



Southeast Asia in International History: Justification and Exploration

Ooi Keat Gin*



[*Abstract*]

Despite its centrality at a pivotal crossroads of both land and sea of East-West trade, communications and travel, the region now known as Southeast Asia provides very few scholarly works situating or featuring it in an international context. Because of this paucity, there is immense scope for exploration. But prior to further explorations, justification is needed to establish that Southeast Asia, as a region, is a subject of interest, relevance, and significance in a global context. Southeast Asia was home to several empires whose reach transcended the region and beyond. Southeast Asia in, and as part of international history as an area of study is therefore justifiable. Moreover, other factors come into play, viz. geography, resources, migration, diffusion of ideas and beliefs from without and accommodation from within, shared experience of imperialism and colonialism, decolonization, and the Cold War, and the collective fate under the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), that further bolster its rationalization as a component of international history. Explorations, on the other hand, examine issues and

* Honorary Professor, School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, kgooi@hotmail.com

obstacles that contribute to the paucity of works on Southeast Asia in international history. Furthermore, in contextualizing Southeast Asia in international history, there might appear challenges that need to be identified, confronted, and resolved.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, international history, global economy, area studies, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

I . Preamble

What is presently recognized as the region of Southeast Asia has been overlooked as a legitimate component of international or global history with few scholarly works adopting a global view of its importance. To date, a mere seven volumes - five historical works, viz. Lockard (2009), Lieberman (2003, 2009), Ang (2018) and Chew (2018), and two volumes in international relations (IR), Acharya (2012) and Dayley (2016) – have presented the region in an international context. This paper will establish a justifiable case in citing a host of compelling factors in support of Southeast Asia’s inclusion in international history. The second part on explorations focuses on issues and hindrances that contribute to the paucity of works on Southeast Asia in international history. Moreover, in attempting to contextualize the region as an international history component, it might foster challenges that need to be ascertained and addressed.

II . Definitions and clarifications

Almost three decades-old, international history (this more inclusive term is preferred over transnational history) is an approach in analysis and interpretation in the discipline of history addressing in what way developments within a country or region have been shaped, influenced, and changed by developments from without, particularly from trends, growths, expansion in the “outside” world. For instance, taking a modern nation-state like Thailand, how has

Thai history been impacted by developments from other neighboring nation-states such as Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Likewise, the history of Southeast Asia has been shaped by developments from outside, from East Asia, South Asia, and West Asia. The progenitor of international or transnational history was the Australian historian Ian Robert Tyrrell (b. 1947). Prominent works that promoted international/transnational history are Tyrrell's *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective since 1789* (2015), and an edited volume by Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake, *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective* (2006)

Southeast Asia as a region was borne from the wartime Allied demarcation of areas of military operations, namely the South East Asia Command (SEAC), a British theater of operations during the Pacific War (1941-1945). Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten was the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia (1943-1946), headquartered in Kandy, Ceylon (Sri Lanka). SEAC's land force operational domain initially comprised India, Burma, Ceylon, Malaya, northern Sumatra, Siam (Thailand), and from August 1945, also the Dutch East Indies and the southern part of French Indochina. The US sphere of military operations, designated South West Pacific Area Command (SWPA), came under US Army General Douglas MacArthur (1942-1945), who commanded the Philippines, Borneo, Dutch East Indies (Java and eastwards), East Timor, Papua and New Guinea, Australia, Guinea, and the Solomon Islands. In the post-war period, the contemporary term "Southeast Asia" came to denote the mainland nation-states of Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and archipelagic territories of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, Brunei, North Borneo (Sabah, from 1963), Indonesia, East Timor, and the Philippines. The Federation of Malaysia, created in 1963, comprised Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, and North Borneo. Singapore seceded from the Federation in 1965 becoming an independent republic. Between 1769 and 1974, East Timor was under Portuguese colonial rule. Following civil war in 1975-1976, Indonesia annexed East Timor as its 27th province in mid-1976. Elections were held in 2001, and in 2002, when East Timor or Timor-Leste attained independence.

III. Justification

Does Southeast Asia as a region warrant a space in international history? This had first to be justified. Grounds for rationalizing the region's qualification include: geography, resources, emigration and immigrants, diffusion of ideas and beliefs, imperialism and colonialism, and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Each factor in concert with others, contributed in legitimizing Southeast Asia as a region worthy to be featured in international history.

3.1. Geography

A glance at a map of Asia with parts of Europe and Africa on the peripheries reveals the centrality of Southeast Asia vis-à-vis the other continents. Specifically, within the Asian continent, Southeast Asia is juxtaposed between East Asia and South Asia, almost equidistant to both. Once one reached the sub-continent of India, either landward or seaward, one's access to West Asia, thence the Mediterranean and to Europe are inevitable. Again, from perusing the aforesaid map, Southeast Asia's positioning between East Asia and South Asia is located between East-West maritime routes. Either commencing from the Sea of Japan or the East China Sea, a vessel proceeds southward and westward through the South China Sea entering Southeast Asian waters. The journey continues through the Straits of Malacca into the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. In crossing the latter, the vessel anchors on the eastern coast of the Indian sub-continent. Continuing seaward and westward, through the Palk Straits into the Arabian Sea, and northward along the western periphery of India towards West Asia approaching the Arabian Peninsula, either via the Gulf of Oman thence the Persian Gulf, or further westward, through the Red Sea. With the opening of the Suez Canal (from 1869), the latter sea route proved more prudent rather than having to make the overland journey through present-day Iraq and Syria to reach the Mediterranean.

The ancient overland network of trade routes, the so-called Silk Road (c. 114 BCE-1450s CE) that connected Chang'an (modern Xi'an) at its eastern end to Byzantium (Constantinople; present-day

Istanbul) at its western point (Liu Xinru 2010; Frankopan 2016). Paralleling this terrestrial passageway was a seaborne route, the Maritime Silk Route (200 BCE-1400s CE) that, in fact, predated the former (Liu Yingsheng 2018). There were three major navigational passages of the Maritime Silk Route, namely the East Route, from China to Korea and Japan; the South Route, from China to Southeast Asia; and, the West Route, from China to South Asia, Arabia and East African coastal territories. The West Route, that connected to Arabia via the Red Sea, embarked overland to Egypt to proceed to the Mediterranean. Undoubtedly the West Route was joined to the South Route, hence Southeast Asia to the Mediterranean.

