The “History of Nation-Building” Series and Southeast Asian Historiography

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Introduction

In 1996, at the fourteenth conference of the International Association of Historians of Asia (IAHA) held in Bangkok, Thailand, Wang Gungwu, a leading historian from Southeast Asia, made an intriguing argument. He wanted historians to pay more attention to nation-building in Southeast Asia, a scholarly field dominated by political scientists, sociologists and other social scientists. Fifty years after the end of the Second World War and the emergence of independent Southeast Asian nation-states, Wang suggested that there was ample temporal distance and documentation for historians to contribute to the literature on nation-states and nationalism.¹ After the conference, Wang secured support from the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore and collaborated with five Southeast Asian historians to publish a “History of Nation-Building” (HNB) book series which examines the historical development as well as the origins of nation-building in the five founding members of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations): Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.² Complementing this core series are two more publications, one which compiles Wang’s essays on Nation and Civilization in Asia and another collecting papers from the 2002 ISEAS conference on “Nation-building Histories: Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.”³ At first glance, Wang’s suggestion seems divorced from pre-existing intellectual trends within Southeast Asian historiography. It apparently calls for a return to more “traditional” forms of history-writing, which emphasizes the perspectives of elites, politicians, and the nation-state, as opposed to histories of the region which adopt a “history-from-below” approach or a broader regional perspective. On the other hand, the HNB series could arguably be seen as a response to frequent calls for Southeast Asians to be more involved in the development of the history and historiography of their region.⁴ The nation-building histories also add to and expand Southeast Asian history and historiography, as the initiator and the five contributing historians are not only born and bred in Southeast Asia, but are considered “home scholars” who work and live in the region during the time of writing.⁵ Moreover, all of the contributing historians were in some way involved in the nation-building efforts of their respective countries. Such a connected relationship to the nation-state not only provides a unique, possibly first-hand account of a particular aspect of Southeast Asian history, but also has implications for historiography in general.

This paper sets out to explore the scope of the HNB series and its implications for Southeast Asian histori-
The first section briefly introduces the series, its origins, scope, development, and its position within the intellectual context of Southeast Asian historiography, as well as within the immediate context and outlook of the series’ protagonist, Wang Gungwu. In examining the historians of the series, their individual histories and background, and how those could have influenced their respective historical accounts of nation-building, the following section suggests that the immediate physical and intellectual environment of the historian (or scholars in general) are essential considerations when attempting to understand the diversity of scholarship in the academic fields of Southeast Asian history and Southeast Asian studies. There is a discernible difference in what the Southeast Asian and non-Southeast Asian scholar is interested in, and this would affect his or her method and approach when attempting to understand the past. The final section of this paper explores the implications of the HNB series for Southeast Asian historiography in general. Even during a period of globalization and being at odds with prevailing intellectual trends within Southeast Asian historiography, the nation-state and its by-products clearly still demand scholarly attention within the region. If anything, the HNB series demonstrates the significance of paying more attention to the dynamics between scholarship and the immediate context of the scholar, and how the latter can and has influenced the questions asked of the region’s past.

The Scope and Context of the HNB Series

There are several objectives of the HNB series as indicated by Wang. First, the HNB series does not focus on the origins of the nation-state or how the five Southeast Asian countries attained independence in the aftermath of the Second World War. While the origins of the ideas and events contributing to the emergence of each nation-state were not disregarded, the focus of the five histories was more on the issues arising and the decisions made for nation-building from “Day One” of independence to tracing the historical paths taken by Southeast Asian leaders after attaining independence. This point is significant as it distinguishes the histories of the HNB series from so-called national or nationalistic histories. The latter are histories, which usually take a teleological perspective of the past in an attempt to provide a unifying historical base to strengthen the nation-state. Hence, the objectives are different from the proposed nation-building histories, which attempt instead to focus more on the processes and complexities in constructing and imagining a nation.

Even so, the late twentieth-century fascination with nation-building, and by extension, the nation-state and nationalism appears odd and even archaic. Such a preoccupation seemingly runs counter to contemporary regionalisation and globalisation tendencies as well as prevailing intellectual trends within Southeast Asian history and historiography. The focus on the nation-state appears to be a reversal of historiographical trends, one which had moved away from historical studies of post-colonial (in the temporal sense) independent nation-states to more sub-regional or regional studies. Some of the more prominent publications include Anthony Reid’s two-volume Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce (published in 1988 and 1993), Oliver Wolters’ History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives (second edition published in 1999), and Victor Lieberman’s Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c.800-1830–Vol. 1, Integration on the Mainland (published in 2003). While not disregarding other historical studies on individual Southeast Asian countries, there is certainly a tendency within Southeast Asian historiography to move beyond national borders and focus more on the pre-independence period.

