

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS

# THE GLOBALIZATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN HISTORY AND ITS DISCONTENTS<sup>1</sup>

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### INTRODUCTION

It is quite a task to ponder and pontificate on the subject of the globalization of Southeast Asian history, given the research and writings that have been generated by it in the past. Nevertheless, granted that history continues to remain alive in spite of it being condemned as dated and irrelevant in certain quarters, another foray into the question at hands remains germane and should excite our imagination.

History, unlike many other fields of study, has never been so lucky, for with each passing moment it acquires additional ground. As we move forward, history keeps on expanding its domain. In the same breath, history too has been placed on trial, by no other than the historians themselves.

A scholar is a man (or woman) possessed. As such this is a real challenge. However, on this score, I am not without reservation. I might end up reiterating the very same thing that has plagued many scholars of Southeast Asia, and my endeavor might turn out to be another case of ‘old wine in a new bottle’?

Today’s presentation, I suppose, is more meant for the younger generations of professional historians, or aspiring historians, partly because in all probability they have not been exposed to problems of Southeast Asian historiography of the earlier time. Correct me, if I am wrong.

I submit that history always follows victory, or the flag; at least it has been so for the greater part of the last half a millennium in the development of Southeast Asian historiography. The globalization of

the region has produced in its wake a flurry of activities in the areas of historical research and writings that only reflects the process. Cultural conditioning, age-old prejudices or sheer ignorance might play a part in the historians' nuanced projection of history, but the underpinning factor remains that of power preponderance that energizes all. History as history of the victors was and is real on most accounts.

Such lopsided development of course has not gone unchallenged. Past debates revolving around the issues of Orientalism, Euro-Centricity versus Asian-Centricity, colonial knowledge and Western dominance smack of discontentment arising from the age-old scholarship that has characterized our university education in particular, leading to attempts among others to the indigenization of regional and national history. An important trajectory was the call for an autonomous history of Southeast Asia.

But for all the efforts to contain the globalization of outside knowledge in the understanding of Southeast Asian history, we as practitioners of the craft wittingly and unwittingly have fallen prey to this 'cultural imperialism'. While in the past, we have been subject to various forms of external influences, Indian, Chinese, Arab, and Western, so much so that Southeast Asian history has become part of outside history, and history has been written in their respective images, we are now faced with a similar situation. Rampant globalization with its concomitant feature of internationalization or universalization of American history has produced the same desired or undesired effects when national governments and societies are made to operate in tangent with extraneous forces. In fact, the shape and momentum of local history is now being determined by outside factors not unlike the case before. We have become part of mainstream history of which we have little share in its making and of which we have little control in its development.

It began with ethno-centricism and now it ends up with the re-enactment of social Darwinism. I suppose, Southeast Asia is not alone to have suffered this fate. South America and the Balkans, among others, have figured likewise in the whole configuration.

## **IDEOLOGIZATION OF HISTORY AND ‘IMPERIALISM OF CATEGORIES’: POWER-CENTREDNESS, POLITICAL CONFIGURATION AND THE PERIPHERALIZATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Ethno-centricism in history writing was not without basis, considering the power relationship between Southeast Asia and the outside world, which has been impacting on it throughout the ages. Ethno-centricity is more than just a viewpoint; it is shrouded in the culture of the power-holders. Historical knowledge became an instrument for the ‘world historical peoples’ (to use Spengler’s term) to dominate and determine their relationship with the ‘others’, or with peripheralised regions.

One might question the use of terms such as ‘Indianisation’ and ‘Sinicisation’ for example, when it comes to depicting and delineating the region, but with historical evidence pointing in that direction there has emerged consensus history of the kind that has been popularized for a long while. For, as noted by John Vincent, “History is about evidence, but only about evidence we approve of.”<sup>22</sup> With evidence extant it is good bargain for Southeast Asianists of all shades, be they colonial-officials, scholar-administrators or amateur historians, when processing their data. “It has been the fate of these countries [of the region] to be overshadowed from the beginning by the immensity and the surpassing fascination of their mighty neighbors.”<sup>23</sup> Indo-China, Angkor Watt and Borobudur, Sanskrit and the Hindu concept of divinity and monarchy, are not mere vestiges of the past; they are living manifestations of ‘Farther India’ or ‘Netherlands India’. The larger than life image of both India and China was not lost on the scholars and future historians, who felt that they were on relatively firm grounds to discuss and debate their way. Historians who have been overtaken by all these traces and trappings should not be excessively faulted for their approaches to Southeast Asian history. In spite of their western tradition and training, and even with their best of intentions, they might have fallen prey to the temptations in their exercise of historical selection. For that, the authors of *The Making of Greater India* and the *Indianized States of Southeast Asia* should be credited for their efforts in spite of their shortcomings.