Participants of the terrestrial Silk Road, mainly Chinese, Parthians, and Romans profited lucratively until the advent of Islam in the seventh century that brought in “new players”, namely the Arabs. The seafaring Arabs brought into prominence the Maritime Silk Route (Kauz 2010). The advantage of the latter over the former was due to the capacity for greater volume of goods conveyed, but more importantly, the sea passages were comparatively safer than the land routes that were often plagued by brigands and warlords. Nonetheless, sea passages too had their shortcomings, from adverse weather conditions, dangerous waterways to piracy. Skilled and experienced seamanship was thus mandatory in undertaking voyages on the Maritime Silk Route.

Southeast Asia played a pivotal role in the ancient Maritime Silk Route. Not only were trade goods conveyed and exchanged, but there was also the migration of ideas, sociocultural practices, and peoples. Southeast Asia was directly involved in the lucrative spice trade from Roman times and flourished during the fourteenth to sixteenth century CE. Spices were needed in the flavouring, colouring and preserving of foods (Czarra 2009). The most common spices as well as commanding a high price were pepper, cinnamon, cumin, nutmeg, ginger, and cloves. The Moluccas, famed as the “Spice Islands”, in present-day Eastern Indonesia, produced most of the spices, likewise the northern part of Sumatra, noted for its pepper. Ginger, however, native to mainland China, was brought to the Southeast Asian spice emporium for conveyance to Europe. As

a result of the trade in spices, Southeast Asia acted as the *entrepôt*, on the one hand, East Asian herbs and pepper, South Asian cinnamon turmeric, and on the other hand, through West Asia to the markets in Europe. Similarly, the luxury China trade of silk, tea, and porcelain (chinaware) also traversed Southeast Asia before making its westward journey to Europe (Greenberg 1951). Southeast Asia's strategic geographical location between East and West, and on the ancient trade routes gave it an essential place in international history.

3.2. Resources

In addition to its role as a go-between in East-West trade and commerce, Southeast Asia is endowed with valuable mineral and plant resources. Spices were the major produce in high demand in Western markets. Paralleling such plant produce, the Malay Peninsula was referred to as the *Golden Khersonese*, the Golden Peninsula, by Greek and Roman geographers in classical antiquity (Ptolemy 2000). Much earlier, the Indian epic, *Ramayana*, had made references to *Swarnabhumi*, a Land of Gold, and *Swarnadvipa*, referring to a Golden Island or Peninsula (Kulke 1986). Possibilities as to these references are either the Malayan Peninsula, or the island of Sumatra, or both, as the two territories were known to have gold deposits.

In south-west Borneo, present-day Indonesian Kalimantan, Hakka gold-miners had been working the gold fields since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Jackson 1970). In the mid-nineteenth century, due to internecine clashes, several of these Hakka miners crossed over to Upper Sarawak, where in and around Bau, gold-mining was undertaken. The cyanidation process of gold extraction was applied to the mines in Bau at the turn of the twentieth century with lucrative outcomes (Ooi 1997: 135-136, 158-159).

Meanwhile, the islands of Bangka and Belitung, off south-east Sumatra, had long been a producer of tin ore. As early as the thirteenth century, Hakka miners were known to have worked the tin fields there. However, it was during the seventeenth century that

the tin industry begun to flourish when local rulers recruited Chinese immigrant mine-workers (Heidhues 1992).

In the mid-nineteenth century, after the fashion of Bangka-Belitung, native rulers, Malay chieftains in Perak sought Chinese labor for the alluvial tin fields of the Kinta Valley, likewise the Klang Valley in Selangor, and Sungai Ujong. Sungai Ujong was one of the larger states of Negeri Sembilan (lit. 'Nine States') (Ooi 2018: 316). Collectively the tin output from the west coast peninsula Malay states of Perak, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan by the early twentieth century accounted for more than half the world's tin production (Drabble n.d.).

The chance discovery of the Telega Tila oil well in northern Sumatra led to the establishment of Royal Dutch Shell in 1890. Oil exploitation commenced in Tarakan in north-east Kalimantan in 1899 (Poley 2000: 121-132). The Miri field in Sarawak was opened in 1910, and Seria, in neighboring Brunei, in 1929 (Ooi 1997: 136-143; Vienne 2015: 120). By the close of the nineteenth century, Southeast Asia was connected to the world's energy markets.

Coffee (Java), tobacco (North Borneo/Sabah), sugar cane and manila hemp (Philippines), pepper (Sumatra, Sarawak), and timber (Siam/Thailand, North Borneo/Sabah) were important agricultural resources of Southeast Asia traded as commodities in the international marketplace (Brema 2015; John and Jackson 1973: 88-106; Aguilar 1998; Owen 1984; Ooi 1997: 175-176, 180-181; Wattanaikorn 2018; Ibbotson 2014; Shaffer 2014: 139-198). Moreover, the region was a major rice exporter to the world market. Successful and sustainable rice cultivation was undertaken in the Lower Irrawaddy (Burma/Myanmar), Central Plains (Siam, Thailand), Mekong Delta and Red River Delta (Vietnam) (Brown 2005; Johnston 1981: 107-126; Coq, Dufumier, and Trébuil 2001). Rice, being the staple food of the peoples of Southeast Asia, was, and still is, grown throughout the region (Piper 1984).

Besides spices, the other profit-making agricultural product was natural rubber. The problematic coffee industry in the west coast peninsula Malay states led to the switch to rubber, and the first rubber boom of 1909-1910 sealed the success of this "miracle

crop” (Drabble 1973). Thanks to Detroit’s automobile industry, the high demand for rubber increased its prices dramatically. Malaya, particularly the west coast Malay states (Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, and Johor), became the world’s largest exporter of natural rubber during the first half of the twentieth century (Drabble 1991; Voon 1976). Indonesia, southern Thailand, and Vietnam too were, and still are, major suppliers to the world natural rubber market.

Southeast Asia’s plant and mineral resources which contributed to the world market demonstrated the close interconnection of the region with other parts of the world, notably East Asia, South Asia, West Asia, Europe, and North America. Linkages between other regions were the inevitable consequence of the networks of international trade and commerce.

3.3. Emigration and immigrants

Besides the transportation of goods and products, the migration of peoples from within and without Southeast Asia were equally significant. Southeast Asia’s population is not entirely indigenous for many residents had migrated from other territories, some in recent years while others since centuries past.

The Bamar, the present-day ethnic majority of Myanmar, originated from Yunnan in south-west China. Their emigration to the Irrawaddy valley occurred in the seventh century (Yi 2015: 3-4). On the other hand, Tai-speaking peoples of modern Thailand’s Central Plains emigrated from Guangxi in southeast China in the first millennium CE, fanning out across mainland Southeast Asia (Evans 2002: 2). Others, however, suggested a later date of this south-westward migration of Tai-speaking peoples between the eighth and tenth centuries (Pittayaporn 2014: 47–64). Similarly, the Lạc Việt, derived from a conglomeration of Yue tribes from Guangxi, which settled in the fertile Red River Delta and subsequently came to be the ancestors of modern-day Vietnamese. The Lạc Việt were known to have established Văn Lang, a kingdom that occupied today’s northern Vietnam, in the third century BCE (Taylor 1983: 303-311). The Bronze Age Đông Sơn culture of mainland Southeast Asia featuring elaborate bronze drums was associated with the Lạc

Việt (Hoang 2007: 12-13).

