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Looking at Southeast Asian History

D. G. E. HALL

In this paper I propose to look at Southeast Asian history for the most part before the era of European political control. My object is on the one hand to avoid the distortions of the picture caused by the wealth of writings on European activities in the area, which have tended to thrust into the background the history of the peoples of the area, and on the other hand to convey some idea of the importance of their history as a field of study today. Incidentally, it is a field in which most of the progress has been made by scholars whose names are largely unknown outside the esoteric circles of orientalism.

In one sense the subject is a very new one, since the first attempt at a synthesis only appeared in 1944. It was entitled Histoire ancienne des États hindouisés d’Extrême Orient, and was by Georges Coedès, then Director of the École française d’Extrême Orient at Hanoi, whose distinguished publications in the field of epigraphy had already thrown light upon many of the dark places of Southeast Asian history. It is not too much to claim that the revised edition of this work, published in Paris in 1948 under the title Les États hindouisés d’Indochine et d’Indonésie is one of the great pioneer works of modern historical scholarship. By presenting for the first time the earlier history of Southeast Asia as a whole it opened a new chapter in its study. But Coedès deals only with the so-called “hinduized” states; he has little to say about the area dominated by Chinese culture, and nothing about the Philippines, which in any case do not come into the historical picture until after the arrival of Europeans in the sixteenth century. Long before that, as Coedès sees it, his “hinduized” states, most of them already declining in the first half of the fourteenth century, have passed away, and he brings his survey to an end with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1511, when, he says, Southeast Asia stood at the beginning of a new era. Coedès sees the first fifteen centuries or so of Southeast Asian history as a process by which the more advanced peoples come under almost complete subjection to either Indian or Chinese cultural influence, and thereafter, through the resurgence of their own earlier culture, gradually develop new and highly individual forms. It is a view which is strongly challenged today.

In this connection, the new name for the area, a mere geographical expression used as a term of convenience when the Anglo-American wartime organization, South-East Asia Command, was formed in 1943, is of interest; for it has given it an identity, which it previously lacked, and by coming into current use has accentuated the inappropriateness of names such as the Indian Archipelago, Indonesia, the Indo-Chinese Peninsula, Greater India, Little China, or the Nanyang.

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all tending to identify it, or parts of it, with one or other of its neighbours. Whether its identity is anything more than is implied by the geographical expression, and, if so, what it is, is a question upon which archaeologists and anthropologists have been busy for some time, with the historians by no means mere interested spectators. Today we see the area divided roughly into four main cultural divisions. There are the Philippines, with a Catholic culture rigorously imposed during the centuries of Spanish domination; the two Vietnamese states bearing the strong imprint of the culture imposed, just as rigorously, during a thousand years of Chinese domination ending in A.D. 939; the Theravada Buddhist countries, Burma, Thailand, the Laos Kingdom and Cambodia; and the Islamic countries, Malaya and Indonesia, though with the notable exception of Bali with its quasi Hindu-Buddhist culture. The importation and development of these cultures is one of the major themes of Southeast Asian history, but, as I have indicated, in studying this development we have to take note of the already-existing culture of the people, who came under these influences, and try to estimate its historical role. Coedès in the case of his “hinduized” states makes a clear distinction between le substrat autochtone and la superstructure indienne, but on analysis its validity looks more than doubtful, as I shall show later on.

This basic culture, to which the names Austro-Asiatic (for the mainland) and Austronesian (for the islands) have been applied by scholars, has been described as a civilization of the monsoons dependent upon the large-scale cultivation of irrigated rice—using the domestic water-buffalo—and of fruit trees, and upon coastal fishing. It was primarily a maritime civilization, the peoples of which possessed such skill in navigation that they carried their languages and some of their culture elements as far afield as Taiwan to the northeast and Madagascar to the far west. They used bronze and iron, the knowledge of which had been derived from China, but they possessed excellent stone tools of their own and were adepts at carving wood. Their villages spread out near the sea or on the first line of hills bordering deltas. And developing, as they did, the organization necessary for the maintenance of irrigated cultivation, they produced powerful centralized societies which drained the delta swamps by mass labour under the direction of their chiefs. In these societies woman played a very important part, with affiliation and inheritance running in the female line. And throughout history she has continued to hold a higher position than anywhere else in Asia. Their religion was a mixture of animism, ancestor-worship and the worship of the local gods, especially those of water. It was one of elaborate ceremonial in which the Chief often played a central part, and it was carried out at shrines on high places, natural or artificial, where he entered into communion with the heavenly powers to ensure the prosperity of his realm. Such were the general features of the culture of the more advanced peoples of the area before Indian influence began to make its impact. They were to show immense powers of persistence.