There are several reasons for this tendency. For a long while, and perhaps even until the present-day, history is only considered respectable if historians maintained some temporal and spatial distance from their subject matter so as to be objective in their observations. Within the field of Southeast Asian history, there is also an innate negative reaction towards “national” or “nationalistic” histories. John Smail’s third way of “autonomous history” could be perceived as a compromised approach between the old colonial-type histories and the emerging nationalistic histories. Harry Benda was wary about the “moral minuses of nationalist historiography.” Oliver Wolters, a mentor of many of the present-day historians of the region, warned a new Filipino graduate student not to write history like Teodoro Agoncillo’s A Short History of the Filipino Peoples. Another reason is the lack of access to archival sources to recent and contemporary events,
which although significant to nation-building are deemed too sensitive for general public consumption. This is in contrast to the availability and abundance of sources relating to the pre-nation-state period, such as the colonial archives, allowing for a relatively less frustrating research and writing project.

Another objective of the HNB series is to include the historian’s perspective and methodological approach to on-going scholarship on nation-states in Southeast Asia. Wang observed that this particular scholarly field of Southeast Asia has been dominated by social scientists, such as political scientists Benedict Anderson and George Kahin. On the other hand, historians looking at Southeast Asian nation-states have tended to limit themselves to the pre-independence period, examining the origins of nationalism and nation-states rather than the issues confronting the leaders after independence. This tendency, Wang felt, was in direct contrast to the role historians and social scientists played in delineating European and Asian nationalism. Wang noted the prominent presence of historians in supporting the infrastructure of new nation-states such as France, the United States, Italy or Germany. In China as well as Japan, historians had laid the groundwork for social scientists to develop their theories of nationalism. Wang notes that “the Chinese example demonstrates that nationalism has to be understood through a deep knowledge of history rather than through theories and typologies.”

The reverse is true for Southeast Asia as social scientists, not historians, lead the way in understanding nationalism, nation-state and nation-building in the region. Wang feared that without a historical framework, the theories and concepts drawn up by political scientists and sociologists would not be able to provide a full understanding of the issues each nation-state has to confront. This concern was realized to some extent in the regular meetings held with the five historians. In discussing the scope and direction of their proposed nation-building histories, and even though they were fully aware of the diversities in the five nation-states, the historians were struck by the essentially different historical paths that each nation-state took after independence despite sharing common historical experiences such as colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism. Wang also noted that the different structures implemented by the various colonial administrations of the British, Dutch, French and Americans in Southeast Asia influenced the individual paths each former colony has taken since independence. Hence, a historical perspective of nation-building, especially of the distinctive issues each independent nation-state had to confront, does not merely contribute to existing scholarship, but provides a platform for further comparative studies without undermining the individual historical experiences.

The personal outlook of Wang Gungwu is perhaps the driving force of the HNB series, shaping its scope and direction. Although he is primarily a historian of China and the Chinese community in Southeast Asia, Wang is very much part of Southeast Asia. He was born in the Dutch East Indies, in the Javanese city of Surabaya and was raised in Ipoh, Perak, in British Malaya. As part of the prominent overseas Chinese community, he “returned” to China, his perceived “home”, to begin his university education in 1947. The Communist victory in China forced him to return to Southeast Asia in 1949 to complete his undergraduate education as well as a Master of Arts at the University of Malaya (then in Singapore). As a promising Malayan in a rapidly decolonizing British Malaya, Wang went on to further his education in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London, receiving a Ph.D. in 1957. He then returned to the University of Malaya to begin his academic career and in 1959, was part of the pioneering faculty which initiated the Kuala Lumpur branch of the University of Malaya.

