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# **Inaugural Lecture: Approaching 'Asia' from the Southeast: Does the Crisis Make a Difference?**

Asian Studies Institute Inaugural Lecture 1

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## **Introduction**

It is a greater pleasure than I imagined to be invited back to my alma mater. Other universities one may impress with a book or two, but at one's own it is much harder to overcome the sins and inadequacies of youth. There is, I discover, a little of the quality of our universal if irrational need for recognition from our parents – it is they who validated us in the first place.

I congratulate Peter Harris and the University on opening the Asian Studies Institute. This is an occasion to reflect on what Asian studies means for us in these islands of the extreme southeastern end of the continental sprawl.

When I was a student in the 1950s there was not much Asian studies at Victoria University of Wellington, though the relatively brief stay of Emily Sadka and Leslie Palmier did suggest that what there was should be centred on Southeast Asia. And somehow we did produce Southeast Asian scholars. Roughly chronologically, from those graduating in the late '40s to the early '60s, there was Harry Benda who went on to a pioneering chair at Yale, Terry McGee to the University of British Columbia, Bill Roff to Columbia, myself to the Australian National University, Margaret Clark back here at Victoria University of Wellington, and Anne Booth to the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. All held responsible chairs around the world and pioneered in our different ways the Southeast Asian studies enterprise.

Why did that happen then, rather more than it happens now? Southeast Asia certainly seemed closer then, in relation to the other foreign challenges which might have excited us. With China closed off by Communism, Japan on its knees and the Pacific still colonised, the new countries of Southeast Asia seemed in the 1950s to be the exciting hinterland that beckoned. The Colombo Plan was the embodiment of that spirit, and ensured that the first real 'others' many of us met were the Southeast Asian students who began receiving scholarships at that time. At least for the Student Christian Movement and Students' Association circle I inhabited, the idealism of graduate volunteers, epitomised by Herb Feith in Australia and Ron Kilgour in New Zealand, was focused particularly on struggling Indonesia. At Auckland Keith Sinclair caught the Southeast Asian bug and for a time worked on nineteenth century Malaya. It was principally he who sought to lure me back to New Zealand, as he did indeed lure Nick Tarling, Michael Stenson, and Leonard and Barbara Andaya in Southeast Asian history, and Richard Phillips in Chinese history.

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When I returned in 1976 to teach a semester at Auckland, it was already harder to sustain any sense that Southeast Asia was particularly close to New Zealand. Japan and (Greater) China had become more important economically, and the Pacific more important as a regional forum for New Zealand activity. The challenge to help the development of poor but promising neighbours had shifted to the Pacific, while 'Asia' was increasingly seen as the economic powerhouse which could help us, rather than we them. The imperial link which had made Indian and to an extent Malayan history seem accessible and relevant was increasingly unfashionable and unhelpful in understanding where we now stood.

Since then we have seen the rise and apparent fall of the East Asian miracle, and the generation of a great deal of hype about the superiority of the Asian way – typified in economic terms by John Naisbitt's *Megatrends Asia* and politically by the 'Singapore school' (Tommy Koh and others) and Mahathir and Ishihara's *The Asia that Can Say No*. [1] Let me say a word about that. Firstly, some hype was appropriate and inevitable, even given the recent setback. The world has never experienced economic growth on the scale of that which several Asian countries achieved after 1950. Japan set what then seemed a freakish pace of around 8% real per capita GDP growth a year for a sustained period of the 1950s and 1960s, emulated by South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore in the 1970s and '80s, and China, Thailand and Malaysia between 1988 and 1996. Even Indonesia, for all the flaws in its regulatory system, was achieving growth of 6 or 7% for most of the 1970s and '80s.

This extraordinary growth could not last indefinitely, especially once Japan, the basic engine of East Asian growth, slowed to near inertia in the 1990s. At least in South Korea, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia the sustained boom made bankers careless. Foreign investment seemed to keep flowing in no matter what, and the euphoria of growth made it harder to say no to irresponsible and unproductive decision-makers. But the contagious way in which the collapse spread from Thailand to Malaysia, Indonesia and Korea in late 1997 made it clear that supposedly hard-headed bankers had swallowed the idea that there was such a thing as 'Asia'. At one moment 'Asia' could do no wrong; the next it could do no right. Panic spread, and everybody tried to get their money out.

We Asianists thought we knew better. Every country is different, and there are no commonalities that make it sensible to talk about 'Asia' in economic terms, still less in political or cultural ones. The euphoria was misplaced, and so was the total disenchantment which followed. Had we done our job better or been listened to more, perhaps the markets would have been able to distinguish earlier the weaknesses of the Indonesian and Korean banking sectors, the overheating of the Malaysian economy and the overvaluing of the Thai baht in relation to the yen, at the different times these factors became significant, and would have been able to resist both the 'Asia' euphoria and the 'Asia' panic. The Asianists have been the first to emphasise that there is no such thing as 'Asia', and that each situation has to be analysed in its own terms.

No such thing as Asia? So why do we call ourselves Asianists, and go on founding Institutes of Asian Studies or Associations of Asian Studies? Are we caught in our own trap, endorsing by our collective existence the stereotype that ought to be consigned to an orientalist past? Is a globalised world in practice converging in communications terms faster than our structures are coping with? Well, yes, but mostly no.

