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social change, Southeast Asia

Charles Hirschman and Jennifer Edwards

Southeast Asia consists of the 11 countries that lie between the Indian subcontinent and China. On the mainland of Southeast Asia are Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Insular Southeast Asia includes Indonesia, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, and Singapore and most recently East Timor. While most of Malaysia (Peninsular Malaysia) is on the mainland, it is usually considered part of insular Southeast Asia because the Malay population (the majority ethnic population of Malaysia) shares a common language and religion with much of the Indonesian population. The city-state of Singapore (on an island connected by a mile-long causeway to Peninsular Malaysia) was historically part of Malaysia, but because of its unique ethnic composition (three-quarters of the population is of Chinese origin) it is more similar to East Asia than Southeast Asia.

While there are some common geographical and cultural features, diversity is the hallmark of the region. Incredible indigenous cultural

variation has been overlaid with centuries of contact, trade, migration, and cultural exchange from within the region and from other parts of Asia, and for the past 500 years from Europe (for general overviews of the region, see Osborne 1997; Somers Heidhues 2000; Shamsul 2001; Wertheim 1968). The common characteristic of mainland Southeast Asia is Buddhism, although there are very significant variations across and within countries. Islam is the majority religion in Indonesia, Brunei, and Malaysia, and there are significant minority Muslim populations in Singapore, southern Thailand, and the southern Philippines. Christianity is the major religion of the Philippines, and there are small Christian minorities throughout the region. Hinduism is the major religion in Bali, an island in Indonesia, and among the Indian minority populations of Malaysia and Singapore. The lowlands of both mainland and insular Southeast Asia tend to be densely settled, and wet (irrigated) rice agriculture is the predominant feature of the countryside. Rural areas are knitted together with small and medium-size market towns. The major metropolitan areas of the region (Jakarta, Bangkok, Singapore, Manila, Rangoon, Kuala Lumpur, Ho Chi Minh City) are typically port cities or located along major rivers. Many of these towns and cities have significant Chinese minorities (often intermarried with the local population) that play an important role in commerce. Every country has remote highland and mountainous regions which are often populated by ethnic minorities.

In terms of land area, population size, and cultural and linguistic diversity, Southeast Asia is comparable to Europe. By the year 2000 the population of Southeast Asia exceeded 500 million – about 8 percent of the world's total. Indonesia is the fifth most populous country in the world, while the oil-rich sultanate of Brunei (located on the island of Borneo) is one of the smallest. The other large countries of the region, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines, are more populous than all European countries except for Russia and Germany. The sea (South China Sea, the Indian and Pacific Oceans) surrounds much of the region, especially the immense Indonesian and Filipino archipelagos. While the sea can be a barrier, the ocean and the rivers of the region are avenues that have fostered local and long-distance trade throughout

history. The same oceans can also be cruelly destructive forces, as evidenced by the enormous loss of life and of entire communities from the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

POLITICAL HISTORY

The contemporary political divisions of the region are largely a product of European imperialism, especially of the nineteenth century. Prior to European intervention, there were great regional civilizations – both agrarian states and maritime empires that waxed and waned over the centuries. The remains of temple complexes at Angkor (in Cambodia) and Pagan (in Burma) rival the architectural achievements of any pre-modern world civilization. Early western observers of the city of Melaka (a fifteenth-century maritime empire centered on the west coast of the Malayan peninsula) described it as more magnificent than any contemporary European city. These early polities were founded on intensive rice cultivation with complex irrigation systems and/or the dominance of regional and long-distance trade. The region has also been deeply influenced by contacts with the great civilizations of India and China. The cultural influences from outside have invariably been transformed into distinctive local forms in different Southeast Asian contexts. The ease of movement throughout the region seems to have shaped cultures that easily absorbed new ideas, immigrants, and a tolerance for diversity.

