FROM THE COMPOSITION OF NATIONAL HISTORIES TO THE BUILDING OF A REGIONAL HISTORY IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

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Abstract

To free themselves of their colonial past and create a unity within the framework created by Western occupiers, or merely to galvanize their countrymen, South-East Asian nationalists rewrote their pre-colonial history and that related to their attaining independence. They have created 'golden ages' and 'glorious models' to legitimize their authority, not only over current national territory, but also over some which today belongs to neighouring states.

In a period marked by the creation of regional entities, history has to be revised to replace the idea of domination with that of unity. Using Indonesian, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Thai examples, this article considers how the nationalist discourse of the past, and the events it gave rise to, have become a handicap to regional groupings which are seen as symbols of political modernity.

Chronicling history represents far more than simply archiving the past in an orderly fashion. It involves more than just choosing and highlighting the men and events that are thought of as decisive. It is the historian's task to prioritize, taking into account—as much as is feasible given known records and established facts—the details crucial to the event under scrutiny; but it is also his mission to take advantage of the distance afforded by the passage of time to review any specific event in a new light. It is at this juncture that the historian's own context, rather than that of the historical subject, proves decisive. Warped perceptions prove inevitable, given that each period is subject to its own social standards and mores, its own moral and ethical fabric and its own manner of pursuing science. But alongside these fundamental influences one must all too often consider, particularly when exploring the elaboration of "national histories", both unabashed and not-so-obvious political imperatives that might lead historians to rethink the past from a determinist perspective. Chronicled history is seen as a valuable force for national consolidation and unity, bolstering and grounding the state.

What does it matter if the Gauls were not the true ancestors of the French? Or that the "great Chinese dynasties" were not always Chinese? In this sense, what is truly important is that history is placed at the service of the present, or, as Truong Chinh suggested regarding Vietnam, to confirm that people "have always sought to preserve their nature and soul."[1]

In this context the past becomes a tool for political authority in order to validate itself historically, whereas scientific detachment and impartiality alone would place it in perspective. Following this thought to its logical conclusion, it is obvious that the processes of historical exclusion and re-appropriation are in fact universal. One encounters examples across the world and throughout history. However, though this form of revisionism by its very nature is difficult to distinguish, it is more readily seen in recent and transparent examples in South-East Asia rather than Europe. The transition from colonial vassalage—which only Thailand avoided in the region—through national independence to maturity as a modern state is only a few decades old. So national political imperatives were crucial.

Another factor that contributes considerably to historic revisionism has been the proliferation of competing political models in the region. We are currently witnessing a form of localized speeding-up of history, which can no doubt be attributed to the population explosion that the entire planet has felt during the course of the twentieth century. To this role of validating nation-building, one must also add regional re-formation and consolidation around poles such as the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) within the context of a process of "internationalization", which in itself represents a reaction to the development of non-governmental transnational factors such as transnational corporations, Chinese immigrant networks, religious groups, etc.

It has thus become a priority for today's national leaders to re-examine their own historical justifications or foundations. But these, though increasingly necessary, have became logically more difficult to establish, precisely because the political structures that they must justify are marked by an obvious impermanence.

1. THE ORIGIN OF MODERN STATES

Peoples, political structures and spatial norms in continuous historical reconstruction

The political and human topography of South-East Asia since the eighth century, the point at which we begin to have enough elements to allow for a comprehensive understanding of the region's history, has changed considerably. It is not simply an issue of changing borders, but of the very peoples who have

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[1] Truong Chinh, 1977: 225–311, quoted by Tertrais 2004: 109–121.

imposed their domain over the region and also the forms that influence over the area have taken.

For our purposes, we would like to draw on four specific moments that can be seen as historic snapshots illustrating the evolution of the political situation in South-East Asia.

What is known of South-East Asia circa 700

First Phase: By about the year 700, several political poles had emerged. The Nan Chao of the Dai, in what is known today as the mountains of Yunnan, defined the southernmost tip of Chinese territorial expansion, while the basin of the Red River inhabited by the Viet remained an integral part of the Tang Dynasty empire. Further south, the Pyu states flourished on the plains of Irrawaddy. Along the basin of the Chao Praya, the Dvaravati of the Mon played a vital role in the dissemination of Buddhism in the region. The Chenla of the Khmers occupied the border area of what is today Vietnam and Cambodia, its cities opening up to international commerce in a fashion similar to that of the Champa of the Cham in what is now central Vietnam. Finally, the kingdom of Srivijaya radiated out from Palembang on the eastern coast of Sumatra, from the Sunda Strait to the northern parts of the Malay peninsula. Records of all these poles of ancient civilizations have been preserved thanks to remains: an abundance of monuments, inscriptions and written references in Chinese chronicles. All of these "states" existed mixed with numerous principalities and a host of peoples without national cohesion (though not without authorities of their own) which would later become known in the peninsula as upland tribespeople.

What is known of South-East Asia circa 1350

Second Phase: By 1350, at the heart of continental South-East Asia lay the Angkorian Empire of the Khmers, which incorporated the Dai Viet of the Viet, the Champa of the Cham, the Burmese Pagan, the Lan Na and Sukhothai of the Thai, the small Malayan principalities and the everlasting upland tribespeople. Among the archipelagos, certain powers had begun to emerge, such as the Mojopahit of Eastern Java and the Sumatran Minangkabao kingdoms surrounding Jambi. But the small maritime states were equally numerous, not to mention the populations that were nationless but not anarchic.