First the bad news. In the 1980s most Asianists in this region did think that we were pioneering a path which should ideally lead to our ceasing to be a separate discipline in any sense. We believed that Australia and New Zealand were ahead of the field in trying to develop a genuinely balanced curriculum in history, geography, political science and literature, in which 'Asia' was neither exotic nor patronised, neither saving us nor being saved by us, but simply a central and dynamic part of the world we inhabit. The study of Asia should be 'mainstreamed' or 'infused' into the core curriculum of every student in every discipline. We would thereby better understand both the modern world and our own identities as immigrant societies on the edge of Asia. In Australia this was the time when Steven Fitzgerald and the Asian Studies Council obtained special funding from federal and state governments to bring about such an infusion into mainstream subjects, both at secondary and tertiary level. Textbooks were commissioned, research on Asia

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was prioritised, and schoolteachers were encouraged to visit Asia and learn its languages.

That seems a long time ago now, and the publication of Steve Fitzgerald's book, *Is Australia an Asian Country?* in 1997 (based on lectures largely given in the 1980s) served to remind us how different the mood now is. His book still championed this strategy of mainstreaming the study of Asia and making us all Asia literate, seemingly oblivious of the ground that had since been lost, superficially perhaps through the short-lived political backlash of 1996 against the trendiness of Asia, but more fundamentally to worrying, long-term developments in the universities. There are many fewer Asianists in departments of history and politics in Australia today than there were 10-15 years ago. Monash and Queensland history departments, two of the strongest centres for the study of Asia in the 1970s, have dropped from about eight Asianists to three. ANU and Sydney history have tried to get out of Asia completely, leaving it to specialist Asian departments or faculties to do the job. Politics departments, with the notable exception of the Defence Force Academy, have gone the same way.

The trend is driven in part by budget cuts and the consequent retreat to what is held to be the intellectual core of departments, and to subjects which can guarantee 100 bums on lecture seats. In the social science and humanities disciplines which once served as windows to the diversity of the world, moreover, there is now an alarming dominance of theory, in practice always North American-driven and antithetical to regional expertise. Dethroning the canon of European classics written by dead white males has led not to a courageously pluralist exploration of the world's cultural and social diversity, but to a new canon of self-referential theory. This is one reason, in my view, for the retreat of the humanities in general; but a more potent reason is the failure of university systems in Australia and New Zealand, unlike the US, Europe and Japan, to allow time in the syllabus for students to pursue their own self-broadening agenda before being consumed by the increasingly competitive need for a meal ticket in commerce and law. Finally there is globalisation, which now means you can stay at home and read *Kompas* or the *Mainichi Shimbun* in English on the net without much specialist study at all. Since Asians too are buying hamburgers and reading Foucault, do we still need specialists to understand them?

That is the bad news, but the good news is more important. In Australia as in New Zealand, Asian languages have flourished – meaning Chinese, Japanese and Indonesian, all now present in the majority of Australian universities, with Thai, Vietnamese, Korean and Hindi a long way behind. They are taught far better, with much more rapid direct involvement in the society, than was the case when French and German held sway. Secondly, Asian studies centres have proliferated, often built around the teaching of languages and some associated 'studies' courses. At least eight new chairs in 'Asian studies' have been created in Australia in the last 10 years (University of Queensland, Flinders, Adelaide, Queensland University of Technology, University of Western Australia, Western Sydney, University of New England, and University of Technology Sydney) and another one is on offer now in Melbourne.

Does this mean that Asia has, despite our intentions, become more 'other', more exotic and separate from the mainstream of our education and cognition? I believe the answer has to be an emphatic no. In all sorts of ways our young people *do* know Asia far better than previous generations. They want to study the languages as the indispensable key to another society, but they are combining this with getting their meal ticket from disciplines far beyond the old core of history, politics, literature and anthropology – such as law, architecture, accounting and business studies, health sciences, psychology, fine arts, film and almost every other field you can think of. But we clearly have to react imaginatively to this new situation if we are not to send people across the cultural barrier with high skills but low understanding. Asian studies will flourish, I feel confident, but only if we constantly redefine creatively and expansively what we mean by it. The reasons are essentially threefold:

- 1) Asia will always be the most important challenge of otherness for the dominant world culture in general, but for Australia and New Zealand particularly urgently and profitably. The debates over 'Asian values', 'Confucian ethics', or 'Islamic sociology' have already been of this type – inadequate, essentialising

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attempts to select ideas from the rich storehouse which is 'Asia' only in the sense of an alternative to the dominant and often misguided world culture. Plunging into this bank of experience will continue to provide the richest vein for understanding ourselves, and stretching our ability to cope with the challenges of constant change in the contemporary world.

- 2) Among the reasons why Asian studies are being compartmentalised is the tendency of the social science and humanities disciplines to become more theoretical, impenetrable to outsiders and self-referential. This is dangerous in a fast-changing world, and makes area studies operations especially precious as reservoirs of cross-disciplinary new ideas fashioned out of empirical and direct contact with difference.
- 3) 'Asians' are discovering each other in a phase of globalisation which will encourage regionalism. It is increasingly they who ask to be considered as a region, or series of regions, even if both Asia itself and most of its sub-regions began as western imaginings. The 'Asia' which for the Greeks was centred in Asia Minor migrated steadily eastward until enthusiastically embraced by Japanese nationalists about a century ago. [2] The Asian Human Rights forum in Bangkok, and the ASEM annual dialogue between 'Asia' and 'Europe' are intriguing and important demonstrations of the newer trend.

