Southeast Asia in World History
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An old and much-loved Indonesian folk song about the Solo River in central Java related Southeast Asia’s green lands to its blue waters, the past to the present, and the local people to the wider world: “Solo River, ancient your histories span. Linking present to past, linking the life of the soil and man. In the summer’s heat your streams are sluggish and slow. In the rainy season’s height far afield your banks overflow. Now you flow on through fertile rice fields, down to the sea at last. Here are ships of trade, and when your journey’s over, sailors brave the ocean wide, seeking some far distant shore.” Today, in an increasingly globalized world, institutions, ideas, ways of life, and traditions are colliding, blending, and even sometimes disappearing. But the process of mixing old and new, local and imported, began for Southeast Asians many centuries ago as the region and its peoples were connected, directly or indirectly, to other Asian peoples and to societies all over the Eastern hemisphere and, after 1500, to the Western hemisphere. The song about the Solo River reflects these encounters.

In various writings over the past 25 years I have noted how world history texts and many academic studies on world history, not to mention History departments in North American colleges and universities, have tended to ignore Southeast Asia, especially for the centuries prior to 1800. In the Anglo-American view of world history, “Asia” has meant essentially China and India, with perhaps a brief nod to Japan. When Southeast Asia finally appeared in a few brief paragraphs in world history texts it was usually in the context of Western exploration, colonialism, nationalism, decolonization, Cold War global rivalries, and the U.S. war in Vietnam. Even with the trend toward a more comprehensive world history in the past decade or so, only a few college-level texts offer anything like reasonable coverage of this important region.

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. 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. 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.

Migration and Mixing

The distant ancestors of many Southeast Asians migrated from China and Tibet. Over the course of some 5,000 years, peoples speaking Austronesian (Malayo-Polynesian) languages took part in an extensive population movement, migrating into Southeast Asia from Taiwan, spreading out around the archipelago and Malay peninsula, and pushing across the Pacific as far as Hawaii, Tahiti and New Zealand as well as westward to the island of Madagascar (much of whose population derives from Indonesian migrants who arrived 1300-2000 years ago). Trade networks linked the central Pacific islands such as Fiji with Indonesia. Indonesians were apparently the major seafaring traders of Asia several centuries before the beginning of the Common Era; they pioneered the commerce between China and India and also carried Southeast Asian foods (especially bananas) and musical instruments to East Africa, which were adopted by the peoples there.

The chronic migration and mixing of peoples over the centuries was as important a theme in Southeast Asia as in Europe, Japan, or southern and eastern Africa. This process closely resembled the migrations and assimilation of various “barbarian” peoples in Western Europe as well as the spread of Bantu peoples in Africa through the first millennium of the Common Era. By 500 BCE or earlier a few small states had emerged in the lowlands, especially in Cambodia and Vietnam, based on irrigated rice agriculture, just as sedentary farming peoples like the Greeks were establishing vigorous states around the northern Mediterranean basin. By 2000 years ago varied Southeast Asian societies carried on maritime trade with each other.
Borrowing and Adaptation

Between 250 BCE-200 CE China and India began exercising a stronger influence; China even colonized Vietnam in the 2nd century BCE, ruling for the next thousand years. Some scholars see these contacts as a generator of state building, others as a response to it. Indian traders and priests began regularly traveling the oceanic trade routes, some of them settling in mainland and island states. They brought with them Indian concepts of religion, government, and the arts. At the same time, Southeast Asian sailors were visiting India and returning with new ideas. Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism became a strong influence in a process often termed "Indianization" (or, more recently, "southernization"), which continued over many centuries and synthesized Indian with indigenous ideas. This occurred about the same time as classical Greco-Roman "civilization" was spreading around the Mediterranean in a similar process. For a millennium many Southeast Asians were closely connected to the more populous and developed societies of southern Asia, partaking in the general historical trends of the Afro-Eurasian Historical Complex to a greater degree than most of the peoples on the western and northern fringes of post-Roman Europe between 500 and 1400.