It is remarkable that in the intervening six centuries, China disappeared from the South-East Asian stage (at least as it is defined today); the Viet, the Burmese and the Thais had established their own states. The Mon had lost theirs; the Cham had momentarily avoided the same fate, but their lands had been occupied little by little by the Viet. The Khmer realm was entirely reformed and rearranged, while in the Nusantaran archipelago, the great state of Srivijaya had faded into oblivion, leaving the lands to a handful of principalities more or less federated with Jambi. Meanwhile Mojopahit, a vast semi-agricultural, semi-merchant nation had developed in Eastern Java.

The region was divided not on a strictly territorial basis, but around major population centres. During this period, the concept of borders was less important than the capacity to mobilize and influence the neighbouring populations to particular agendas. Within this paradigm the power of a state was measured by its manpower, expressed in terms that took into account the fact that slavery was probably less widespread than early Western orientalists believed. Clearly, the popula-

tions displaced following victorious military campaigns seemed to have assumed less the role of serfs than that of citizens, as is testified by the perpetual fusions witnessed within the contemporary and successive political entities that involved the Mon, Khmer and Cham populations.

This focus on the population (from lowly farmer to the religious, intellectual and artistic elites), rather than the territories themselves and consequently their borders, seems to be an unmistakable and persistent element of the history of the South-East Asian peninsula. In this regard, the overall situation saw few changes between the eighth and fourteenth centuries. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the establishment during this period of the Viet states (loosely united within the Dai Viet) heralded a fundamental change to the South-East Asian political model. The conflicts which were to oppose these newcomers and Champa between the eleventh and seventeenth centuries revealed symptoms of this clash of political models. While both boasted similar levels of military might and faced alternating periods of internal revolt and aggressive expansionism, the means at the disposal of these two factions were not what truly differentiated them but, in different and irreconcilable forms, rather the way they chose to express their political uniqueness. According to evidence the Dai Viet and its avatars, influenced by the Chinese model that had ruled over them for a thousand years, saw Champa as a land to be conquered, a possible colony, one whose acquisition would be natural and convenient. Ultimately the Viet desired to expand over the south an influence which was inconceivable in the north, where China remained more of a threat than an opportunity, though there was also an underlying interest in controlling Champa's rich agricultural potential. With each victory the Viet authorities made every effort to incorporate the newly conquered bastion into their territory, quickly renaming it and integrating it into their rolls of provinces.[2]

On the other hand, illustrating the traditional South-East Asian political-military model, the Champa offensives were expeditions into what were seen as foreign lands, destined to continue to be perceived as such. Without researching the very origins of the Cham population in the area, there are no records of intent on its part to expand its vital space, or to establish suzerainty over new lands which might over time be integrated into its overall territorial and administrative framework.

Between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries the Sino-Viet model of nation-state gradually became dominant, driven by the increasing demographic pressures in certain South-East Asian deltas like that of the Red River. In fact, with the growth in population, it was no longer their inhabitants, but the territories that became the focus of the political game, increasingly so as the region also became the focus of the appetites of exogenous powers.

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[2] This process was well detailed by Maspero 1988.

South-East Asia in 1940

Third stage: By 1940, continental South-East Asia was divided between the French and British, and the archipelagos between the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and Americans. With the notable exception of Siam, which to preserve its independence played European powers against one another admirably well,[3] political authority in the region had become European. It would be an understatement to say the European powers opted to ignore prior local political realities.

The Portuguese occupied Malacca in 1511, followed by the Dutch in 1641. Britain seized control of Burma between 1824 and 1885, and the Malay states between 1864 and 1909. France appropriated Vietnam as a first move towards China, beginning with the occupation of Cochinchina in 1862 and the establishment of the protectorate over Cambodia in 1863. Annam and Tonkin suffered the same fate in 1885, and Laos followed in 1893.

The implementation of the concept of "people" and the compartmentalization it induces became forcefully prevalent in regional politics. In the middle of the ninteenth century, the political thirst for conquest was fuelled by competing European powers and governed by a racialist paradigm that categorized peoples by their morphology and their assumed aptitudes. In this new context, the intermingling of populations, so common up until this point, became morally proscribed (though it

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[3] Refer in this regard to Tips 1996 and Dovert 2001: 177–248.

was never actually to disappear completely). Above all, previously mutable borders crystallized in the time-honoured Western tradition of dividing the world amongst great powers, descending from the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494)[4] or, closer to the period at hand, the Congress of Berlin (1884-1885).[5]

South-East Asia in 2004

Fourth stage: In 2004, less than a century after the apogée of European colonial expansion, the region is yet again the stage for radical transformation, though the change is not truly "revivalist" in nature, since there is no return to the status quo prior to colonization. Gone is the Mon nation, gone too the Cham state, and the traditional upland tribespeople have been assimilated by new states over whom they wield no influence.

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[4] Signed by Portugal and Spain under the gracious arbitration of Pope Alexander VI Borgia, the treaty placed the "demarcation line" between the Portuguese and Spanish "Americas" at 100 to 370 leagues west of the islands of Cape Verde, de facto dividing the New World between the two nations.

[5] The Congress brought to the table Germany, Belgium, France, Great Britain, Portugal and Turkey. It was meant to define once and for all these nations' respective areas of economic and trade influence in Africa and relevant standards and exchange rates. The convention quickly devolved into a political excuse to carve up the "African cake" following the terms proposed by Leopold II, and resulted in a race to occupy and demarcate new territorial borders throughout the African hinterland.