When, at some period not earlier—probably later—than the second century of the Christian Era, history begins to dawn, many of the peoples were already in regions where they are found today. The Vietnamese were in Tongking, but the areas to the south that they now occupy were the home of the Chams, a Malay people, who were to carry on a dogged struggle for survival against the Vietnamese until over-

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whelmed by them in the latter half of the fifteenth century.\footnote{The Vietnamese movement of expansion in the Indo-Chinese peninsula was to become a factor of major significance in Southeast Asian history, and present-day events suggest it has not yet been exhausted.} The Khmers, the Cambodians of today, were on the rivers leading to the Middle Mekong, a little to the north of their present homes. The Mons, who were to play so important a part in transmitting Indian culture to both the Burmese and the Tai peoples, were already in Lower Burma and the Chao Phraya (Menam) basin. The various Malay peoples were to be found in the Peninsula and throughout the vast island world, chiefly round the coasts and in the river valleys. Over the whole region inland in the jungles and mountains lived the more primitive peoples, who had not been assimilated with the immigrants, for none of those I have named were autochthonous. Immigrants yet to arrive were the Burmese, who were to penetrate central Burma from Yunnan in the ninth century, and the Tai, who were to percolate to the regions of northern Burma, the upper Salween, the upper Mekong and the northern parts of Siam during mainly the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

So many myths regarding the introduction of Indian culture have got into circulation—at first as guesses of Western Sanskritists, more recently as expressions of Indian cultural imperialism\footnote{See Radhakumud Mookerji, \textit{Indian Shipping: A History of the Seaborne Trade and Maritime Activity of the Indians from the Earliest Times} (London, 1912).}—that the student has to force his way through a jungle of scholarly hypotheses, sometimes brilliant, imaginative theories and mere wishful thinking, before he can examine the little solid evidence there is. The earliest historical evidence shows us kingdoms and rulers with Sanskrit names, served by Brahmans trained in writing and administration, who consecrate the ruler as a legitimate raja in terms of Śiva, Vishnu or Buddha in accordance with the ideas contained in the Hindu or Buddhist classical writings. Our earliest glimpses of such states are in three regions: Funan on the Mekong delta, the area around Huế which later emerges as the kingdom of Champa, and the isthmian tract of northern Malaya. Perhaps the most striking fact about them, however, is that our knowledge of them comes not from Indian, but from Chinese historical sources. For, so far as ancient Indian writings are concerned, the spread of Indian culture to Southeast Asia passes completely unnoticed. Were it not for Chinese writings—dynastic histories, reports of ambassadors or of Buddhist pilgrims on their way to or from India—the first six or seven centuries of Southeast Asian history would be almost a blank, save for a mass of unidentifiable place names in Ptolemy’s \textit{Geographia} and some isolated inscriptions scattered about the area. Up to well into the Ming period Chinese writings form one of our best sources. They supplement the evidence of inscriptions and provide a useful check on the later vernacular chronicles, which for the earlier periods deal in dynastic myths, folk tales and adaptations of stories from the \textit{Mahābhārata}, the \textit{Ramayana} or the Buddhist \textit{Jatakas}. Thus Funan, the name by which historians know the first great Southeast Asian empire, was the name the Chinese gave it because the title of its ruler was “king of the mountain.” They it is, also, who record the tradition that it had been founded by an Indian Brahman, who had married the daughter of a local chieftain and introduced Indian Court ritual.

This legend provides one useful clue to the method by which Indian culture came to Southeast Asia. The myth of Indian colonization was disposed of as long ago as
1934 by J. C. van Leur in his Leiden doctoral dissertation, but like the myths of Magna Carta its powers of survival still defy the iconoclasts. Now that an English version of the work, entitled "On Early Asian Trade," has recently been published, however, one may hope for wider currency of his views.

