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What is Southeast Asia?

THERE is no better place to start than with a discussion of size and scale. For a newcomer to Southeast Asian history the past is more confusing than the jumbled present. Yet even when considering the present an outsider has the greatest difficulty in visualising just how large an area Southeast Asia occupies in geographical terms, and how substantial is the size of its population. The fact that Indonesia's population is nearly one hundred and seventy million may be well known. But how often is this fact recognised as meaning that Indonesia has the *fifth* largest population in the world? Only China, India, the Soviet Union, and the United States outstrip Indonesia in terms of population. And how many casual observers think of a now united Vietnam of over sixty million persons as having a substantially larger population than such countries as Spain (thirty-nine million), Egypt (forty-seven million), Poland (thirty-seven million), or Canada (twenty-five million)? Yet Vietnam is only one of four Southeast Asian states, in addition to Indonesia, whose populations are each in excess of thirty million. Figures can only be approximate where population is concerned, but of the world's population in the late 1980s Southeast Asia accounted for no less than 8 percent. The significance of this percentage is made clear when the population of China is expressed as a percentage of the world's total. China, the world's most populous country, accounts for between 20 and 25 per cent of the total. Against this yardstick alone, therefore, the population of the Southeast Asian region is substantial indeed.

Size by itself does not mean power, and this is as true for contemporary Southeast Asia as it was for other countries and regions in the past. Whatever the power that an individual Southeast Asian state can exert within its own borders, or outside them, none of the

countries in the region has yet developed the global power that was once exerted by some European powers, such as Britain in its imperial heyday, or by the superpowers of the last quarter of the twentieth century. Here, right away, is a major question for historians of Southeast Asia to answer: Why has the Southeast Asian region, despite its size, played so small a part in the shifts of global power over the past two thousand years?

The answer, or more correctly answers, to this question will need to take account of many factors, not all of them agreed among those who make it their business to study the Southeast Asian region. To a great extent, moreover, the answers will point to the need to think about Southeast Asia in terms that will often seem surprising for those whose cultural background has been strongly influenced by Europe. Here is where scale as well as size deserves attention.

When dealing with the unknown or little-known there is a strong tendency to think of cities, countries, or groups of people as being in some way smaller in size and importance than is the case for better-known areas and peoples. In the same fashion there is a familiar readiness to discount the achievements of unfamiliar civilisations by comparison with the presumed importance of our own society and cultural traditions. This may be less of a feature of life today than it was a hundred years ago when the exploring European and his successors, the administrators, missionaries, planters and men of commerce had not the slightest doubt about their own superiority. Nonetheless, the problem remains today as Southeast Asia is still an unfamiliar area to most who live outside its boundaries.

Because we know that London and Paris are major cities today, and that these are the modern successors of settlements dating back to Roman times, our tendency is to think of their always having been large and important. *Londinium* was important in Roman times, possibly more so than the settlement of *Lutetia*, which was to change its name to Paris in the fourth century. But because of our familiarity with the name London it is hard, perhaps, to visualise just how small this centre was in Roman times and through to the period of the Norman Conquest. When William of Normandy was crowned in Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day 1066 London still did not enjoy the status of being England's royal city. No more than 35,000 persons lived in the ill-kept streets of this medieval city; yet this is scarcely the image London summons up.

At the same time, in the then unknown land of Cambodia—unknown that is to the men and women of Europe—a population of more than a million grouped around and supported a city that could rival and surpass any then existing in Europe for its architectural

achievement, its sophisticated water engineering, and its capacity to produce a regular harvest of three rice crops each year. This was the city of Angkor from whose ruins with their accompanying rich stock of inscriptions we have come to know of a civilisation of remarkable achievement and high technological complexity. But whereas the wonders of Europe, of Rome and Venice, of Paris and London, and a dozen other major cities, have preoccupied scholars and interested observers for hundreds of years, the great Cambodian city of Angkor, the centre of a powerful empire for nearly six centuries, only became part of Western consciousness in the nineteenth century, and then only slowly. Hard though it may be to believe nowadays, the first European visitor to Angkor in the mid-nineteenth century, a missionary priest named Father Bouillevaux, was unimpressed by what he saw.

