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Southeast Asia
A CONCISE HISTORY

Thames & Hudson
Introduction

At first glance, Southeast Asia displays great variety and important divisions. A closer look reveals underlying similarities and significant unity. For while religion, history and politics have made the peoples and nations of Southeast Asia highly diverse, the region remains essentially united by location, climate and many common cultural traits.

Nearly all of Southeast Asia is tropical, hot and humid, as travellers to the region soon discover. Monsoonal winds alternate to bring dry and wet seasons each lasting half the year, the latter bringing heavy downpours. The changing winds facilitate seaborne trade and travel, too. There are exceptions: some mountain regions have cooler temperatures, for example, and northern Vietnam experiences rather chilly winters. Near the equator, monsoons are less pronounced and rain may fall during the entire year, something which made equatorial regions, with their dense vegetation, rather inimical to early settlement. This was the case in Sumatra and Borneo, for example, which even today are less populated than other areas of the Indonesian Archipelago. In eastern Indonesia, on the other hand, the dry season lasts so long that rice cultivation is often impractical and other crops such as sago (and in modern times, maize) are the dietary staples.

A useful, if not perfect, distinction is that between mainland and maritime Southeast Asia, the former part of the Asian continent, the latter stretching across island groups toward the Pacific Ocean and Australia. The mainland region includes the states of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Burma (Myanmar). The maritime region is composed of the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore
and Brunei Darussalam. Although West Malaysia, as a peninsula, is attached to the mainland, its religion, language and history clearly link it with neighbouring islands. Historically, mainland states generally controlled rice-growing agricultural populations and maritime states profited from seaborne trade. Buddhism is, broadly speaking, the majority religion on the mainland, while Islam dominates much of maritime Southeast Asia.

Rainfall and water have influenced lifestyles throughout the region. Great rivers flow through mainland Southeast Asia, most importantly the Irrawaddy and Salween in Burma, the Chao Phraya in Thailand, the Red River in northern Vietnam, and the great system of the Mekong, rising in southern China and flowing all the way to the South China Sea. These are the traffic arteries of mainland Southeast Asia; the mountains that lie between them divide the land into discrete cultural areas with distinct languages such as Vietnamese, Khmer, Thai and Burmese.

The sea, by contrast, connects as much as it divides the separate islands of maritime Southeast Asia, enabling frequent and ready communication, aided by the seasonal winds. Thanks to this ease of contact, the cultures and languages of the Malayan Peninsula, the Indonesian Archipelago, and the Philippines are related, although minorities with distinct cultures do remain in the interior of some islands, just as they do in the mountainous areas of the mainland.

Heavy rainfall, combined with the control of water, also enables intensive irrigated rice cultivation, especially in lowland areas. Rice paddies cover a significant part of the landscape; rice – usually complemented by spicy side dishes – is the most important item in most Southeast Asians’ diets.

Southeast Asians share other common cultural elements: most use kin terms for personal address, saying not ‘you’ but a word that assigns the speaker and the addressee to a place in a hierarchical relationship. One language, Javanese, carries the feeling for hierarchy even further, using different vocabularies to indicate the relative status of the speaker and the person spoken to.

Historically, women in Southeast Asia enjoyed much social freedom, owning property, participating in the marketplace, even reigning as queens – at least before stricter world religions like Islam and Christianity limited some of their activities. Southeast Asian kinship systems, too, give equal importance to relatives from the father’s and the mother’s side, in contrast to China, for example, with its strong emphasis on the male line.
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History has introduced great diversity into Southeast Asia. The region has long been a crossroads for international trade, beginning in the first centuries after Christ with the traffic between its great neighbours, China and India. Indian influences in art, politics and religion reached much of Southeast Asia. The trade with China encouraged new economic developments and the formation of trading states; many Chinese immigrants later settled in the region.