The principle of the "succession of states" (which requires that national frontiers follow those of the colonial period), so cherished by international law, was strictly implemented. To pick just a few examples: Thailand did not recover the territories that it had acquired from Cambodia before colonization, and similarly Cambodia was unable to lay claim over the now-Vietnamese lands of the Mekong delta, despite these being populated by Khmers. In the archipelagos, it should be noted that it was not happenstance that in 1999, while Indonesia was reeling from a period of internal turmoil, East Timor was able to take advantage of the momentary weakness to assert its "right" to independence (granted on 20 May 2002); meanwhile, dissenting provinces like Aceh or Papua were condemned to remain under Indonesian rule simply because they had belonged, prior to decolonization in 1949, to the Dutch East Indies. By the same measure, the Philippines have never allowed Mindanao, previously under Spanish and later American rule, to claim separate independence. Little does it seem to matter that it represents the sole area of the entire Philipino archipelago where Islam claims dominance, and that in the past it has always refused to bow to Manila's control.

In accordance with the "succession of states" principle, borders were transformed overnight from simple delimitations of the ruling guidelines and imperatives of colonial expansion into essential building blocks of national edification. This change crystalized realities that were formerly much more fluid.

To summarize, one can say that between the eighth and twentieth centuries, the region experienced essentially three types of developments.

Initially, the states changed. These particular developments often made themselves felt through major geographic shifts in the centres of power. It is difficult to define a common ground in the methods and forms of national construction. Political legitimacy was in fact often far more susceptible to the whims of transitory power dynamics and military might than to the precepts and canons of some unspecified legal framework. Thus, one can come to understand the transfer of the heart of the Khmer world from Chenla to Angkor and then to Phnom Penh, and that of the Sumatran Minangkabau from Srivijaya to Jambi, and eventually to Jakarta.

Next, one notes that the nations themselves also changed. Beyond transient political structures and affiliations, the states changed because the people they represented changed. The Mon and Cham slowly vanished from the political landscape, ceasing little by little to be represented, despite being at the heart of a region where they could have claimed ethnolinguistic preeminence. The Javanese too lost authority over their nation, but in their case, this should be considered a success since they exchanged self-governance for a favourable new arrangement, which granted them authority on a different, much greater level.

Lastly, the political principles underpinning society evolved considerably. The new concept of borders, descending concurrently from Chinese influence (in

Vietnam) and Western imperialism, became dominant everywhere—ever more so as growing demographic pressure established settlement continua across the region instead of the former isolated islands of population. The territory, rather than its inhabitants, became the central element for national power and influence. Simultaneously, the concept of "people" developed into a continual clash with that of "social contract" in a struggle that would find expression throughout all these periods. Inevitably, though the contest between the right of blood and the principle of adhesion was an element of an older reality, it never truly lost its significance in South-East Asia.

Revising pre-colonial history and its role in independence movements

Almost forgotten by history, Angkor, a site of religious pilgrimage the construction of which was attributed to the divine architect Pisnukar, was gradually "rediscovered" by European researchers in the years following 1908.[6] It was quickly transformed into a source where the national imagination of the Cambodian people could imbibe a past that glorified their Khmer heritage. It was also to assume a far more than symbolic weight, for it came to illustrate a national imperative of expansion and power—after all, did Angkor not control most of peninsular South-East Asia in the twelfth century? Had not the Khmer people been wrongfully deprived of territories that at a given moment in time, or to be more precise during the century chosen as reference, were rightfully theirs? The ancient kingdom became the focus of a sense of national grandeur and manifest destiny amongst the Khmer that their contemporary situation would have been hard-pressed to inspire and sustain. Thus one can understand the proliferation, starting in primary schoolbooks, of maps and texts highlighting this glorious past and showing without nuance the territories the Thai and particularly the Viet appropriated "to the detriment of Cambodian claims" at different points in history.

However, to study the country where this historical reappropriation was undoubtedly essential at the dawn of independence, one must look not to the peninsula, but to Indonesia. The Indonesian archipelago could not count on an Angkor of its own to validate the dimension of its colonial and post-colonial domain and so was obliged to invent one.

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[6] The fieldnotes of naturalist Henri Mouhot published in 1863 by the magazine *Le Tour du monde* were the first to draw European attention to the millennial site—at the time located in Siamese territory. But it was only in 1908 that the first systematic inventory of the monuments was carried out by Etienne Lunet de Lajonquière, an officer in the French colonial infantry, on behalf of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient.

From contemporary Cambodia to the Angkor of Khmer schoolbooks

Sources: David K. Wyatt, *Thailand, A Short History,* Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, 1991, p. 26, and *Kingdom of Cambodia - Nation, Religion, King,* History schoolbook in Khmer, published in 1994 with UNICEF support.

Since the mid-seventeenth century the Dutch East India Company, the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), committed itself to monopolizing all trade involving the archipelago. In this campaign it was confronted by a multitude of minor principalities, sultanates and peoples who possessed no centralized government or allegiance, which it was necessary to sway or force into submission. By the eve of the Second World War, within a framework that had become unmistakably colonial (since 1799)—though characterized by the principle of "indirect rule"—"traditional" local authorities in many cases could still invoke a certain level of autonomy. Consequently when, in the 1920s, the first nationalist movements professed the belief that the entire Dutch East Indies should approach potential independence as a single entity,[7] it was absolutely necessary for them to establish grounds for their aspirations from beyond the scope of the reviled colonial experience.

