Southeast Asia
A Concise History

with 131 illustrations and 11 maps
the Shans situated their capital at Ava. The next centuries saw division, conflict and disorder. A Burman policy finally reappeared at Toungoo on the Sittang River in the sixteenth century, where the Toungoo dynasty took power and assumed the task of reasserting Burman rule.

A TAI CENTURY
The collapse of Pagan, and that of Angkor, brought Tai kingdoms to the fore. The Shan capital at Ava replaced the authority of Pagan in upper Burma. Even Srivijaya suffered from Tai expansion on the Malayan Peninsula, while these newly self-conscious peoples attacked Angkor and pushed back its boundaries. David Wyatt has called the period 1200–1351 a 'Tai century'. Hand-in-hand with Tai expansion and their formation of new states went the consolidation of Theravada Buddhism and the spread of monastic institutions among these former mountain peoples.

The most important expansion of a Tai people was that of the Siamese into the fertile rice-growing lowlands of present-day Thailand, areas then inhabited by Mons (about whose early kingdoms little is known) or ruled by Angkor, which controlled territories reaching to northern Thailand and much of Laos, where the population was not Khmer. The bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat portray Siamese troops, perhaps captives, who fought in the armies of Suryavarman II.

Although a northern Tai kingdom, Lan Na, existed in Chiang Mai from 1292, the kingdom of Sukhothai is considered the earliest predecessor of Siam–Thailand. A core of Tai elite grew up in the mid-treeth century southeast of Lan Na, in the Chaophraya valley, not far from Angkor and under the cultural influence of the Khmers and Mons. In the inscriptions of neighbouring states, as in Angkor, these people are known as Syam, or Siamese.

Sukhothai’s third and most famous ruler, Ramkhamhaeng, 'Rama the Bold' (r. 1279–98) was able to take advantage of Angkor’s weakness to make his kingdom a major power on the mainland. Ramkhamhaeng identified his new state closely with Theravada Buddhism: monarchy and sangha supported one another. He subdued, or made vassals of, rulers in Laos, much of modern Thailand, Pegu in modern Burma, and parts of the Malayan Peninsula. This expansion was not so much territorial conquest as the wholesale incorporation of other realms, which in turn brought the loyalty of their subordinates, and so on. The result was a mandala or galactic polity of centre and peripheries, cemented by pyramids of patrons and clients similar to those in many modern Southeast Asian societies.

Ramkhamhaeng’s power was not only military; it was based on moral prestige as well, something his support of Buddhism confirmed in the eyes of his subordinates. His patronage and that of his successors gave rise to the Buddhist-influenced Sukhothai artistic tradition. His sculptors also still cast images of Vishnu and Siva, showing the continued influence of Hinduism at the court.

After Ramkhamhaeng’s death, Sukhothai lost control of its territories as its vassals became independent. The mandala receded. Although now divided into many principalities, the Tai nonetheless remained important actors on the mainland scene.

AYUDHYA
In 1351, U Thong, possibly the son of a Chinese merchant family that had married into the local elite, established Ayudhya as his capital and took the name of Ramathibodi. Its location on the Chaophraya River enabled Ayudhya to take advantage of the contemporary increase in international trade. Ramathibodi’s links to the Chinese community would have reinforced this advantage. By the fifteenth century, Ayudhya was in close commercial contact, and sometimes competition, with Malacca, the Malay entrepôt on the Straits of Malacca.

In administration, Ayudhya adopted Khmer institutions, giving the realm a more structured authority than its predecessors. Successor kings were responsible for an increasing hierarchization of society, probably also evidence of Khmer influence, for traditional Tai societies had been more egalitarian. The backbone of Ayudhya’s power was Tai military strength. By the early sixteenth century, Ayudhya, now virtually an empire, was the strongest power on the
influence was limited to the upper classes. Yet even if Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism were for the most part religions of the elite, and temple-building was mostly an exercise of royalty and royal power, important legacies remain.

While all members of the Hindu trinity—Brahma, Vishnu and Siva—are reflected in Southeast Asian remains, Siva was the most widely venerated. Siva worship was closely linked to royal authority. Monarchs in Champa adopted the Siva cult in the second half of the fourth century, according to inscriptions. An emissary from Funan to a Chinese court reported that Siva worship dominated there. And Khmer rulers venerated and identified with Siva, first as a linga (phallus), then as a statue.

Fasting, meditation and the concentration of spiritual power were pursued by Khmer chiefs with the aim of drawing on cosmic power to enhance personal and kingly qualities. The prestige of identification with Siva probably passed to the king’s kin and enabled him to construct ever more monuments, statues or lingas. Asceticism entered the religious practice of lesser men, too, and influenced other religions, including Islam.

Basic to Hinduism, but of little influence in Southeast Asia, was the idea of caste. In Indian society, the Brahmans or priests, the Vaisya or warriors, and the Sudra or farmers constitute the three major castes, and there are hundreds of sub-castes related to descent and profession, as well as groups whose supposedly impure occupations (such as the handling of leather or the slaughtering of animals) put them beyond caste. The result of deeds in previous existences, caste was not to be overcome.

In Southeast Asia’s more fluid societies, caste meant little. Nonetheless, Brahmans—or self-styled Brahmans, since there is a tradition that the Brahman should not travel abroad—rapidly took over spiritual functions in Southeast Asia. Taruma, the late fifth-century kingdom in western Java, used Brahmans to ritually secure its hydraulic project, the diversion of a river. They assisted in legal questions, importing Indian law codes to Cambodia by the eighth century, and as scribes. Some may have engaged in commerce. Brahmans married into royal families, crossing a caste barrier and becoming highly influential. Even the Theravada Buddhist courts made use of Brahman astrologers. They were valued for their esoteric knowledge as recently as 1948, when Brahmans determined the auspicious time and date for Burma’s ceremony of independence.