Wang returned to a Southeast Asia undergoing fundamental change. The former colonial empires were disintegrating and from the ashes emerged new nation-states. By 1957, the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar (then Burma) and the Federation of Malaya were independent nation-states, some having fought violent conflicts to attain that status. The former French Indochina states of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, though formally independent, were slowly but surely getting
caught up in the bi-polarity of the Cold War. The emergence of new nation-states could have only encouraged the interest of a historian who was also exposed to the various kinds of nationalism in Malaya, Southeast Asia and China.16 Wang himself was particularly interested in the national development of Malaya (which in 1963 became Malaysia). He and several colleagues attempted very early on to make some sense of the nation-building issues Malaya had to confront, and Wang himself published several essays on Malayan nationalism and leadership.17

Wang’s fascination with the nation-state and its connections with former colonial empires and world civilisations comes through clearly in his essays collected in Bind Us In Time: Nation and Civilisation in Asia. The book is divided into two parts. The first part represents what he termed as his “current and early phases of [his] education in nationhood”.18 The second group of essays focus on broader regional and global themes, demonstrating the ways in which a historian can contribute to scholarship on the nation-state, nation-building and nationalism. A historian has to negotiate his or her attention between getting right the minute details of daily occurrences and the “longue duree structures which give each change a larger significance.”9 Hence, a historian’s trained eye for factual detail and recognition of their position within broader structures provides the necessary historical context and framework from which social scientists can deliberate on the shapes and forms of the different nationalism and nation-building paths each Southeast Asian nation-state took since independence. Wang also noted the dilemma the “modern historian” has in tracing the dual historical trajectories of nation-states and civilisations. Engaged as historians are in times past, their “respect for the time needed for the human race to create civilisations” is severely challenged by “nationalist time”, a situation which “press[es] for a faster pace” of creation whether people were ready for it or not.20

The scope and outlook of the HNB series also have roots in contemporary time. Wang’s personal motivations and interests were further piqued by the emergence and oft-time painful development of new nation-states in Eastern Europe and Central Asia in the aftermath of the Cold War and the break-up of the former Soviet Union. Indeed, this historical occurrence has parallels to the post-Second World War decolonisation and nationalism process in Southeast Asia. Hence, the issues addressed and the broader questions asked by the HNB series – what happens after independence, nationhood path to choose and the considerations influencing that decision – are very relevant to emerging nation-states who similarly have to decide their future development.

There is then a contemporary relevance to the historical study of nation-states, via nation-building histories. Such an attempt and focus however does seem out-of-touch with present-day intellectual and institutional norms within Southeast Asian historiography. It would be negligently simple to suggest that this difference arises from having a Southeast Asian or non-Southeast Asian perspective. Although born and bred within Southeast Asia, Wang’s education and career path have taken him to England, and later Australia and Hong Kong, with his primary research focused on the history of China. The Southeast Asian perspective is not easily separated from the Western structures Wang has been exposed to, and hence perhaps should not be the end-all objective of scholarship, for instance the call for autonomous Southeast Asian histories during the 1960s. Primarily, it was Wang’s personal experiences and his contemporary outlook which have shaped his motivations and questions for the HNB series. The same could be argued for the five historians of the HNB series. Taking similar paths as Wang, their histories and approaches should not be judged merely by their place of origin or on an intellectual framework, which may not be relevant to them. Instead, an examination of the historical situations and contexts they have experienced would provide more insight to the types of nation-building histories they choose to write.

The Histories and Historians of the HNB Series

To date, three of the five nation-building histories have been published: Malaysian historian Cheah Boon Kheng on Malaysia, Singaporean Edwin Lee on Singapore, and Indonesian Taufik Abdullah on Indonesia. At first glance, the nation-building histories offered by the three historians do share certain general similarities. As a result of the overarching questions asked, there is a heavy emphasis on the nation-state’s leaders and the decisions they took after raising the new flags of each
nation-state. From this, the nation-building histories of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia follow a chronological and “top-down” perspective in an attempt to trace the nation-building issues confronting the newly independent leaders. As noted earlier, this focus and approach go against the intellectual grain of Southeast Asian historiography and indeed, even one of the historians’ personal preferences.

While the general direction is similar, the character and tone of each nation-building history follows the individual historical development of each nation-state as well as the individual questions of each historian. The three nation-building histories focus on very different themes, driven by the questions of their historians. Cheah Boon Kheng cautiously but forcefully highlights the centrality of ethnic relations and considerations in the decision-making of Malaysia’s four Prime Ministers as they try to balance the demands and historical baggage of the nation-state’s multi-ethnic population since 1957. Taufik Abdullah based his nation-building history on how the ideals of democracy and how concepts of equal representation acted as the glue for a group of archipelagic islands which consist of diverse peoples, languages, cultures and religion, and how succeeding Indonesian leaders attempted, some successfully and others less so, to remain true to those ideals.