The transmission of Indian culture was a court affair; it was primarily the work of Indian Brahmins, imported by Southeast Asian rulers anxious to increase their dignity and power by copying the grander style of the Indian courts, about which they had learned through commercial intercourse. And so far from this forming part of a movement of Indian expansion, howbeit peaceful, as it has been represented, such evidence as exists tends rather to emphasize the importance of the role played by Asians, who went to live and learn in India, and returned home bringing with them the sacred books and the precious knowledge required by their rulers in order to build the monuments and carry out the rites conferring upon them the attributes of the great gods, and assuring them glorious life after death.

Funan, which fades out in the sixth century, handed on its traditions to other states, as did Rome in Europe. They passed into the dynastic traditions and practice of the Khmers, who founded Angkor, and from the tenth to the early thirteenth century indulged in an orgy of temple-building of the utmost magnificence. Funan's conception of a maharaja, who is "king of the mountain," also inspired the Buddhist Sailendra dynasty of central Java, which in the eighth and ninth centuries built the gigantic Borobudur and many other monuments and temple-complexes.

Khmer civilization rose to the greatest material and artistic heights achieved by any of the early Southeast Asian states. In two recent publications of special interest, Bernard Groslier has shown the city, with its nucleus of temples, palaces, and government offices, as the operating centre of a system of canals and waterworks regulating the irrigation of a vast expanse of intensively cultivated fields yielding up to three, or even four, harvests a year. "Nowhere else in the world," he claims, "can there be found a collection of buildings comparable in number, size and perfection." Angkor at the beginning of the thirteenth century under Jayavarman VII, the builder of Angkor Thom with its grotesque Bayon temple, was an imperial power whose writ ran from the borders of Yunnan in the north to the Gulf of Siam in the south, and whose empire included the Cham kingdom in the east, and in the west the Mon principalities of the Chao Phraya (Menam) Valley.

But she had reached the end of her temple-building; she had strained her resources to the uttermost; and at the end of the century, when the Chinese envoy Chou Ta-Kuan wrote his famous Memoirs on the Customs of Cambodia, although the sovereign was still represented as Siva descended to earth, the "anarchical spirit of Sinhalese Buddhism," as Coedès puts it, had infected the whole country.

Moreover, a new power, that of the Tai, who had been seeping in from the north,
was building up in the Chao Phraya valley, and in 1350, with the foundation Ayutthaya as the capital of Siam, the days of Angkor were numbered. A long period of incessant Tai raids with crippling deportations of people caused the Khmer economy to run down, and after the sack of Angkor Thom by the Tais in 1431 it was abandoned and a new capital founded at a safer distance from Ayutthaya. Thereafter Cambodia rapidly became a small and weak state. At the end of the sixteenth century she became the vassal of Siam. In the next century, expanding Vietnam, having absorbed the lands of the Chams, entered upon a long contest with Siam for control over her, and only the establishment of the French protectorate in 1867 saved the Khmers from absorption into the Vietnamese state with all that this would have implied culturally as well as politically.\(^{10}\)

The expansion of the Tai peoples at the end of the thirteenth century affected the Burmese and Mons as much as it did the Khmers. The Mons of the Chao Phraya valley were absorbed into the new kingdom of Siam and passed on their Buddhist civilization to their masters. Those of the lower Irrawaddy region, having been conquered by the Burmese from the north in the middle of the eleventh century, carried out a similar role. Thus the Burmese-Buddhist empire of Pagan, which lasted from 1044 until the end of the thirteenth century, when it was destroyed by Kublai Khan's Mongols, was predominantly Mon in civilization during its first century of existence.\(^{11}\) Its collapse before Kublai Khan's armies, and the subsequent failure of China to maintain her hold on Burma, "opened the floodgates," as Gordon Luce puts it in a recent paper of outstanding importance contributed to the *Journal of the Siam Society*,\(^{12}\) and the Shans (i.e. the western Tai) descended westwards and covered both banks of the upper Irrawaddy. From then until nearly the middle of the sixteenth century, with the Mons once more independent in the South, a devastating struggle went on between Burmese and Shans for dominance over central and northern Burma. In the fifteenth century, Ming China herself became involved in it for a time. In the end it was the Burmese who won. They were saved by the support of China, the lack of cohesion among the Shans, and principally by their own intense national sentiment. When they ultimately triumphed, they blotted out Mon independence, established their own suzerainty over the great wedge of Shan states that is today a component part of the Union of Burma, and nearly ruined their country in a series of attempts to subjugate not only Siam but also the Laos kingdom of the upper and central Mekong.

