised a far-reaching influence on the ways the region’s past is presented. The typical textbook came to be conceptualized in terms of a cultural, geographic, and “prehistory” section, followed by the great “classical” states (roughly seventh–early fifteenth centuries), seen as providing a political and territorial model or “charter” for their successors; a “precolonial” period, characterized by the crystallization of many polities into fewer and larger units (fifteenth–early nineteenth centuries); the colonial period (mid-nineteenth–mid-twentieth centuries); and the era of independent nation-states (mid-twentieth century to the present). While it is still possible to use “pre-colonial” to describe the entire period before a country’s colonization, contemporary historians of Southeast Asia generally avoid applying this term to the period that lies between the “classical” and “colonial” because this places undue emphasis on European dominance in the nineteenth century. The search for an acceptable way of categorizing the centuries that roughly correspond to the European “early modern” period helps explain the acceptance of the same term in Southeast Asian historiography. This acceptance has been encouraged because the increasing availability of sources from the late fourteenth century enables us to track historical developments in Southeast Asia in a way that is not possible for earlier periods. The unequal distribution of material still means that some areas and some topics are better documented than others. Nonetheless, to a far greater extent than in previous times we can discuss the changes and continuities that have provided a framework for global approaches to this period.

As in other world regions, the adoption of “early modern” by historians of Southeast Asia is a relatively recent development. The term appeared first in 1993 in the title of a volume edited by Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era*. In the introduction, Reid argues that the early modern period marked a watershed for Southeast Asia, though its “boundaries or dominant features” remained blurred.⁴ That same year the second volume of Reid’s *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450–1680* appeared,

⁴ Anthony Reid, ed., *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era: Trade, Power, and Belief* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

clearly defining a specific time frame for an “age of commerce” that formed part of an early modern period. The explicit focus on commerce is crucial to his contention that in this period the inclusion of Southeast Asian trade into the global economic network produced “transformations in urbanism, commercial organization, religious systems and values, and state structures.”⁵ In 1999 Victor Lieberman embarked on a major project to identify what constituted “early modern” in terms of world history. He identified commonalities across “Eurasia” (including Vietnam, Thailand, and Java) and Europe between the fourteenth/fifteenth centuries and about 1800 that he regarded as sufficient reason to justify the use of “early modern” to define a specific historical period.⁶ This research culminated in a monumental two-volume work of impressive scholarship, appropriately entitled *Strange Parallels*.⁷ Here Lieberman refined his arguments to depict a coherent period extending between about 1450 and 1850 in which Southeast Asia’s major polities displayed patterns of territorial consolidation, administrative centralization, and cultural integration that could be usefully compared with those of Japan, Russia, France, China, and South Asia.

In the meantime there has been a steady stream of publications by other scholars that offer detailed explanations and interpretations of demographic shifts, environmental change, religious interactions, and gender relationships as they occurred in local areas implicated in global developments. This growing corpus of material has made it possible to propose certain features that characterize an early modern period in Southeast Asia in a global context. In distinguishing this period, world historians most commonly cite the expansion of international commerce and maritime traffic, a rise in population, a more intensified use of land, the diffusion of new technologies, the growth of regional centers, the rise of urban commercial classes, religious revival, and missionary movements, and a more pronounced incidence of peasant unrest. Although the applicability and impact of these features certainly varies in different cultural contexts, there can be little doubt that the expansion of international exchanges and the transformations they generated brought the world together in ways never before experienced. Significantly, no one area dominated these developments, but by the early nineteenth century fundamental changes in Europe and America – the centralization of nation-states, increasing industrialization, advances in science and military technology, developing theories about human hierarchies – meant that an earlier multi-centered world gradually became one in which the West occupied a hegemonic position. The contrast with the previous centuries helps mark the divide between “early modern” and “modern” history.

⁵ Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450–1680, vol. II: Expansion and Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 2.

⁶ Victor Lieberman, “Introduction,” in Victor Lieberman, ed. *Beyond Binary Histories: Imagining Eurasia to c. 1830* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 14.

⁷ Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830, Vol. I. Integration on the Mainland* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and *Vol. II, Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).