The point may be made over and over again. Athens, Thebes, and Sparta were tiny states, nevertheless they live in the minds of those who study European history for the contributions that they made to the development of European culture, in that term's broadest sense. By contrast, it is still rare outside either specialist circles, or among the ranks of the exceedingly well travelled, to find any awareness of the empire of Pagan, a centre of Burmese power during the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries and the site of a temple complex that some believe rivals the buildings of Angkor. Those who are the inheritors of the Western tradition are not immediately receptive to the religious and cultural underpinnings of the societies that built Pagan and Angkor. The same problem of a lack of immediate sympathy is apparent when attention turns to other early empires of Southeast Asia. It is easier to conjure up a picture, accurate or otherwise, of Crusaders travelling to the Holy Land than it is to picture the heroic navigational feats of Malay sailors who voyaged to China and made the Sumatra-based empire of Srivijaya such a powerful force in early Southeast Asian history.

The contrast between our awareness of Europe and unawareness of Southeast Asia should not be stressed beyond reason. There are a great many good reasons why it is easier to understand segments of European history and why real and continuing difficulties stand in the way of acquiring a similar background awareness of the historical process in Southeast Asia. To gain more than a superficial knowledge of early Southeast Asian history requires time, dedication, and a readiness to learn a surprisingly large range of languages. All this is required for the study of problems that may often seem lacking in general interest. Generations of scholars have laboured in some cases to leave little more than fragments for incorporation in the overall fabric of the region's history. For the

general student there is, fortunately, some middle ground between a broad lack of knowledge and scholarly devotion to detail that is, however admirable, the preserve of the specialist.

So far in this introductory chapter the term Southeast Asia has been used in a general, undifferentiated fashion. Fifty years ago this would have caused surprise, for only a few persons at that time thought and spoke about 'Southeast Asia'. Some writers used the term 'Further India' to describe sections of Southeast Asia, as if all that was to be found beyond the Bay of Bengal was the Indian subcontinent on a smaller scale. It is only necessary to think of the influence that China has had over the formation of Vietnamese cultural life, or of the extent to which the Philippines has acquired a very special character because of the long-term Spanish influence in those islands, to realise how inappropriate the term 'Further India' is. Another general description that was used before the Second World War was 'Asia of the Monsoons', a term deriving from the monsoon weather pattern that is important in almost all of Southeast Asia. This term, used by geographers most particularly, did not relate merely to the area that modern scholars have termed Southeast Asia, for Ceylon and parts of India, as well as areas of southern China, might equally well be described as monsoon lands.

For the most part, however, neither the foreigners who worked in Southeast Asia before the Second World War, whether as scholars or otherwise, nor the indigenous inhabitants of the countries of Southeast Asia, thought about the region in general terms. The general tendency to do so came with the Second World War when, as a result of military circumstances, the concept of a Southeast Asian region began to take hold. From a strategic military point of view it was apparent that an area existed that was not India, nor China, nor part of the Pacific. Instead, a sense began to grow that Brunei, Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia—to use modern names rather than those different ones which, in some cases, were current in the early 1940s—formed some kind of geographical unit. The omission of the Philippines is deliberate, at this stage, for the question of whether or not the Philippines formed part of Southeast Asia was to remain a matter of scholarly uncertainty as late as the 1960s.

The sense of Southeast Asia being a geographical and cultural unit did not, of course, depend solely upon strategic thinking. Already, in the 1920s and 1930s, anthropologists and historians had begun to take account of the similarities that could be found between one region of what we now call Southeast Asia and another. Similarities in the rituals used by the various royal courts throughout mainland Southeast Asia were recognised as an in-

dication of a common inheritance or tradition. Basic similarities in family structure were found to exist over a wide area. And for all of the evidence that was accumulating of the importance of foreign ideas, and of foreigners, throughout Southeast Asia's long history, historians had begun assembling the evidence that showed a regional pattern of international relations within Southeast Asia from its earliest historical periods. Southeast Asia was not, in other words, merely a region that sustained the impact of its greater neighbours, China and India. Empires within the region waxed and waned and at various times links were established between the mainland and the islands of the Indonesian Archipelago involving both politics and trade.