All of the world's major religions have left their mark. (For a fuller discussion of Southeast Asian religions, see Chapter Three.) Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion of mainland Southeast Asia. Many Vietnamese are Buddhists of the Mahayana tradition; their beliefs are also mixed with Taoist and Confucianist elements, while in the south of Vietnam Theravada Buddhism is also present. Islam is the dominant religion of the Malayan Peninsula and the Indonesian Archipelago. The Philippines are overwhelmingly Christian. The Indonesian island of Bali adheres to its own unique version of Hinduism. Upland minority groups still practice natural religions, though some have, over time, adopted the religion of the lowlanders or converted to Christianity. Despite the preponderance of the major religions, indigenous elements and earlier beliefs persist everywhere.

Southeast Asia's location exposed it to Western colonial penetration from the beginning of the sixteenth century. Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, Britain, France and the USA all left their different impressions on Southeast Asian states. Most conspicuously, colonialism was responsible for today's national boundaries. These boundaries are often not historically or geographically determined, and may enclose peripheral ethnic groups living on both sides of the border.

The borders of colonial times kept Southeast Asia divided, and to an extent they still do. In recent years, however, the expansion of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) beyond its original five founding members to include all states of the region has given Southeast Asia a framework for regional cooperation. ASEAN sponsors activities to bring together not just politicians, but scholars, businessmen, artists and professionals, encouraging a sense of regional identity. If the colonial powers defined the present boundaries of Southeast Asian states, political, cultural and economic dynamics now cross those boundaries and defy limitations.
SOUTHEAST ASIA TODAY
From north to south, ten very different countries make up contemporary Southeast Asia:

**Vietnam**, with its capital at Hanoi, had in 1997 a population of nearly sixty-six million. Under French colonial rule in the nineteenth century, the country was divided from north to south into three administrative units: Tonkin (Tonking), Annam and Cochin China. The overwhelming majority of the people are Vietnamese.

**Laos** has a comparatively small population of about five million. Its capital is Vientiane, and its population is Lao, although there are important minority groups.

**Cambodia**'s people are called Khmer; smaller minority groups and significant Vietnamese and Chinese minorities also live there. In 1975 the country was renamed Kampuchea (the Khmer pronunciation of Cambodia) but after the expulsion of the Khmer Rouge from the capital city Phnom Penh in 1978, the name Cambodia was restored. Its population numbers over eleven million.

**Thailand** was called Siam from its foundation in the thirteenth century until 1939, when the new name was adopted and its people, previously called Siamese, assumed the name Thai. ‘Thailand’ was an attempt to identify the land with the Tai peoples, who are a language group including the Thai/Siamese, but also
the Lao, the Shan in Burma, and minorities in Vietnam and southern China. Thailand's capital is Bangkok. Its population of over sixty million includes a sizeable Chinese minority (perhaps eight per cent of the total population) as well as other groups.

'Burma' is an approximation of the Burmese name for the country. In 1988 the military leaders of Burma changed the name officially to Myanmar, a more correct transliteration of the same word. The capital, Rangoon, was also given its Burmese pronunciation, Yangon. The majority ethnic group are called Burmans or Myanmars. Citizens of Burma/Myanmar, who are not all Burmans, are usually called Burmese. Apart from small Indian and Chinese minorities, there are several million other Burmese who are not Burmans. The opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi still calls her country Burma; many authors follow her example. The population in 1997 was nearly forty-four million.

Indochina is a geographic expression referring to the peninsula that includes the five mainland countries of Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Burma), but usually excluding the Malayan Peninsula. French Indochina was the term adopted by the French for their Southeast Asian colonies, namely Laos, Cambodia and the three parts of Vietnam.

The Philippines take their name from the Spanish King Philip II. They were a Spanish colony until 1898, when they were taken over by the United States of America. Although Filipinos celebrate their declaration of independence of that year, they only became fully independent in 1946. The population of about seventy-four million are from a number of ethnic groups, most of them related to Malays.

Malaysia has a western part, on the Malayan Peninsula, and an eastern part, in the north of the island of Borneo. The Malayan Peninsula, colonized by Britain, became independent in 1957 as the Federation of Malaya. Then, in 1963, the British colonies of Sarawak and Sabah (on the island of Borneo) and Singapore were added to Malaya, which became Malaysia. In 1965, Singapore left Malaysia, becoming independent. About sixty per cent of the population of nearly twenty-two million are Malays, while around twenty-five per cent are ethnic Chinese. Other minorities include those of South Asian origin and groups indigenous to Borneo. The capital is Kuala Lumpur.