It is here that, similiarly to Cambodia, the providential contribution of European orientalists comes into play. In 1913, N.J. Krom, then first director of the Archaeological Service of the Dutch East Indies, resumed the work begun at the turn of the century by his colleague Brandes: an attempt to draw up a history of ancient Indonesia, a history in which the manifold islands of the nation were the crown jewels in what was believed to have been a great Hinduized empire. Basing this hypothesis on the *Nagara-Kertagama*, an allegory written by one Rakawi Prapanca in 1365, Krom concluded that the Javanese kingdom of Mojopahit had exerted its authority not only over the entire archipelago, but also over Malaysia, the Philippines and a significant part of peninsular South-East Asia.

From the onset historians challenged this imperial vision of nation, regarding Mojopahit as merely a local kingdom (covering the eastern half of Java and the island of Madura), though one particularly open to the neighbouring and outlying areas.[8] They unintentionally provided Sukarno, proclaimer of national independence and first Indonesian president, with the historical symbolism that he required not only to validate the very existence of greater Indonesia, but also to justify the fight against separatism (in Maluku in particular) and the country's later expansionist ambitions (initially over the Philippines then, more earnestly, over British Malaysia).[9] So that the references were not exclusively and blatantly centred on Java, Indonesian nationalists also called up a mythic vision of the Srivijaya coastal state to further fuel a common national pride.

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[7] The Youth's Oath [*Sumpah Pemuda*] on 28 October 1928 is considered by most scholars as the true founding act of Indonesian nationalism, and it was on that occasion that the indigenous future elites decreed the unity of the Indonesian people [*Rakyat Indonesia*] within the framework of a single nation [*Bangsa Indonesia*].

[8] On the historic reality of Mojopahit, see Théodore Pigeaud 1963.

[9] Cayrac-Blanchard, Dovert and Durand 2000: 352.

Indonesia, the invention of golden ages (Srivijaya)

Sources: Robert Cribb, *Historical Atlas of Indonesia,* University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2000, G. Nye Steiger, H. Otley Beyer & Benitez, 1926, in J. Leclerc, *La Circonscription, remarques sur l'idéologie national indonésien,* 1975.

Indonesia, the invention of golden ages (Mojopahit)

Sources: Robert Cribb, *Historical Atlas of Indonesia,* University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2000, G. Nye Steiger, H. Otley Beyer & Benitez, 1926, in J. Leclerc, *La Circonscription, remarques sur l'idéologie national indonésien,* 1975.

Returning to peninsular South-East Asia, we find that in Laos the Socialist Constitution of 1991 refers in its preamble to Lan Xang, the "kingdom of the million elephants", which in the seventeenth century reached the apex of its power.

Even a country like Thailand, where the absence of colonial experience might lead to dispensing with the need for similar efforts, also devoted itself to reconstituting a linear national history. Snubbing the evidence that for a very long time Thailand was simply the sum of smaller principalities, it chose to erect a common national history, a history according to which from Sukhothai (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries) to Bangkok passing though Ayutthaya (fourteenth to eighteenth centuries)—conveniently ignoring its Khmer roots[10]—power had been gradually centralized and legitimated on a regional scale which reflects the extent of the country as it stands today.

The old kingdoms were not given borders that would make them more limited than contemporary ones. So it is unsurprising to find that school maps, such as those published by the Thai Watthana Phanit publishing house, opt to illustrate the periods when Thai hegemony would have been most significant. In this respect, the map representing the kingdom of Ayutthaya under the reign of Naresuan (1590–1605) is particularly interesting. Remarking that no mention is made to the fact that borders at the time did not have the significance they boast today, the kingdom of Ayutthaya is depicted in yellow, clearly setting it apart from its neighbours, the kingdoms of Pegu (Phakho in Thai, Mon, and Burmese, also known as Hanthawaddy or Hongsawadi) and Malayu (consisting of the sum of the local sultanates), which are both depicted in pink. Curiously the Chinese empire and Yeh Lam (the Dai Viet) are not portrayed as distinct entities and both appear in green.[11]

This mythical vision of Ayutthaya's grandeur—a quintessential reference in the history of the nation—is underscored by the regular official re-publication of the Royal Chronicles, generally written many decades after the period they purport to cover. Within this ideological context, claims to local individuality or idiosyncracies are likely to be seen as treason in respect of national history. Above all, the view fuels a useful and easily rekindled historic nostalgia. Hence it is hardly coincidental that the first government of Plaek Phibunsongkhram (1938–1944) invoked a common "historical" destiny of the people of the Tai linguistic group, to justify its claim over certain territories under its neighbours' control, namely China and India but also Vietnam, Cambodia (which numbers barely any Tai speakers),

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[10] Vickery 2004: 73.
[11] Thongchai Winichakul, 1998: fig. 17.

Laos, Malaya and Burma.[12] On the eve of the Second World War, it was not without apprehension that foreign observers saw maps of the region go up on the walls of schools and military academies, on which these territories appeared in the same colour as Thailand itself.[13]

The Thai government then endeavoured to benefit from heightened international tensions to try to implement this territorial ideal. It is with this objective in mind that one should view Colonel Mankon Phromyothi's visit to Hanoi in early September 1940. The Thai diplomat was dispatched to meet Admiral Decoux, governor-general of French Indochina, and to suggest that his country might be inclined to offer France assistance and support if France were only to see fit to relinquish control of the right bank of the Mekong.[14]