With the end of the Second World War the tendency to think of Southeast Asia as a whole gained even greater currency as there was a sharp increase in the amount of scholarly attention given to the region. Now, more than ever before, the underlying similarities to be found throughout a wide range of the region were stressed by historians, anthropologists, political scientists, and linguists, to mention only the prominent academic disciplines. To sense why these scholars found their work so exciting, and to emphasise the way in which the picture of Southeast Asia as a unit deserving of study in its own right emerged, it is useful to review briefly some of the features of the region that are now taken for granted but which only gained general recognition in the post-war period.

Probably most important was the recognition that the countries of Southeast Asia were neither 'little Indias' nor 'little Chinas'. The impact of those two great countries on the Southeast Asian region cannot be dismissed, though the degree and character of their influence is still debated, but the essential right of Southeast Asian countries to be considered culturally independent units was generally established. To put the matter in another fashion, if the tendency in the past had been to think of Southeast Asia as an area shaped by external cultural values, most particularly those of India and China, scholars now paid just as much attention to the strength and importance of indigenous cultural traditions. Where Indian or Chinese influence did play a major part in the development of Southeast Asian art, or religion, or political theory, stress began to be placed on the extent to which Burmese, Cambodians, Indonesians, and others adapted these foreign ideas to suit their own needs and values. The importance of Indian religious concepts, for instance, must be recognised for a broad area of Southeast Asia. But one of the most essential features of Hinduism, the caste system, was never adopted in the countries outside India. Indian artistic and architectural concepts played an important part in the

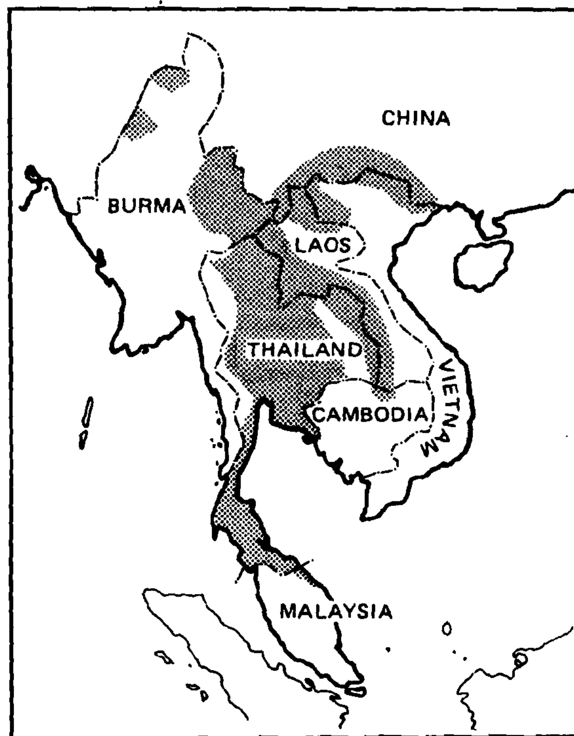
development of Southeast Asian art. Yet the glories of Pagan, Angkor, and the temple complexes of Java stem from their own individual character, just as the exquisite Buddha images that were created in Thailand are quite different from the images to be found in India. Even in Vietnam, where dependence upon an external, Chinese cultural tradition has clearly been more significant than elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the strength of non-Chinese cultural life, particularly below the level of the court, belies any picture of that country as a mere receiver of ideas, unable to offer traditions of its own.

Southeast Asian and foreign scholars alike came to recognise that Indian and Chinese influence had been overemphasised in the past and that insufficient attention had been paid to fundamental similarities existing in the societies making up the region. While uniformity most certainly is not present throughout the societies of Southeast Asia, certain broad similarities spread across a wide area are striking. The importance of the nuclear or individual family in much of Southeast Asia, as opposed to the importance placed on the extended family in India, was one of these broad similarities found over much of the region. So, too, the generally important place allotted women in the peasant society of traditional Southeast Asia reflected both a widespread value and a contrast with both Indian and Chinese societies.