The tone and questions asked in each nation-building history were in no small way shaped by the personal outlook of each historian. As a Malaysian Chinese, Cheah is a member of a minority ethnic group and, as such, he has to navigate his way through a form of reversed affirmative action that protects the status of the Malays. It comes as no surprise then that he chose the issue of managing ethnic relations as the key nation-building issue the Malaysian Prime Ministers had to face. He highlights and discusses the various decisions each Prime Minister made in maintaining a plural social order and a dominant Malay presence – briefly, Tunku Abdul Rahman’s “Bargain” with the other ethnic political groups, Tun Razak’s attempts at national unity in the aftermath of the tragic May 13 ethnic violence, Tun Hussein Onn’s management of the old and emerging social issues such as Islamic fundamentalism, and finally, Mahathir’s rather unsuccessful attempts to recognise the role of non-Malays as equal players in Malaysia’s national development. Cheah concludes that the role of the Prime Minister in balancing the demands of ethnicity and religion will continue to be crucial in Malaysia’s nation-building efforts.

Cheah’s nation-building history of Malaysia reflects his initial career as a journalist covering labor unrest during the 1950s and 1960s in volatile Singapore. His straightforward account follows a neat chronological framework as he tries to explain the decisions each Prime Minister made during their tenure especially concerning the main theme of managing a plural society. While the focus on political leaders diverges from Cheah’s earlier publications on the social histories of Malaya, his interest in politics and focus on ethnic issues actually do reflect the emphasis of those publications such as *The Masked Comrades: A Study of the Communist United Front in Malaya, 1945-48* – where he examined the post-WWII left-wing movement, and *Red Star Over Malaya: Resistance and Social Conflict during and after the Japanese Occupation, 1941-1946* – a study of the ethnic violence which erupted between the Malays and Chinese during the brief interregnum when law and order broke down. His personal outlook was also influenced to a large extent by scholars such as Anthony Reid and David Marr, his PhD supervisors at the Australian National University, as well as his teachers and the intellectual climate at the University of Malaya, which encouraged a regional focus for scholarly research.

Edwin Lee’s all-encompassing nation-building history of Singapore is slightly different. The twenty-two
chapters do not seem as focused or as tightly organized as Cheah’s or Taufik’s historical accounts. This is perhaps an unavoidable side-effect of an attempt to highlight the various political, social and economic forces, which demanded the attention of a government that was unprepared for an independent Singapore. The failure to stay within the Malayan Federation as a result of traumatic communal violence and political tensions only contributed to a sense of urgency to address those vulnerabilities in a pragmatic and orderly fashion. In a massive twenty-two chapter account, Lee highlights the various issues confronting the government of a small island from 1965 onwards: economic productivity, national defence, social services such as employment and housing, the harnessing of education towards national development, and the attempts at creating a “Singaporean” identity. Similar to Cheah, Lee places heavy emphasis on the decision-making process at the government level, focusing on the Singaporean Prime Ministers and Chief Ministers. However, Lee’s approach is slightly different as the Prime and Chief Ministers were the only windows to the broader historical context Lee is interested in. He also begins Singapore’s nation-building story not in 1965, but in 1819 when the British founded a trading settlement on the island, ostensibly because the present-day social and political structures had their roots in that period. Singapore’s nation-building history also intertwines with that of Malaysia, having been part of it for two tumultuous years. Indeed, in Lee’s perspective, the separation in 1965 was the defining and catalytic moment, which accentuated the social and political issues fermenting since 1819, forcing Singapore to adopt certain measures to ensure survival after independence.

The choice of Edwin Lee as the historian for Singapore’s nation-building history is apt as well as interesting. He completed a PhD dissertation on how the British governed a multi-cultural Singapore, edited a volume on Singapore history and has supervised several theses and dissertations on Singapore history. Unlike his colleagues in the HNB series, Lee is not as prolific in terms of publications and research and is the odd one out as he received his PhD locally (from the University of Singapore in the early 1980s). Although he has a MA from Cornell, his path and outlook were perhaps more directly influenced by the conditions in 1970s Singapore. The University of Singapore during the 1970s was unabashedly harnessed for national development purposes, ensuring that the university produced graduates who would service the fledgling nation-state. The appointment of a cabinet minister as Vice-Chancellor of the university in 1969 was the most telling indication of the government’s intentions to ensure university policies and curriculum met national objectives.

