



## Adaptability and Fatalism as Southeast Asian Cultural Traits



Frank Dhont\*

[ *Abstract* ]

This paper will concentrate on how various particular Southeast Asian conditions created a distinct Southeast Asian cultural identity despite a very challenging geographical and historical diversity in the region. The paper will argue that Southeast Asians demonstrate an ability to adapt to changes and new values but also exhibit fatalism through a very high degree of passive acceptance to political and other changes that affect their society. The paper identifies a degree of environmental and geographical uniqueness in Southeast Asia that shapes context and gives rise to very distinct cultural traits. The historical transformation in the region brought about by colonialism and nationalism, combined with this geographical and political make-up of the region, had an immense impact on Southeast Asian society as it fostered adaptability. Finally, the political transitions brought about by various conflicts and wars that continued to affect the area in rapid succession all throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century likewise contributed immensely to a local Southeast Asian fatalistic response towards change. Historically, Southeast Asia demonstrated these socio-cultural responses to such an extent that these are argued to permeate the region forming

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\* Senior Lecturer, University of Brunei Darussalam, frank.dhont@ubd.edu.bn

a distinct aspect of Southeast Asian culture.

**Keywords:** colonialism, nationalism, adaptability, fatalism, Southeast Asian culture.

## I . In Search of Southeast Asian Cultural Traits

Locating cultural characteristics of Southeast Asia holistically, as attempted in May 2017 at the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies in Busan University of Foreign Studies, remains a major challenge.<sup>1</sup> It is a universal given that time and events continuously flow and affect, to large or lesser extent, the lives of people and their environment. Their whole living environment has numerous aspects and facets and thus both people's past and present can be analyzed, narrated, and recorded from various viewpoints: social, economical, political even environmental, natural, and spiritual to name but a few. The actual scope that is examined in any of such an analysis or narrative can also range widely: from an individual to a family, a clan, a tribe, a large ethnic group, a society, a region or country, a continent to even the whole world. Even the sentences above only provide a partial perspective on the complexity of human society and culture and how these can be studied. In the case of Southeast Asia as a whole, the focus appears to be clearly immense and seemingly inaccessible. Any cultural characteristics must however hold a historical dimension as can only be found in the body and beliefs that were inherited from earlier generations in Southeast Asia. Even if the current values and cultures of the present were at one point transmitted or adapted from other societies, they were internalized over time by Southeast Asian culture. Therefore, this paper will use the historical perspective to investigate cultural traits in Southeast Asian society. The argument in this paper is that various particular Southeast Asian conditions were present that created attitudes of adaptability and fatalism in society and thus

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<sup>1</sup> The paper that this article is based on was initially written for and presented in the international conference: "Locating Cultural Characteristics of Southeast Asia as a Whole" of May 2017 in the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, Busan University of Foreign Studies, South Korea.

formed a basis for a cultural identity.

## II . The Southeast Asian Geographical Environment

Southeast Asian culture and values were shaped by the past as well as transformed and created to represent the identity of the Southeast Asian individuals today. During this historical process, there is also an environmental component to consider. Examining Southeast Asian culture holistically is to an extent a political choice within borders that have been drawn rather arbitrarily. The *Southeast Asia Command* started out originally as *East Asia Command* from the perspective of the Allied side in World War II, whereas in Japan, a sense of Southeast Asia crystalized decades earlier (Shiraishi S. and Shiraishi T. 1993: 26-27). As the Japanese Empire included Korea, Taiwan, and islands of the South Pacific after World War I, it was probably easier for Japan to see Southeast Asia as distinct compared to the Western powers that all held their own colonial possessions in Southeast Asia and therefore did not conceptualize the region as one region or entity. The events of World War II in Asia changed that thinking and created this concept of Southeast Asia.

After World War II, the concept of Southeast Asia was increasingly more widely adopted. The formation in 1967, growth, and rise of the *Association of Southeast Asian Nations* (ASEAN) as a political expression of this conceptual vision of Southeast Asia as an entity in a wider world, exemplified that even Southeast Asians had started to see themselves as such. In fact, the political group is at the moment only one country (Timor Leste) short from incorporating the whole of what geographically is now defined as Southeast Asia. The concept of Southeast Asia is as artificial as the concept of East Asia and South Asia, and one wonders if there is also such a thing as East Asian culture and South Asian culture. One specific element inherent to the region of Southeast Asia is that it is made up of more member nations than its closest neighboring areas mentioned above, and spans a very wide geographical area of diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. This unique geography and

socio-political situation distinguishes Southeast Asia from its surrounding regions. These undoubtedly shaped Southeast Asian culture as it emerged and continues to be practiced by its people.