Since I deal myself with the seemingly most diverse and improbable of these sub-regions, but the one playing the most interesting role now in constructing a larger 'Asia', I want to spend a little time considering that transformation as far as Southeast Asia is concerned. [3]

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### Southeast Asia's Growing Identity

1997, the year of Malaysia's chairing of ASEAN, sealed a remarkable process of acceptance by the regional political elite that the ten countries formed some kind of 'natural' unit. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir complained at the July 1997 meeting which intended to admit three new members, "It is regrettable that there are those who would not see the obvious. Instead of encouraging ASEAN to accept all South-East Asian countries as soon as possible, ASEAN has been urged to pass judgement, deny membership and apply pressure on a potential candidate [Cambodia]". [4]

With a speed that is bewildering, ASEAN has expanded to the borders of China and India. In 1996 it embraced still-Communist Vietnam, the perceived danger of which was one of the reasons for its founding in 1967. On 23 July 1997, it took in Communist Laos and the pariah of the western world, defiantly undemocratic Burma. The Malaysian hosts of the 30th anniversary meeting were particularly anxious to add Cambodia at any cost, though they were eventually overruled by cooler heads.

Throughout the 1990s, in fact, the conviction has spread rapidly that Southeast Asia is "one". [5]

What is the basis for this new imagined community? The extraordinary diversity of Southeast Asia is palpable, whether we look at religion, language, ideology or colonial experience. Particularly in what I am going to call the 'high periphery' of the region – Indonesia, Vietnam, Burma and the Philippines – there has been almost zero teaching or learning about their Southeast Asian neighbours, let alone their languages.

I am one of those who has argued that there are profound commonalities in Southeast Asia, essentially arising from a similar environment, a long history of maritime interaction among the countries of Southeast Asia, and a somewhat similar pattern of influences from the neighbouring civilisations of China, India and Japan. These commonalities reveal themselves particularly in material culture, including agricultural and marine technology, diet, dress and house styles, as well as in popular religion, music, games and pastimes. [6] But in imagining community, the shared realities of growing rice and chewing betel (neither of which the political elite do much of) are less important than the capacity of common images and myths to excite the imagination of elites. One would be inclined to

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wonder why these elites would not find Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and Communism more powerful pulls outside the Southeast Asian region than anything within it. Even the modern attractions of popular culture point to Hollywood, New York, Hong Kong, Tokyo and Bombay, not to any cultural icon in Bangkok or Singapore.

Despite this the political elites have begun to find 'Southeast Asia' a genuinely useful construct. I want to explore the origins of this idea in a way which puts the focus on regional imaginings, not external ones.

Two inherently Southeast Asian factors determined that the region would be seen as one:

- 1) A *positive* view from what we now call Malaysia/Singapore, that it sits in the centre of a meaningful region which has been called by a diversity of names. This self-conscious centrality is based, however, on communications, not on civilisation or empire like the cores of many other historic regions. The Malacca Straits area has always been a meeting-place of ports and portages, not a centre of agriculturally-based population, large armies and architectural or literary monuments.
  - 2) A *negative* decision by the peripheries of this region that they did not want to be appendages of their larger and more threatening neighbours made Southeast Asia a kind of default option. The agricultural and demographic weight of mainland Southeast Asia was for a thousand years in the northern rice-growing valleys of what are now Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Burma, and the important relations of those centres were to some extent with each other, but particularly with larger population centres in China and India. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the demographic balance of all these civilisations shifted southward, which increased their capacity for long-term autonomy. Southeast Asia's island population was historically centred in the rice-growing areas of Java, Bali, the Sumatra highlands and the central Luzon plain, completing the circle of relatively high population density and civilisational potential around the 'low centre' of the Malayan peninsula, Borneo and eastern Sumatra. For the 'high periphery', Southeast Asia was a relatively unthreatening forum of interaction and communication, not a magnet of civilisation or power.
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### A 'Low' Centre

Not long ago I sought to trace the lineage of 'Southeast Asian Studies' in outside models, particularly that of Cornell University. [7] Only in preparing that paper did I realise how this picture failed to explain even myself. I had no contact with Cornell or any Southeast Asia programme up to the point when I began to consider myself a Southeast Asianist. That happened because I arrived in Kuala Lumpur in 1965 with a Cambridge degree and a little knowledge of Indonesia, and was asked to teach the early modern history of Southeast Asia. I scarcely knew what it was, but the process of finding out was unquestionably the formative experience for me in my subsequent writing.

I was not alone. The post-War writers in English who have been most sympathetic to the idea of Southeast Asia as a region have tended to be those obliged to think in these terms during their apprenticeships in universities of Malaysia and Singapore.