Due partly to the stimulus from outside, the great classical states developed near the end of the first millennium CE, with their main centers in what is today Cambodia, Burma, the Indonesian islands of Java and Sumatra, and Vietnam, which managed to throw off the 1000 year Chinese colonial yoke in the 10th century CE. In this period many Southeast Asian states made brilliant and selective use of Indian models in shaping their political and cultural patterns.

Historians differentiate coastal and inland states in this era. Coastal states, especially those in the Malay peninsula and the western Indonesian archipelago, which were adjacent to major international trade networks, mainly thrived from maritime commerce. The Straits of Malacca between Sumatra and Malaya had long served as a crossroads through which peoples, cultures, and trade passed or took root in the area, with peoples of many societies following the maritime trade to this region. The prevailing climatic patterns in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean of alternating monsoon winds allowed ships sailing southwest from China, Vietnam and Cambodia and southeast from India and Burma to meet in the vicinity of the Straits, where their goods could be exchanged. This process had already commenced by 200 BCE. Sumatra and Malaya had long enjoyed international reputations as sources of gold, tin and exotic forest products; the Romans referred to Malaya as the "golden peninsula." Between the 4th and 6th centuries CE the overland trading routes between China and the West (the "Silk Road") were closed off by developments in central Asia, increasing the importance of the oceanic connection. Srivijaya, for example, in southeast Sumatra, was the hub of a major trade network linking South and East Asia as well as a center for Mahayana Buddhism.

Gradually a more complex and increasingly integrated maritime trading system emerged that linked the eastern Mediterranean, Middle East, East African coast, Persia, and India with the societies of East and Southeast Asia. Over this network the precious spices of Indonesia (especially cloves, nutmeg and pepper), the gold and tin of Malaya, and the silks and tea of China traveled to Europe, sparking interest there in reaching the sources of these eastern riches. Inevitably, then, a vigorously mercantile variation of Indianized classical culture emerged to capitalize on this growing exchange.

The largest inland state, the Khmer Empire, flourished for half a millennium in Southeast Asia. At its peak, the empire covered much of what today is Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, and southern Vietnam. By the 12th century its bustling capital city, Angkor, and its immediate environs had a population of perhaps one million, much larger than any medieval European city but comparable to all but the largest Chinese and Arab cities of that era. And even interior states were linked to international trade. Angkor enjoyed an active and multifaceted trade with China and housed many resident Chinese merchants. Its art and culture were heavily influenced by India due to long established sea trade routes with that subcontinent. Hinduism mostly, but Buddhism as well, were important religions in the region, mixed with animist and traditional cults. The Khmer were great builders, filling the landscape with monumental temples, huge reservoirs (called baray) and canals, and laying an
extensive road network with all sorts of bridges - the main highways are 800 km long. The most stunning temple, Angkor Wat, is a microcosm of the Hindu universe and defies imagination as the world’s largest religious complex - covering 200 hectares;

The great Indianized kingdoms gradually came to an end between the 13th and 16th centuries, for reasons both internal and external. The Mongols helped destroy the Burman kingdom of Pagan, but were unable to extend their domination into Southeast Asia generally, failing in attempts to conquer Vietnam, Champa, and Java. Hence, Southeast Asians were among the few peoples to successfully resist persistent efforts at integrating them into the vast and powerful Mongol empire, a tribute to their skill and might as well as their distance from the Eurasian heartland. However, Angkor was eventually unable to resist invasions by the Thai-Lao peoples migrating down from China. The empire disintegrated and the capital was abandoned.

**Religion and Maritime Trade**

Hinduism from India dominated early SE Asian regional history, especially among coastal regions, reaching their peak during the reign of the Sumatra-based Srivijaya civilization, whose influence extended through Sumatra, Java, the Malay Peninsula and much of Borneo from the 7th to the 13th centuries.

Succeeding Srivijaya was the Indianized kingdom, Majapahit (1293-1500), the last of the major Hindu empires of the Malay archipelago and is considered one of the greatest states in Indonesian history. Its influence extended over much of modern-day Indonesia and Malaysia.