Ethnic Malays are indigenous to eastern Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula, coastal Borneo, and island Southeast Asia, comprising the modern nation-states of Indonesia, southern Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and southern Philippines. Islam, *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language), and sociocultural practices and traditions conventional in the Malacca sultanate of the fifteenth century are distinct attributes of *Malayness*. The *Melayu asli* (aboriginal or native Malays) or *Melayu purba* (ancient Malays), were of Austronesian stock believed to have migrated on a piecemeal basis to the Malay Archipelago between 2500 and 1500 BCE.

Theories of the origins of ethnic Malays, at best tentative and contested, are divided into two schools of thought, the Taiwan theory (1997) and the “Southeast Asian origin” model (1998). The out-of-Taiwan theory posited that Proto-Malays left Taiwan to migrate southward to the Philippines, Borneo, Eastern Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea (Bellwood 1997). The Taiwan theory is based on linguistic evidence drawn from the Austronesian language family. The “Southeast Asian origin” model, on the other hand, contended an “opposite flow”: inhabitants of Sundaland (comprising present-day Malay Peninsula, Borneo, Java, Sumatra and all the islands in between) during the last Ice Age (110,000 to 12,000 years ago) lived on a vast land mass created when sea levels decreased some 30-40 meters. The population migrated northwards to the (present-day Southeast Asian) mainland consequent of the rise in sea level (Oppenheimer 1998; Oppenheimer 2006: 65-73; Piper et al. 2017; Donohue and Denham 2014). The current Sunda continental shelf is evidence of this “Southeast Asian origin” thesis.

During the first century CE, there was a phenomenon referred to as *Indianization*, a phrase coined by French archaeologist, George Coedès, who contended in *Histoire ancienne des états hindouisés d'Extrême-Orient* (*The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* [1968]), that the spread of sociocultural elements – ideas and concepts (kingship), language (Sanskrit), beliefs (Hinduism and Buddhism) – from the Indian sub-continent influenced and impacted on the peoples of Southeast Asia.

It could be argued that Indian traders and merchants then, in their pursuit of gold and spices, established economic contacts with the lands of Southeast Asia through the Maritime Silk Route. *Suvarnabhumi* and *Suvarnadvipa* were Sanskrit terms for Golden Island or Golden Peninsula. On the heels of the traders were Brahmin priests, on their own initiative or invited by local elites, seeking vocations in the region. The native upper classes of mainland and island Southeast Asia adopted the sophisticated sociocultural practices of the Brahmins including the idea of kingship, viz. *Devarāja* (god-king), *Chakravartin* (ideal universal ruler), from the Sanskrit language, religious traditions and beliefs, and from Hinduism in particular. Today, the Indonesian island of Bali has continued to embrace Hinduism (Stuart-Fox 2002).

Buddhist monks from India, like their Brahmin counterparts, too ventured into Southeast Asia. While the Brahmins and Hinduism took root in mainland Southeast Asia in the initial stages, Buddhism then was far more influential in the archipelago. But Buddhism proved sustainable in the long run evident from its legacy in modern Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and to a certain extent, Vietnam.

The Hindu-Buddhist transformation was exhibited in the example of Angkor Wat, originally a Hindu temple dedicated to Vishnu by the Khmer king Suryavarman II (1113-1145/1150) in the early twelfth century as his state temple and eventual mausoleum. In fact, he broke convention, from the traditional honoring of Siva to Vishnu. But towards the end of the century, Angkor Wat was transformed into a Buddhist temple (Richter 2009).

Srivijaya (650–1377 CE), a Malay Buddhist thalassocracy in the south-east of Sumatra at its zenith in the eighth century CE, oversaw a maritime empire that comprised Sumatra, the Isthmus of Kra, the Malay Peninsula, and the greater part of West and Central Java (Munoz 2006: 171). Borobudur, a ninth-century Mahayana Buddhist temple in Central Java, Indonesia, reputedly the largest Buddhist temple in the world, is testimony to the Buddhist impact on the Javanese (Gifford 2011).

Since then, Indians have been in Southeast Asia with enclaves

in the port-cities of the region. Archaeological evidence from *Lembah Bujang* (Bujang Valley) pointed to the existence of a Hindu-Buddhist kingdom in present-day Kedah in the north-west of the Malay Peninsula (Mohd Supian Sabtu 2002). Tamil traders had sojourned there and brought back trade goods for exchange at the capital of the Tamil Chola dynasty (300s BCE–1279 CE). *Kedah Kuno* (Old Kedah) was referred to variously as: *Kadaram*, *Kataha-Nagara*, *Anda-Kataha*, *Kataha-Dvipa*, and *Kataha*. In the fifteenth century Malay-Muslim Malacca sultanate, the Indian mercantile community was so large that it required the appointment of a *Kapitan Keling* (Indian Captain) to ensure harmony within the community and to deal with petty offences. Likewise, *kapitans* were appointed for the other trading communities. This form of indirect rule was prudent and cost-effective (honorary appointment without remuneration) (Ooi 2004: II: 711).

During the colonial period, convicts from British India were transported to other British colonies such as Fort Blair in the Andaman Islands and Penang. In George Town, Indian convicts were seconded to the Public Works Department (PWD) to erect and repair public buildings, churches, and roads (Ooi 2019: 11-12). Towards the last quarter of the nineteenth century, not only were Indian *sepoys* (Hindu and Muslim) stationed in British Malaya, but also Indian wage laborers were conscripted to lay rail sleepers, followed by road construction (Soh 1973). Indian traders, artisans, and professionals too emigrated to urban centers in Southeast Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Enclaves of Indians in contemporary Yangon (Rangoon), Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Manila testify to past emigrations.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Tamils from South India migrated in their thousands to the rubber belt of British colonial Malaya. As foreign indentured labor, the Tamils met the labor shortage and contributed to the development and success of the Malayan rubber industry, the world's largest pre-war exporter of natural rubber (Drabble 1991).

