

Southeast Asia in World History¹

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In the Anglo-American view of world history, "Asia" has meant essentially China and India, with perhaps a brief nod to Japan. How did Southeast Asia fit into world history and world history into Southeast Asian history? In this paper I identify several key themes that closely connected Southeast Asia to what Marshall Hodgson called the wider Afro-Eurasian Historical Complex⁴ and hence can serve as a basis on which to integrate Southeast Asia into world history as more than a sideshow of marginal importance. In contrast to strictly national or regional history, world history emphasizes all societies, the connections between them, and the larger patterns of trans-regional or global significance. To be sure, Southeast Asian historians must seek to explain the diverse and distinctive societies and cultural traditions that arose in the region, societies very different from those of other regions. Yet, many historians of Southeast Asia have also paid attention to connections, since the encounters over 2500 years with India and China, and later with the Middle East, Europe, and North America, greatly influenced Southeast Asian states, religions, arts, and economies.⁵ Like the Japanese, Southeast Asians borrowed ideas from others. Like Chinese, Indians, and West Africans, they supplied commodities to the world. Like Arabs, Indians, and Chinese, they transported trade goods around vast ocean basins. It may be possible to write the history of Japan or of southern Africa or perhaps, some might argue, even of China before 1500 without paying very much attention to the links with other world regions, but it is not possible for Southeast Asia. Among the major concepts relevant to connecting Southeast Asia to world history are: borrowing and adaptation, migration and mixing, the diffusion of religions, maritime trade, the expansion of Dar al-Islam, Western expansion and colonialism, and the rise of the global system.

Borrowing and Adaptation I

To be sure, Southeast Asians were also creative. The early inhabitants developed agriculture and metalworking. Rice was first domesticated in the general region about 5000-6000 years ago; Southeast Asians may also have been the pioneers in cultivating bananas, yams, and taro, and likely first domesticated chickens and pigs, perhaps even cattle. Southeast Asians mastered bronze making by 1500 BCE and iron by 500 BCE. These early Southeast Asians also built sophisticated boats capable of sailing the oceans, beginning the maritime trade that soon linked Southeast Asia to China, India, and points beyond over networks of exchange.⁶

Yet despite centuries of borrowing and sometimes foreign conquest, Southeast Asians rarely became carbon copies of their mentors; they took ideas they wanted from outsiders and, like the Japanese and Europeans, adapted them to their own indigenous values and institutions, creating in the process a synthesis. Historians are impressed with the resilience and strength of the many indigenous beliefs and traditions that have survived the centuries of borrowing and change. In many Southeast Asian societies women long held a higher status and played a more active public role—including dominating small-scale commerce—than was true in China, India, the Middle East, and even Europe.⁷