Singapore, an independent republic since 1965, is a city-state with over three million inhabitants. Over seventy-five per cent of them are of Chinese origin; nearly all the rest are Malays or South Asians.
**Brunei Darussalam**, an Islamic sultanate that gave its name to the island of Borneo, has a population of just over three hundred thousand. Most of its inhabitants are Malays, but there is a Chinese minority of perhaps twenty per cent of the population. It was a British protectorate until 1984. The capital is Bandar Seri Begawan.

**Indonesia** declared independence in 1945. Four years later its sovereignty was finally recognized by the Netherlands. It covers the territory of the former Netherlands Indies or Dutch East Indies. Its capital, Jakarta, was called Batavia in Dutch colonial times. The largest country in Southeast Asia and one of the largest in the world, it has a population of over two hundred million, while its islands extend over an area comparable to that of Europe or the United States of America. Indonesians belong to many ethnic groups, the largest of which are Javanese, Sundanese, Balinese, Madurese, Minangkabaus and Bugis, though no group forms more than half of the population. Nearly all speak languages related to Malay, and the national language, *Bahasa Indonesia*, is practically identical to that of Malaysia, *Bahasa Malaysia* (modern Malay).

**East Timor**, a former Portuguese colony whose capital is Dili, was absorbed by Indonesia in 1975, but this annexation was not recognized, for example, by the European Union or the United Nations. In a plebiscite held in August 1999, its approximately eight hundred thousand inhabitants voted for independence, making them Southeast Asia’s eleventh country. Following the vote, pro-Indonesian ‘militia’ groups rampaged through East Timor, killing and burning. The UN sponsored an international force to end bloodshed and secure the transition to independence.

**SOUTHEAST ASIAN HISTORIES**

Because the national units of Southeast Asia differ greatly in size, population density, wealth, form of government, religion, traditions, and in colonial experience, many histories of the area have concentrated on individual countries and not on common themes affecting the region as a whole. The novelty of the idea of Southeast Asia as a historical region is shown by D.G.E. Hall’s *History of Southeast Asia*, which appeared as recently as 1955. Hall’s was probably the first book to link the disparate experiences of the region in a single volume. Since then historians have confidently put aside the national approach and tried to view the area more broadly wherever possible. Volumes like the *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, edited by Nicholas Tarling, and the works of Anthony
Reid, especially *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce* (see the Short Bibliography on p. 186), have uncovered so many common features of the region that a strict nation-by-nation approach now seems inappropriate.

This text will proceed with a regional approach without ignoring the importance of individual national experiences. Although it aims to offer a general overview of Southeast Asian history, it cannot be overlooked that the author is especially interested in modern Indonesia. Hopefully this has not led to neglect of other areas. Finally, chapters deviate from a strict chronological order because themes persist and the past continues to live in the present. If the book serves its purpose, readers will want to learn more about the area. To this end, a list of readings follows at the end of the book.

**NOTE ON SPELLINGS**

Because this book is not for specialists, it does not use a specialized linguistic apparatus. Vietnamese and Sanskrit expressions are given without diacritical marks. Thai spellings follow those in Wyatt (1984). Indonesian-Malay terms are spelled according to the most recent orthography (in use since 1972), even if they refer to earlier persons or institutions (Sukarno not Soekarno; Masyumi not Masjumi). Readers should note that many Southeast Asians, including former presidents of Indonesia Sukarno and Suharto, have only one name, while it is common in many countries to refer to individuals by their first names.

For Chinese, Mandarin Pinyin transcription is used (in spite of the difficulties in pronunciation for the inexperienced), except in well-known expressions (for example Taoism).

Plurals are generally built with 's', even if that is not the case in the languages concerned. The text endeavours to limit foreign-language terms; a glossary of those that seemed unavoidable is appended.
Waterways

From Early Settlements to the First Maritime Kingdoms

In prehistory, during times when glaciers bound surface water and the sea level fell, Borneo and the western islands of Indonesia (Java, Sumatra, Bali) were linked by a land bridge to the mainland, allowing humans — and flora and fauna — to cross easily. During warmer times, when sea levels rose, these islands were separated from the mainland of Asia. In time — perhaps thousands of years ago — islanders were such good sailors that the sea presented no barrier to their movement, and in historic times fishing, trade and seafaring were a major activity of maritime Southeast Asians, and an important one for mainlanders. Water and the management of water is vital to Southeast Asian cultures.