All the universities of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei have since their foundations taught the history, politics, geography and sociology of 'Southeast Asia' as the obvious context for their national existence. In reality, Australia, for example, is probably of interest to far more Singaporeans than Vietnam or Burma, but Australia has no clear place in the school syllabus whereas Vietnam and Burma have to be taught as part of 'Southeast Asia'.

We could in fact trace this pattern back in time, to pioneers of the Southeast Asian idea who learned it by working in the ports of the Malayan peninsula. [8] Symptomatic of them was Victor Purcell, who had a colonial career in the Chinese secretariat of the Malayan Civil Service (1921-41) before writing his classic work on the Chinese in Southeast Asia (1951), the earliest really important work in English to use the title Southeast Asia. [9]

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It is of course significant that Purcell's topic was the Chinese and that he had been based in Malaya. The Nanyang [South Seas] Chinese themselves were a transnational community with their major communications hub in Singapore but networks throughout the region. Much of the emigration from China to the region was organised through different networks centred in Singapore. While Europeans had divided the region into colonial empires, the Chinese tended to see it as one, with a logical centre in Singapore, where Chinese publishers routinely printed material from throughout the Nanyang. Two Singapore Chinese institutions, the South Seas Society of 1940 and Nanyang University of 1956, were pioneers of the notion of a single Southeast Asia. [10]

For the great religious traditions, too, Southeast Asia represented a distinctive sub-culture largely defined around the communications hub in the Malacca Straits. To begin with, Islam, from the time it became a mass religion in the sixteenth century, began to adopt a self-consciously Southeast Asian character, using Malay as a lingua franca in the same way that the other great Islamic sub-groups used Turkish, Urdu, Persian and Swahili. People of every mother-tongue who wanted seriously to understand Islam learned to read and speak Malay. They moved about the region to Malay-speaking *madrasahs* [small mosques] in different cities. They distinguished themselves from Europeans, Arabs and Indians as people 'below the winds' [*di-bawah angin*], and when they went to the centres of Mecca, Madinah and Cairo they discovered that they were seen there as one people also, the *Jawah* or *Jawiyyin*, catered for in the same hostels by the same sheikhs. [11] The same Malay-language *kitab* [holy book] circulated to religious schools throughout the region, and in the nineteenth century Malay/Muslim newspapers and magazines printed in Singapore, Pinang or Padang circulated throughout Muslim Southeast Asia.

Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia had a similar oecumene of peripatetic monks travelling between the holy places of Burma, Siam, Laos and Cambodia. Though much less dependent on sea-routes and more on royal power than the Islamic equivalent, this oecumene also operated through established communications hubs in the neck of the Malayan Peninsula, such as Nakhon Sithammarat, Thaton and Phetburi. [12]

If we exclude the Philippines, which was conceptually separated from the rest of Southeast Asia by the particular character of its trans-Pacific Spanish Catholicism, the minority Christians elsewhere also had this functional, communications-centred view of a Southeast Asian region. A particularly interesting case, and another candidate for the first pan-Southeast Asian college, is the College General established by the French Society of Foreign Missions in Siam in 1665. It migrated in 1780 to Cambodia, then briefly to India, before coming to rest in Pinang in 1808. Over three centuries it trained hundreds of priests from Vietnam, Siam, Cambodia, Burma, Malaya, Sumatra and Borneo. [13] As for the English Protestant tradition, Robert Morrison aspired in 1812 to build "an institution at Malacca for the training of missionaries, European and native, and designed for all the countries beyond the Ganges". [14] In the years his Anglo-Chinese College operated in Malacca (1814-43), it taught Malay, Javanese, Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai, and published a quarterly journal on the region. [15]

The communications role of the Straits of Malacca and Sunda is clear from a distant past. Successive ports in this locality – Sriwijaya, Melaka, Johor, Patani, Banten, Batavia, Pinang, Singapore – served as foci of the trade of the whole region, as was noted by Tome Pires, author in 1515 of what may be considered the first economic survey of Southeast Asia:

Melaka is a city that was made for merchandise, fitter than any other in the world; the end of monsoons and the beginning of others. Melaka is surrounded and lies in the middle, and the trade and commerce between the different nations for a thousand leagues on every hand must come to Melaka. [16]

These Straits ports had little real hinterland. The central area of Southeast Asia comprising the Peninsula, eastern Sumatra, western Borneo and western Java was relatively "empty" until the late nineteenth century, because its year-round rainfall and poor soils made it unattractive for rice agriculture. [17] The ports were always part of larger networks. [18] Despite colonial, and later nationalist, attempts to close off Indonesia and Vietnam from the commercial influence of Singapore, in the long term its communications role has always recovered.

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It is therefore hardly surprising that the academic construction of a Southeast Asian identity in English (and Chinese) should have been concentrated especially in Malaya/Singapore, nor that such institutions as the Catholic College General, the Anglo-Chinese College, Nanyang University, the *Journal of Southeast Asian History* (1961 – later *The Journal of South East Asian Studies*) and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (1968) should all have begun there. If we extend the concept of 'low centre' to embrace Bangkok (though this complicates the model), that accounts for most of the remaining regional initiatives, including the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO, 1965), and its offshoot, the SEAMEO Project on Archeology and Fine Arts (1978). Nor should we be surprised at the particular interest shown by Malaysian and Singapore leaders in building regional organisations, when their neighbours were still more interested in ideological comrades around the world. Already in 1959, only two years after Malayan independence and at a difficult time in terms of cold war rivalries, Tunku launched a plea for an Association of South-East Asia (ASA), and persuaded a lukewarm Thailand and the Philippines to join it (1961). Maphilindo followed soon after (1963), and ASEAN in 1967, in all of which Malaysia (and later Singapore) were the most unqualified supporters. Similarly it is not surprising that it is Dr Mahathir who most energetically pushed the 'Southeast Asian 10' idea in the 1990s. The economic lead and central location of Malaysia and Singapore give them the motive and wherewithal to champion these ideas; their smallness in political terms makes them less threatening in doing so.