On top of that, history writing became much alive following the arrival of the Europeans. In this regards, historical materials, including colonial records, were easily available and were for easy picking. Researchers and writers like Frank Swettenhem, R. J. Wilkinson, R. O. Winstedt, W. Linehan and High Clifford, sprang into action as in the case of Malaysia.<sup>4</sup>

The advent of Islam and the advocacy of the religion have likewise shaped the perceptions of historians, either in their conceptions or in their periodization of events.

Southeast Asia was subject to a continuous cultural penetration from another region of the world, the Middle East, causing its peoples to follow a new form of living. The appropriation of Islamic values might not entail a total transformation in the life its populations, but to a large degree the region as a whole has become repository to globalization emanating from the Middle East. At the very least, Islamized Southeast Asia was made to co-exist with the larger Muslim world.

The Islamization of Southeast Asia was the result of the propagation of the religion by the Arabs, Indians and Persians. Arising from the respective historical process, scholars of Islam have opted to adopt a one-dimensional view of the Islamization, so much so that Southeast Asia, its peoples and societies, became at best active agents in the spread of the faith within the region. Works on the subject of Islamization of Southeast Asia include writings by S. Q. Fatimi, C. A. Majul and Syed Naguib Al-Attas, and they generally point to the 'recipient' role of the region in its interaction with the outside world.

Like Indianisation and Sinicisation, Westernization was another form of globalization. But unlike its predecessors, it had made a pervasive and long-lasting presence, politically and economically. European relationship with Southeast Asia also sublimated into an unequal relationship between the two.

Western discovery and domination of Southeast Asia not only had brought changes in the life of the people of the region, but also had its own ramifications in historical scholarship. Beginning in the eighteen century, attempts were made by Europeans to "bring the extra-European world into the field of inquiry and thus to make universal

history possible.”<sup>75</sup> The baseline was that: “The universalization of history under European hegemony ultimately meant the division of the world into subject and object regions.”<sup>76</sup> A natural corollary to that was the development of historiography with its attendant ‘hegemonic discourse’, and which was permeated by imperial consciousness. In the words of Harry Benda, “The history of modern Southeast Asia then only too often becomes the history of European colonial regimes, from which Southeast Asians – let alone generic Southeast Asia – get progressively drained.”<sup>77</sup> On the one hand they were those who were propelled by the belief in the ‘hierarchy of races and civilizations’ and fell for Eurocentric categorization or adopted ideological scheme that privileged the West, while on the other they were those who turned orientalists in the service of colonial powers and became complicit with the powers-that-be. Either way, they became purveyors of historical knowledge with its centrality of Europe and agents of the Western idea of progress. Such Western-based history could only have developed under the shadow of Western colonialism.

History as a matter of course flourished in the fold of British, Dutch, Spanish and French colonialisms, partly to explain the civilizing missions or the ‘White Man’s burden’ of the conquerors, and partly to rationalize many of the colonial undertakings. Southeast Asia generally appeared on their radar screen as part of the ‘non-Western world’, which was ‘secondary and primitive’. One notable experience was the preoccupation of Christian Snouck Hurgonje who amassed data on Indonesia and presented an array of works in order to advance the cause of Dutch colonialism. Knowledge as power was applied in their exercise of their duty. Surely, some of the scholars have treaded the path by consciously following the order in the Rankian way, “history ...should above all benefit our nation, without which our work could not have been accomplished”<sup>78</sup>, but in the main it accrued from Western political and economic dominance. Colonialism and its manifestations have provided a supportive environment. Historians might not want to pander to the whims and fancies of the colonizers, and wish to be determined by the rationalist spirit, but under the circumstances they found difficulty escaping the tentacles of the ruling regimes. Moreover, much of the funding and the scholarship which were instrumental in the development of their scholarship and their research and writings came from the governments. In the circumstances, even those colonial-officials or scholar-administrators who purportedly wanted to avoid

the pitfalls arising from ethno-centricism found it difficult to extricate themselves from the clutch of orientalism or colonial scholarship.

