



The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History

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The word “emergence” is a fraught term, appearing in scholarly discourse on Southeast Asia on a seemingly regular basis, and showing up in contemporary articles about the region from a wide variety of sources as well. For example, read an article about the avian flu epidemic or developing economies in Asia, and one is likely to encounter the word “emergence”, as in “emerging diseases” or “emerging markets.” The word has implicit dramatic value, suggesting that an abstraction is being defined in an active way by being held up to the light and away from the shadows of the past. More often than not, the word is used with regard to developing regions or countries, although it has lost some of its literal punch and it is easy to gloss over it without absorbing its implications. The title of the text, therefore, envisions an historical juncture that demarcates the pre-modern from the modern, while spanning three hundred years of Southeast Asian history.

The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia, edited by Norman Owen, intends to serve as a kind of companion to another general historical reference of Southeast Asian studies, *In Search of Southeast Asia*, edited by David Steinberg (2nd edition 1997, University of Hawaii Press), which is comprised of a more detailed historical survey of the region in the modern period. One of the measurements of this text, therefore, will be its utility for the student of the region and its ability to synthesize a wide field of scholarship into a distilled essence by its essential authorial personalities – in this case eight names that have come to be relatively synonymous with the national histories of the countries they study, such as David Chandler (Cambodia), Norman Owen (the Philippines), William R. Roff (Malaysia), David Joel Steinberg (the Philippines), Jean Gelman Taylor (Indonesia), Robert Taylor (Burma), Alexander Woodside (Vietnam) and David K. Wyatt (Thailand) . The objective of the project, according to the preface, was to try to “break the original book (*In Search of Southeast Asia*) completely open, take a fresh look at modern Southeast Asian history, and draft a shorter, more accessible text for the twenty-first century.” (p. xiv).

The authors make clear, then, that we are no longer “in search of Southeast Asia” because as a discrete unit, it has emerged, blinking in the dazzling light of the twenty-first century, a century in which “secular nationalism” has triumphed across much of Southeast Asia and, perhaps, the entire globe. Two photographs included in the text make this startling transformation clearer: one of Kuala Lumpur circa 1880 (p.

2) and the other of the same city today (p. 3). The comparison of the two photographs is an impressive illustration of the inexorable growth and advancement of economics, population, and the human imagination.

The book is smartly designed, its cover graced with an image culled from an old travel poster depicting Java for an airline company. The text is divided into five sections. "Modernity" (Part 1) begins in the eighteenth century and colonialism's effects are related in parts 2, 3 and 4, while the final part, called "Coping with Independence and Interdependence" details the outcome of the colonial projects in the region and the strategies used to adapt to independence. The book contains six maps and two demographic tables. It is prefaced with information on the changing place-names of the region and an advisory section on how to use the book. Illustrations are peppered liberally throughout the text, which contribute effectively to an understanding of the key points of each chapter. Following each section and subsection is an abbreviated bibliography of "further readings" to guide the reader who would like more information about the material covered in the section.

While the overall aim of this text is ambitious, it runs the risk of remaining a "coffee-table" reference for those who are more familiar with the histories of the countries that comprise Southeast Asia. However, while students of the region have their own foci and their own references, for the layperson this volume would provide undoubtedly smooth entry into the field in a way that does not tax the attention span, but without some of the deeper issues from the historiography of the region. The style, therefore, is fluid and readable and surprisingly consistent, given the range of authorial voices and styles, and the textbook qualities, for example, photographs and clear subject headings, make this book a valuable and coherent addition to a Southeast Asian history library.

Its drawbacks are generally in keeping with what one might expect from a book that deals with a broadly defined region, a multiplicity of individual national histories and a complexity of historical issues. In keeping with its objective, it is certainly an "accessible" text, with fairly straightforward historical divisions with highly synthesized segments. However, brevity is not always a virtue in historical accounts. For example, chapter six, "Siam: From Ayutthaya to Bangkok" covers a period of dramatic and generally complicated historical events in a mere twelve pages and two photographs.

Generally, the picture of modern Southeast Asia that emerges in the text is a politically balanced one, with a few notable exceptions. For example, in "The Dark Side of Development" (p. 402), the less-than-subtle heading aside, the reader is treated to the standard and simplified litany of complaints that tend to deprive the countries of Southeast Asia of their often staggering modern achievements, or of their ability to "cope" with such problems: i.e., unimaginable poverty, crime, drugs, urban squalor, corruption, prostitution. While these are all obviously present in modern Southeast Asia, they are also found throughout the developed world as well. The implication is that these aspects of life in Southeast Asia are the consequences of development and are, hence, a relatively new phenomenon. In this section, then, is it really necessary to refer to Prime Minister Tanom (Thailand), Presidents Marcos and Estrada (the Philippines), and President Suharto (Indonesia) as "the biggest rogues" [who were] "eventually overthrown"? (p. 403-404) Or, in the same way, is it finally

satisfying for the reader to find in a single paragraph dedicated to the topic that the rise of the notorious commercial sex industry in Thailand is simply attributable to American G.I.'s on R&R during the Vietnam War? (p. 405).

In short, the oversimplifications in this section in particular detract from an otherwise readable book, rather than clarify or correct firmly entrenched preconceptions (and misperceptions) about the region today. These are also illustrative of the problems that a succinct summary of historical trends and developments presents along with the complex picture of modern Southeast Asia. In its mix of conversational and academic styles, the book's overall intent remains clear, but in the provocative rhetorical leaps described above, it highlights the problem of a synthesis of academic thought on an enormous topic with clear political undertones. These final, political intrusions in the text, therefore, were hopefully intended to stimulate debate on the regions current political features. For the student of Southeast Asia, though, it is likely that the editorial position that has been taken with regard to the oversimplified problems that beset modernizing Southeast Asia (and, indeed, the entire world), is merely "preaching to the choir."

Nonetheless, the overall impression of *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia* is a positive one. It serves as an excellent reference and introductory text to the modern period in the region, and it nicely, if at times imperfectly, consolidates critical historical and political developments that characterize the region today.