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### A High Periphery

The situation has been entirely different in the far more populous civilisations of Java, Luzon and Mainland Southeast Asia. These 'outer' countries of Southeast Asia I will call the high periphery: high because they were far more important in civilisational terms, but peripheral in their substantial involvement in the rest of the region. For them the region meant only a little-known alternative to their overmighty and influential neighbours – China for Vietnam, India for Burma, the Americas for the Philippines.

Rangoon and Hanoi were older and stronger centres of ancient civilisation and modern scholarship than anything in the 'low centre'. In both cases one might have expected that they would see something other than Southeast Asia as the larger region of which their subject was a part. Burma was attached to India by administration as well as contiguity, and marginal to the growing Indochina-Indonesia nexus in archaeological and ethnographic scholarship. Vietnam was oriented to Chinese civilisation through 2000 years of common literary culture. Why did prominent scholars in these colonies, as well as many of their nationalist leaders, turn their interests towards comparisons and parallels in less familiar, less culturally esteemed, Southeast Asia?

When D.G.E. Hall and J.S. Furnivall taught at Rangoon University in the 1920s and '30s, Burma was structurally part of British India. Before Rangoon University was constituted in 1920, students had been prepared for the examinations of Calcutta University by local colleges. When 30-year-old Hall was appointed the first professor of history in 1921, he found a syllabus in place which was exclusively Greece, Rome, Europe and British India. Hall developed in Rangoon a new subject he called East Asian history, within which Burma was situated, quite distinct from the more developed Indian history. He fought for the separate chair in 'Far Eastern History' established for the Burma specialist G.H. Luce in 1922.<sup>19</sup> Whether or not it was the passionate desire of his students to be free of British India which made him see Burma as part of something else, this belief certainly arose from the climate of Burma. Hall went on to occupy the world's first chair of Southeast Asian History at SOAS in 1949, and wrote there the influential *History of South-East Asia*, [20] the roots of which certainly lay in his pre-war career in Rangoon.

J.S. Furnivall was the other extremely influential resident and scholar of Burma who directed his comparative gaze towards similar agricultural and social systems in Indonesia, again reacting against the usual *British* colonial models in India and Africa. In his 1938 words,

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Problems essentially the same arise throughout the tropical Far East, and, so long as they are regarded as merely local problems, there is less prospect of reaching a wise solution anywhere. [21]

*French* colonial rule in Indochina was unusually intent on separating its colonies economically from their neighbours and directing their trade towards France. The original perception of Vietnam and the Mekong as gateways to the great market of China was soon subordinated to this end. Educationally the French did much to separate Vietnam from its cultural association with China by encouraging the use of the romanised alphabet for Vietnamese rather than Chinese characters, which had given all previous generations of the Vietnamese elite access to the cultural heritage of China. But the French imagination was for my present purpose even more important than concrete French colonial policies. For that imagination, Angkor was supreme as a positive symbol of the beauty and mystery of Asia, and France's responsibility to recover and document it. The powerful contemporary culture of Sinicised Vietnam, by comparison, failed to excite the interest of the best French minds, perhaps because it was manifestly 'theirs', forever out of French reach. But Angkor could be celebrated, romanticised, plundered for French museums and exhibitions, and finally reinvented as a classic vanished past after the image of Ancient Greece, with the particular attraction of being a French, not a Cambodian, project. Beginning with the Universal Exposition of Paris in 1867, and continuing with the literary popularisations of Pierre Loti and André Malraux, [22] the mysterious faces of the Bayon and the charming *apsaras* of Angkor Wat seduced France as nothing else in Asia. The *École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, "the scientific arm of French rule", set up its headquarters in Saigon (1898) and later Hanoi, but its largest and most exciting project was the preservation, restoration and analysis of Angkor, commenced in 1907. [23] Successive directors, Louis Finot and George Coedès, were preeminently concerned with deciphering Angkor.