Southeast Asian historiography took another turn following the eruption of the Cold War. The belief in the domino theory especially spawned academic and intellectual reactions among foreign and local scholars. With the region becoming part of the ideological scene, an area for political and economic contestation, it succumbed to the weight of power established by external forces. With Southeast Asia becoming part of the ideological clash, the region became more subservient to outside powers. Surreptitiously, the powers-that-be, whether in the capitalist or the communist camps, had taken control of scholarship.<sup>9</sup> Generally, historical explanation became a matter of positioning oneself in the context of the new confrontation. The American involvement in particular had put a spin on the development of Southeast Asian historiography. Firstly, 'knowledge production' became part of the trade of those who were party and privy to the conflict. Secondly, scholars under the American influence pursued the same line in their efforts to turn Southeast Asia into a communist-free zone. The passing of traditional societies into modern states in the Western mold was of paramount importance. The ideas of 'nation-states' and 'nation-building' which developed after independence were shaped in the same 'epistemological space'. To quote McCargo: "The academic study of Southeast Asia burgeoned in the 1950s and 1960s, in large measure because the future political direction of the region appeared crucial to American and Western geopolitical interests."<sup>10</sup>

## **DECOLONIZATION, DAMAGE CONTROL AND DECONSTRUCTION**

The development of Southeast Asian historiography with all its weaknesses did not go unnoticed, even among those not tutored in history. The unification of the world through history became the central concern. Interestingly, even before the nationalist historians raised the battle cry against Western biasness, Western trained professional historians had started with their criticisms of the knowledge establishment of which they were a part. J. C. van Leur in his seminal work on Indonesia, very early advanced the cause of Southeast Asian-centric historiography, to be followed by others such as John Smal who emphasized on the need for an autonomous history

of Southeast Asia and Benda who called for a history of the region to be written “from within”. There was also the exhortation by a group of Indonesian historians who not only pursued a similar line, but even demanded an Indonesian-centric approach ‘in order to eliminate the colonial historians’ presentation and restore the proper emphasis on the indigenous culture, tradition and history in history books.’<sup>11</sup> It was a tall order by any standards. At the minimum, there were attempts to de-emphasize the presence of outside influences, as in the case of countries which had long been subject to Indianisation, by localizing their histories.

One salient feature of the emergent works on Southeast Asian historiography was the attempted establishment of the region as a basis of history. The integrity of Southeast Asia was the issue. Was the region a passive ‘recipient’, or was it ‘radiating’ in its relationship with the outside worlds.<sup>12</sup> Some scholars hope that by bringing to bear ‘the greatness’ or the ‘uniqueness’ of Southeast Asia, they could chart a new beginning in historiographical study. Such deconstruction is easier said than done.

Even the question of Indianisation continues to puzzle and perplex the concerned scholars in view of the complexity of the phenomenon. In establishing the interaction between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ forces, one is drawn to the issue of where one ends and the other begins.

At the hands of nationalist historians, history became an arena to propagate the virtues of their countries’ past. In their cultivation of indigenous perspective and in challenging the Euro-centric bias, they often expressed highly subjective opinion. Over time, the euphoria that surrounded the earlier consciousness to challenge Eurocentrism was overtaken by a preoccupation to write ‘their own history’ from the viewpoint of the nation. Consequently, by either acts of omission or commission, their historical works or prescribed history books often suffer a similar fate that had befallen writings by their European counterparts. Romanticizing the past without the backing of solid scholarship only created a dent in established scholarship. It did not have a lasting impact on the ‘paradigm of Eurocentrism’.



There is no denying that their spirited defense of their viewpoint too has produced some good results, when many a historian, both local and foreign, rose to the occasion and published works in the new mould. They included William R. Roff, Barbara and Leonard Andaya, Anthony Milner and J. M. Gullick, as in case of Malaysian history, not to mention the many scholars who wrote in Malay who virtually went unnoticed in the English-speaking world. Abdullah Zakaria, Nabir Hj. Abdullah, Ramlah Adam and Redzuan Othman, were among the many who entered the fray, and in so doing were able to partly fill the void. However, the new basis for history was not strong enough to stand the tide of globalization. The knowledge establishment that developed over the centuries following colonialism was well entrenched, and with its overarching presence, it was there to stay. So long as Southeast Asia remains on the receiving side, historians would necessarily view the asymmetrical relationship from the vantage point of the cultural colonizers or political masters. Even the supportive environment provided by the governments of the now independent countries of Southeast Asia fail to arrest this development. Kratoska has a point when he wrote that “Nationalist histories, which might be expected to provide an alternative to colonial accounts, have been particularly culpable in their failure to produce a different understanding of the past. . . The centrality of the British administration, the colonial export economy, and relations with London, continues to be widely accepted.”<sup>13</sup> Or as Shaharil Talib puts it: “‘The civilizing role’ of international capitalism and colonialism continued in disguised form to produce and reproduce knowledge that was useful for their knowledge.”<sup>14</sup>