The Mons not only handed on their cultivation to the Burmese and Siamese, but were mainly responsible for the religious transformation which brought the peoples of Burma, Siam, Cambodia, and the Laos kingdom into the Theravada Buddhist fold. Previously, rulers had adopted one or other Indian religion as a court religion, using it as an instrument of policy. The religious life of their peoples continued unchanged so far as its content and meaning were concerned: to them the Hindu or

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\(^{10}\) Le Thanh Khoi's *Le Vietnam, histoire et civilisation* (Paris, 1955) is the only complete survey of Vietnamese history from the earliest times in a European language. The work of a Vietnamese scholar, it has many valuable features, though marred by the author's Marxist outlook.

\(^{11}\) Incidentally its temple-builders made the city of Pagan blossom with architecture which for sheer beauty is claimed by its admirers to exceed anything else of its kind in Southeast Asia.

Buddhist sculptures, which they saw as objects of worship at the great temple festivals, personified the divine and magic powers of their own folklore and legend. The new movement was different. It was preached to the people by missionary monks, who themselves practised the life of poverty, meditation, and self-abnegation which they taught as the way of salvation.

The missionary impulse came through Mon contacts with the Mahavihara monastery in Ceylon towards the end of the twelfth century, and the first mass impact began with the establishment of an ordination centre near Pagan. During the thirteenth century it was carried to the Mons of the Chao Phraya region, who transmitted it to the Tai kingdom of Sukhothai, whose ruler Ramkamhaeng gives eloquent testimony to the new faith in the celebrated inscription which he erected in 1292. This, incidentally, is the oldest extant written specimen of the Siamese language. During the same period, Theravada Buddhism spread to the Khmers, exactly how is a matter of guesswork. But the Burmese Glass Palace Chronicle mentions a son of a king of Cambodia among the original Mon pilgrims, who returned from Ceylon to propagate the Theravada doctrines in Burma. When the Laos Kingdom came into existence in 1353 with its capital at what is now Luang Prabang, missionary monks were imported from Angkor to establish the faith there. In Burma, where Hinayana Buddhism was the official religion of the Pagan Court, the new teachings made slow headway against the opposition of the existing syncretist form introduced centuries earlier from India. Matters were not finally clinched until a new contact with Sinhalese Buddhism, fostered by the Mon king Dammazedi (1472–92), resulted in a vigorous purification movement, which stamped its character upon Burma’s Buddhism. All these efforts, it is worth noting, led to a great spread of monasteries and monastic education which explains the high degree of literacy of these Buddhist countries in modern times.

Turning to the islands, Java affords us some of the most striking examples of the results produced by the encounter between the imported Indian civilization and the indigenous one, not only in the field of art and architecture, but also in the development of its literature and drama through the stimulus of the Indian classics, and in the adaptation of both Hinduism and Buddhism to the expression of its own traditional religious ideas. In the case of religion, indeed, the opinion has been expressed that the peoples of Southeast Asia were never conscious at all of a change of religion in adopting that of India.

It was the Buddhist Śailendra dynasty and its immediate Hindu successors who were responsible for the glorious monuments which arose in central Java between the eighth and the early tenth centuries. N. J. Krom, the greatest authority of the inter-war period on the early art, archaeology and epigraphy of Java, saw them as essentially productions of Indian genius. His successors, however, have rightly stressed their essential Javanese nature, and in a recent study of the inscriptions of the period, Dr. J. G. de Casparis demonstrates the need to examine the Borobudur itself, for example, not only in the light of Sanskrit texts but also in that of Javanese ancestor-worship. His work has added enormously to our knowledge of Java during this period.

13 Possibly a son of Jayavarman VII, himself a Buddhist of the Mahayana persuasion.
16 Inscripties uit de Śailendra-tijd (Bandung, 1950).
important period. Not his least contribution has been his identification of the Sàilendra monarchs themselves, thereby solving what had come to be regarded as an insoluble riddle; and in interpreting the "hidden meaning" of Chandi Borobudur itself he has pointed to the clue that may link the Javanese "king of the mountain" with his predecessor in Funan.