Most areas such as South America, Europe, Africa, etc. contain land masses that are continuous and physically connect the countries in these regions. Oceania is the obvious exception. Southeast Asia however is typified by an equal maritime and mainland area. This had, of course, enormous impact in connecting and setting cultures apart. With the sheer distances in the region, this also clearly diminished a Southeast Asian identity. Historically, most human interaction and major trade connections were by way of rivers and seas. Indian influence and trade with Southeast Asia was of a tremendous impact with the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries as apex; Chinese trade with India over Southeast Asia even dated from the 1<sup>st</sup> Century (Curtin 1984: 101). This peculiar geographical environment and extensive trade in Southeast Asia created two types of states: the city port state, building wealth on trade, and the more inland situated agricultural society extracting wealth from the agrarian surplus (Van Leur 1983). This factor of a unique Southeast Asian geographical environment sets out a foundation for the conceptualization of Southeast Asian society and culture.

### **III. 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Century Colonialist Determination**

Trading and agricultural societies that historically surfaced in Southeast Asia were however in competition with the expanding colonial powers. They increasingly became isolated and hemmed in by the expanding colonial power. During the colonial era, the trade volumes shipped were so important and locations so specific that maritime trade interests became of paramount importance. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British negotiated with Siam (later Thailand) in order to effectively bring Thai trade into the British colonial network, make it sympathetic to British colonialism, neutralize the perceived Burmese threat to British India, and strengthen their interests in the Malay Peninsula (Webster 1998: 230). The problem of course was that indigenous trade was increasingly replaced by European

networks of commercial and military power that operated on a larger scale. If Southeast Asian traders played major roles in different trade networks in the earlier era, their power began to wane in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century as Southeast Asia became more and more entangled in various colonial networks. The foundation of Singapore as hub in the region for British colonial interests was very important (Webster 1998: 83). Various other Western countries positioned their own colonial networks all engulfing Southeast Asia.

Colonialism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries strongly gripped on Southeast Asia and more territories were placed under Western colonial powers. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the only country not under foreign control was Siam, though it was under influence of France and the United Kingdom. A shift of control of trade and geographical ports to hinterlands with markets and resources began between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. A case in point is the rapid growth of the Javanese sugar industry. Between 1880 and the outbreak of World War II, Javanese sugar industry grew exponentially based on an alliance of capital investment, government cooperation, and technological advances (Galloway 2005: 10). Colonialism and development affected Southeast Asian society in a far more penetrating way than ever before.

The peoples of Southeast Asia were forced to meet colonial goals of profit. Infrastructure and education changed Southeast Asia as the need to extract resources required these investments. Western powers continued to exploit colonies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and with modernization, road and rail networks began to grow in importance. In 1898, Governor-General Paul Doumer proposed the idea of connecting China with Bangkok, and by 1936, a railroad connected Hanoi with Saigon in French Indochina. (Del Testa 2002: 183). That railroad is still in use today. During the Japanese occupation, when the whole of Southeast Asia was under imperial control, the Thai-Burma Railroad project was pursued in 1943, forcing numerous locals to toil in connecting the Malayan railroad network to the Burmese network (Akashi and Yoshimura 2008: 139). It is clear that the importance of land connections increasingly began to play a role in Southeast Asia long before air connectivity we see today. Southeast Asia is however geographically unique in the sense that it

can be distinguished by way of its two different parts: Insular Southeast Asia and Mainland Southeast Asia. This created a very peculiar situation where distance remained an important factor despite the developments in modern technology of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The conceptual region of Southeast Asia found itself in an environment where distances were still considerable despite the onslaught of modern technology.

#### **IV. Southeast Asian National Reactions against Colonialism**

Southeast Asia was a region that found itself colonized by many different Western countries and experienced shifts in trade from within as colonialism cleared the hinterlands through modern travel connections and technology in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Its very nature as region colonially occupied by various nations made it less of a unified assembly of indigenous forces against this force compared to areas like China or India. This also constitutes a fundamentally important factor in explaining the development of Southeast Asian culture. South Asia is larger than just India today. However, British India, which included Bangladesh and Pakistan in the past, displayed a similar opposition to colonialism through a national quest for self-determination. It would be wrong to assume that there were also no regional interests and divisions in that region. However, the larger administrative unit of British India managed to absorb regional interests more easily by considering British colonial administration as a common enemy.<sup>2</sup> In East Asia, the situation was different yet again, here Chinese and Japanese administration accounted for the whole region of East Asia. In the case of Southeast Asia, there were more national movements opposing colonial powers: the Netherlands, in what would later become Indonesia; France in Indochina with Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam; the British in what would later be Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei; and the United States of America in the Philippines, after having replaced Spain in 1898. Thailand was