Apparently for many of them, after being trained in the Western tradition, and once equipped with Western methods of research and writings, they too were colonized. In constructing their conceptual framework, and in trying to be ‘scientific and impartial’, they also ended up pursuing the same approach with its all its normative trappings. “Colonial methods of knowledge accumulation and the resultant corpus of knowledge gathered has been critical in providing not only the substance but also the sustenance to the whole exercise.”<sup>15</sup> The Cold War was a new conditioning factor which had reinforced the trend, and scholars were presented with less and less choice in their endeavor to come up with new rendering of history, independent of the



old colonial influence. At the end of the day, they either became the victims of circumstances or they simply opted to join the bandwagon.

## **CONTEMPORARY GLOBALIZATION AND THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF WESTERN HISTORY**

The end of the Cold War did not put a brake on the development of Southeast Asian historiography which was to all intents and purposes Western-driven. Instead, the process turned full circle, when not only conventional ideas and concepts predominated, but also practitioners of the craft equipped with the same tools of analysis, become part of the support system in advancing globalization. A prediction once made by Wang Gungwu is fast becoming a reality; “sooner or later, Southeast Asians have to submit themselves to the full force of an alien historiographical framework and, indeed, many countries in the region are beginning to produce their own historians in the same mould.”<sup>16</sup>

Contemporary globalization has taken many forms, but its underpinning force is liberal capitalism or the market economy. The development paradigm associated with it has led to harmonization of interests among Southeast Asian nations, making them all the more vulnerable to outside globalism. It has overcome nation-states and national considerations like never before. The Western idea of progress is very much embedded in it, either in the kind of democracy that has been preached, or in the sort of human rights that have been popularized.

With the integration of Southeast Asian region into the world economic system, many of the earlier colonial ideas and concepts pertaining to scholarship have been recycled or reinforced. The Western vision of history too received renewed impetus in the process. In the prevailing political and economic contexts, scholars were driven to conform to the much-vaunted colonial way of looking at the past and the present. With English remaining a global academic language, it too has been an immensely helpful vehicle for the transmission of Western values.

Globalization might have given way to greater universalization, and global history might have been transformed into universal history, but the present globalization with its association with liberal capitalism has made it difficult for the production of an alternative approach

to history. Attempts at ‘internationalization of history, ‘by treating the entire work as [a] framework of history’<sup>17</sup> have not born fruits, notwithstanding Southeast Asia’s strategic importance to the outside world.<sup>18</sup>

The verdict given by John Bastin, more than five decades ago, holds true, if not wholly true, when he opined that: “The type of Asian and Southeast Asian history which is being written today, even by Asian historians themselves, is history in the Western tradition; for the kind of history with which we are all familiar is indissolubly tied to the whole Western base.... If a different sort of Southeast Asia history is to be written, then what is required is a revolutionary reappraisal of existing historical methods and techniques, and of existing concepts and periodization.”<sup>19</sup>

### **CONFRONTATING THE PAST, CHARTING THE FUTURE: EMPOWERING SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE REWRITING OF HISTORY**

One lesson learnt from past enterprise in history writing is that power defines research and writing. Power offered to those concerned an Olympian position to witness and assess historical events, power equipped historians with the necessary methods and tools to undertake research and publish their writings, and power also ensured that their works sell. On that account, any attempts to render Southeast Asian history autonomous must first and foremost empower the region, if not politically, at least economically and socially. This sounds like a tall order, but historians have no other recourse except to fall back on power in order to match power.

Where history as construction is premised on reality, it would necessarily grow in stature with the expansion of the latter. In the past, Southeast Asia has been subjected to the vagaries of international politics, not of its making, and had to contend with the power relationship, which resulted from it. Its history consequently had been churned out in the respective global context. One possible way to address the problem and overcome some of the concerns expressed by Bastin is for Southeast Asia to be empowered.