The peninsular tin industry of the 1840s in pre-colonial British

Malaya bore witness to the influx of Chinese miners and laborers from the southern provinces of China (Jackson 1961). When the tin-rich west coast peninsular Malay states of Perak, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan became British protected states from 1874, greater Chinese investment from the neighboring British crown colonies of the Straits Settlements further spurred the tin industry that in turn enticed more Chinese immigrants (Wong 1964; Yip 1969). While the mining industry (tin and gold) drew in proletarian Chinese from peasant stock, trade and commerce in the Straits Settlements brought in the Chinese mercantile class (Yen 1986; Tai 2013). The latter too were spread across Southeast Asia's port-cities and urban centers where their activities can be discerned today in the many Chinatowns in the region: Yaowarat (Bangkok), Tayoke Tan (Yangon), Binondo (Manila), Cholon (Ho Chi Minh City), Petaling Street (Kuala Lumpur), Glodok-Mangga Dua (Jakarta). More apparent in the Chinese diaspora are the Chinese-majority cities and towns in Malaysia, viz. George Town (Penang), Ipoh (Perak), Kuching and Sibu (Sarawak), and Singapore.

Emigration was a consequence of "push" and "pull" factors. The arrival of large waves of Chinese immigrants to Southeast Asia, in particular the west coast peninsular Malay states during the second half of the nineteenth century owed much to unpalatable conditions in the Chinese mainland. Internal strife and rebellions coupled with external threats from European and Japanese imperialist powers created political instability, economic dislocation, and social chaos (Spence 2012: 137-245; Keay 2009: 446-479). Aggravating human-made troubles were natural calamities: floods, droughts and earthquakes resulting in widespread famine, outbreaks of disease, loss of properties, and high death tolls. Poverty and the vagaries of the weather were "push" factors in the Indian sub-continent especially in South India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Sandhu 1969: 31-74). Southeast Asia provided attractive "pull" factors, notably trade and commerce, the mining sector, commercial agriculture all of which required investment, enterprise, and immigrant labor.

From the seventeenth-eighteenth century and earlier, there were small-scale piecemeal migrations of peoples within mainland

and island Southeast Asia. Enclaves of Javanese and Bugis, for instance, in peninsular Malaysia, are testimony to such movements. Similarly, Karen communities in present-day north-west Thailand, Dayaks (Ibans) in west-central Sarawak, or Minangkabaus in Negeri Sembilan (West Malaysia) are a consequence of past migrations from within the region.

Emigration and immigrants from within and without Southeast Asia point to the interrelatedness of the region with neighboring territories, notably the Indian sub-continent, and mainland China. Southeast Asia's innate attributes of acceptance welcomed sojourners and immigrants. Sojourners too appreciated the congenial environment of their host country and decided to establish their homes with local spouses. Co-habitation and miscegenation generated hybrid communities such as the *peranakan* and unique Eurasian communities in present-day Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia (Dhorausam 2006; Suryadinata 1997; Chia 1983; Khoo 1996; Daus 1989; Walker 2009).

3.4. Diffusion of ideas and beliefs that accommodated local input

Southeast Asia had long witnessed the inflow of trade goods and peoples as well as ideas and beliefs. Buddhism was adopted in Thailand as early as the reign of Ashoka (268-232 BCE). The flourishing of the religion occurred when it was designated as the officially-sanctioned religion during the Sukhothai kingdom of the thirteenth century (Rooney 2008). The kind of Buddhism adopted was of the Theravada school after the Sinhalese tradition. However, Theravada Buddhism in Thailand had been integrated with local folk animism and the eclectic religious practices of the sizeable resident Chinese community. Contemporaneous with Buddhism was Hinduism, both being transplanted in what is referred to as the Indianization process. But as the Thai example has shown, Hinduism too was subject to acculturation to indigenous animistic beliefs and practices. Most of mainland Southeast Asia, with the notable exception of Vietnam, was greatly influenced by Hindu-Buddhist traditions. As pointed out, Angkor Wat, initially Hindu, was transformed to a Buddhist monument. The Angkor or Khmer Empire (802-1431 CE) in about 900 CE covered the greater

part of the modern nation-states of Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. Jayavarman II (802-835 CE), the founder, was proclaimed *Devarāja* (god-king), and declared *Chakravartin*. Thus, Indian concepts of statecraft and kingship derived from Hinduism were embraced by the Khmer rulers.

Meanwhile, Vietnam, during the ascendancy of the neighboring Khmer empire, was drawn into the Chinese world order, dominated by Tang China (618-907 CE). Chinese colonialism dates back to the annexation of Vietnam by Han China (202 BCE-220 CE). Overall Imperial China's domination stretched over a millennium, between 111 BCE to 939 CE (Kiernan 2017: 61-100). The Vietnamese reclaimed their independence when they triumphed at the celebrated battle of Bạch Đằng in 939 CE. Nonetheless, as part of Imperial China, there was the concerted attempt to transform Vietnamese peoples into Chinese citizens, a process termed Sinicization. Although a political tool – in becoming Chinese, Vietnamese identity and nationalism would be discarded – Sinicization focused on sociocultural transformation, notably customs, traditions, attire, hairstyles, language, and mannerisms. To a certain extent, the Vietnamese were already admiring their dominant neighbor; hence adopting Chinese ways and styles was not unduly problematic. Advanced Chinese expertise in architectural and building technologies contributed to the infrastructural development of Vietnam, and in turn, economic progress. Imperial China's model of statecraft (absolute monarchy) and the mandarin system of civil administration (scholar-bureaucrats) were adopted in Vietnam which subsequently emerged as the “Little Dragon”. But the “Little Dragon” did not fully *kow-tow*.

The Vietnamese revolted at earlier stages but they later supported Sinicization and adopted most of Chinese culture. *The Vietnamese chose what to adapt to and what to reject*. For example, they saw that the Chinese military system would be of great benefit to them, so they adopted it. However, the Vietnamese women greatly rejected and revolted against the patriarchal system of leadership. The women rejected the culture that forced them to be submissive to men, and refrain from leadership and trading activities. On the other hand, China largely benefitted from Vietnamese rice. The rice later

became the staple food of China (World Atlas n.d., emphasis added).

Like others in Southeast Asia, the Vietnamese retained their ethnic and cultural identity despite Sinicization. And although they used the Chinese script for official purposes, Vietnamese mandarins retained their mother tongue in interactions within the domestic domain. Like the Chinese, the Vietnamese were pragmatic, tolerant, and embraced eclecticism. Folk beliefs accommodated Confucian ritual, ancestor worship, the Chinese Daoist pantheon of deities were honored, and given equal reverence alongside native animistic spirits.

