

Project Southeast Asia



“Contemporary Issues in Southeast Asia”
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Opening Panel: **Past and Future Directions in Southeast Asian Studies**

1. Redefining Southeast Asia and its position in the word: an interdisciplinary perspective

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What is the validity of Southeast Asia as an area of study? Is it purely an analytical construct created in European “Orient institutes” against the backdrop of western imperialism? An impressionistic glance at the map of present-day Southeast Asia seems to suggest so. All modern national borders are products of European imperialism, accounting for arbitrary divisions such as those between Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, Myanmar and northeast India, and Vietnam and China. Southeast Asia’s geo-political division is essentially a western legacy created in a setting of uneven power relations. Indeed, the first endeavours to study and mentally map this region were primarily to justify the colonisation of societies perceived to be at a lower level of development. The consequences of these foundations persist into modern times and are not easily uprooted. Post- independent Southeast Asian nations still largely construct their national identities through active delimitation of their neighbours, treating their national borders as a given, rather than an anomaly. This notion permeates through national historiographies, cultural policies and mediated representations to the outside world. While debates on national identity in decolonising Southeast Asia have always been very internationally oriented, the focus was largely on global geo-political divisions, such as (former) colonies versus (former) colonisers, communism versus capitalism, and Islam versus “the West”. The cultural and historical interconnectivity of Southeast Asia, it seems, is rarely allowed its rightful place within these nation-building narratives. Despite obvious similarities in climate, geology, agricultural practices, food preparation, material culture, societal structures, ethno-linguistic affiliation, early history and ways of dealing with the colonial past, Southeast Asian governments, policy-makers and scholars still display over-particularisation and failure to approach their region in its entirety.

The necessity of treating Southeast Asia as a whole lies in the fact that many of the underlying mechanisms that continue to determine its present-day shape – such as agrarian-based economic structures, complex relations between coastal and inland populations, and patron-client networks of power consolidation – predate European intervention (and were often exploited by it). Therefore, in spite of the region’s colonial-era demarcated borders, we need to delve further back in time, as only by disentangling what truly defines Southeast Asia can we do justice to its people as

objects of study. From an archaeologist's point of view, such an enterprise should bring together data from various academic fields and benefit from the most recent technological developments. Only then can we meaningfully increase our understanding of the socio-economical dynamics by which Southeast Asians were able to form semi-urbanised prehistoric settlements in which wet rice cultivation, metallurgy and regional trade were practiced, colonise the island of Madagascar long before the world's better known civilisations were able to successfully undertake comparable transoceanic voyages, and construct the world's two largest religious monuments; the Borobudur and Angkor Wat. While various questions remain to be answered, interdisciplinarity and trans-nationality are keywords in solving the complex jigsaw puzzle of Southeast Asia's history and future, deconstructed from colonial impositions. My ongoing research on the role of Southeast Asia in the Indian Ocean trade networks of antiquity further illustrates these points.

2. Searching for a vernacular subaltern transregional Southeast Asian history

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The historiography of Southeast Asia has been characterised by the dominance of nationalist histories, shaped by the exigencies of the Cold War and nation-building, and skewed by the easy availability of colonial archival records (as opposed to other sources). As a result, the historiography of Southeast Asia suffers from a severe lack of vernacular, subaltern, and transregional perspectives.

This severely misrepresents the region. Southeast Asia is fundamentally characterised by an extremely high level of interconnectedness and movement. Its dense populations, cultural and social diversity, and the antiquity and frequency of inter- and extra-regional contacts make it a significant arena for the transmission and exchange of people, trade, ideas, and diseases. From as early as the 9th century, its sea lanes were already highways, part of a global network which ferried goods and ideas between the Middle East to north China and everywhere in between. The region is also highly integrated by common physical, material and social structures. Throughout, the maritime peoples shared a common climate, landscape, and staple diet, underpinned by the high degree of commercial intercourse. The region was at least as well integrated (if not more so) as southern Europe, the Levant, and North Africa by the Mediterranean.

For example, Southeast Asian nationalist political movements all have common ancestry and cause with each other and with similar movements across the world. Yet nationalist political histories and Cold War exigencies have frequently removed regional and global context from political movements. This has severely hampered any comprehensive study of how political ideas circulated within the region. The importance of global and regional influences on nationalist movements is thus largely unknown.

Furthermore, existing historiography has also been limited by a heavy focus on administrative and constitutional developments, and the rapid economic growth, of the maritime states. The influence of social, cultural and physical factors, both local

and transnational, on the shape of Southeast Asia's modern political and economic development have been neglected. In particular, historical research has been largely carried out in the language of colonial or postcolonial elites, and thus restricted to their perspectives, values, and cultural assumptions. It ignores the great variety of vernacular tongues through which ideas were filtered, interpreted, and translated into local context. As a result, the social and cultural history of the South China Sea is severely underdeveloped in comparison to the West. This has, correspondingly, had severe implications on attempts to understand the modern states of the region, hampering engagement.

This paper discusses the state of Southeast Asian historiography, explores the methodologies involved in the creation of a possible vernacular, subaltern, and transregional historiography of Southeast Asia, and uses examples drawn from studying the network of maritime port city-states to illustrate the development of such a historiography.