The intellectual and institutional situation in the university arguably affected Lee considerably as three chapters of his book were devoted to the discussion of the role of the university – of which Lee was an integral part of as a member of the Department of History – in Singapore’s nation-building efforts. Just as Singapore attempted to steady itself on its nation-building path in the early years, the University of Singapore, staffed by a fair proportion of expatriates, particularly in the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences, was an ideological battleground between a government galvanized (traumatized?) by the events leading to sudden independence and an academic faculty whose teachings may not reflect the nation-building objectives of the government. Lee himself was part of the nation-building process. He is the former Head of Department of History, has a presence (as most senior Singaporean scholars do) on various government and semi-government projects pertaining to heritage and history, published a book on the history of the National University of Singapore (NUS) and is currently working on the history of the Faculty of Engineering of NUS, which is perhaps the most important academic department and discipline for early nation-building efforts.

In contrast to Cheah and Lee’s nation-building histories, there is a palpable romantic strain in Taufik Abdullah’s *Indonesia: Towards Democracy*. Born in Bukittingi, West Sumatra, he attended Gadjah Mada University and received his MA and PhD from Cornell, the latter in 1970. After his PhD, he returned to Indonesia to teach in Gadjah Mada and has also held various positions in the Indonesian Institute of Science (or the *Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia*, LIPI). Taufik had personally experienced several of Indonesia’s pivotal events in its history as well as its nation-building efforts. As a student, he witnessed the rise of Sukarno and the painful birth of the Indonesian nation-state as it fought its way out of Dutch colonialism by 1949 but into civil war during the 1950s as regional factionalism reared its head. He also witnessed first-hand Sukarno’s...
gradual fall from the years of “Guided Democracy” to the “night of terror” in 1965 and its bloody aftermath, and finally to 1967 when he handed power over to Soeharto. As a scholar, he worked under the New Order government of Soeharto and came close to losing his position at LIPI for voicing his dissatisfaction at the government. Taufik’s personal experiences come through clearly in his nation-building history. There is an element of regret whenever he writes about Sukarno, an element which is replaced by obvious disdain for the mechanisms of the “greedy state” exemplified by Soeharto’s New Order.

Taufik based his account of Indonesia’s nation-building efforts on the theme of democracy. The idea of equal representation and opportunity, particularly for an archipelagic entity, must have been very attractive for the budding Indonesian leaders trying to put together a viable post-Dutch political and social reality. After independence was achieved, the reality of governing and administering a country divided by politics, languages, religions and cultures forced the gradual erosion of those democratic ideals espoused in a much different revolutionary context. Similar to Cheah’s approach, Taufik’s organised and focused approach in his seven chapters masks a chaotic and oft-times violent process of nation-building.

Pivotal on the theme of how the ideals of democracy changed and evolved after Indonesian independence, Taufik aptly demonstrates how the initial idealistic intentions of revolutionary leaders can sometimes go awry when they become administrators. For instance, despite his early rhetoric, Sukarno found himself having to utilise “undemocratic” means to ensure Indonesia was held together. He almost unilaterally introduced a period of “guided democracy” after he failed to gain a consensus from the various political factions on the future direction of Indonesia. As Taufik discussed in a chapter entitled “Democracy and National Integration”, both elements do not always go hand-in-hand. However, in spite of certain set-backs, the commitment of succeeding Indonesian leaders and Taufik himself to the ideals of democracy, or at least to the rhetoric of democratic values, remained unblemished going into the twenty-first century. Taufik opened his nation-building account with a preamble on the first direct elections of the Indonesian President in 2004 and his conclusions are optimistic that Indonesia, as a relatively young nation-state, can learn from past setbacks and inspirations.27

Taufik’s optimism may stem from his semi-revival after the fall of the Soeharto government, but could arguably also have roots in his close experiences with the birth of the Indonesian nation-state when he was a student in the 1950s when Sukarno fired the imagination of his countrymen-to-be with his speeches. Similarly, the nation-building histories of Cheah and Lee are affected by their first-hand experiences with their respective country’s nation-building efforts. As a Singaporean historian working at a university afflicted with government intervention for nation-building purposes, Edwin Lee’s nation-building history cannot help but closely follow the usual frameworks of Singaporean history, for instance, the founding of Singapore by the British in 1819 and the traumatic events of Separation in 1965. As a Malaysian Chinese working and living in a Malaysia dominated by Malays and pro-Malay policies – a political and social reality which could have also contributed to Wang Gungwu’s departure from the University of Malaya in 1968, Cheah’s account of nation-building through the eyes and policies of the Prime Ministers may seem cautious and non-incendiary to other historians.