Similarly, the diffusion of Islam across island Southeast Asia from the thirteenth century displayed adaptability and accommodation by local communities. Islam which established a strong foothold on the northern coast of Java during the early decades of the fifteenth century, adjusted to local situations and tolerated animistic practices. Hence, the dichotomous nature of adherents of Islam in Java between the *santri*, the orthodox practitioners, and the *abangan*, who observe a more syncretic version of Islam incorporating indigenous folk beliefs called *adat* (customary rituals, practices and tradition) and *kebatinan* (Javanese folk religion) (Geertz 1976). The latter, also called *kepercayaan*, is a syncretic amalgamation of Javanese animism, Buddhism, Hindu, and Sufi beliefs and practices. Undoubtedly some aspects of *abangan* practices were regarded as *syirik* (*shirk*), a sinful partiality to polytheism. Nonetheless, the Javanese, as with others in Southeast Asia, exercised a high degree of tolerance.

Christianity too in the Philippines where Catholicism was established as the predominant faith among the indigenous inhabitants underwent transformation and adaptation to local folk beliefs and practices (Andaya 2016: 233-249). The pre-Hispanic animistic beliefs comprised a host of deities, spirits, creatures believed to oversee and/or guard, protect streams, fields, trees, mountains, forests, and even houses and other buildings (Pelmoka 1996). Moreover, Chinese residents in the Philippines have been culturally influential in impacting on Catholicism with their “world of beliefs”, viz. Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. Like their

Javanese counterparts, Filipinos too were tolerant and accepting of hybridization.

Overall, there was a high degree of syncretization of ideas and beliefs. World religions from without upon entering Southeast Asia were subject to local influences and enrichment that facilitated native acceptance and consumption. An ambience of co-existence and mutual beneficence abounds throughout the region.

3.5. Imperialism and colonialism

Imperialism and colonialism from within and from without are elements that contributed to Southeast Asia as a region warranting a place in international history. Undoubtedly imperialism and colonialism moulded, influenced, and transformed the region. As indicated, the Khmer empire held sway over the greater part of Indochina for more than six centuries. Borne from this domination, modern Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos shared numerous sociocultural practices, customs and traditions, language, and Theravada Buddhism. Nevertheless, there are distinct characteristics of these shared elements derived from indigenous influence and adaptation. Lao Buddhism, as a case in point, presents a distinctive version of Theravada Buddhism founded upon the basis of Lao culture where animist beliefs and reverence to ancestral spirits remained strong and influential.

In archipelagic Southeast Asia, imperialism and colonialism from within were exemplified by Malay-Buddhist Srivijaya, Javanese-Hindu Majapahit (1293-c. 1500), and Malay-Muslim Malacca (c. 1400-1511). Malacca, for instance, at the apex of its power, dominated central Sumatra, the Straits of Malacca, and the central-southern Malay Peninsula (Villiers 2004: II 868-871). But Malacca's influence via its maritime trade expanded further to Borneo, Java, the Moluccas, and beyond. Its trade networks facilitated Islamic proselytization when missionaries travelled with traders and merchants. Owing to the rice trade, and relations between Malacca and Java, the northern coastal Javanese polities were transformed into Islamic sultanates, notably Bantam, Demak, Ceribon, Tuban, and Gersik (Graaf and Pigeaud 1976).

Between the Catholic Iberian powers, Spain made the greatest impact as an imperial and colonial power in the region, specifically, in the Philippines. The Spanish brought Roman Catholicism to the Philippines which flourished during more than three-centuries of colonial domination (1565-1898). US colonialism in the Philippines (1898-1946), on the other hand, brought Protestantism. Both Spanish and American colonialism had a profound religious impact on the Philippines.

The Philippines proudly boasts to be the *only Christian nation in Asia*. More than 86 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 6 percent belong to various nationalized Christian cults, and another 2 percent belong to well over 100 Protestant denominations (Miller n.d., emphasis added).

Besides the religious legacy, Western imperialism and colonialism exerted a strong and deep influence on the peoples of Southeast Asia. The introduction of Western-style formal education delivered in Western languages (English, Dutch, French) produced several generations with knowledge of Western philosophy, history, politics, economics, science and technology. The growth, nurturing, and flourishing of nationalism across the region, to a great extent owed much to Western education.

Infrastructure developments in transport and communications by the Western colonial regimes primarily to expedite economic exploitation and serve military purposes brought modern amenities to Southeast Asia.

In guerrilla struggles for independence, rail track and rolling stock became prime targets for sabotage. In such ways, railways insinuated themselves into the *mentalité* of Southeast Asian nationalism (Dick and Rimmer 2003: 66).

In fact, the railways, roads, telecommunications, the mass media (newspapers, magazines, periodicals) all facilitated greater proximity thereby allowing local nationalists to be in touch, to discuss, to plan, and to plot against their colonial masters.

Admittedly, Western imperialism and colonialism with their

legalistic approach to governance and borders, created the modern nation-states of present-day Southeast Asia. To a large extent, modern Thailand was a consequence of Anglo-French competition and strategy; to avoid friction in sharing a common border, Thailand remained an independent, sovereign kingdom, a buffer between the two imperialist powers (Baker and Phongpaichit 2014: 46-79; Tuck 1995). Again, the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of London (1824), ensured that spheres of influence were clearly demarcated between Britain and the Netherlands by a border drawn along the Straits of Malacca, the northern portion being assigned to the British, the southern part, to the Dutch. As a result, Malaysia and Indonesia followed a different colonial pathway, the former within the British sphere, and the latter, the Dutch realm.

Imperial Japan was the first and only colonial power which managed to establish a regime and administration, albeit a military-type, over the entire region except Thailand (Satoshi 2019). In a sense, Imperial Japan regarded Southeast Asia as a region. The concept appeared to have impacted on the Anglo-American military planners that designated the SEAC as a theater of military operations. In other words, Southeast Asia as a region was borne of wartime military exigency and expediency.

3.6. Decolonization and the Cold War (1947-1990) scenario

Post-war developments in Southeast Asia witnessed two overlapping phenomena, mainly the decolonization process and the Cold War (1947-1990). As each colonized state struggled to unshackle itself from the metropolitan power, to the right stood the US, champion of the so-called free world and Western democracies, and to the left, the USSR, leader of the socialist states, both extending “welcoming hands” to enter or join their respective camps. The Washington-Moscow “conflict”, labelled the Cold War, due to the fact that both sides did not come face-to-face in armed clashes, but simply clashed ideologically: democracy against communism, and free market competition against a centralized, planned economy. Each protagonist sought support from other countries, especially the newly-independent nation-states that were grappling with their new reality, unclear, and unsure of the future, at the crossroads, considering whether the

Western-type liberal democracy model of governance would be appropriate, or whether the communist form of centralized authoritarian government should be followed. The “race” to recruit adherents to their respective camps was underway in earnest in Southeast Asia.