In the tenth century, the centre of gravity in Java moves eastward to the Brantas river valley, and it is there that the major developments of Old Javanese literature take place besides a further flowering of art and architecture. It is there also that the Javanese empires celebrated in their earliest chronicle writings, the Nagarakertagama and the Pararaton, had their centres, Singosari in the thirteenth century and Majapahit thereafter until the beginning of the sixteenth. Here we tread on delicate ground, for Professor C. C. Berg of Leiden has applied a system of "higher criticism" to expose the weakness of these documents as historical evidence, and has divided Dutch scholars on the subject of thirteenth century Kertanagara as a "misunderstood empire-builder" and on the question whether the far-flung empire of the islands dominated by Majapahit was ever a reality.

Sumatra can show nothing comparable to Java's achievements in the realm of art and architecture, but its geographical position on the main sea route to and from the Far East, and its natural resources, caused its ports to become centres of international trade before anything is known of Java's history. Little was known of this before the publication in 1918 of Coedès's epoch-making article "Le royaume de Çrivijaya." This at once stimulated so much research and controversy, particularly on the relationship of the Sàilendra temple-builders of central Java with the Sàilendras of Palembang, that the outlines of the story of a great seapower emerged out of the gloom, a power which controlled the trade and traffic of the narrow straits from the seventh until the thirteenth century. Coedès shows it in its later history as a "great economic power which neglected spiritual values," but earlier, between 671 and 695, I Ching, the Buddhist pilgrim-scholar, made two long stops at Palembang, amounting to several years altogether, because of its importance as a centre of Sanskrit Mahayanist learning, and Atiśa, the renowned Tibetan Buddhist teacher, studied there from 1011 to 1023 for the same reason.

Later on Sumatra was to play a not unimportant part in the history of Islam in Southeast Asia. Our earliest glimpse of Islamic missionary activity is in the year 1292, and for it we are indebted to Marco Polo, who visited the north Sumatran port of Perak in that year and wrote that it had been converted to the Law of the Prophet.

The new religion made its first impact through the trade connection between the northern Sumatran ports and the port of Cambay in western Gujerat. Later on, Tamil Muslims from the Coromandel Coast were to play their part. The interesting fact is that Muslim Arabs and Persians had traded to Southeast Asian ports for centuries without effecting, or even attempting, any conversions. The beginnings of the Islamization of Southeast Asia were the result of the new impulse given to Islam in India by the Sultanate of Delhi in the thirteenth century.

After its initial impact upon the north of Sumatra, however, Islam made very little progress until the foundation of Malacca at the beginning of the fifteenth cen-

17 He has since published a second volume in English entitled Selected Inscriptions from the Seventh to the Ninth Century A.D. (Bandung, 1956).
tury. The founder of Malacca embraced Islam through marriage with a daughter of the Mohammedan ruler of Pasai in north Sumatra. Thereafter, until the conquest of Malacca by the Portuguese under Albuquerque in 1511, Islam spread with the extension of Malacca's power over the Malay states of the Peninsula and of the east coast of Sumatra, and through her trade with the northern ports of Java and with Brunei in north Borneo. The manner of its spread, particularly in the case of Java, has been the subject of much controversy among Dutch historians and ethnologists. Snouck Hurgronje believed that Islam was spread by trader-missionaries and that its penetration was peaceful because it was attractive to the Indonesians as a culturally inferior people. Van Leur, on the other hand, insisted that in its early stages the movement was entirely a political affair, an affair of the rulers and the aristocracy. Islam, he said, brought neither a higher civilization nor economic development. He thought mass conversion to have been unlikely, and pointed to the significant fact that Muslim law had no influence: Indonesia remained faithful to its own adat law.