Anthony Milner for instance does not appear convinced by Cheah’s nation-building account and argued that there are varieties of nation-building histories depending on the narrative and the historian. Having read a preliminary draft on the Philippines’ nation-building effort by Reynaldo Ileto – which focuses more directly on the role the historian or “historian-ideologues” plays in nation-building, Milner sees Cheah as one of many “historian-ideologues”, each with their own perception of how Malaysia’s history as a nation unfolds.28 In examining various local historical narratives and identifying their salient characteristics such as the “historic bargain” between the Malays and non-Malays, the British role, treatment of ethnic issues, the position of Melaka and the monarchy, Milner argues for more attention to be paid to the relationship between such historians and the political leaders of their time.29

Milner’s observations are valid, particularly his call for more study of the historian’s context and relationship with the leaders of his or her society. What is more interesting are his initial concerns about a nation-
building project which seemed dated by intellectual standards presumably within Southeast Asian history. A historian who has published on various political and social aspects of Malaysian history, Milner’s arguments are perhaps representative not so much of his education from Cornell, but his physical position or situation. The question is whether he would be able or willing to present similar observations – the various perceptions of the Malaysian nation-state which openly discuss sensitive issues such as the monarchy or ethnicity – if he were in Cheah’s shoes, that is as a scholar working and living in Malaysia. To be clear, this is not a criticism of Milner or other scholars with similar approaches, but more of an observation of how the immediate situation as well as the historical context of the scholar can affect the scope and direction of his or her scholarship, the questions they ask, and the arguments they put forth. Cheah himself was very aware of criticisms of his nation-building history. His position was that it was “impossible not to pay close attention to the ideas of political leaders” in a history of nation-building as not only were they elected into government, “their policies played a large part in determining the development and direction of the nation, and nation-state.”

There is no concrete evidence to link Cheah and Milner’s arguments and observations to their personal backgrounds, education and career paths. But there have been recent studies on how the context of the scholar affects his or her scholarship. Geoff Eley, a historian of Europe, finds that his approach to history was less influenced by an irrelevant undergraduate curriculum and more by the vibrant (mostly left-wing) politics during the late 1960s. Although his approach is “necessarily partial and subjective”, it is beneficial in uncovering the close yet understated relationship between the scholar (and scholarship) and his or her immediate surroundings. Reynaldo Ileto, one of the five historians of the HNB series, has also explored the relationship between scholarship and their context. He contrasted the different approaches of his mentor Oliver Wolters and the Filipino historian Teodoro Agoncillo, and suggested their approaches to the past were coloured by their personal experiences. Formerly the student who Wolters warned not to write “nationalist history”, Ileto suggests that Agoncillo’s history cannot be reduced to the “essentialist and developmentalist formulations of what nationalist historiography was all about.” In brief, to do so would be unhistorical, as it separates the processes of scholarship from the intellectual and institutional realities they are situated in.

In discussing the impact of several Southeast Asian scholars, including the late Syed Hussein Alatas, Zeus Salazar, Adrian Lapian and Charnvit Kasetsiri (the latter the remaining historian of the HNB series), Ileto noted how this group of scholars shared common experiences such as colonialism, decolonisation, nationalism and the violence which sometimes accompanied those processes. Similarly, all the five historians of the HNB series, including the protagonist Wang Gungwu, were an integral part of their countries’ nation-building efforts. They participated in similar ways, through the writing of textbooks, through the teaching of university students, through research and public commentaries on their respective country’s affairs. More crucially perhaps, all of them witnessed their country’s nation-building efforts directly as they physically resided in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand during the formative years, and at times to the potential detriment of their careers and even lives. Their perspectives may be skewed or prejudiced by their experiences – as Cheah himself has admitted, but they are nonetheless valid representations of the past and should not be saddled with the negative connotations of “nationalistic” history.

The Implications of the HNB Series

The academic baggage of “nationalistic” histories within Southeast Asian historiography comes from a very different time and context. The institutional bias against the teleological perspective of history originated during a time of rampant nationalism, when emerging nation-states needed to address the consequences of colonised empires, such as rallying diverse peoples and cultures within a territorial space which may be illogical to a common cause. History is then the tool for such a task. Wang has also noted that this particular utilisation of history is not entirely new. The various kingdoms and states of Southeast Asia have previously used three main recording traditions to make sense of their contemporary situation: the Hindu-Buddhist chronicles, the Sino-Vietnamese annals, and the Perso-Arabic tarikh and tawarikh, and various sejarah and hikayat. Wang suggest that
while such traditions are no longer in use in the region, nation-building histories can perhaps draw connections to those traditions as they all share the common trait of using the past to make sense of the present and the contemporary.