Remains of human habitation of Southeast Asia go back hundreds of thousands of years, but only in the last 4–5,000-years did the ancestors of most contemporary Southeast Asians reach the area, mixing with or dispersing earlier human settlers. Newcomers travelled to the Indochinese Peninsula along rivers rising in south and southwestern China or followed the shallow coastal waters around China; others crossed to Taiwan and from there migrated to the Philippines and beyond.

EVIDENCE FROM PREHISTORY

The prehistory of Southeast Asia is still being discovered; controversies, suppositions and educated guesses prevail. Dense forest covered much of the region until this century. Without iron tools, early humans could not have felled the trees, and the jungle probably sustained only a few hunters and foragers with wild plants and animals. Where conditions were more hospitable, along the coasts
and riverbanks, in caves or on alluvial plateaus where forests were more open (especially at times and in places of a generally drier climate), human settlements formed, at first using stone tools.

One group of settlements, found at several sites on the mainland, is named after Hoa Binh (Hoa Son Binh) Province in Vietnam, near Hanoi, where the first examples were found. The more sophisticated stone axes and knives of these Hoabinhian people enabled them to penetrate the edges of rainforests, where they lived mostly by hunting and gathering. The relics of these relatively mobile people, uncovered in caves or rock shelters, are dated at about 10,000 BC. Other early foragers probably lived along the sea coasts, but because the sea level has since risen, remains of their settlements lie submerged.

Both water and the humid tropical climate have destroyed many remains of early Southeast Asians. Even recently, these peoples lived in dwellings of bamboo, wood and thatch, and used implements and eating dishes made from equally perishable materials, leaving few traces for archaeologists. When writing did arise, it too was ephemeral. Most written texts were on strips of palm-leaves, which could disappear leaving little trace.

SOUTHEAST ASIANS
The movement of people has always played an important role in Southeast Asia, and continues to do so today. Scholars believe the ancestors of most present-day Southeast Asians were Southern Mongoloids who dispersed gradually through the region from the area of China south of the Yangtze River or from northern Southeast Asia. They began arriving at least 4,000 years ago. The China–Southeast Asia boundary is now a significant political divide, but in these early times southern China was culturally and environmentally a part of Southeast Asia. An expanding Chinese Empire only absorbed these southern regions into its culture and polity in the first millennium BC. Even today, some ethnic groups live on both sides of China's borders, linking Chinese with Southeast Asian peoples.

Only a few pockets of Negritos – in Thailand, West Malaysia and the Philippines – as well as the Melanesian people of New Guinea and its surrounding islands do not fit this type. Many eastern Indonesians also represent a mix of Melanesian and Southern Mongoloid traits; some preserve Melanesian languages.

There are two dominant language families in Southeast Asia, Austroasiatic and Austronesian. Linguists now believe that they
ultimately developed from a single source somewhere within China. They were spoken by separate migrant groups that left southern China at about the same time, c. 4–5,000 years ago. Migrants to mainland Southeast Asia spoke languages of the Austroasiatic family. Today, representatives of this group include the languages of Cambodia (Khmer), Vietnam, parts of Burma and Thailand (the Mon minority), and small groups in Laos and in northeastern India. There is also a range of non-Austroasiatic languages spoken in mainland Southeast Asia; linguists usually assign these to the families Tai (spoken in Thailand, Laos and parts of neighbouring countries), Tibeto-Burman (spoken above all in Burma itself), and Miao-Yao (spoken by minorities in Thailand and Indochina). These were also introduced by migrants from southern China, though probably only in the last thousand years; all are spoken by ethnic minorities in southern China today.