Only a few days after Decoux's negative response, the same Colonel Mankon embarked for Tokyo, again with the goal of laying the groundwork for possible Thai territorial expansion. This time the proposal was for Thailand to take Japan's side in the imminent conflict in exchange for Japanese support of the Thai expansionist agenda.[15] Finally, in October 1940, Marshal Phibunsongkhram turned to Singapore, sending an envoy entrusted with negotiating the conditions of the possible involvement of the British and Americans in "recovering" the coveted territories.[16]

Once the precariousness of France's overall situation was confirmed by the developments on the European front in October 1940, Phibunsongkhram's regime felt emboldened enough again to stake its claims over the territories of Cambodia and Laos "in the event France could be brought to renounce its sovereignty over Indochina".[17] Through the avenues of national radio and the propaganda literature of Wichit Wathakan, Phibunsongkhram yet again vehemently stressed the "historical rights" of Thailand over these two colonies, once again invoking a mythical and hypothetical "racial identity" common to Thais and Cambodians.[18]

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[12] To this end, he was abetted by the theatrical propaganda pieces penned by Luang Wichit Wathakan and widely broadcast at the time. For more on this, see Barmé 1993: 121–131.

[13] Crosby 1945: 113–114.

[14] Decoux 1949: 130–134.

[15] The Thai diplomat is alleged to have assured the Japanese that his government would be willing to cooperate in all respects, going so far as allowing, if necessity arose, the movement of Japanese troops through its territories. However, all the Japanese authorities' attempts to secure these promises in writing proved vain (Flood 1967: 302–307, 323–347).

[16] Stowe 1991: 155.

[17] Gaudel 1947: 94; Fifield 1958: 234–235, Direk Jayanama 1966: 22.

[18] Gaudel 1947: 94–95.

After several skirmishes between Siamese and French troops,[19] the nego-tiations between Bangkok and Tokyo bore fruit. On 9 May 1941, a Japanese "mediation", that the French authorities in Indochina were not in a position to refuse, negotiated a settlement under which the French were to cede control of the Laotian lands on the left bank of the Mekong and a significant portion of Cambodia, in-cluding the rich province of Battambang.[20] Following the signing of a treaty of alliance between Tokyo and Bangkok on 21 December,[21] Thailand declared war on Great Britain and the United States (25 January 1942), which in turn allowed it, beyond "recovering its Indochinese territories",[22] to participate in the Japanese invasion of Burma and obtain the Shan states of Kengtung and Mongpan. Thailand was also offered Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan and Trengganu—the Malay States sur-rendered to Great Britain in 1909.[23] All these territories would later have to be returned after the war, putting on hold the hopes for a restoration of the golden age of Ayutthaya as depicted in Thai schoolbooks.

The glorification of "the struggle for national independence"

The idea that it had not been colonization which had brought unity, but rather decolonization, is another aspect of national historical construction aimed at validating the implementation of the concept of a single national "people" over what were in fact the demands of colonial realities. Beyond being subjected to the artificial demarcations the Western states had imposed on South-East Asia, they also impressed upon the region a political model which had become universal. Though this model was inherently favorable to them when the issue was carving up the world amongst the powers-that-be, it proved easily reversed when its logic of firm borders and "peoples" was turned against the colonial powers, and was quickly used by Asian nationalists. It became a tool to grant them legitimacy in the fight for independence, though to them remained the responsibility of finding local legiti-macy for this model.

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[19] These sporadic clashes are abundantly described in the writings of authors of the period and are effectively summarized in Stowe 1991: 168–169.

[20] The document is reproduced in its entirety in Direk Jayanama 1966: .276–285.
For the details of the above-mentioned mediation and respective analysis, see Flood 1967: 415–594.
[21] The pact reproduced in Charnvit Kasetsiri 1974: 77–78 (Appendix IV).
[22] Marshal Phibun's intervention in the cabinet session, on 18 November 1941, as recounted by Flood 1967: 680–681, also Kasetsiri 1974: 54.
[23] The treaty would be signed on 20 August (Fifield 1958: 236–237).

The image of the 1600 A.D. Ayutthaya Kingdom as a golden age reference

Sources: Thaiwatthanaphanit Co; Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped, A History of the Geo-body of a Nation,* Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, 1995, figure 17.

The Indonesia of Sukarno, for instance, finding it difficult to impose a sense of national unity, long entertained the ideal of the anti-colonial struggle as the banner for national pride. It is not a coincidence that the Afro-Asian Conference of April 1955 was held in Bandung, Indonesia. For a long time after independence, it remained good form, in particular due to the outstanding issue of Irian Barat (Western New Guinea), to maintain an illusion of national unity even in opposition to the remnants of a colonialism that had objectively became trivial.[24]

In comparison, Vietnam was far more frugal with regards to reappropriating ancient history. Indeed, the country built itself on a gradual expansion, and thus had no reason to rekindle nostalgia for a time when the centre and the south of the country were respectively in the hands of the Cham and Khmer (not to mention the upland tribespeople of the hinterlands).

Its status as victor over its neighbours did not require further amplification, the more so since the Vietnamese authorities were no doubt aware of the susceptibilities that might be strained, given an excessive exaltation of this kind of patriotic memory.[25] On the other hand, as testified by the significance given to the celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of Dien Bien Phu, in 2004, the Vietnamese state regularly underlines not only the heroism of its eternal resistance to the imperial tendencies of its immense Chinese neighbour, but particularly its decades-long struggle against Western powers. The fight against imperialism is easily invoked on almost any subject, and the blood supposedly shed by both the Viet and national minorities is the consecration of a common destiny–one that only distant foreigners have attempted to bring down.