Another factor leading to interest in the Southeast Asian region as a whole was the recognition of how much linguistic unity there was from area to area, cutting right across the boundaries set, in many cases, by colonial powers. There are still ill-informed people who have not shed the illusions fostered by the former colonial powers which sought to emphasise disunity rather than to recognise broad similarities. So, at the level of a single country, there are some who still speak and write as if the Vietnamese of northern Vietnam speak a different language than the Vietnamese of the southern regions of that country. The reality is that Vietnam, like almost any other country, has dialectical variations from region to region. But, if linguistic unity is taken as a significant factor indicating basic broader social unities, then Vietnam despite its political history is unified indeed. The difference between the Vietnamese spoken in the north of that country and the Vietnamese to be heard in the south is certainly no greater than the difference between 'educated southern English' and broad Scots. And the difference is a great deal less than that to be found between the dialects of northern and southern Italy.

When looking at areas larger than a single country such as Vietnam, the presence of broad linguistic unity is more striking.

Some of this unity is apparent only to the most skilled scholars. This is the case with the quite recent suggestion that modern Vietnamese and Khmer (or Cambodian) have a common, if very distant, linguistic ancestor. For the non-specialist this is difficult to comprehend, in part because of the fact that of these languages Vietnamese is tonal, while Khmer is non-tonal. But a non-specialist can respond to the striking fact that the Tai language, admittedly with considerable dialectical variations, is spoken not only in Thailand, but in parts of southern China, in Vietnam, in the Shan states of Burma, in Laos, in both western and northeastern Cambodia, and, though this is less and less the case today, in the extreme north of peninsular Malaysia. Here is a situation full of interest and im-



Map 1 Mainland Southeast Asia: Distribution of Tai Speaking Peoples
The Tai language is not only the principal language of the population of Thailand. It is, in addition, spoken widely by the Shans of Burma, by the lowland population of Laos, and in the northern parts of Vietnam, Cambodia and Malaysia. Tai speakers are also to be found in the extreme south of China.

portance. That the Tai language has such a broad distribution alerts us to the often artificial character of the border lines drawn on maps, for if a common language were taken as a basis for establishing a state then to divide the lowland areas of Laos from Thailand seems hard to justify. At the same time, an awareness of the presence of Tai-speaking persons over such a wide area of Southeast Asia brings a recognition of the extent to which many of the states of modern Southeast Asia are troubled by disunity resulting from the presence within their frontiers of minority groups. Their interests, including their linguistic interest, are not shared by the majority or dominant and governing group. Many Tai-speaking Shans in Burma, to take only one example, continue in modern times as in the past to resist control by the Burmans who are their long-time rivals, speaking a different language.

Another most important instance of linguistic unity is the broad spread of the Indonesian/Malay language. Here again the dialectical differences from region to region are considerable but variants of this basic language are spoken throughout modern Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia, and in the southern Philippines, as well as along the southern coastal regions of Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam where there are long-established Indonesian/Malay-speaking settlements.

Yet just as the national motto of Indonesia is 'Unity in Diversity', the similarities and unities that have just been described should not blind a student of Southeast Asia to the profound differences that do exist from place to place and between one ethnic group and another. Indeed, a study of the history of Southeast Asia raises some of the most difficult issues of judgement in this regard. What should be emphasised for a region or for a period, the unities or the differences? And to what extent should we concentrate on the continuities that so often seem a feature of Southeast Asian history rather than paying attention to the discontinuities, to the breaks with the past and the changes that disturb any suggestion that we are dealing with an area in which traditional patterns are still dominant and little affected by the modern world?