A second group of migrants left China up to 5,000 years ago for Taiwan. These people spoke Austronesian languages and were capable seafarers. Their descendants moved on in small groups through the Philippines and toward Sulawesi, Borneo and the rest of maritime Southeast Asia, probably arriving in Java by about 1,000 BC. Archaeological evidence confirms this expansion. Identifiable pottery types,
for example, are found at successive sites through the Philippines and southward toward Indonesia. Austronesian speakers eventually covered an enormous distance, spreading along an arc from Madagascar to Hawaii and New Zealand. Today the Austronesian language family includes, among others, Malayo–Polynesian languages such as modern Malay and Indonesian, Philippine languages, and Cham (spoken by a coastal people of the mainland who once dominated southern Vietnam). The languages of Taiwan's aboriginal people and some minority languages of the mainland are distant relatives.

FARMING AND METALWORKING
The early migrants from China probably brought with them techniques of agriculture and especially rice cultivation that they developed further in the fertile landscapes of the Southeast Asian mainland. However, rice cultivation may have developed independently there: archaeological sites from 3–2,000 BC already show the domestication of rice and widespread use of pottery.

With agriculture, population density increased. Mainland sites, in particular on the Khorat Plateau of Thailand, where agricultural societies appeared by about 3,000 BC, show incipient efforts to control the water supply in order to ensure adequate rice harvests. With the later introduction of ironworking, settlements grew larger and agriculture more intensive. Animals like cattle and water buffalo were domesticated. Some of these settlements were surrounded by moats, possibly for defence, but the waterworks were connected to reservoirs and canals that may have been laid out to support rice cultivation.

Somewhere between 2,000 and 500 BC mainland peoples began using bronze and, centuries later, iron. Whether the working of bronze began independently in Southeast Asia, or whether it entered from China, is still a matter of debate. (The two metals, bronze and iron, appeared later and almost simultaneously in the Archipelago, in about 500 BC.) Trade and exchange increased and by 500 BC long-distance exchanges involved both China and India. Burial practices also became more elaborate; some sites give evidence of social differentiation in the greater quantity and quality of objects buried with the dead. The introduction of bronze in particular offered possibilities for distinguishing wealth and power, while iron allowed more effective weapons. In about 500 BC, small settlements began to agglomerate into larger units under their own chiefs.
By far the most striking products of Southeast Asian bronze-working were the so-called Dongson or Heger Type I drums produced at Dong-son in Thanh Hoa province, northern Vietnam, from about 600 BC until as late as the third century AD. These magnificent metal drums, some of which are a metre high, may be based on forms that originally developed in Yunnan, but they themselves are uniquely Southeast Asian. Excavations have confirmed the extent and quality of bronze-working in Vietnam’s Red River basin at that time. Expertly cast by the lost-wax method and weighing up to 100 kilograms (220 pounds), Dongson drums were both musical instruments and cult objects. Decorated with geometric patterns, scenes of daily life and warfare, animals and birds, and above all boats, drums became objects of trade and heirlooms. More than two hundred have been found throughout Southeast Asia as far as eastern Indonesia and even in southern China. This geographic dispersal may have taken place over centuries, as rulers traded or captured these prestigious items to add to their kingly regalia.
These and other objects found far from where they were made confirm that trade and contact among Southeast Asian peoples was growing. In Java and Bali, bronze-working, which began later than on the mainland, brought a variety of artistic and useful objects by the first millennium AD, including bronze drums resembling those of Dongson but produced by a slightly different method. The megalithic remains on the Pasemah Plateau of South Sumatra, also dated to the first millennium AD, show a man carrying a Dongson drum. Nor was exchange limited to other Southeast Asian destinations: pottery found in north Bali shows that Indian goods reached that area two thousand years ago.

EARLY STATES AND INDIAN INFLUENCES
Agriculture, trade, waterworks, early towns and social differentiation laid the foundation for the first Southeast Asian states. New crops, new artifacts and new concepts of kingship and rule followed trade, and the earliest maritime kingdoms arose.

When Europeans reached the region in the sixteenth century, few remains of the earliest states were visible, and even local people seemed to have forgotten them. This was especially true of maritime Southeast Asia, where climate and vegetation quickly reclaimed evidence of earlier human achievements. Only when scholars began to look at Chinese descriptions of the Southern Seas or Nanyang,