European influence began in the sixteenth century with the appearance of Portuguese and Spanish naval forces, followed by the arrival of the Dutch in the seventeenth century, and then by the British and French. In the early centuries of contact, European powers were able to dominate the seas and thereby limit the expansion of Southeast Asian polities, but rarely penetrated very far inland from their coastal trading cities. All of Southeast Asia was transformed, however, in the nineteenth century, as the industrial revolution in the West stimulated demand for mineral and agricultural products around the globe. New economic organizations of plantations, mines, and markets led to large-scale migration of people and capital to frontier areas and to the cities of Southeast Asia. There was an accompanying flurry of imperialist wars to grab

land, people, and potential resources. In a series of expansions, the British conquered the area of present day Myanmar (Burma) and Malaysia, the Dutch completed their conquest of the East Indies (now Indonesia), and the French took the areas that formed their Indochina empire (present day Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos). At the turn of the twentieth century, the United States defeated nationalist forces to take control of the Philippines just as the Spanish empire was crumbling. Siam (Thailand) was the only indigenous Southeast Asian state to escape the grip of colonialism.

The political history of the region has not been stable or evolutionary. As western countries moved toward more democratic social and political institutions over the first decades of the twentieth centuries, the colonists (British, Dutch, American, and French) constructed authoritarian dependencies in the tropics based on export economies and racial ideologies. Although there were stirrings of nationalist sentiment during the first half of the twentieth century, it was only after World War II that the nationalist forces were strong enough and the international environment favorable enough to bring political independence to the region. The critical turning point was the Japanese conquest and occupation of Southeast Asia from 1942 to 1945, which permanently shattered the myth of European superiority. The colonial powers returned after World War II, but encountered popular nationalist movements that demanded the end of colonialism.

Independence was negotiated peacefully by the Americans in the Philippines and the British in Burma and Malaysia, but nationalist forces had to wage wars of independence against the Dutch in Indonesia (1945–50) and against France in Vietnam (1945–54). The interplay of nationalist struggles, class conflicts, and East–West Cold War rivalry had a marked influence on political developments in the region. In almost every country there were radical and communist movements that held the allegiance of significant sectors of the population. In several cases, communist parties were part of the nationalist movement, but then departed (or were driven out of) the political arena as domestic and international tensions escalated. Vietnam was unique in that the nationalist movement was led by communists. After the French were

defeated in 1954 and agreed to grant independence to Vietnam, the United States intervened to set up a noncommunist Vietnam state in the southern region of the country. After another 20 years of war and a million casualties, Vietnam was finally united as an independent state in 1975. Following 1975, tensions between the socialist states (Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos) and the rest of the region were the major focus of international relations in the region, but by the late 1990s these rivalries had subsided.

Domestic political developments within individual countries of the region have been no less dramatic. Governments have oscillated between authoritarian and democratic forms with no clear linear trend. Behind the headlines of military coups, regional wars for autonomy, and “managed” elections, have been the complex political struggles among various contending groups defined by class, region, ethnicity, and kinship. These struggles have ranged from civil war to fairly open elections. Large-scale violence is not the norm, but massacres in Indonesia, Cambodia, and East Timor have been among the worst of such episodes in modern times. Popular civil protests against ruling elites in the Philippines and Burma have had significant domestic and international reverberations. Neither academic scholarship nor political reporting has offered broad empirical generalizations or convincing interpretations of the postwar political change in Southeast Asia.

Evolutionary – and sometimes revolutionary – social change continued throughout much of Southeast Asia in the 1980s and 1990s. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the socialist countries in the region, including Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, moved rapidly toward more market-driven economies. Several other countries in the region experienced major political movements that led to changes in national leadership. The “people power” movement led to the end of the Marcos regime in the Philippines and a return of regular elections. Nonviolent mass street protests ended the string of military coups in Thailand and ushered in an era of open democratic governance. Popular protests also forced the end of the Suharto regime in 1998 and brought the first free elections in 45 years in Indonesia. The military junta continues to rule Burma in the early years of

the twenty-first century, but few expect it to last for many more years. Even in Malaysia and Singapore, perhaps the most stable countries in the region, change was in the air, when after several decades of rule, first Lee Kwan Yew in Singapore and then Mahathir Mohamed in Malaysia handed over power to appointed successors. After many years of instability, Cambodia experienced consecutive peaceful elections in 1998 and 2003.