There can be no certain and agreed answer to any of these questions, for what is involved is judgement, whether individual or collective, and judgement will always be open to argument. Judgement will also always be subject to fashion and there is no doubt that historical and anthropological fashions, to mention only two scholarly disciplines, are as changeable, if not quite as frequently, as fashions in clothes. Yet there might be some sort of general agreement about the following propositions. The study of Southeast Asia over the past thirty years has contributed greatly to

the acceptance that this is a region deserving attention as a whole and as an entity separate from the cultures of South Asia and China. To think of Southeast Asia in this framework is very much a product of the post-Second World War years and contrasts considerably with the way that scholars approached the region in earlier periods. Now that the unities and similarities have been generally recognised, however, it remains important to give due attention to the differences that do set geographical region apart from geographical region, ethnic group apart from ethnic group, and which, for a traveller, so often make the physical transition from one area of Southeast Asia to another an easily and sharply perceived experience.

The sheer size of the geographical region making up Southeast Asia, stretching over more than thirty-five degrees of latitude and nearly fifty degrees of longitude, prepares us for its immensely varied geographical character. If population has traditionally been concentrated in lowland settlements, along the seacoasts and by rivers and lakes, this only tells part of the story of geography and settlement patterns. The demands of high-density settlement in northern Vietnam, for instance, have led to a very different approach to agriculture along the Red River from that followed by the much less concentrated Vietnamese population in the Mekong River delta. Yet even along the lower Mekong River a traveller, only a few years ago, could see dramatic evidence of the difference that existed between the physical landscape of Cambodia and southern Vietnam, as the result of differing population pressures in those neighbouring regions and of differing values about the aims to be pursued by an agricultural population. To drive from Phnom Penh to the city that was then called Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) was to pass, sharply, from one landscape to another. On the Cambodian side of the frontier there was untilled land, while the land that was under cultivation was cropped once a year. Scattered clumps of sugar palms gave a sense of scale to the landscape and emphasised that all other vegetation had not been sacrificed to the growing of rice. Once over the frontier, however, the scene changed immediately. Even to a casual observer it was apparent that a very different pattern of agriculture was followed, one that seemingly left no land untilled and grew its two rice crops each year on land from which the sugar palms had been removed so that the landscape stretching away to the horizon was unmarked by any vertical features.

The contrasts between the physical appearance of the Mekong delta region of Cambodia and Vietnam are essentially those resulting from differing approaches to agriculture. Even more striking are the contrasts that stem directly from basic geography,

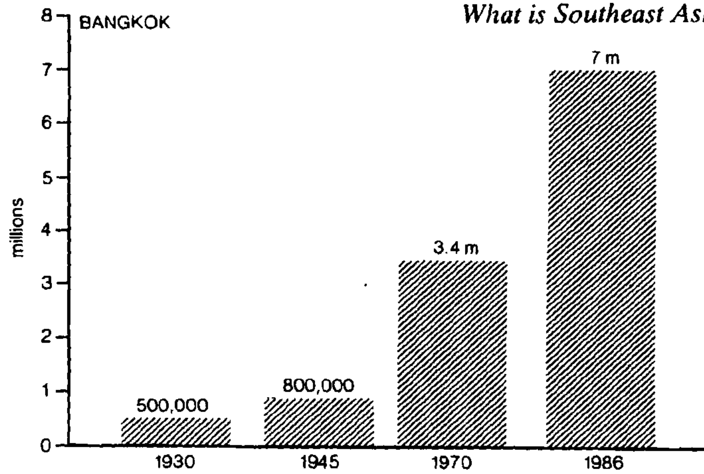
from the difference between hill and valley and between those areas favoured by climate and those where rainfall is uncertain and infrequent. Almost all of Southeast Asia lies in the tropical zone, yet this does not mean that tropical abundance is universal. For those hill peoples who live in areas of the upland regions of Thailand, Burma, and Laos the pattern of life dictated by their physical environment has little reminiscent of the tropical lushness that, on occasion, may be typical of existence in more favoured regions.