2. FROM NATIONAL TO REGIONAL CONCEPTS

South-East Asia: a recent but fast developing concept

A recent development is that the nation-states are no longer the sole subjects of historical revisionism. South-East Asia as a community in its own right is a relatively new concept, one which has barely been around for more than half a century. Nevertheless, the simple fact that it has become rooted in the collective consciousness often leads to the idea that it boasted a recognizable physical reality which it had always possessed. A cursory examination of the historical literature also proves quite convincing. *A History of South-East Asia*, by D. G. E. Hall, pub-

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[24] Feith 1962; Robert C., Jr. 1958; Defert 1996.

[25] If the Cham, today a shadow of their former selves, more or less absorbed by the Vietnamese, are no longer in a position to demand anything, the same cannot be said for the Cambodians to whom the issue of the plunder remains sensitive.

lished in 1955 and re-published many times, opens with an encompassing description of the "proto-history" of the area (in this case a history of its Hinduization during the first centuries AD).[26] Many are the later works, from *Early South East Asia*[27] through *Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th Centuries*[28] that suggest, intentionally or not, the validity of a global approach to studies of the region's past.

In fact, there are more than enough elements to endorse this encompassing vision of the region. Without delving as far back as the first Mongoloid migrations, dear to the Australian prehistorian Peter Bellwood[29]—but of which we unfortunately do not possess significant traces and facts—one can however look to the mysterious dissemination of the bronze drums said to be of the Dong-son period scattered across the region as evidence of some sort of common past. Forged between the fifth and second centuries BC, these drums have been uncovered across almost all South-East Asia, from northern Vietnam (from where they supposedly originated) to Seram, off the coast of New Guinea. Though we cannot truly speak of a coherent community at this point in time, there is undoubtedly evidence of early trade and commerce networks, which in turn integrate surprisingly well with our later image of the region. From this perspective, early South-East Asia is characterized less by a cultural or civilizing homogeneity—of the sort more easily recognized in India or China—but rather by its seminal role in the history of international commerce. Funan (first to sixth centuries), Srivijaya (seventh to thirteenth centuries), Malacca (fifteenth to sixteenth centuries)[30] and Ayutthaya (fourteenth to eighteenth centuries)[31] in their heyday undoubtedly represented major trading hubs on the main oceanic commercial routes. As crossroads for traders of all origins, these political entities would have embodied South-East Asia much more surely than the greater nation-states; since even though the latter were sometimes more powerful, they were more centralized and thus, by definition, less open to other peoples (notably the great agrarian kingdoms of Angkor, Mataram of central Java, and the kingdom of Pagan which succeeded the Pyu states in the Irrawaddy basin).

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[26] Hall 1981: 12–46.

[27] Smith and Watson 1979.

[28] Marr and Milner 1986.

[29] Most notably Bellwood 1979 and 1985.

[30] It is said the city was founded by a fleeing prince of Srivijaya after the destruction of the Sumatran ports by the Javanese armies. What is known is that the expansion of the city occurred under the banner of Islam (undoubtedly after 1415), before it became a beachhead for the Portuguese expansion in the Far East after falling to the Portuguese in 1511.

[31] Considered a posteriori as the capital of Siam since its founding in 1351, Ayutthaya was destroyed in the Burmese invasion of 1767 and would never rise again. Bangkok became the core around which the Siamese kingdom was rebuilt towards the end of the eighteenth century.

It is through its trade networks that South-East Asia would have forged a cohesion enabling it to assert some sort of unity. It would thus be logical to consider the period which extends from 1450 to 1680 as the historical apogée of the region as we know it today. It was during this period that the South China Sea came to represent, on a regional scale, an element of integration that the historian Anthony Reid described as "more important" than even the Mediterranean as a bridging crossroads between southernmost Europe, the Middle East and North Africa.[32] It is also during this period that the strongly-interconnected merchant principalities were to become "more dominant [...] than either before or since".[33]

What one retains of these two centuries is the idea that they might indeed qualify, as a tongue-in-cheek reference to the Japanese project of the 1930s, as an "era of South-East Asian co-prosperity", and that the period is naturally not lacking in symbolic significance in contemporary South-East Asia, especially when the situation calls for the (re)constitution of functional multilateral institutions and accords. The keynote speeches that, on 15 December 2000, set the tone for the inauguration of the Center for History and Tradition in Rangoon—part of the inter-governmental network SEAMEO, grouping regional ministers of education—were of considerable interest in this regard. General Khin Nyunt, First Secretary of the Burmese regime, underlined the fact that the new Center's intrinsic vocation was to reinforce regional sentiment. The Indonesian Minister for Education declared, in a message read by a representative, that nationalism was a recent phenomenon in the region, a reaction to Western influence. In effect, he "recalled" the "fact" that before colonization the feelings of solidarity among the nations of South-East Asia had been decisive.

In this international context, new generations of Asian leaders would have the duty of reforging the unity "shattered by a hostile West" and regional integration could represent the best contemporary method to reach that goal.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), originally founded during the Cold War to band together the United States' Asian allies, seems to have today become the main vector of this regional dynamic. The political leadership of the ten member countries[34] meets regularly at high-level summits and technical conferences which, on an increasingly regular basis, bring together their respective foreign ministers (since the founding), economy ministers (since 1976), ministers of finance (since 1996), not to mention the now-annual summits drawing the

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[32] Reid 1988 2 vols.

[33] Reid, 1998 I: 7.