The significant difference is the introduction of professional standards expected of scholarship during and after the nineteenth century, with the establishment of a professional academic discipline. The idea of an objective history, supported by documentary evidence, undermined earlier Southeast Asian recording traditions, initially dismissing them as myths and legends but at the same time, perhaps misunderstanding the purpose and context of such traditions. Such professional standards prompted scholars such as John Bastin, John Smail, Harry Benda and Oliver Wolters to decry “nationalistic” histories that were produced to justify the existence of new nation-states because they were unprofessional – by the standards of the professional discipline of history – in their use and representations of the past. For instance, the links to the classical Southeast Asian kingdoms of Melaka or Majapahit made by local historians and politicians of the nation-states of Malaysia and Indonesia are tenuous to say the least, if not downright unsubstantiated.

The HNB series on the other hand allows for a re-examination of how historians of Southeast Asia can understand and approach national history. The five historians plus Wang Gungwu are respected scholars in their individual fields locally and internationally, and cannot be easily lumped together with the “nationalistic” historians of the decolonisation and nationalism period. Historical scholarship on Southeast Asia has been dominated by certain approaches to the region’s past. At the risk of over-generalization, those approaches usually include, in response to earlier colonial scholarship, an emphasis on uncovering local Southeast Asian perspectives and thought. A premium is placed on learning local languages and using indigenous sources. Some bemusement could be detected in Milner and Craig Reynolds’ contributing chapters to Nation-Building: Five Southeast Asian Histories regarding the Southeast Asian preoccupation with the nation-state. Reynolds for instance contrasted the Southeast Asian preoccupation with the South Asian disdain for the nation-state, although he did acknowledge the nation-state as a reality for the historians of the HNB series to confront.36

It is far too simplistic to suggest that this divide is due to a Southeast Asian or non-Southeast Asian perspective. The published nation-building histories are written in English and make use of a number of English (and other colonial) sources. Four of the five HNB historians – Taufik, Charnvit, Ileto and Lee – are in one way or another graduates of the Cornell Southeast Asian Studies programme. Cheah and Wang took their Ph.D.’s outside of the region in Australia and England respectively. So the “Southeast Asian” perspective is not easily discerned or distinguished. Hence, the focus should be on the context of the scholar and his or her scholarship, and not the scholar’s place of origin or academic credentials. Seen this way, the questions and issues raised by the HNB series offers an opportunity for Southeast Asian history and historiography to move beyond the norms and values which are representative of another time and context.

The HNB series not only expands scholarship and knowledge about one particular aspect of Southeast Asia’s past, but also makes several contributions to its evolving historiography. The five historians are tackling contemporary history and its problems, one of which is the availability and accessibility of sources. Edwin Lee’s nation-building history of Singapore is severely restricted to the use of newspapers and the relative absence of official Singapore government records, particularly to discuss decisions behind the various political, economic, and social policies. Taufik Abdullah chose to give a factual account of the events of September 30, 1965—including the actions committed and persons involved, commenting that is impossible to discover the reasons behind the actions, and hence pass judgement, without further evidence. Similarly, Cheah Boon Kheng did not dwell too long on the May 1969 communal violence, an event which fundamentally changed Malaysia’s nation-building path, choosing instead to focus on the aftermath of the riots.

Those incidents in Malaysia and Indonesia, and the various policies enacted by the Singaporean government, are arguably some of the main events in their respective nation-building histories. How then can the historian understand those events and issues with limited access to sources and documents, the lifeblood of any history? How can the historian work around this obstacle? Each of the historians have been personally involved in their country’s nation-building efforts, ostensibly going against the objective detachment of a
professional historian from his or her object of study. These are some of the historiographical questions raised by the HNB series and they are not limited to the field of Southeast Asian historiography, but to historiography in general.

In another paper contributed to the 2002 ISEAS seminar, Singaporean historian Albert Lau recounted his own experiences in researching the 1965 Separation of Singapore from Malaysia.39 Acknowledging that his personal perspective and the availability of sources play a role in determining his representation, Lau suggests that in the end, all that the historian can do is maintain the basic principles of the historical discipline, which is to represent the past as accurately and objectively as possible. This is necessary even if accuracy and objectivity may be compromised by the lack of sources and the personal prejudices of the historian, both of which are unavoidable.40 It would perhaps be a bigger loss to not even attempt to research and write or to wait for sources to be available at a later date, as fruitful debates and discussions can only occur over presented papers with substantial content.