In the case of Java the question was closely bound up with the disappearance of the empire of Majapahit. The Javanese chronicles describe a Muslim conquest, and the Babad Tanah Jawi makes the king of Majapahit ascend to heaven at the moment when his capital falls. The theory of a Muslim conquest was for many years accepted by European scholars; the year 1478 was the date assigned to it. Krom accepted the theory, but placed the date of the conquest somewhere between 1513 and 1528. He ended his history of Hindu-Java (Hindo-Javaansche Geschiedenis) with the fall of Majapahit, thereby accentuating the idea that with the coming of Islam a great cleavage occurred in Javanese cultural life. This idea, however, was attacked so powerfully by sociologists such as van Leur and the late Professor Schrieke that it must now be relegated to the limbo of discarded notions. Schrieke, for instance, disputed the theory of a Mohammedan conquest of Majapahit, and showed that as late as 1597 the interior of Java was still "infidel." And the historian de Graaf has supported this view by showing how Majapahit gradually fell to pieces through her vassal states embracing Islam and declaring their independence. Well into the seventeenth century a stiff struggle was still going on between the defenders of the old religion and the Muslim rulers of Mataram, and when Balambangan, the last independent Hindu/Buddhist state of East Java, accepted Islam, the upholders of the old religious traditions found a home in Bali, which has never succumbed to the pressure of Islam, and is today a wonderful treasure-house of old Javanese culture. Professor C. C. Berg sums up the cultural cleavage-question unerringly when he tells us that Java was never converted to Islam: her pattern of culture in the course of the centuries has absorbed elements of Islam, as indeed it had already much earlier absorbed elements of Hinduism and Buddhism, and was later to absorb elements of European civilization. The point he makes is of special importance, for it applies not to Java alone but to the whole of Southeast Asia. It provides also the real answer to Coedès's untenable theory of an Indian superstructure placed upon an autochthonous substratum, namely that the peoples of Southeast Asia in the course of their history have absorbed into their culture-patterns certain imported elements, Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic or Chinese, as the case may be, adjusting them to their own requirements and outlook, and in the process developing a marked degree of individuality in each case.

19 Published in 1931.
20 Geschiedenis van Indonesië ('Gravenhage, 1949).
How far the political expansion of Islam in the Malay world would have proceeded had it not been for the appearance of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean in 1497 is a speculation which has intrigued students of the subject ever since van Leur in his essay *On Early Asian Trade* formulated the theory that the two things were not unconnected: that the advance of the Portuguese led to a bigger effort in the propagation of Islam in Indonesia. The publication in 1957 of an English translation of the completed parts of an unfinished study of the old Javanese realm by Schrieke has thrown welcome new light on the subject. In an essay on the penetration of Islam in the Archipelago,21 he devotes a section to “The Race with Christianity.” He draws attention to the close coherence of the Muslim powers which found expression in their annual meeting at Mecca. Through this medium, he says, rumours of the Christian struggle against Islam in the Iberian Peninsula reached Indonesia ahead of the Portuguese, and stimulated the Muslim rulers to press on with the expansion of the influence of the Crescent. Whether this be so, or not, it is a striking fact that in Indonesia Islam was always a move or two ahead of the Portuguese, wherever they went.

Obviously, however, it was not entirely a matter of politics. The movement had its missionary side, and on this subject van Leur accepted Snouck Hufgronje’s thesis that the trader was the most common missionary. We must remember, of course, that in sixteenth and seventeenth century Indonesia the ruler was the chief merchant and controlled all external trade and traders. He could, therefore, and did, control the extent of missionary enterprise in his territory entirely according to his wishes. His link with the outside world was the Shahbandar, the “King of the Haven,” who, on Schrieke’s showing,22 was everywhere a Muslim, and was the main channel for the penetration of Islam. Through him Muslim scholars and saints were introduced to become mentors of the ruler and to make his court a centre of Islamic learning. Banten (Bantam) in western Java and Acheh (Achin) in the north of Sumatra became such centers before the end of the sixteenth century, developing close contacts with Mecca and the Mughal Court in India. Acheh, as the point of departure for pilgrims to Mecca, played a leading role, producing great numbers of Malay writings on the teachings of Islam, and passing on to the Archipelago whatever was considered the proper thing in Mecca, where many Indonesians tended to settle, and in Mughal India. Acheh copied everything Mughal, their architecture, gardens, dress, titles and court manners. Its importance is shown by the fact that in 1683 a Meccan embassy came on a visit to its sultan because it had been unable to obtain audience of the Emperor Aurungzeb. For the common people there were the trade guilds of Sufi mystics coming from India. They were tolerant of the traditional usages and beliefs of the people which did not accord with the strict practice of Islam, and thus may have been chiefly responsible for the penetration of Islam at village level.

Southeast Asia’s relations with China, which are of such vital interest today, partly because of the more than ten millions of Chinese occupying key positions in her economy, and partly because of the big question-mark regarding China’s intentions since the Communists seized power in 1949, were quite different from her relations with India. Relations with India were purely cultural, those with China primarily

political—China was the Elder Brother receiving “tribute”; rulers of Southeast Asian states like all the others within China’s orbit sent specimen products of their countries, accompanied very often by musicians, dancers and actors to perform before the Emperor. Chinese recognition gave independence to a ruler; there were frequent embassies, and the records of them right into the Ming period are of special value to historians.