[34] There are the five founding members (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore), Brunei (since 1984), the countries of Indochina (Vietnam and Laos since 1995, and Cambodia since 1999), and Burma (since 1997).

various heads of government. It is clear the organization is no longer what was described for a long time as an "officers' golf club". Through the implementation and expansion of commissions and sub-commissions (currently more than thirty), it has developed naturally towards the role of a supervising entity for international business in the region.

ASEAN's most vaunted current goal is the establishment of a free trade zone. Prior to the economic crisis of 1997, this agreement, named AFTA (Asian Free Trade Association), was to some extent preceded by the emergence of multi-lateral cross-border trends, which reflected convergences of private economic interests. The Batam/Singapore/Johore triangle would thus be able to triumph over the hermetic markets of Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia. The Penang triangle was to link the Indonesian island of Sumatra to the north of the Malay peninsula and the south of Thailand. The region of the Sulawesi Sea was to link the activities of the Celebes to the Philippine island of Mindanao. Another was also conjured up by the so-called rectangle making up the common border between Yunnan, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, and finally there is the East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) which was to gather Brunei, the southern Philippines, the Malay states of north Borneo, eastern Indonesia and eventually the north of Australia.[35]

These anticipated transnational convergences were to be grounded upon industrial and commercial networks animated by the Chinese community, representing between 3 per cent (in Laos) and 80 per cent (in Singapore) of the population. The Hokkien are a major presence in Singapore, but are also found in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, the Teochiu are in Thailand, in Singapore and Vietnam, and the Cantonese are equally well entrenched in Malaysia and Vietnam.

A common South-East Asia or a collection of South-East Asian states?

Though "a map is not the territory" remains a truism, the fact is that drawn borders tend to give a map a reality of its own. To remap South-East Asia into an area where the borders and states, though not vanishing, grow indistinct, amounts to trying to introduce into the collective consciousness a process which, under closer scrutiny, lacks consistency in many regards.

The first remarkable element in what initially appears to be a straightforward process of regional integration is the operational limits of ASEAN itself. Established in 1967 by the Bangkok Declaration—whose very nomenclature highlights the fact that it is neither a charter nor a treaty—ASEAN was not founded on

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[35] On these, special reference should be made to: the special issue of *Hérodote* magazine dedicated to the subject of Indonesia (no. 88, first quarter 1998); the work of Besson and Lanteri 1994; the contributions of Charras and Franck 2000: 69–105; and Boisseau du Rocher 1998.

Inventing subregions in Asia Pacific

Sources: Nakayama H., «New Dynamism and Expanding Business Opportunities in Asia», in *Nomura Asia Focus,* 1991, n°3 June; Fau N., *Un centre dans la périphérie indonésienne : le pôle de Medan,* Mémoire de DEA, UPX-Nanterre, 1996; Hérodote n°88.

restrictive legal principles. Devised to embody a "common state of mind", it functions exclusively by consensus. One of the organization's founding principles is that of non-interference in the internal affairs of its member states, and it does not possess a "supranational" vocation. In practice, it functions more like a forum for facilitating dialogue than an institution for regional integration, and it is far more disposed towards ensuring stability than coping with development. This is one reason why it watched impassively the unfolding of the financial crisis of 1997. Despite the establishment of an ad hoc commission, it was still no better equipped to coordinate the fight against the immense Indonesian forest fires that plague South-East Asia, just as it remains impotent to fight the production and dissemination of synthetic drugs, an overwhelming social problem that some of its members face.

From an economic standpoint, the free trade area is still far from being truly operational, even if the customs taxes and duties are regularly reviewed and lowered. However, the concept of a single large South-East Asian marketplace has not impressed many investors, since in a few years, South-East Asia's share of direct foreign investment in developing countries fell from 26.5 per cent (1986–1990) to 11.2 per cent (1997–1999), while China's share increased over the same period from 11 to 23 per cent.

The reasons for this caution, not to say outright reluctance, in respect of regional integration are numerous and often quite ancient. If one looks back upon the realities of the region's precolonial past, one inevitably notes that the cordial concord suggested by those who defend the historical harmony of the peninsular maritime states masks a far more troubled reality. In the past, certain great nations were deprived of countries of their own because of their neighbours' ambitions. Such was the case of the Mon of Pegu, victims of the Burmese and of the Siamese, and that of the Cham, slowly assimilated into Vietnam. Others thrived despite centuries of clashes (as exemplified by the Siamese defiance of Burmese rule). Others still saw bonds of vassalage imposed by more powerful neighbours. This was the case of the inhabitants of the Malay sultanates and the Lao kingdoms which were subjected to Siamese rule, and of the Khmer of the post-Angkorian period who, for an extensive period, endured a dual submission to Bangkok and Vietnam.

Beyond the politicians' rhetoric, this history of conflict remains alive in the collective memory of the people. As we have seen, the concept of Indonesia itself was born of colonization and, through more or less shrewd strategic alliances, most of the states in the region have tried to expand their territories at the expense of neighbouring countries. For a while, Jakarta attempted to integrate British Malaysia during its decolonization process, and in 1975 it even invaded East Timor, today a potential new member of ASEAN. Thailand became involved in the Vietnam conflict, providing passage and support to American bombing. By occupying Cambodia between 1979 and 1989, Hanoi's forces, actively intervening to bring to an end the regime of the Khmer Rouge, only managed to revive the vivid enmity the Cambodian people still maintain towards their neighbour, which it has yet to forgive for the occupation of "their" territories of the Mekong delta more than three centuries ago.