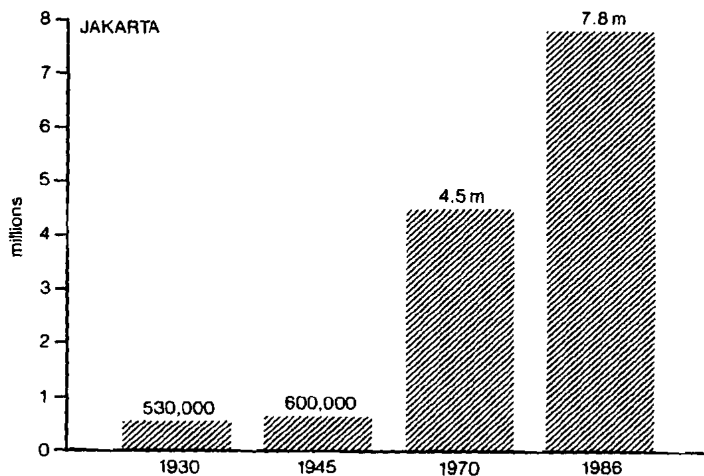
The whole concept of Southeast Asia as an area of lushness, growth, and fecundity needs qualification. It can be all of these things, but only if such factors as population pressure do not intrude and when the land is fertile and cultivable. Nothing is more deceptive than the endless green of ripening crops on the island of Java where an ever-increasing population, perhaps exceeding 80 million in the early 1980s, is jammed into an area little different from England, where a population half the size benefits from the economic diversification of a developed society. Equally deceptive are the rolling hills covered with rain forest of peninsular Malaysia. Seen from an aircraft the forests of West Malaysia run away to the horizon, unbroken by roads or settlement. There is timber wealth here, but little promise of easy agricultural expansion for a growing population.

From the dry zone of Burma to the snow-covered mountains of Irian Jaya (West New Guinea), and from the rolling pastoral grasslands of northwestern Vietnam to the steep terraced rice lands of the Philippine Islands, Southeast Asia is a conglomerate of geographical and agricultural contrasts.

Southeast Asia is an area of many other contrasts. One of the most obvious for a modern traveller in the region is that between city and country. The growth of Southeast Asia's cities has been one of the most striking features of developments in the twentieth century, particularly since the Second World War. A few examples make clear how dramatic the changes have been. Bangkok in the early 1980s has a population of more than 6 million inhabitants. Just over a century ago the *total* population of Thailand was only 6 million persons. As recently as 1960 the estimated population of Bangkok was less than 1½ million inhabitants. The example of Bangkok has its parallels elsewhere in the rapid growth in the size of Jakarta, of Singapore, of Phnom Penh before the exodus of population in 1975, of Saigon, and of many provincial urban centres.

These fast-growing Asian cities are magnets for the rural inhabitants who flock out of the country, where they often see little hope of change and virtually no prospect of prosperity. For them the urban centres, however miserable conditions may be, appear to





Graph 1 Rapid Urban Growth in Southeast Asia
A Tale of Two Cities: Bangkok and Jakarta

Rapid urban growth has been a striking feature of Southeast Asia's modern history, particularly since the Second World War. Developments in Bangkok and Jakarta exemplify this situation. At the end of the Second World War both these cities had populations of less than a million. Twenty-five years later, Bangkok's population had quadrupled and Jakarta's had grown by more than six times its 1945 figure.

The continuing growth of Southeast Asia's primate cities places tremendous strains on governments faced with the need to provide services for their populations and to find work for those seeking employment.

offer some hope of personal advancement. Such hopes often cruelly evaporate in the face of unemployment, over-crowding, and an inadequate system of city services. Yet nothing could better illustrate the contrast between city and country in modern Southeast Asia than the continuing migration of rural inhabitants into the urban areas. For this migration is, in considerable part, a reaction against the life offered in the countryside with its limited horizons, its frequent drudgery and, in the eyes of many younger men and women, the limitation of tradition-bound existence. The disadvantages of life far from the cities has, for the rural and provincial population of Southeast Asia, been made all the clearer by the communications revolution that has placed a transistor in almost every household's dwelling, and by the greater availability of transport that has made visits from one area of a country to another so much more readily possible.