China’s policy was mainly one of concern for the security of her frontiers: hence her close relations with the peoples inhabiting Western Yunnan and Tongking. The former she brought under her control when in the late ninth century the once powerful empire of Nanchao came within her political and cultural frontiers. The Vietnamese, on the other hand, were brought under Chinese control as early as 111 B.C. and became an integral part of the empire created by Wu Ti (140–87 B.C.), though at first retaining their own traditional system of administration. Their repeated efforts to gain their independence, however, led to the imposition of Chinese administration and a gradual intensification of Chinese cultural pressure. Nevertheless, they both retained their individuality as a people, and ultimately, in 939, won their independence, thus entering what has been called the “never to be Chinese world” of China’s “vassals.” The early history of the Tai peoples of Southeast Asia is the story of their migrations from the lands south of the Yangtze in order to escape subjection to China.

China’s policy towards Southeast Asia in general has been described as one of fragmentation. Strong states, it has been said, could only be formed in periods of Chinese weakness. When they did arise, she would encourage splinter movements such as, for example, the formation of Tai states inside the Khmer empire in the thirteenth century, or the independence of Malacca in the Malay lands claimed by Siam in the fifteenth. Closer examination of the evidence, however, makes such generalizations appear highly doubtful. The powerful empire of Srivijaya, for instance, arose at a time when China was strong, and throughout its history was favourably regarded by her. Thus her policy must rather be seen as dictated by a desire for stable conditions in the Nanyang: fragmentation spelled disorder and warfare, and the interruption of profitable links with the outside world.

Very rarely did she intervene by force in Southeast Asia; only twice did she commit herself to any large-scale intervention, but each occasion had considerable effects upon the history of the area. The first was the series of Mongol invasions directed by Kublai Khan against Vietnam, Champa, Burma and Indonesia during the last quarter of the thirteenth century. The second came early in the fifteenth century when the Mings revived the policy of making China the centre of the eastern world by sending Cheng-ho on his famous voyages into the Indian Ocean between 1405 and 1433, and at the same time attempted to reconquer Vietnam (1407–28) and to break the power of the Maw Shans in northern Burma. After this, however, China turned in upon herself once again, and until well after the end of the Manchu period concerned herself only with matters of frontier security.

Chinese migration into Southeast Asia dates from the earliest days of the junk trade with the Nanyang. Only bits and pieces of the story are known as yet. But the Chinese problem as we know it today is of very recent growth. It was the stability and economic development which Western enterprise brought to Southeast Asia, mainly from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, that caused Chinese migration and settlement to increase as never before.
In order to avoid the distortions of historical perspective that have arisen through the immense wealth of historical material in European languages and the Europocentrism of European writers, one must never lose sight of the fact that Western dominance in Southeast Asia was for the most part extremely short-lived. The real exception is the case of the Philippines. The Portuguese held Malacca very precariously from 1511 to 1641 and even more precariously a few forts in the Spice Islands. All these they lost to the Dutch. The Dutch empire was for long a commercial one based on Batavia and a number of scattered forts and factories. Their expansion as a territorial power was very slow. Their control over Java was incomplete until well into the eighteenth century. Most of what in 1949 became the Republic of Indonesia was not acquired by the Dutch until late in the nineteenth century. The independence of Aceh and Bali was not extinguished until the early years of the present century.

British annexations in Burma began in 1826, but the independent kingdom of Burma did not disappear until the end of the year 1885. In Malaya, Penang was acquired by the East India Company in 1786, Singapore in 1819 and Malacca in 1824, but British advisers only began to be appointed at the courts of Malay rulers from 1874 onwards; the first federation was founded as late as 1896 and included only four states. The four northern states of the present Federation did not receive British advisers until 1909. The French did not begin to conquer their empire in Indo-China until 1859. Tongking was not acquired until after 1880 and the Laos Kingdom not until after 1890. The Americans acquired the Philippines from Spain in 1898. Siam has remained independent throughout. These are facts of fundamental significance for an understanding of the revolutionary developments in Southeast Asia since the Second World War.

But if Western dominance has been brief, the Western impact has been decisive; and not only has it outlasted the political dominance of the West, but it shows all the signs of increasing. For the achievement of independence has meant that the peoples of Southeast Asia have themselves taken control over the process of modernization introduced by their previous masters, and are accelerating its pace and extending its scope with all the means at their disposal.