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<sup>2</sup> On regional politics in Bombay, see Gordon Johnson. 1973. *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism: Bombay and the Indian National Congress 1880 to 1915*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

independent but negotiated between France and Great Britain; and Timor Leste was under the Portuguese. The national colonial borders and control were just one way to divide the different peoples of Southeast Asia, and it prevented pan-Southeast Asian feeling from surfacing in any menacing way for colonial rule.

China and India benefitted from the larger administrative entity they formed. They grew in cohesion because of the improved connectivity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is largely absent in Southeast Asia as the local areas and nations were not strong enough to claim dominance. One notable exception was the Netherlands-Indies and the larger Malay speaking world. Even today, the population of Indonesia is by itself the as big as the next three most populated Southeast Asian countries (the Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand) combined. It is however not as influential as India is in South Asia, and China or Japan in East Asia.

Indigenous opposition to colonialism started to emerge in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This was again not unique to Southeast Asia, but here, distance and the localized nature of Southeast Asian nationalism made peoples more concerned about the interests of their immediate communities. As these societies negotiated the limitations and borders of their own areas and national power, Southeast Asia's colonial past and the very specific lay of the land prohibited the formation of a larger political entity. Conceptually, this accounts for the region's uniqueness as compared to other areas. Only the region that later became Indonesia, and to a certain extent, the whole Malay world (including arguably Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Timor Leste, Indonesia, and the Philippines) might have emerged to reinvent itself as an *Indonesia Raya* (Greater Indonesia) or *Melayu Raya* (Greater Malay). Yet history teaches that these two concepts never became very prominent. One manifestation of such thinking may be found in the case of the *Kesatuan Muda Melayu* (Young Malay Union) in the late 1930s, when it looked for a convergence of political nationalist forces of what will later become Indonesia and Malaysia, with all the "Malays" being united (Cheah 1983: 10-11).

It was often extremely challenging to politically oppose

colonialism. The only genuine power that successfully opposed it lies in the grouping of the local elements of a society within these colonial boundaries. Historically, and in most cases, the nations of today were the colonial possessions of yesterday. This means that Southeast Asia as a concept could not immediately gain appeal as the fight against colonialism meant fighting against various colonizers and focusing on one's own nation for the mean time. For one, Indonesia, the region's largest political entity, adapted the idea of the nation in the 1920s, perpetrated by Indonesian intellectuals and spread over the Netherlands-Indies (Dhont 2005). The Communist movement had also appealed over the population in the locality (Petrus-Blumberger 1935). Alongside Nationalism and Communism, Islam and regionalist movements were politically appealing for Indonesians (Petrus-Blumberger 1931). The educated elites used modern political thought to strive for self-determination. In areas such as Siam (Thailand), this was deliberately institutionalized by the traditional historical leadership. Despite rejecting democracy, King Chulalongkorn nevertheless embarked on a path where he instituted Western-style education and modernized the country (Somwung Pitiyanuwat and Siridej Sujiva 2005). This process of nationalism swept Southeast Asia, though it remained confined within the colonial state boundary.

Only Brunei and Thailand managed to remain more or less under local traditional authority. All the other countries yielded new local elites. The nations of Southeast Asia were significantly transformed even while they were opposing colonialism. The whole process however affected only a limited number of people in Southeast Asia. The increase in population of Southeast Asia in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries marked a shift into newly claimed land for agriculture (Booth 1990: 7). A large section of Southeast Asian society lived in rural areas in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Access to education was very limited and no Southeast Asian country gained independence before the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Literacy in Indonesia, for instance, was extremely minor (Groeneboer 1993). The colonial powers opened access to education to a handful of local people. This created a gap between the educated and the illiterate masses. Southeast Asian adaptability to these modern conditions has to be



understood on the various national levels as choices made by the elites opposing colonial power. For the masses, life went on as new ideologies and ideas against colonialism spread in society. This resulted in the search for alternative sources of popular strength. Religion, capitalism, and socialism, as well as more indigenous ideologies, permeated Southeast Asia and added to its unique cultural identity.