Richness and poverty, development and a lack of development, these and many other social contrasts stand out more clearly in Southeast Asia than in those areas of the world that benefited from the great industrial changes of the nineteenth century. If Southeast Asia is also an area that has been marked by a notable degree of political instability, this is scarcely to be wondered at in terms of the broad range of unresolved problems—in almost every aspect of life—that have confronted those who govern, and those who wish to govern, since the countries of the region attained independence after the Second World War. The one exception to this observation, Thailand, was never under European colonial rule. In terms of the problems Thailand has faced and faces, however, its historical experience has many parallels with the former colonial territories.

Here, to return for a moment to similarities present among the countries of Southeast Asia, is another important reason for thinking about the region as a whole rather than solely in terms of individual countries. With the exception of Thailand that has just been noted, all of the other countries of Southeast Asia sustained varying periods of colonial rule. What were the similarities and differences to be found in this common experience? Did it matter whether the alien colonial power was Britain, or France, or Holland, or the United States? And why did some colonial regimes leave peacefully while others fought bitter wars to try and remain?

To refer to the colonial period in Southeast Asia is to raise another much-debated historical problem: how much attention should be given to the colonial element in Southeast Asian history? The answer will vary from person to person and from period to period. The realisation that too often in the past Southeast Asians were excluded from their own history by the non-Southeast Asians

who wrote about the region has had a healthy effect so that most historians are aware of the importance of essentially Southeast Asian developments and the role played by Southeast Asians in them even if they continue to see some value in discussing the part played by Europeans and others who came to seek power and fortune in the area.

What will be examined in this book, then, is an immensely varied region marked by some notable unities and containing great diversity. An attempt will be made to discover the factors that have been important in determining why Southeast Asia has its present character and why it is that such sharply differing political developments have occurred in countries that at first glance seem to possess similar historical backgrounds. The region that is the setting for the events and developments we consider will sometimes stagger us by the richness of its diversity. To take one further example underlining this point, the Southeast Asian area continues to be most diverse in its religious character. Islam is strong in the maritime regions and Theravada Buddhism is the national religion of Thailand, as it was in Cambodia until recently. Some sections of the area are strongly Christian, most notably the Philippines, but in other areas a basic animism is the most fundamental of the population's religious beliefs. Even having mentioned these religions is to give a most incomplete catalogue. There are followers of Hinduism, not only the descendants of Indian immigrants but the indigenous populations of Bali and Lombok in Indonesia. Communism is the secular religion of Vietnam, but it is not hard to sense the continuing presence of some Confucian values in Vietnamese society.

For all the diversity we encounter we will still find that there are important common themes in the historical experience of the countries making up the region. Most particularly as we approach the modern period of Southeast Asian history we will find that the problems faced by peoples seeking independence and then of governments seeking to operate within independent states often possess great similarities, even if the attempted solutions to these problems are greatly different in their character.

With its rich past and sometimes turbulent present Southeast Asia is a region full of interest for a casual observer as well as to those who have made its study their lifetime task. An awareness of Southeast Asia's history will not provide any certain guide to future developments in the region, for that can never be history's task. But a review of the area's history will illuminate the present, making clear why the politics of one country are so different from those of another, or why the region as a whole has, in so many ways and over such a long period, been subject to strong external influence.

1 The Sultan Mosque, Singapore
Islam is one of the major religions in Southeast Asia, and the dominant religion in Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia. Increasingly, the architectural forms used for Islamic mosques in Southeast Asia show clear borrowings from the Middle East, as in this photograph of the Sultan Mosque in Singapore.

Above all, an awareness of Southeast Asia's history provides an insight into the life and beliefs of a large and fascinating segment of the world's population, which in cultural achievement, quite apart from contemporary political interest, deserves a much greater degree of attention than it has yet received. In an era which has seen the tragic results of a lack of knowledge of the political and cultural background to developments in more than one Southeast Asian country, there is an even greater incentive to learn something of the broad lines of historical development that have made Southeast Asia what it is today.