From 1949, an additional Cold War protagonist emerged, the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Between 1949 and 1960, the Moscow-Beijing axis stood firm against Washington and its close allies (UK, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, also Canada, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand). Fundamental ideological differences, however, led to the Sino-Soviet split in 1960. Thereafter, Beijing pursued its own agenda, and courted its own supporters and allies.

Following the tense situation on the Korean peninsula and following the conclusion of an uneasy armistice on 27 July 1953, the global focus turned to Southeast Asia, when unexpectedly following a four-month siege, French forces surrendered to the Việt Minh at Điện Biên Phủ on 7 May 1954. Undoubtedly the French capitulation was seen as an escalation of the Cold War, a triumph for the communist bloc.

In the First Indochina War (1946-1954), while the Western democracies led by the US lent support to France, struggling to reinstate its colonial rule over Indochina but faced with resistance from the Việt Minh. Both Moscow and Beijing in their respective ways contributed to the Việt Minh’s cause for independence. France’s defeat at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954 and its withdrawal, witnessed the increased involvement of the US in the Vietnam imbroglio (Fall 1966; Logevall 1999).

US President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-1961), in referring to communism in Indochina, espoused the domino theory on 7 April 1954 at a news conference prior to the 1954 Geneva Conference (26 April-20 July 1954). Eisenhower’s “falling domino” principle envisaged that, if a single country in a region embraced communism, then its neighbors would follow in a domino effect (Leeson and Dean 2009: 533–551). The 1954 Geneva Conference ended the First Indochina War but left an uneasy situation whereby Vietnam was divided at the 17th parallel until 1956 between a more

populous North under the Việt Minh, and the South under a democratic regime. The year 1956, as sanctioned by all parties, witnessed democratic elections supervised by an international authority. Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969) and the Việt Minh would undoubtedly have attained an electoral triumph due to greater support and the bigger electoral roll of the North. Taking heed of Eisenhower's forewarning of "falling domino", the US "blocked" the scheduled 1956 election, and instead increased the number of military advisers to the Ngô Đình Diệm (1955-1963) regime of South Vietnam. The Second Indochina War (1955-1975), popularly rendered as the Vietnam War, saw the increasing involvement of the US that subsequently led to the commitment of ground troops from mid-1965 in support of the non-communist South Vietnam regime (Logevall 1999: 333-374).

In the Cold War scenario, whilst South Vietnam was supported by the US and the Western democracies, North Vietnam was militarily sustained by the USSR and PRC. Such a scenario had a precedent in the Korean War (1950-1953) whereby communist North Korea received Moscow-Beijing support including the commitment of ground combat forces, the so-called Chinese People's Volunteer Army (PVA) from October 1950. South Korea, on the other hand, received a UN international force (16 nations) headed by US Army General Douglas MacArthur (June 1950-April 1951) (Hastings 1987; Cumings 2010).

Besides the conflict in Indochina, Southeast Asia witnessed an alignment of the main Cold War protagonists (US, USSR, and PRC) in insurgencies in territories in the region. Shortly after the cessation of armed military hostilities of the Pacific War British Malaya saw the declaration of an "Emergency" on 16 June 1948, when the colonial administration, and the government of independent Malaya (from 1957), waged a 12-year war with the guerrilla army of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) (Tonder 2017). The UK was undoubtedly a close ally of the US, and it was no surprise that the latter rendered material support to an almost fiscally devastated post-war London in its Malayan anti-communist conflict.

Paralleling the Malayan Emergency, was the Hukbalahap

Rebellion (1942-1954), a leftist-led peasant rebellion by members of the former *Hukbalahap* or *Hukbo ng Bayan Laban sa Hapon* (People's Army against the Japanese) soldiers against the Philippine central government (Greenberg 1987; Corpus 1989). Whether it was misinformation or the truth, the Manila correspondent of the respected *New York Times* 1949 allegedly claimed that Soviet submarines were supplying weaponry, ammunition and supplies to the Huks (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 Apr 1949). Ex-colonial power and close ally, the US, undoubtedly assisted the Philippines in its fight against any leftist threat, and the Huk insurgency was no exception.

When the concept of “Malaysia” was first mooted in 1961, whereby the newly-independent Federation of Malaya together with the British crown colonies of Singapore, Sarawak, and North Borneo, and the British protectorate of the Sultanate of Brunei would form a wider federation, initial responses within the component states ranged from enthusiasm (Singapore), bafflement and uncertainty (Sarawak and North Borneo) to cautious reservations (Brunei) (Ooi 2020: 200-236). Likewise, neighboring countries too, namely Indonesia and the Philippines, *did not openly object initially*. But as the scheduled deadline of September 1963 approached, attitudes started to change. The most conspicuous response came from Jakarta with its accusation that Malaysia was nothing more than a neo-colonial plan to extend Britain’s influence in the region after decolonizing its colonial territories (Poulgrain 1998). Indonesian President Sukarno threatened to launch *Konfrontasi* (confrontation) in opposition to this wider federation, and his less than subtle phrase, ‘*Ganyang Malaysia*’ (lit. “to chew”, obliterate or smash Malaysia), further aggravated the hitherto tense situation. Meanwhile, Philippine President Diosdado Macapagal (1961-1965) objected to North Borneo’s incorporation in the proposed wider federation claiming it as its possession owing to the fact that it was once part of the Sultanate of Sulu, therefore a part of the republic (Noble 1977).

Mandarins at the British Foreign Office (FO) and Colonial Office (CO) in London were uneasy over Sukarno who seemed to be increasingly leaning to the left, apparently closer to *Partai Komunis*

Indonesia (PKI, Indonesian Communist Party). In fact, Sukarno was struggling for his own survival in balancing two opposing but influential forces, the PKI on the left, and the *Tentara Nasional Indonesia* (TNI, Indonesia National Armed Forces), particularly the Army, on the right (Huges 2002; Daves 2013; Mortimer 2006). *Konfrontasi*, a low-intensity war characterized by occasional cross-border incursions, was a distraction in order to turn public attention away from the deteriorating domestic economic situation, and also, to “please” the Army who could justify demand for a more generous budget.

Nonetheless, Sukarno’s allegation of Malaysia as a neo-colonial plan of the British was proven to be concise and precise. Whitehall was undoubtedly concerned with developments in the on-going protracted Indochina conflict. The Sino-Soviet split had implications for Southeast Asia. Following the soured relations, Beijing could act unilaterally without having to seek Moscow’s sanction. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had actively supported communist parties in the region including the MCP, PKI, and the Việt Cộng in South Vietnam, as well as the communist regime of North Vietnam (Belogurova 2019; Simon 1969; Olsen 2006). In such a scenario, in order to ensure that none of its former colonial possessions fell into the socialist camp, Malaysia, comprising the Malay Peninsula (West Malaysia), and northern Borneo (Sarawak and Sabah), were regarded as a barrier to communism.