The educated Southeast Asian became increasingly aware of the colonial world-system. The cry for self-determination became stronger as time went by. Independence made education accessible to the masses. The countries that underwent education inherited from the West, but the actual drive to band together with regional neighbors remained largely absent. This is an important point in the search for common cultural traits of the Southeast Asian. The specific context in which the process of self-empowerment took place made it individualistic and nationalistic. Southeast Asians adapted to new educational values but were also in no way able to practically implement and exercise these new beliefs in Southeast Asia as a whole or even in their own local national country. One problem was the presence of the colonial powers with interests and military apparatus to quell challenges to their authority. The limited number of indigenous people educated in the West during colonial times, as well as their willingness to participate in the struggle, constituted another major issue. If World War I largely left Southeast Asia in colonial grip, World War II changed everything. For all its horror and conflict, the war changed Southeast Asia and broke the colonial stronghold.

## **V. The Japanese Occupation and Ensuing Cold War**

The Japanese occupation may have caused hardship but it brought more and more Southeast Asians into the political scene in its recruitment of local support against the West. Many suffered the war, but it also lent a sense of local independence and self-determination. There was a single ruler in the whole of Southeast Asia to be considered a common enemy. Japanese occupation and

imperial policies transformed Southeast Asia in a very profound way creating a common experience in the region (Dhont 2016: 92-93). Colonial powers of the West were also forced to re-evaluate their colonial policies. Fighting fascism and espousing freedom and democracy in Europe did not add up to occupying Southeast Asia. Fighting alongside Southeast Asians against the Japanese only to restore former regimes was hard to justify. Most countries in Southeast Asia gained independence soon after World War II. A large number of countries remained embroiled in new conflicts as the Allied Powers from World War II split in two camps that started the Cold War.

The Cold War affected Southeast Asia. The regions of South and East Asia provided space for countries to develop into nations and achieve a degree of political direction. The diversity that characterizes Southeast Asia and the fact that the region is situated in a fault line of different spheres of political influence did not provide the ideal opportunity for nations to solidify and strengthen after the World War II. Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia became the battlegrounds for the Vietnam War and subsequent conflicts. The list of post-war coups in Thailand is long. In the British controlled territories of the Malay world local conflicts added instability to the region: the Communist insurgency in Malaysia; the Brunei Rebellion; and the *Konfrontasi* (Confrontation) of Indonesia that opposed the formation of the state of Malaysia. Myanmar, Indonesia, and the Philippines underwent very strict military rule. This gave the Southeast Asians an enhanced awareness that political participation and the struggle for freedom were not without risk of military repercussions.

When the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was created in 1967 as an expression and symbol of political will of cooperation, it was no coincidence that the countries of Indochina did not join. Originally, the countries that leaned towards Communism found themselves excluded; they regarded ASEAN negatively and as an instrument to contain Communism (Litta 2011: 35). In the late 1970s, Cambodia and Vietnam found themselves supported by the feuding powers of China and the Soviet Union. Their attitude towards ASEAN shifted as it was began to be

perceived as a regional entity worthy of attention. (Narine 2002: 41). The Soviet Union fell in 1991 and the Communist-leaning countries finally joined ASEAN. The Cold War and prolonged conflicts among key forces had until the 1990s prohibited cohesion in Southeast Asia.

Gradually ASEAN would come to represent a Southeast Asian identity as political support for the organization gradually materialized. ASEAN celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> year in 2017, yet enthusiasm for its vision remains largely top-down with very limited genuine popular interest. Clearly, Southeast Asian identity will need more time to permeate the whole region. For the ordinary Southeast Asian however, political turmoil, rebellions, war and conflict in the 20<sup>th</sup> century created in him enormous adaptability in the changing times. Also, save for the period of struggle against the Japanese, and at those times when individual countries rose up against national dictatorships, Southeast Asian culture exhibited fatalism to politics, an easy acceptance of new political regimes after being regularly devastated by wars.

## **VI. Southeast Asian Adaptability and Fatalism**

Historical pressures and conditions at work in Southeast Asia also affected other regions. Southeast Asia was not the only region in the world to know war, geographical distances, and colonialism. Their local particularity however, created a distinct Southeast Asian cultural experience. Southeast Asia was an area situated between two more noticeable and distinct political entities, South and East Asia. Southeast Asia did not form a continuous landmass and was also not under one regionally dominant colonial administration, except during the brief instance of World War II. The different colonial administrations created a political situation where distinct national sentiments and ideas grew each in their own way. This distinct colonial mix and the complex ethnic mix combined with the limited amount of time Southeast Asian nations historically had to mature, and the many wars that were fought out in the region created a distinctly unique cultural element for the whole region.