Seen this way, the role of the historian becomes even more significant. One of the questions posed by Wang in his initial proposal for the HNB series is whether the historian should wait until more sources and materials become available, so as to present the past as accurately as possible. Wang and the five historians decided that enough time has passed for historians to look at nation-building histories, and as noted earlier in this paper, the nation-building histories offered by the HNB series are a crucial complement to the abundant existing social scientific literature on Southeast Asian nation-state and nationalism. Going by the collected papers presented at the 2002 ISEAS conference, the published and drafted histories offered by the HNB series have already provoked fruitful discussions over several historiographical questions concerning the nation-state, the role of the historian in nation-building, and the problems posed by contemporary history. The historian then does not merely exist to present some objective and detached perspective of the past, but to also actively push the boundaries of history and historiography as well as their respective fields of study by researching, writing and engaging with their audiences. The above discussion is admittedly limited and more can be done, especially with regards to the detailed studies of the connections between the intellectual outlook and physical situations of the five HNB historians as well as Wang Gungwu. There are still two more volumes to be published, and it will be interesting to read how Charnvit and Ileto approach the nation-building efforts of Thailand and the Philippines.41

In the meantime, the available volumes of the HNB series represent an attempt by Southeast Asians to confront and address the reality of their immediate environment – that is, the Southeast Asian nation-state, which still demands scholarly attention despite current regionalisation and globalisation trends. In doing so, the historians and histories of the HNB series have expanded our knowledge of Southeast Asian history as well as its historiography. The historians of the HNB series have and are grappling with historiographical issues which go beyond the field of Southeast Asian history. In doing so, the questions and issues posed by the HNB series encourage present-day historians to rethink accepted norms within Southeast Asian history as well as history in general, particularly the role and purpose of the historian within the nation-state, and the relationship between the historian or scholar and his or her immediate situation.
End Notes

5. Thongchai Winichakul, “Writing at the Interstices: Southeast Asian Historians and Postnational Histories in Southeast Asia,” in *New Terrains in Southeast Asian History*, ed. Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Liok Ee (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003), 6 and fn.12. I am tweaking Thongchai (and Hong Lysa’s) definition of home scholar slightly. Thongchai defines the home scholar as “scholars (historians) of the home, by which [he] mean[s] those who study the country, region, or location they consider their home, and whose works are read, debated, and become, in a sustained manner, part of the scholarly discourse and cultural politics of their home society.” I would suggest that the home scholar has the above characteristics and crucially, is also one who works and lives in the country they call home, hence subjected directly to the limitations and opportunities in said society.
The “History of Nation-Building” Series


12 Ibid., 9-10

13 Ibid., 13.


17 See essays by Wang on Malay/Malaysian nationalism in Community and nation: essays on Southeast Asia and the Chinese, selected by Anthony Reid (Singapore: Published for the Asian Studies Association of Australia by Heinemann Educational Books Asia, 1981).

18 Wang, Bind Us In Time, viii.

19 Ibid., vii.

20 Ibid.


25 Lee’s publications include the published version of his PhD dissertation on The British as rulers governing multi-racial Singapore 1867-1914 (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1991), his MA thesis on The towkays of Sabah: Chinese leadership and indigenous challenge in the last phase of British rule (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1976).


27 Taufik, Indonesia, 570


29 Ibid., 155-156.

30 Ibid., 117.

31 Cheah, Malaysia, 92


35 For instance, Taufik Abdullah incurred the wrath of the Soeharto government and suffered a demotion with LIPI and Charnvit Kasetsiri had to leave Thailand in the aftermath of the Thai army crackdown of protesters in Thammasat University in the October 1976 Incident.


37 A situation which arguably does not exist as more present-day historians of Southeast Asia continue a post-WWII trend to mine indigenous literary sources for information about the past.

38 Craig Reynolds, “Nation and State in Histories of Nation-Building, with Special Reference to Thailand,” in Nation-Building, 21.


41 Charnvit Kasetsiri and Reynaldo Ileto are both graduates from Cornell in the early 1970s. Both has published and commented on their respective nation-state’s histories. Charnvit is well-known for being one of the earliest Thai historians to question the teleology of Thai national history, while Ileto is known for using non-elite perspectives to look at key events in Filipino history.