Southeast Asian regionalism with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) at its core has been impacting on the outside world for some times now. This could augur well for Southeast Asian history, and by the same token, Southeast Asian historiography. The globalization of its regional values can go a long way in influencing the ‘others’. While subsisting in the new globalized world, it could also play a definitive role in certain areas of international relations. “Wildly optimistic claims” about ASEAN’s success aside, there is a basis for the regional grouping to define its way in its relationship with the others.

In the same vein, if we are able to unearth new materials to show that there was elephant trade for example between Old Kedah and the Indian sub-continent, with ancient Kedahans defining the commercial ties, or provide ample proofs that Southeast Asian *ulama* in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina managed to create a niche for themselves in the Arabian religious communities in the 18th and 19th centuries, or come up with strong evidence to indicate that the Malay rulers, through their machination of politics, were responsible for the rivalries relationship among the colonial powers in the region and beyond, then we should be on firmer ground to reconstruct the past from the Southeast Asian perspective. Such change in context is crucial to allow historians to interpret events in terms of the region’s ideas and institutions.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Being a keynote address delivered at the 23rd International Association of Historians of Asia (IAHA 2014) conference held in Alor Star, Kedah, Malaysia, 23-27 August 2014.

<sup>2</sup> John Vincent, *History*, New York: Continuum, 1995, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Hugh Clifford, *Further India*, Bangkok: White Lotus, 1990, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> For further details, see J. M. Gullick, “A History of Malayan History,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (JMBRAS), Vol. 71, Pt. 2, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> G. Barraclough, “Universal History,” in H. P. R. Finberg (ed.), *Approaches to History*, London: Routledge, 1962, p. 85.

- <sup>6</sup> Manfred Kossok, "From Universal History to Global History," in Bruce Mazlish and Ralph Buultjens (eds.), *Conceptualizing Global History*, Oxford: Westview Press, 1993, p. 100.
- <sup>7</sup> Harry J. Benda, "The Structure of Southeast Asian History: Some Preliminary Observations," *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. 3, No. 1, March 1962, p. 112.
- <sup>8</sup> Quoted in Howard Zinn, "The Politics of History in the eve of the Cold War," *The World War and the University*, New York: The New Press, 1997, p. 51.
- <sup>9</sup> See Shamsul A. B., "Colonial Knowledge and the Deepening of Orientalism: The Asian Experience," in Azizan Baharuddin and Farish Noor Mohd Noor (eds.), *Occidentalism and Orientalism. Reflections on the East and the Perceptions of the West*, Kuala Lumpur: Centre for Civilizational Dialogue, University of Malaya, 2008, p. 3.
- <sup>10</sup> Duncan Mc Cargo, *Rethinking Southeast Asian Politics*, Inaugural Lecture, Leeds: University of Leeds, 17 October 2003.
- <sup>11</sup> Justus M. van der Kroef, "National and International Dimensions of Indonesian History," *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. 6, No. 1, March 1965, p. 17.
- <sup>12</sup> Benda, "The Structure of Southeast Asian History," p. 109.
- <sup>13</sup> Paul H. Kratoska, "Many Malayas: Placing Malaysia in a Historical Context," in Cheah Boon Kheng (ed.), *New Perspectives and Research on Malaysian History*, MBRAS Monograph No. 41, Kuala Lumpur: The Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (MBRAS), 2007, p. 231.
- <sup>14</sup> Shaharil Talib, *Interrogating the State and the Craft of History, The Malaysian Historiographical Journey*, Kuala Lumpur: Asia-Europe Institute (AEI), University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, p. 11.
- <sup>15</sup> Shamsul A. B., "Colonial Knowledge and the Deepening of Orientalism," p. 5.
- <sup>16</sup> Quoted in Nicholas Tarling, *Historians and Southeast Asian History*, Auckland: New Zealand Asia Institute, 2000, p. 17.
- <sup>17</sup> Eric Foner, *Who Owns History?*, New York: Hill & Wang, 2002, p. 54.
- <sup>18</sup> For an interesting discussion on the subject, see Philip Chavier, "ASEAN's Inheritance: The Regionalization of Southeast Asia, 1941-61", *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2001.
- <sup>19</sup> Quoted in Tarling, *Historians and Southeast Asian History*, p. 52.