Not only did the inscriptions of Angkor and Champa (unlike the culture of Vietnam) point towards connections with Java, the scholars too began to interact. From the time of the first exchange of visits in 1929, the Conservation d'Angkor worked closely with the Archaeological Service (van Stein Callenfels especially) in Java. They influenced each other far more than either were influenced by archaeological activity in India. [24]

In 1944, George Coedès brought this work together in a book first published in Hanoi, demonstrating effectively the similarities in the use of Indian ideas in Southeast Asia and their differences from India itself. [25] His work was the indispensable basis for the later work in English by D.G.E. Hall and others. [26] Was it also this southward interest of the *École Française d'Extrême-Orient* that influenced the anti-colonial Vietnamese ethnographer, Nguyen Van Huyen, who taught Vietnamese in Paris in the 1930s? He deserves more recognition as the first local-born scholar not only to use the term 'Southeast Asia' in the title of a learned work but also to explore one of the more interesting common themes in the material culture of the region – the pattern of house-building on poles. [27]

Moving around the 'high periphery' to the Philippines, Southeast Asia was perhaps even more the 'default option', where nationalism rejected first Spain and then America as Vietnam rejected China and France, and Burma rejected India and Britain. The new regional identity was always pursued as a somewhat cerebral romanticisation of the pre-hispanic Philippine past. Despite the similarities of language and material culture, there was little real interest in or know-ledge of even Malaysia and Indonesia. Under the influence of the Austrian orientalist Ferdinand Blumentrit, Jose Rizal sometimes refers to his people as 'Malays', and Blumentrit famously confused later generations by hailing Rizal after his death as "the greatest Malay who ever lived". [28] It might be said to be the repeated returns to Filipino-ness from the impossible dreams of trans-Pacific identity which have driven successive generations of Filipino nationalists back to a regional orientation.

However economically, politically or culturally attractive they were at various periods, India, China and the Americas were too big and too threatening, their relations too much burdened by the element of force, for Burma, Vietnam and the Philippines respectively to find that association congenial in the long term.



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The first steps to a 'Southeast Asian' identity after 1945 were in fact initiated from the most unlikely part of the 'high periphery', Vietnam. In the aftermath of World War II the struggle against returning colonialism was a common theme for the countries of Southeast Asia, even though their elites had been kept apart for a century and had difficulty even communicating. Most of the earliest calls for anti-imperial unity were of the pan-Asian type, in the hope that the strength of India and China might be harnessed to the goal of liberating the rest of Asia. By 1947, however, there was a widespread view that Southeast Asia's interests could best be served by keeping the big players out.

The strongest roots of this anti-colonial solidarity were in the links the Comintern tried to build among left-wing movements in the region. Indonesia's Tan Malaka (though he split from the Comintern and Leninism in 1927), Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh and the double agent Lai Tek in Malaya were all active in the regional Communist underground in the 1930s and '40s. Tan Malaka, whose best months as a Comintern agent were spent in Manila, first began to write about a future 'Malay' federation of the Philippines, Malaya and Indonesia in 1926. At least by 1942, however, he had expanded this to 'Aslia', a future socialist federation the shape of which he spelled out most fully in 1946: "Make a circle [from Singapore] with a radius of 1500 miles. Inside this circle lie Burma, Siam, Annam, the Philippines, the whole of the Republic of Indonesia, and Australia. This is what we call Aslia (Asia-Australia) ... What we wish to project mainly here is the importance of this region from the strategic viewpoint". [29]

The common struggle against (or in some cases for) the Japanese version of Asian unity, the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, must have strengthened potential solidarity among the Southeast Asian movements. By 1944 the Vietminh was giving priority to relations "with fellow Southeast Asian revolutions". [30] In November 1945, Ho made an appeal for solidarity to the revolutionary government of Indonesia. [31] Though Prime Minister Sjahrir failed to respond, the idea of a Pan-Asian union of some sort continued to be pushed by the embattled Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), and to meet considerable sympathy from the left wing in Thailand, Malaya and the Philippines.

Burmese nationalists, wary of India and China, were also early to envisage a grouping that excluded these two powers. Already before independence, in January 1946, the Burmese leader Aung San began aspiring for "something like the United States of Indo-China comprising French Indo-China, Thailand, Malaya, Indonesia and our country". [32] A year later the first Burmese Foreign Minister sketched the three pillars of Burmese foreign policy as being friendship for all; support for the UN; and strengthening relations with Southeast Asian countries, including the development of a regional grouping. [33]

At the end of 1946 the leaders of Communist-led independence movements in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia called for a Southeast Asian Federation to comprise all the independence movements of the future 'ASEAN 10' except the Philippines. [34] The omission of the Philippines at that time may have been due to the association of the term 'Southeast Asia' with the limits of Mountbatten's Command, but there may also have been uncertainty over what Philippine party could be included without alienating the vital United States.

Hopes of Asian anti-colonial solidarity centred for a time on the Inter-Asian Conference of 23-30 March 1947 in New Delhi. Delegations from both sides in the Indonesian and Indo-China conflicts attended, along with non-official representatives of independent Thailand and the Philippines. The meeting was disappointing, however, especially for the embattled revolutionary delegations from Vietnam and Indonesia, who were looking for more concrete support than the independent governments were prepared to give. The DRV delegates and some of the Indonesians left Delhi convinced that the most effective regional grouping would be one which left out the big states and their conflicting agendas. [35]

Vietnamese representatives pressed the Thai government repeatedly in the months following New Delhi to take the lead in establishing a Southeast Asian league. On 8 September 1947, taking advantage of a period of bitter relations between Thailand and France, a founding meeting was held in Bangkok of a Southeast Asia League intended to include Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Malaya, Indonesia and the

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Philippines. In reality only the Thai and DRV governments sent representatives, as did the struggling Lao Issara and Khmer Issarak movements, both dependent on the DRV. Independence leaders in Burma, the Philippines and Indonesia were careful not to become involved lest their credibility in international negotiations be tainted with Communist associations. When the left-liberal Thai Prime Minister Pridi Panumyong was ousted by Phibun Songkram in a military coup in November 1947, the League lost even its Thai support and was quickly buried in cold war rivalry. [36] It represented a brief moment of opportunity for Southeast Asian regionalism, not entirely forgotten in subsequent years.