Developments such as those which unfolded in Indochina, the prelude to Malaysia and the Indonesian and Philippine objections, and the involvement, directly or indirectly, of the major Cold War players in post-war Southeast Asia, made the region an indispensable chapter in international history’s “Table of Contents” relating to “Decolonization” and “the Cold War era”. Global phenomena, decolonization and the Cold War dominated the second half of the twentieth century.

3.7. Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

The ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) agreed in Bangkok on 8 August 1967 established the Association of Southeast Asian

Nations (ASEAN); it abstained from using such words as “communist” or “communism” or “leftist”, its formation as “an Association for Regional Cooperation” was aimed specifically as a bulwark against the further expansion of communism in the region (The ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) Bangkok, 8 August 1967). By 1967, Washington had committed close to half a million ground combat troops in the Vietnam War, and there was no significant sign that victory was at hand. The initial five signatories of the ASEAN Declaration had encountered the threat of communism in one way or another, and by 1967, each had justification for participation, viz.

Indonesia had emerged in the post-Sukarno era called *Orde Baru* (New Order) under President Suharto. The Sukarno regime appeared to be falling into the grips of the PKI until arrested by the anti-communist purge of mass killings in 1965 that was orchestrated by the Army.

Malaysia had triumphed over the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) but was confronted by the Sarawak Communist Insurgency (1962-1990).

The Philippines that had faced a leftist-led uprising, the Huk Rebellion, was ever cautious of a revival of armed communism. Manila’s fear was not unfounded, for in 1969, the Maoist New People’s Army (NPA, *Bagong Hukbong Bayan*), the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), was established in March, and thereafter launched a guerrilla war in accordance with the strategic line of protracted people’s war (Corpus 1989).

Singapore had its close brushes with the wily *Barisan Sosialis* (Socialist Front), undoubtedly a front political party of the communists that had covertly infiltrated labour and student movements. Barely two years after joining Malaysia Singapore was expelled from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965 owing to insurmountable ethnic issues, hence as a newly-independent small republic, it felt vulnerable.

Thailand faced a communist insurgency (1967-1983), a guerrilla war between the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and the Thai government at Bangkok. The CPT was supported by neighbouring

communist organizations including Cambodia's Khmer Rouge (until 1978), Lao's Pathet Lao, and Malaysia's MCP. North Vietnam, later (from 1976) Vietnam, PRC (1971-1978), North Korea, and Soviet Union were also known supporters of the CPT.

Forward-looking ASEAN in disregarding “-isms” and past histories, expanded its membership to include Brunei (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos (1997), Myanmar (1997), and lastly, Cambodia (1999) (Weatherbee 2019: 95-118). For better or worse, ASEAN's pragmatic outlook, in embracing inclusiveness, and in widening its membership, further strengthened itself as a regional bloc in regard to other counterparts such as the European Union (EU), North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA).

Although ASEAN does not wholly represent Southeast Asia, its importance in world affairs justifies both – ASEAN and Southeast Asia – to be an integral part of international history. Through ASEAN, Southeast Asia as a region is enhanced, and its importance amplified.

IV. Exploration

Having established and justified Southeast Asia as a region worthy to be a component of international history, it is prudent to ponder on the paucity of publications on Southeast Asia in this field. Such a phenomenon necessitates further inquiries as to issues, problems, and obstacles that have hitherto hindered the output of more scholarly publications on the region. Identifying, and subsequently addressing the issues, problems and barriers is the first step in moving forward the agenda of Southeast Asia in international history.

4.1. Core-periphery

Southeast Asia as a region had long paid a subordinate role to China in the east, and the Indian sub-continent in the west. Southeast Asia appeared on the *periphery* of both East Asia and

South Asia, a side show to the main developments in the *core* areas. In this connection, Southeast Asian historiography too had played a secondary or subordinate role to the two Asian historical “movers and shakers” – India and China. Likewise, from the sixteenth century, with the advent of Western powers – Spain and Portugal, thereafter Britain and the Netherlands, France, and the US – Southeast Asian historiography was again marginalized as if being written from the deck of galleons, carracks or East Indiamen. The seminal work of John Smail (1961), argued for Southeast Asia to be regarded in its own right as a region, and not as an appendage of others. Although the call was made in the early 1960s, Southeast Asian history managed to emerge as “an Autonomous History” only from the 1980s and 1990s.

Beginning from the 1970s, universities within Southeast Asia gradually produced publications in the vernacular. This point is based on personal insights and observations drawn from more than three decades of involvement as an academic staff member affiliated with a public university in Malaysia as well as holding several visiting fellowships in various institutions throughout East and Southeast Asia. Owing to pecuniary issues, only a handful of academic staff benefitted from postgraduate studies abroad. Moreover, not all those who possessed foreign, mainly Western degree qualifications, published works in English, the academic *lingua franca*. The growth and expansion of the tertiary educational sector across Southeast Asia became increasingly apparent from the late 1980s and the 1990s when improved economic performance offered the much-needed capital for investment in new universities and colleges. But this growth and expansion was a double-edged sword. As more and more local universities were available, there was a cost-effective trend to have home-trained scholars rather than spending huge amounts on tertiary training abroad. But, on the other hand, as the majority of local universities in the region taught in the vernacular, rather than utilizing English, with the exception of the Philippines, Brunei, and Singapore, unsurprisingly, scholarly publications in English remained low. Regardless of the language medium, the quality of universities across the region, with notable exceptions, were at best less than average. Universities in Singapore,

such as the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University, were exceptions to the regional norm. Kuala Lumpur's Universiti Malaya too, in the past decade, had proven its mettle as one of the top-tier institutions globally.

Consequently, the works produced and published might not meet the highest standards in the international scholarly arena. The down-side of non-English publications moreover is their limited dissemination, localized within the confines of national boundaries, (as there is unlikely to be any market) for Khmer books in Myanmar, or *Bahasa Indonesia* volumes in Vietnam.

Publishing nationally in the vernacular undoubtedly makes the work of local historians in Southeast Asia even more peripheral and divorced from the international scholarly community. At the same time, any attempt at utilizing publications to contribute to Southeast Asia in international history requires the fluency in the various languages throughout the region in order to tap into these works.

4.2. Parochialism

Furthermore, not only were locally trained historians not publishing in internationally (acclaimed) journals, or with major (established) publishing houses, largely due to the formidable English language barrier, but local academics have a tendency to be inward-looking. The latter mind-set typically characterized a domestic-trained historian with a tendency to focus on local subject matter, and ethnic-bound topics and themes pertinent to his or her community, tapping into local source materials. Publications tended to be in local journals and publishers that utilized the vernacular for the local market. Such trends appear to be the norm in the region rather than the exception, as I have observed personally for more than three decades.