The 1990s also witnessed the creation of the new state of East Timor. After a long history of political repression by Indonesia, the people of East Timor voted for independence in a UN supervised referendum in 1999. After a period of brutal retaliatory violence from Indonesian sponsored militias, East Timor was granted international recognition as an independent state in 2002.

SOCIOECONOMIC CHANGE

Southeast Asia has been one of the most economically dynamic regions in the developing world. Economic change has been accompanied by many other attributes of modernization, including the widespread availability of education, modern transportation, and the mass media during the post-Independence era. This is most evident for the original ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries of Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, and Brunei (admitted in 1984). Several of these countries are often identified as second-tier Asian tigers (following the earlier model of the rapidly developing countries of South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore). Progress has been slower in the remaining Southeast Asian countries of Vietnam, Myanmar (Burma), Laos, and Cambodia, which were admitted to ASEAN in the 1990s.

Many indicators of development in Southeast Asia, including very low levels of mortality and almost universal secondary schooling, are approaching the prevailing standards of developed countries. Demographic research has revealed very rapid declines in fertility in several Southeast Asian countries, particularly in Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. If the current pace of decline continues,

replacement-level fertility (two children per woman) should be reached in the near future (Hirschman & Guest 1990).

At the same time, however, there is wide variation within the region and within some countries on all of these indicators. Life expectancy varies by over 20 years across some of the ASEAN countries, with a low of 55 years in Laos and a high of 82 in Singapore. While Singapore and Malaysia are competing for high tech industry jobs, the majority of the population in Burma and Laos remains in subsistence agriculture.

The reasons for the success of some countries and economic stagnation in others are a matter of dispute. The East Asian model of state-sponsored export industrialization is widely discussed in policy and academic circles, but the parallels between East Asian and Southeast Asian economic development strategies are still a matter of considerable uncertainty. Although market-driven capitalism is part of the story, the role of the governments in managing their economies has also been integral to economic development in the region. What is striking about economic development in the region is the degree to which it has been carried out by fairly authoritarian states. The relationship between democracy and economic growth and development, argued to go hand in hand by modernization theorists, seemed to be challenged by the experience of Southeast Asian tigers towards the end of the twentieth century, but much research is left to be done on the causes and consequences of economic development and modernization in the region.

For much of the 1990s, most of Southeast Asia experienced rapid economic growth and the development of a middle-class population whose growing social and political influence has been widely discussed in the research literature (McVey 1992; Girling 1996; Embong 2001). For example, the reform political movements in Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia are thought to be one manifestation of the increasing role of the new middle class. The period of very rapid economic growth was halted in late 1997 by the "Asian economic crisis" that hit the region, and Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia in particular. The causes of the crisis are the subject of much debate, with the role of "crony

capitalism" and highly speculative financial markets widely considered to be important contributing factors.

Despite the economic crisis of the late 1990s, economic growth has resumed in the region, even for some of the poorer countries like Laos. Assuming that current socioeconomic trends continue, several countries in the region will probably follow Japan, Korea, and Taiwan along the path of development in the early decades of the twenty-first century.

SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Scholarship on Southeast Asia has often reached beyond the boundaries of the region to influence debates over social science concepts, theory, and models. Perhaps most influential has been the work on Indonesia by anthropologist Clifford Geertz. His evocative concepts of the "theatre state," "thick description," and "agricultural involution" have stimulated debate and research in several social science disciplines, including sociology. His model of agricultural involution (Geertz 1968) has been one of the most provocative developments in scholarship on Indonesia over the last generation. A strikingly bold thesis, agricultural involution is an attempt to explain how Java became one of the most densely settled populations in the world within a traditional agricultural economy. To address this question, Geertz presents an ecological interpretation of the evolution (involution) of Javanese social structure in the face of rapid population growth and Dutch colonialism within the constraints (and possibilities) of wet rice economy. The colonial system prevented industrialization and the development of an indigenous entrepreneurial class. The traditional rice economy, however, could absorb a larger population because additional labor inputs in the maintenance of irrigation facilities, water control, weeding, and harvesting yielded marginal increments in rice production. Over the decades, this refinement of traditional production technology (involution) led to an increasing rigidification of traditional Javanese culture that discouraged innovation and any efforts at social change – therefore reinforcing the structural limits of the colonial system. Even after independence

when structural limits were lifted, the legacy of the past, as reflected in Javanese culture, remained.