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### A Saucer Model

There are few successful examples of regional organisation of the ASEAN type in which there is no dominant centre or common civilisational heritage. Southeast Asian countries are all conscious of relative weakness, and most have felt the need at times for powerful friends outside the region. One spokesperson for the Southeast Asian League made the analogy of the Balkans, not a very encouraging one. What has tended to keep the Southeast Asian idea in being is the fine balance between the demographic and civilisational weight of a less committed periphery (Indonesia, Burma, Vietnam and to some extent the Philippines), and the economic and communications weight of the small countries making up the centre (Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei and to some extent Thailand), for which the regional organisation is an essential forum of action. That these are too small to be perceived as dominant is one of the major sources of Southeast Asia's fragile contemporary coherence.

'Asia', however, remains a much more questionable construct, which makes little sense except as a geographical area or an 'other' to European civilisation. Australia at least (I will not speak for New Zealand) has an interest in defining it as a geographical zone of which we are a part, and not encouraging (if only by stressing our differentness) the sense of 'Asia' as an antithesis to 'western' liberalism – an idea which has had its day.

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### Endnotes

1 John Naisbitt (1997) *Megatrends Asia: The Eight Asian Megatrends that are Changing the World*, London: Nicholas Brealey; Mahathir Mohamad and Shintaro Ishihara (1995) *The Voice of Asia: Two Leaders Discuss the Coming Century*, Tokyo: Kodansha – first published in Japanese as *The Asia that can Say No*.

2 Two insightful recent analyses of Japan's 'Asia' are Stefan Tanaka (1993) *Japan's Orient: Rendering Pasts into History*, Berkeley: University of California Press, and Tessa Morris-Suzuki (March 1998) 'Invisible countries: Japan and the Asian dream', *Asian Studies Review*, 22 (1), pp. 5-22.

3 The ideas in the remainder of this paper were first set out at the ASEAN Interuniversities Sociology Conference in Pekanbaru in June 1997, and were published in very abbreviated form in *The Asia Pacific Magazine* in February 1998.

4 *The Australian*, 25 July 1997.

5 The papers by Michael Vatiokotis and Amitav Acharya at the Pekanbaru conference document this phenomenon more fully.

6 See particularly Anthony Reid (1988-93) *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, c.1400-1680*, 2 vols, New Haven: Yale University Press.

7 Anthony Reid (1994) 'Recent trends and future directions in Southeast Asian studies (outside SE Asia)', in Taufik Abdullah and Yekti Maunati (eds) *Toward the Promotion of Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia*, Jakarta: Indonesian Institute of Sciences, pp. 256-76.

8 Examples include John Crawfurd (1856) *Descriptive Dictionary of the Indian Islands and Adjacent Countries*, London and New York: Oxford University Press; J.H. Moor (1837) *Notices of the Indian Archipelago and Adjacent Countries*, Singapore.

9 Victor Purcell (1948) *The Chinese in Malaya*, London: Oxford University Press, reprinted Kuala Lumpur, 1967; Victor Purcell (1951) *The Chinese in South-east Asia*, London: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed. 1965. Significant in this connection is Skinner's unique role as pioneer of a 'Southeast Asian' vision at Cornell (above), and the fact that one of the first British academic works to use the concept Southeast Asia was also concerned with the Chinese: G.T. Miles (1932) 'The Chinese in South East Asia and the East Indies', unpublished M.A. Thesis, London University.