The parochialism of locally-trained historians is accentuated by the research grant structure. More often the rule than the exception, the bulk of local academics including historians rely on university-based funding and national government largesse for research and conference attendance. Understandably, public universities that receive annual financial support from the government follow

national priorities and concerns. Government-funded research obviously focus on the national agenda. All the aforesaid are justifiable, and no quarrel could be made from such goals. Historians and other scholars who relied on local funding for their research therefore, have little latitude, but to pursue nationally prioritized agendas.

Private tertiary institutions (colleges, university colleges, universities) on the other hand, have relegated research activity of their academic staff as a marginal activity; the primary focus is in graduating students. Private universities throughout the region are profit-making organizations. Higher education, not unlike other service sectors, is profit-driven. Altruistic intentions might appear in an institution's motto or vision statement, but the "bottom-line" has to be the handsome annual dividends that are delivered.

As a result, few historians in public universities dare take the gamble to work on non-national designated topics or themes lest they be marginalized for government grants. Although international grants are undoubtedly available, they are highly competitive. Moreover, owing to the paucity of publications in English, not many historians received international grants. In other words, as far as historians in Malaysian public universities are concerned, they have focused on research in topics and themes that qualify access to university-based funding and national government grants, and in turn, have published their research findings in the vernacular. Subsequently, these individuals will be rewarded with more grants as well as elevation in their academic career.

Furthermore, if one is to work on cross-country themes, for instance, a Malaysian historian undertaking comparative historical study of the Malay and Thai monarchical institutions, there is no escaping the reality that the historian needs to master both court Malay and classical Thai to enable the examining of source materials accessible at the respective royal repositories. Mastering a single language for academic work is already a challenging endeavor; fluency in two or three languages might prove insurmountable. Consequently, there is a paucity of trans-national studies in the region.

To overcome the language barrier, cross-border collaboration between a Malaysian and Thai historian might be the panacea. Again, there is little scholarly cross-border joint-research projects. ASEAN notwithstanding, collaborative scholarly research among academics from the various member countries are few and far between. Despite the proximity, there are few collaborative works on Malaysia and Singapore, or Myanmar and Thailand, or Indonesia and the Philippines largely due to a parochial outlook. Furthermore, historians, owing to the nature of the discipline, are solo scholars, and collaborative research and publications tend to be the exception rather than the norm.

4.3. Challenges

We have thus far explored two apparent obstacles to the paucity of publications on Southeast Asia in international history, namely the core-periphery issue, and parochialism of historians of the region. The justifications indicated in the first part of this paper might address the core-periphery issue in demonstrating and justifying that Southeast Asia as a region is significant as a component in international history.

Whether it is the core-periphery approach or through the Big Picture and Small Picture lenses, a complementary balance between them (core and periphery, and Big Picture and Small Picture) should be pursued. For instance, it is difficult to fully understand international trade patterns (core or Big Picture) without taking into account regional trade networks (periphery or Small Picture). Equally challenging is to fathom the Second World War (1939-1945) (core or Big Picture) without comprehending the Pacific War (1941-1945) (periphery or Small Picture).

If one is to reverse the viewpoint in putting the periphery ahead of the core, likewise the Small Picture preceding the Big Picture, would one's understanding and grasp of the entirety be improved, equal, or less apparent? Due to their complementarity, a reversal of viewpoint, in fact, does not affect one's overall understanding. It all depends on one's interest or priority, to see the parts first, or to view the whole, and thereafter, the individual parts.

The challenge, therefore, remains with the parochialism and inward-looking attitude of historians in Southeast Asia. Unless they go beyond their national borders and conduct regional historical studies, and from there proceed to a wider and broader scope, namely international history, then Southeast Asia could indeed establish its place and significance vis-à-vis other parts of the “outside” world.

The parochial mind-set, however, is more difficult to resolve. Interestingly, a way out of this predicament in changing the attitude of local historians in Southeast Asia might lie in the world-ranking league tables of institutions of higher learning. For better or worse, many universities in the region, regardless of whether they are public or private, have bought into the various annually-published ranking tables for higher education that emphasize publications with two conspicuous criteria, publishing in English, and in Scopus-listed journals. Scopus is reputedly the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature in both the science and arts disciplines (Elsevier 2019). The pressure then to “publish or perish” in English, is placed upon academic staff, from Yangon to Hanoi, Jakarta to Manila.

The vicious cycle begins, thus. Increasing pressure on historians (and other academics) is exerted by university administrators, who in turn are pressured by the government minister in charge of education, who in turn is answerable to the cabinet, which in turn is answerable to Parliament, and the electorate, the taxpayers and the stakeholders. Parliamentarians demand that budgetary allocation for higher education should be reflected in qualitative improvements, and the yardstick is the widely publicized annual world university ranking league tables, viz. The Times Higher Education World University Rankings, and QS World University Rankings. Like football league tables, any layperson could easily comprehend the rankings, for example, “top 10 in the world”, or “top 50 in Asia”.

Undoubtedly, academics and university administrators tend to temper the poor performance with excuses, the most common appears to be in criticizing the criteria used, highlighting shortcomings of

such surveys, and any other explanation short of acknowledging their own inadequacies. But if the world rankings exerted positive changes and improvements, the scenario will be encouragingly positive in this manner, namely in addressing the parochial mindset.

Therefore, as a result of the annual world university rankings, more historical works will be published in Scopus-listed journals thereby ensuring a degree of acceptable quality. The ready availability of these published works will, to some extent, facilitate research and works of Southeast Asia in international history. Undeniably, mastery of the various languages in the region remain the key in undertaking intra-regional studies, and comparative work. Alternatively, joint collaboration among historians of the region might serve as a viable solution in integrating Southeast Asia in the corpus of international history.

V. Concluding remarks

International history explicitly demonstrates the interrelatedness between the parts and the whole. Simply expressed, adhering to logic and rationality, if Southeast Asia is a part of the whole world, the region's place is arguably confirmed in international history. Southeast Asia as a region is justifiable as an integral part of international history as this paper has shown. However, there remain obstacles and barriers – core-periphery and parochialism – that need to be addressed and overcome. As has been argued, a complementary balance would resolve the core-periphery outlook. The annual published world university rankings might work against the bastion of parochialism and the inward-looking attitude of local historians. Pressure to ascend the league tables might break down the parochial barrier. Time might be a factor in changing mindsets, but possibilities abound for more positive outcomes in the foreseeable future to see more work of Southeast Asia in international history emerging.

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Received: Jan. 30, 2020; Reviewed: June 10, 2020; Accepted: July 7, 2020