Southeast Asia demonstrated a very high degree of adaptability.

Southeast Asians demonstrated an ability to adapt that allowed their societies to continue despite different regimes, rulers, and wars. Yet it also led to fatalism towards politics and any political situation. This explains the lack of support for nationalism and the building of a Southeast Asian political identity building through ASEAN. Southeast Asia was, and remains therefore, a unique place in the world where the mix of political interests from outside the region; its sheer geographical vastness and diversity of the region; and its special political make-up shaped by various national struggles and conflicts, created a balanced area of diversity where the Southeast Asian can be seen to be culturally adaptable but also aloof and fatalistic in a general sense. The values of consensus and tolerance for others, as well as non-interventionism, are held paramount for both nations in Southeast Asia as well as society.

The nations of Southeast Asia know that political problems will be hard to solve, and therefore a mix of national strengthening as well as convergence in a larger world pushes regional identity. These nations have constantly shown an ability to adapt to the different contexts and political currents that sweep the continent—a strong cultural trait. Flexibility and adaptability honed them. Change is seen as constant and resistance is futile. Change has come so often and in such unexpected ways and therefore the desire to engage oneself politically is far less present. A major stumbling block for the Southeast Asian culture to grow is the absence of a dominant country in the region. This prompted non-alignment and internal opposition within Southeast Asia. One is also confronted with the reality that many Southeast Asians are still coming to terms with their own national borders and nationalism. This creates less desire to be engaged in the larger project of a cultural and political Southeast Asia.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Southeast Asia has a rich history and is geographically composed of a mainland as well as a maritime component. Diversity, colonial influence, and nationalist reactions contributed to its emergence as

well as lack of political cohesion. Colonization in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and national independence movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century created societies where adaptability became a cherished trait in responding to changes and challenges. The conflicts and wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the consequent political changes they brought were met with fatalism. Life in micro-level went on despite major macro-level changes. The unique geographical and socio-political context of Southeast Asia created a peculiar environment with large swaths of geographical space creating distance and connection among Southeast Asians. This, combined with the region's historical evolution in the last two centuries provided specificity and space that honed adaptability and fatalism as two Southeast Asian cultural traits.

As clearly demonstrated, seeing Southeast Asia as a culturally whole unit is challenging. There are elements of clear distinctness compared to other regions such as East Asia or South Asia. Defending cultural Southeast Asian distinctness can be maintained if one considers the geographical and socio-political climate in which the region came into being as socio-political concept. A region historically wedged between the more uniform societies of China and India, Southeast Asia was defined by these neighbors as different. Yet despite some elements of Malay or Indonesian integration in Insular Southeast Asia, the region maintained an internally rich diversity that also prevented homogenization to a large extent. Southeast Asia also formed a natural geographical environment with a maritime and mainland area where distances remained important during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries despite technological improvements.

Southeast Asian diversity was further enhanced and accentuated when colonial powers drew administrative and political borders for the present countries. Regional modernization, the economic exploitation of resources during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as well as deep and prolonged political conflicts, all added to a growing differentiation of Southeast Asian society into nations. In that process, fatalism became the antidote to all these. The Southeast Asian learned to adapt quickly, but with a fatalist acceptance of the actual changes. The nationalistic reaction caused

a contraction of local Southeast Asian societies in the sense that the nations entrenched themselves into colonial structures and borders. The Southeast Asian was never particularly concerned about a single political Southeast Asian entity.

In Southeast Asia, political tensions between the West and the Communist-leaning countries blocked the growth of Southeast Asia as a single, stable, and self-governing entity for decades. Until the 1990s, the Cold War prevented a political coming together. Furthermore, because of the particular geography and politics of the region, there was no real possibility for any country to dominate and control the region. Only recently the ideal of a Southeast Asian society in ASEAN is gaining momentum. Southeast Asian culture today contains the markings of this particular combination of history, geography, and political turmoil. These factors and historical processes produced the distinct Southeast Asian cultural traits of adaptability and fatalism as means of coping with the changes and challenges that the 19<sup>th</sup> and especially the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought to Southeast Asia. These are also present in many other cultures, but Southeast Asia has distinctly embodied them throughout its history.

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Received: May 1, 2017; Reviewed: Sep. 15, 2017; Accepted: Dec. 10, 2017