It is against this historiographical background that we accepted the challenge of writing a history of Southeast Asia in the early modern era, which we have dated from the early fifteenth to the early nineteenth century. Because Southeast Asians were active players in the global phenomenon of expanding commerce, local societies were both beneficiaries and casualties of the changes that typify the period. As this book will show, many features associated with early modernity in other parts of the world can be tracked in Southeast Asia, but the region also displays a character of its own. The idea that modernity is not arbitrated by particular cultures or nations and that its manifestations will differ according to particular locations, be they spatial or temporal, opens up intriguing questions for scholars working on non-Western societies. Historical evidence suggests that Southeast Asian societies were remarkably accepting of new ideas and that the desire to be “up-to-date” appears to have been culturally and historically characteristic from early times. The means by which “modernity” was displayed could differ over time and between cultures, and were typically eclectic. A Vietnamese ruler who saw the imperial court in China as the apogee of culture could also look to European traders to supply the latest military technology; by the same token, a Malay Muslim king might eagerly listen to reformist ideas from newly arrived Arab teachers even as he sported a Dutch-style jacket and requested German porcelain ornaments for his children. In other words, the world that lay beyond familiar environments did not signify threats or danger but offered novel opportunities and the possibility of widening social interactions. A legion of Southeast Asian myths in which a beautiful princess, symbolic of the country, takes as her husband a foreign prince, reveals a deep-seated and recurring desire to create and strengthen trans-cultural links. In a similar vein, legends from all over the region describe cultural heroes who travel to distant lands in search of knowledge and return loaded with honors to gain the hand of the community’s most beautiful woman, herself imbued with unusual qualities.

These stories provide useful metaphors by which to consider the ways in which Southeast Asian societies managed connections with a wider world. While new ideas and technologies were usually welcomed, a remarkable capacity to localize incoming influences meant that the ancestral past still retained its authority and its relevance to human action. Because of this cultural ability to adapt, adjust, and integrate, the history of Southeast Asia during the early modern period can be written largely in terms of indigenous agency and self-confidence. From the late eighteenth century, however, traditional strategies of selective innovation became increasingly more difficult as the global connections to which Southeast Asia had been so open hastened the pace of change. In numerous societies the cumulative effects of social and economic inequities and greater state demands posed a heavy burden for ordinary people, but it was in relations with Europeans that cross-cultural tensions were most painfully manifested. By the 1830s Southeast Asia, like several other world areas, was faced by the relentless and uncompromising pressures of European-dominated global imperialism and the tightening restraints that brought the early modern period to an end.



Framing a history of early modern Southeast Asia

Bearing these issues in mind, our *History of Early Modern Southeast Asia* focuses on the varied nature of Southeast Asian experiences as local societies were caught up in the complex forces of change associated with the early modern world. Throughout the book we emphasize three major and interwoven themes: first, the various ways in which Southeast Asia's diverse societies evolved in relation to their specific environments; second, the nature of the far-reaching economic, political, and cultural changes that characterize the early modern period; and third, the dynamics of "localization" through which Southeast Asians responded to such changes by selecting and adapting incoming influences.

We have organized the material in a way that we feel reflects significant connectivities in Southeast Asia during the early modern period, particularly the growing links with the outside world. In approaching "Southeast Asia" as a region, we remain aware of the ways in which geographic and environmental influences have contributed to differing historical trajectories and relationships, and especially to the distinction between "island" and "mainland." This distinction is accentuated by the nature of contemporary sources. On the mainland, for instance, both European and indigenous material tends to focus on political centers, several of which became the core of modern nation-states. These centers and the founder-figures viewed as fundamental to the national story thus gained a privileged position in later histories. By contrast, sources from the island world are more disparate. Despite the wealth of detail available for some places, notably Java, the complex interaction between different types of polities and communities is not easily connected to the evolution of present-day nations. Conscious of these differences and the historiographic problems they present, we have nonetheless worked to construct a history that gives attention to developments across the entire region. Accordingly, while recognizing the importance of major centers of power, we also draw attention to developments in lesser-known localities and to the peoples who were distanced from mainstream cultures. Though most of these societies left no written accounts of their own past, they were nonetheless integrally involved in the changing cultural, economic, and political patterns that characterize this period. We believe that this attention is necessary because regional generalizations, usually based on better-documented areas, can obscure the diversities that make the study of Southeast Asia so fascinating. Ultimately we have tried to provide a coherent narrative that is faithful to local concerns while relating these events to larger regional and international circumstances.

Chapters 1 and 2 are intended to provide a general background and a context for understanding the historical environment in which early modern Southeast Asia developed. The following five chapters are organized chronologically. Though roughly based on the centuries of the Common Era, the beginning and end points are demarcated