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BOOK REVIEW

The 'Nodes' of South-East Asia's History

A short history of South-East Asia / [edited by] Peter Church. - 6th ed. - Singapore : John Wiley & Sons, c2017. - xviii, 252 p. : ill. - ISBN 978-1-119-06249-3 ; 978-1-119-06248-6 (ebk)

Is it possible to concentrate the complex history of eleven countries into 220 pages – and at the same time to avoid the risk of oversimplifying reality, thereby misleading readers? The international bestseller *A Short History of South-East Asia* – now in its sixth edition – is the perfect answer to these questions. In his preface, the author describes the book as an attempt "to find a middle path" between academic works – sometimes perceived as too detailed and infused by theory – and the abbreviated form of history to be found in tourist guides. Peter Church himself is not primarily a scholar, even though he has been appointed Adjunct Professor at the Curtin Business School in Perth, Western Australia. But at a certain point in his 35-year-long career as lawyer, company director and corporate advisor in South-East Asia, he came across the following sentence from Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father of Singapore, dating back to 1980: "To understand the present and anticipate the future, one must know enough of the past, enough to have a sense of the history of a people." These words "hit me like a sledge hammer", the author writes – even though he admits he had been "an indifferent student of history at school in Australia" (vii).

From the very first page, then, the reader is informed that this is a book with a clear target audience and purpose. The target audience consists primarily of those living and working in South-East Asia without necessarily having a background in the region's history, language or culture: first and foremost, managers, business people, practitioners and international experts of all sorts not familiar with the intricacies of South-East Asia's historical path. The purpose of the book is to offer a concise – but at the same time extremely precise – overview of the fundamental legacies that these countries have inherited from their turbulent past. For a busy business audience, there is no time to be wasted in reading a boring history book. The challenge for Church was, therefore, to write a book capable of grabbing the attention of this kind of reader. How can that be done? By simply finding a narrative which – for each South-East Asian country – deals with the most significant 'nodes' (the "deep forces", as French historian Pierre Renouvin called them) that have had consequences in shaping South-East Asia's political systems, economies and societies – consequences that must be taken into account if one wants to engage successfully with the actors and institutions in the region. In that sense, Peter Church lives up to the challenge.

A Short History of South-East Asia is divided into eleven chapters, covering all ten member states of the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) – that is, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam – plus East Timor, the last country in the region to acquire statehood in 2002. The first 'node' touched upon is the colonial experience, represented mostly by the European encroachment on the region. In the 19th century, the Spanish, the Portuguese, the French and the Dutch had all established their presence in South-East Asia – but it was the British Empire that most profoundly shaped the map of this part of the world. In order

to protect its commercial interests embodied in the East India Company, Britain invented new countries, such as the city-state of Singapore, drew new borders without paying attention to the social and ethnic composition of the population, like in Myanmar, and made sure that ancient kingdoms would stay free of other foreign influences, as in the case of the Kingdom of Siam (present-day Thailand). The English crown also succeeded in keeping the Dutch and the French south and east of the Malacca Strait, confining the French to the Indochina peninsula and maintaining a colonial outpost in the territory of the Dutch East Indies, now an independent entity under the name of the Sultanate of Brunei. Since territories were carved out according to national interest (the same goes for France dealing with the area now comprising Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia), the liberation movements were a process of state- and nation-building as much as a fight against the West: sometimes new nations had to be conceived from scratch – creating Indonesia out of thousands of islands is the most striking example. In fact, in countries like Myanmar, the state-building process has never been completed, as minorities have been waging decade-long wars against the central government; moreover, the region surrounding Myanmar, Laos and Thailand still has porous borders that complicate the economic and political relationships between these countries.

Even though newly independent states forged their identities in the fight against Europe – and, later, against the United States during the bloody war in Vietnam, with spillovers into Laos and Cambodia –, their attitude towards European culture was not totally negative – quite the contrary. Many political leaders of the new South-East Asian nations matured their pro-independence views while living in France and reading Karl Marx. This is, for instance, the case of Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh or Cambodia's Pol Pot. José Rizal, an intellectual who became the Philippines' national hero, thought that European Enlightenment offered a way out of religious conservatism, and a path to modernisation. The British monarchy is still popular among Singaporeans. Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi was married to an Oxonian professor and received a tribute from the Westminster Parliament, once released from house arrest.

The relationship with the West then became ambivalent, halfway between suspicion and admiration. On the one hand, for South-East nations it became a symbol of oppression, generating the need to find their own way – the "ASEAN way", as the organisation likes to say. But, on the other hand, the West gave them the ideological tools to establish 'new', autonomous and totally independent institutions, even though they sometimes went to extremes in the process, such as trying to create a totally pure 'new man', as in the tragic horrors of Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. After the end of the Cold War and Communist China's embrace of capitalism, the West became a trade and investment opportunity, generating much-needed economic growth.

The second 'node' in South-East Asia's contemporary history is the role played by military elites. Their involvement in politics, often a consequence of their political leadership during the struggle for independence, has led to a permanent tension between democracy and authoritarianism (between poetry and violence, to quote Michael Vatikiotis' *Blood and Silk*, one of the most interesting books on South-East Asia in recent years). Thailand, with its recurrent *coups d'état*, is the paradigmatic example, but all South-East Asian countries continuously strive to find a balance between order (guaranteed by a strong military presence in society) and freedom (a component of full-fledged democracies). The armed forces are also a factor in vicious intra-elite fighting, another common feature in South-East Asia. The maintenance of harmony between different religious identities also plays a role in this complex civil-military power sharing.

Finally, the economic take-off of most of these countries is a third – more recent – 'node' in the book. South-East Asian countries are growing fast, and are more and more embedded in the global economy, especially through involvement in global manufacturing value chains. However, the strong connection between business interests and the political-military elite, which is creating greater domestic inequality, raises serious concerns about the sustainability of this type of economic development.

To the point that the reader, at the end of the book, might ask a fundamental question: have these countries ever developed a sense of citizenship, as Western democracies have? *A Short History of South-East Asia* leaves us with the impression that they are more similar to the ancient kingdoms that they once were than we often think. Ruled by (sacred or secular) elites that function like royal courts, these countries allow a moderate degree of freedom and create a certain amount of wealth for ordinary people who, however, have no opportunity to alter the political economy of their nations. The book does not address this issue, and rightly so. But if it inspires such academic questions in the reader, it means that the book has achieved its aim – that is, to generate a strong interest in South-East Asia's history and make the reader reflect on its implications for the present and future of a region that is increasingly crucial for the destiny of the world.

Reference

Vatikiotis, M. 2017. *Blood and Silk: Power and Conflict in Modern Southeast Asia*. London: Hachette.

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