But by the 14th century, two of the great universal religions were filtering peacefully into the region: Theravada Buddhism and Islam. Theravada Buddhism from Sri Lanka became the dominant religion of the major mainland societies (except Vietnam) by incorporating the rich animism of the peasant villages and the Hinduism of the courts. Sunni Islam arrived from the Middle East and India, spreading widely in the Malay peninsula and Indonesian archipelago while gradually displacing or incorporating the local animism and Hinduism; it was closely tied to international trade. Through this process of trade and religious networks, Southeast Asia became even more firmly linked to the peoples of Southern and Western Asia. These trends inaugurated a new era that persisted until the acceleration of European conquest in the 19th century.

Beginning in the 14th century a new pattern of world trade was developing that more closely linked Asia, Europe and parts of Africa. There was no particular center but Southeast Asia, especially the archipelago region, became an essential intermediary as long voyages were replaced by shorter hops and more frequent trans-shipment. This enhanced the value of regional ports and a half dozen distinct commercial zones arose in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asian peoples like the Malays and Javanese played active roles in the interregional trade, which also spurred the growth of cities. Changes in the international maritime economy beginning around 1400 fostered an unprecedented commercial prosperity and an increasing cultural cosmopolitanism, most especially in the archipelago. A new type of maritime trading state arose to handle the increased amounts of local products dispatched to distant markets.
Expansion of Dar al-Islam and Trans-regional Trade Networks

By the 14th century Muslim merchants (mostly Arabs and Indians) were spreading Islam along the great Indian Ocean maritime trading routes. The arrival of Islam coincided with the rise of the great port of Melaka, on the southwest coast of Malaya, which became the region’s political and economic power as well as the crossroads of Asian commerce. During the 1400s Melaka was a flourishing trading port attracting merchants from many lands including Chinese, Arabs, Persians, Vietnamese, Burmese, Jews, Indians, and even a few Swahilis from East Africa. Observers reported that Melaka boasted 15,000 merchants and more ships in the harbor than any port in the known world, induced by stable government and a free trade policy. Melaka’s rulers sent tributary missions to China and their port became an important way station for the series of grand Chinese voyages to the Western Indian Ocean in the early 15th century led by Admiral Zheng He, the greatest seafaring expeditions in history to that point.

Soon Melaka became the southeastern terminus for the great Indian Ocean maritime trading network and one of the major commercial centers in the world, very much a rival to Calicut, Cambay, Canton, Hormuz, Kilwa, Aleppo, Alexandria, Genoa and Venice. An early 16th century Portuguese visitor noted the importance of Melaka to peoples and trade patterns as far away as Western Europe: "Melaka is a city that was made for merchandise, fitter than any other in the world... Commerce between different nations for a thousand leagues on every hand must come to Melaka... Whoever is lord of Melaka has his hands on the throat of Venice."

The spread of Islam and the expansion of commerce developed simultaneously in many places, ultimately creating a Dar al-Islam ("Abode of Islam"), an interlinked Islamic world stretching from Morocco, Spain and the West African Sudan to the Balkans, Turkestan, Mozambique, Indonesia, and China, joined by a common faith and trade connections. Muslim merchants and sailors became central to the great Afro-Eurasian maritime trading network. By the mid-15th century Melaka had become the main center for the propagation of Islam in the Malay peninsula and Indonesian archipelago.

Southeast Asia had long been a cosmopolitan and wealthy region where peoples, ideas and products met. The intrepid Italian traveler Marco Polo had passed through in 1292 on his way home from a long China sojourn; his writings praised the wealth and sophistication of Indochina, Java, and Sumatra, fostering European interest in these seemingly fabulous lands. The Moroccan Ibn Battuta stopped by on his way to China in his lifelong tour of the Dar al-Islam in the 14th century.

Southeast Asia, then, with its long, rich connections to the wider world and persistent ability over the millennia to integrate ideas and institutions from abroad with varied but still powerful indigenous traditions, has made its mark on world history and will likely continue to do so in the near future. The Solo River still flows to the sea and ships, joined today by airplanes, laden with goods and travelers still link Southeast Asians to other parts of the world.