One could easily multiply the examples in a region where many issues of contention remain unsettled regarding the location of borders (for example, between Vietnam and Cambodia, Thailand and Laos or Burma); not to mention the conflicts over maritime territorial limits, which oppose China, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines and Brunei over the supposedly oil-rich Paracel or Spratly islands.

To put it bluntly, the extensive bitterness born of painful memories and sustained by the open wounds of past antagonisms, do not predispose the region's political leadership to delegate some of their sovereignty to any international

regional institution, even more so when the supposed regional unity stands up so poorly to a closer inspection of its heterogeneity. Geographers have long been sceptical of the idea that the various countries of the region concerned actually constitute a particular community.[36] In fact, it has proven quite difficult to find common attributes amongst them. In the first instance, it should be noted that their religious identities differ radically, and, though we cannot accurately speak of theocracies, a number of countries in South-East Asia regard their religious convictions as both a founding cultural element and an active component of citizenship. Thus, not only are the populations of Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, respectively, Muslim, Christian and Buddhist (each in excess of 90 per cent of their total populations), but, in these three cases, their respective faiths are seen by the states as fundamental pillars of national identity.

Additionally, the countries of the area also diverge considerably on matters of political orientation and models of government. The Philippines (since 1986), Thailand (since 1992) and Indonesia (since 1998) now boast democratic political systems. Burma is governed by a military junta. Singapore and Malaysia remain under the rule of semi-authoritarian regimes, while Laos and Vietnam remain under the sway of their respective Communist parties.

Finally, from an economic standpoint, the different levels of development are spectacular in their variation. The GDP of Cambodia was, in 2002, almost 4 billion dollars per annum, compared to more than 126 billion for Thailand and close to 87 billion for tiny Singapore.[37]

The remaining symbol of union could be rice, the gathered but unbound stalks of which make up the logo of ASEAN. But even here the image is fragile at best, for though rice remains undoubtedly the basic foodstuff across the region, the same could easily be said for India, China, and even Madagascar. As for its actual production, often upheld as the symbol of the organized agrarian cultures that ASEAN claims to stand for, its importance varies considerably from country to country. Nearly 35 per cent of all Indonesian soil is devoted to rice production, but it covers only 10 per cent of the surface of the Philippines, 6 per cent of Malaysia, and is nonexistent in Brunei and Singapore.

Worse still, as regards potential regional integration, the nations of South-East Asia possess few traditions when it comes to co-operation. As has been mentioned above, between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, the local maritime states provided the outside world with the appearance of cohesion, evoking the image of a peaceful crossroads of flourishing intercontinental trade. But even if

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[36] On the evolution of the concept of South-East Asia, see Durand 2000: 184–193.
[37] ASEAN Secretariat http://www.aseansec.org/pdf/ASEAN_statistical2003.pdf, page 36.

China, India, the Middle East or even the distant West were taken in by this semblance of cohesion, the various states constituting South-East Asia at the time were, towards the end of this period, largely content to ignore their neighbours. Opting instead to turn their sights towards far-flung partners, they ceased to perceive themselves enduringly as integral elements of a regional whole, especially as the colonial pressures contributed to dissuade them from any reversal of that trend. The model here is thus significantly different from the European, which—if one excludes the interludes associated with the period of the great discoveries—has, above all, focused on developing its domestic trade, using the long-term strategic economic relations between its various members as an element of regional consolidation.

Even during the 1980s, at the height of South-East Asian economic growth, ASEAN's internal trade never exceeded 23 per cent of the total of the foreign trade balance of the member states.[38] Today, the Philippines export five times less towards its regional partners than towards its principal Western associate (the United States); Vietnam equally encourages its flourishing relationship with Japan over local alliances.

Disregarding for the moment the undeniable bonds which link Vietnam and Laos and, to a lesser extent, Cambodia and Thailand, it is an understatement to say that the various countries' interest towards their neighbouring states is negligible. The fact that most Indonesian citizens readily believe that Vietnam is still a country at war illustrates exceptionally well the opacity still clouding relations between the insular and peninsular worlds, that the absence of regular flights between Manila and Hanoi readily confirms. But even within the various sub-regions, the communications are hardly any better. Although culturally and linguistically related, Filipinos and Indonesians maintain hardly any dialogue or regular exchange beyond that related to the islands that make up their common borders. Rare are the events in Manila likely to interest the press in Jakarta. As for the Thai and Vietnamese media, by their indifference towards their South-East Asian partners, they sustain their respective population's ignorance. It is hence not surprising to find that European or North Asian languages are taught extensively in the schools and universities of Bangkok, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, whereas, with the notable exception of Mandarin Chinese, the languages of the neighbouring countries remain largely ignored.

Confronted with this acute heterogeneity, the need for regional consolidation must be understood as rooted in the emergence elsewhere of large and powerful political and economic communities of which the European Union

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[38] Gazzo 2001: 52–54 .

constitutes the preeminent example. For more than half a century, national histories were opposed to each other because they were considered by every government in the region to be necessary for the formation of their own nation-states. It was thus necessary to emphasize national opposition not only to the colonial overlords, but also to the various enemies closer at hand who, by their hostile attitudes, or their very existence, had amputated a part of each nation's territories—which each nation's respective vision of its past vindicated as their own.

The regional ideal, however, represents the opposite imperative. It demands decisive steps towards harmonization and concurrence, and the disappearance of nationalism. Whilst the process of reconstructing and revising history under this new paradigm has undoubtedly begun, it remains embryonic. For the South-East Asian region, history, conceived as a form of reconstructing the past, obviously still has a major role to play.

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