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- 10 Leo Suryadinata (1994) 'Southeast Asian studies in Singapore: past and present', in Abdullah and Maunati, op. cit., pp. 115-37.
- 11 Snouck Hurgronje (1931) *Mekka in the Latter Part of the 19th Century*, Leiden: Brill, reprinted 1970, pp. 229-91.
- 12 David Wyatt (1994) *Studies in Thai History*, Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, pp. 22-48.
- 13 Jean Guennou (1986) *Missions étrangères de Paris*, Paris: Fayard, pp. 149-59.
- 14 Cited in Brian Harrison (1976) 'The Anglo-Chinese College at Malacca, 1818-1843', in C.D. Cowan and O.W. Wolters (eds), *Southeast Asian History and Historiography: Essays Presented to D.G.E. Hall*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 246-7.
- 15 Op. cit., pp. 246-61. And see *The Indo-Chinese Gleaner*, Malacca, 1817-1822.
- 16 Armando Cortesao (ed.) (1944) *The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires*, London: Hakluyt Society, p. 286.
- 17 The phrase "the empty centre" of Southeast Asia emerged at a workshop on 'the last stand of autonomous Asian states' in 1992, and I credit both Yumio Sakurai and Carl Trocki as having a hand in framing it. It is discussed in Anthony Reid and Carl Trocki (November 1993) 'The last stand of autonomous states in Southeast Asia and Korea, 1750-1870', *Asian Studies Review*, 17 (20), pp. 109-10; and Anthony Reid (1995) 'Humans and forests in pre-colonial Southeast Asia', *Environment and History*, 1, pp. 94-5.
- 18 Phan Huy Le, Claudine Salmon and Ta Trong Hiep (eds) (1994) *Phan Huy Chu, Hai Trinh Chi Luoc: 'Recit sommaire d'un voyage en mer'*, Paris: Association Archipel, p. 23.
- 19 C.D. Cowan (1976) 'D.G.E. Hall: A biographical sketch', in Cowan and Wolters, op. cit., pp. 15-16.
- 20 D.G.E. Hall (1955) *A History of South-East Asia*, London: Macmillan. This first edition ignored the Philippines, probably influenced by its absence both from Mountbatten's SEAC and from the work of the French and Dutch chroniclers of Indianised states. The later editions of 1964 and 1968 quietly remedied this deficiency.
- 21 J.S. Furnivall (1939) *Netherlands India. A Study of a Plural Economy*, Cambridge University Press, reprinted 1967, p. xvi. An explicitly comparative volume followed: *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (Cambridge University Press, 1948). Furnivall also preceded Hall in writing two explicitly 'Southeast Asian' books: *Progress and Welfare in Southeast Asia* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1940) and *Educational Progress in South-East Asia* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1943).
- 22 Pierre Loti (1912) *Un Pelerin d'Angkor*, Paris: Calmann Levy; Andre Malraux (1930) *La Voie Royale*, Paris: Grasset.
- 23 Bruno Dagens (1995) *Angkor: Heart of an Asian Empire*, trans. Ruth Sharman, New York: Thames and Hudson, p. 84.
- 24 Van Stein Callenfels was also involved in Malaya in the 1930s, instructing the Government Ethnographer I.H.N. Evans in excavating techniques – Victor Purcell (1965) *Memoirs of a Malayan Official*, London: Cassell, pp. 275-84.
- 25 George Coedès (1944) *Histoire ancienne des États Hindouises d'Extrême-Orient*, Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême Orient. The better-known second (1948) and third (1964) editions were entitled *Les États Hindouises d'Indochine et d'Indonesie*. Only in the English translation of the third edition did the term Southeast Asia appear in its title – *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1968). In keeping with his theme, the book in all editions explicitly excludes the Philippines and northern Vietnam.
- 26 Hall, op. cit.; Brian Harrison (1954) *South-east Asia: A Short History*, London: Macmillan; Reginald Le May (1954) *The Culture of South-East Asia*, London: Allen and Unwin.
- 27 Nguyen Van Huyen (1934) *Introduction a l'étude de l'habitation sur Pilotis dans l'Asie du Sud-est*, Paris: Paul Geuthner. Huyen made two formative visits to Holland in preparing his study, and met Indonesians as well as Dutch scholars there. As terms for his region of study he uses interchangeably 'L'Asie du Sud-Est', 'Le Sud-Est de l'Asie', 'L'Indochine et l'Insulinde' and 'L'Indochine et l'Indonesie', but never the colonial labels themselves.
- 28 Two subsequent Filipino biographers took this up by labelling him "the great Malayan" (*Carlos Quirino, The Great Malayan*, Manila, 1940), and "Pride of the Malay Race" (see Rafael Palma [1949] *The Pride of the Malay Race: A Biography of Jose Rizal*, New York: Prentice Hall), without much curiosity about what that meant. Gregorio Zaide (1957) *Philippine Political and Cultural History*, 2nd ed., 2 vols., Manila: Philippine Education Company, II, p. 138; cf. John N. Schumacher (1979) 'The "propagandists" construction of the Philippine past', in Anthony Reid and David Marr (eds), *Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Heinemann for ASAA, pp. 270-77.
- 29 Translated from Tan Malaka's thesis (1946) by Helen Jarvis (ed.) (1991) *From Jail to Jail, by Tan Malaka*, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies, pp. xcvi-xcvii.

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30 Christopher Goscha (1991) 'Thailand and the Vietnamese Resistance against the French', Unpublished M.A. Thesis, ANU, pp. 136n, 135.

31 Hanna Papanek (1990) 'Note on Soedjatmoko's recollections of a historical moment: Sjahrir's reaction to Ho Chi Minh's call for a Free Peoples Federation', *Indonesia*, 49.

32 Speech to AFPFL 20 January 1946, in *Speeches of Bogyoke Aung San (1945-1947)* (Rangoon, 1971), p. 36. Solidarities on the side which had been with the Japanese were also continued. In 1946 the son of Philippine wartime President Jose Laurel attempted to embark with 20 young colleagues for Indonesia, to support the anti-Dutch struggle (Salvador Laurel address in Jakarta, 28 August 1997). In January 1947 Dr Ba Maw, the former Japanese-era premier of Burma, announced that a force of about 100 Burmese volunteers would be sent to help the Vietnamese in their struggle against the French (Goscha, op. cit., p. 138).

33 Goscha, op. cit., p. 144n., citing the Foreign Minister's remarks to an Australian diplomat.

34 Op. cit., pp. 136-7.

35 Op. cit., pp. 140-44.

36 Op. cit., pp. 144-64.

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