Geertz's thesis remains highly controversial and many of its components have been confronted with negative evidence (for a review of the debate, see White 1983; Geertz 1984). For example, Geertz deemphasized social class divisions with his interpretation of "shared poverty" as the traditional social strategy. Most research has shown significant inequality of landholding and other socioeconomic dimensions in Javanese villages, although it is not clear if inequality is permanently perpetuated between families across generations. Even accepting many of the criticisms, agricultural involution is a seminal sociological model that should serve to generate empirical research on the historical development of Asian societies.

Moral Economy

A classic question in social science concerns the causes of revolution or rebellion. Neither Marxian theory, which emphasizes exploitation, nor relative deprivation theory seem to be satisfactory models to explain the occurrence of revolutions or rebellions. The most sophisticated sociological theory of peasant rebellion is based upon historical materials from Burma and Vietnam by political scientist James Scott (1976). Scott argues that peasants only rebel when their normative expectations of a minimum subsistence level are not met. These conditions are more likely to occur when capitalist market relations and colonial states erode traditional social structures and the reciprocal obligations of peasants and their patrons.

In a more recent study based upon fieldwork in a rural Malaysian village, Scott (1985) examines how class antagonisms are displayed in everyday life. Given that rebellion is a very rare event in most societies, Scott calls attention to political, social, and linguistic behaviors (weapons of the weak) that reveal the depth of antipathy and potential social conflict, but do not risk violent reaction from the state and powerful elites. In these two books and related publications, Scott has provided original interpretations of peasant political behavior in Southeast Asia and set a research agenda for

scholars of other world regions and, more generally, the development of social theory.

Status of Women

In addition to the theoretical concepts mentioned above, empirical generalizations have arisen from studies of Southeast Asian societies that have relevance far beyond the region. Empirically, the most common cultural characteristic across the region is the relatively high status of women in Southeast Asian societies, especially when compared to East Asia and South Asia. While women still face many social and cultural obstacles in Southeast Asia, the situation appears much different than the patriarchal societies of other Asian societies and the model of traditional female domesticity of many western societies. While there are a few matrilineal societies in the region, Southeast Asian kinship systems are typically bilateral, with equal importance attached to the husband's and wife's families. The patrilocal custom of an obligatory residence of a newly married couple with or near the groom's family is largely absent in Southeast Asia. The residence of young couples after marriage seems to be largely a matter of choice or dependent on the relative economic opportunities. There is no strong sex preference for children in Southeast Asia, and both girl and boy children are highly valued. Divorce, often initiated by wives, was part of the cultural fabric of several Southeast Asian societies, including Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand (Hirschman & Teerawichitchainan 2003).

The relatively positive status of women is also evident in earlier times. Historian Anthony Reid (1988: 146–72) reports that early European observers were struck by the active role of women in economic and political affairs in Southeast Asia. Traditional folklore also suggested that women play an active role in courtship and that female sexual expectations were as important as men's.

At present, women seem to be well represented in schools, universities, and in employment in all modern sectors of the economy in almost every country of Southeast Asia. There is only a modest scholarly literature on the higher status of women in Southeast Asia (Andaya 2001; Van Esterik 1982), and few efforts have

been made to explain the links between traditional roles of women as productive workers in the rural rice economy and their relative ease of entry into the modern sector, particularly in manufacturing industries such as textiles. The impact of modernization and economic development on gender relations and on the status of women are important topics for future scholarship.

Cultural Pluralism

Cultural pluralism has been the focus of both historical and contemporary research on Southeast Asia. Historically, one of the defining features of the region was the relatively easy absorption of peoples, ideas, and cultural practices from elsewhere. In the twentieth century, however, assimilation into Southeast Asian societies became more difficult with the creation of political and social barriers. Some of the key sources of ethnic and religious conflict in the region are illuminated in Chirot and Reid's (1997) collection of essays that compare the experiences of the Chinese in Southeast Asia with those of Jews in Central Europe. The implications of religious and ethnic diversity in the region for democratization have also garnered scholarly attention (e.g., Hefner 2001).

In particular, the relationship between politics and Islam is a topic of growing regional research interest with implications far beyond the region. Even with their majority Muslim populations, Indonesia and Malaysia have managed to maintain relatively secular states in spite of challenges from opposition parties that espouse religiously oriented politics. Hefner (2000) challenges the widely asserted stereotype that democracy is unable to flourish in the presence of Islam.

CONCLUSION

A generation or two ago there was intense discussion and debate over the question of whether Southeast Asia was a region in more than a geographic sense. The question has pretty much been settled by historical and contemporary research (Wolters 1999; Reid 2003). In spite of the great political, economic, and sociocultural diversity in the region, there are many common cultural, political, and social forms. The similarity of family systems and the status

of women throughout Southeast Asia suggest common historical and cultural roots among all the peoples of the region. The long history of migration from other regions, the ecological, cultural, and social differences between lowland and upland peoples, as well as the presence of linguistic and religious pluralism, have created multi-ethnic societies in every country in the region. Colonialism created many divisions that affected variations in the political and economic developments of Southeast Asian countries during the twentieth century. The study of these processes of modernization and social changes in politics, family structure, ethnic relations, and other social spheres makes Southeast Asia an extraordinarily interesting sociological laboratory for comparative research.

SEE ALSO: Colonialism (Neocolonialism); Gender, Development and; Modernization; Plural Society; Social Change; Transition from Communism

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social cognition

Chandra Mukerji

Studies of social cognition attempt to explain how thought or cognitive problem solving takes places in groups. While scholars generally agree that learning can be a collective activity, many

are reluctant to accept that thinking itself could have a social dimension. Psychologists and cognitive scientists tend to consider thought as an internal brain activity. Sociologists generally avoid the problem by focusing on social behavior. When sociologists look at consciousness, they generally study how internal psychological processes have been shaped by external social demands. Media scholars examine patterns of persuasion, and political sociologists look at ideology and hegemonic practices. All agree that collective life proceeds through the mind as well as the body, but few consider social cognition or how thinking might take place through interaction (Scribner & Cole 1974; Longino 1990; Hutchins 1995; Turnbull 2000; Rosental 2003).

Scholars doing work in the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK) have been the exception. Conducting fieldwork in laboratories, they have repeatedly found that ideas emerge through interaction. Researchers talk to one another about what they are seeing and how they understand their data (Bloor 1990; Longino 1990; Knorr Cetina 1999). Their thinking takes place in conversation and this fact is documented in the long list of authors in many scientific publications.

The problem for those interested in social cognition is to define the more general conditions under which such activity takes place (Latour 1993; Rosental 2003; Mukerji 2006). Ed Hutchins (1995), an anthropologist working in cognitive science, has been a leader in this field. He explains that social cognition can take place even when individuals are alone. He asks us to imagine a student sitting at a desk, doing a math problem. There is paper on the desk and a pencil in the student's hand. Where, Hutchins asks, is the thinking going on? The simple answer is in the brain. The student absorbs the problem, solves it internally, and puts the result onto the paper. But Hutchins argues that the calculations in fact take place on the paper as well as in the brain. The student uses cultural symbols to do the problem, and manipulates them in culturally prescribed ways, using techniques designed for pencil and paper. Many math problems are impossible to solve without writing them down. So, Hutchins argues, the thought is *both* in the brain and in the material world. The brain learns to do what the culture says can be done on paper, and the problem is