

What is so Modern about this Southeast Asian History?

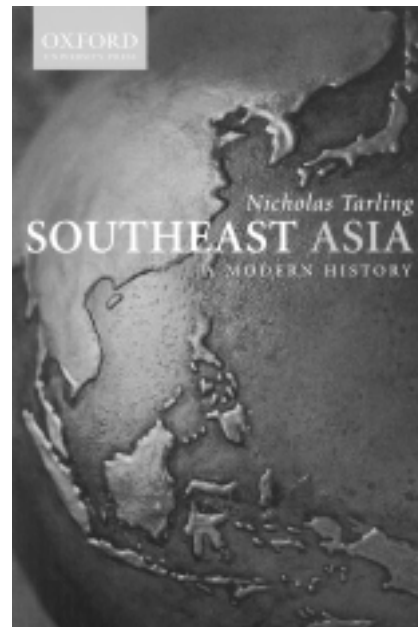
Review >
Southeast Asia

The back cover of Nicholas Tarling's *Southeast Asia: A Modern History* declares it to be 'essential reading for students of Asian and Southeast Asian history'. In it, the author has sought a comparative subject-based approach of five main sections: 'Peoples and states', 'Environment and economies', 'Societies and commitments', 'Protest and politics', and 'Historiography'. Despite this approach and his own misgivings, however, Tarling exposes the risks of his endeavour.

By M.F. Laffan

In the first two sections, Nicholas Tarling seeks to describe the 'peoples' of Southeast Asia. Despite the occasional reference to Southeast Asian figures, however, it is the states he describes that take on a life force of their own, and ultimately against the semi-states of the European mercantilists. Tarling also tends to make the Asian component of his account monolithic and the European individualized and empowered. Moreover, he is condescending in the way he describes the rulers of Southeast Asia as being profoundly ignorant of their fate. Still, whilst right to emphasize the importance of Europeans as agents of change in Southeast Asia, and the effects of global politics on the region, his description is not merely Eurocentric: it is Anglocentric. According to Tarling, everything is subject to British power, and sensible native rulers could deal only with that power to prolong their tottering regimes. This Anglocentrism is further manifested in his inconsistent blending of orthographies, his references to 'Westerners' thinking of their Shakespeare (p. 274), and his comparing of Singapore to the Isle of Wight (p. 429). Furthermore, his singling out of Oxford University Press (his own publisher) as having played a major role in disseminating an awareness of Asian history (p. 511) smacks of the very qualities he ascribes to the courtiers of the sultan of Brunei (p. 90-91).

Despite his intention to show how events within the region were coloured (or perhaps driven) by those beyond it, Tarling's discussion remains dominated by the earlier incarnations of the states it now comprises. It is for such reasons that a discussion of Brunei can deserve almost as much space as Mataram which, with its 'outer islands', serves as a convenient pre-modern template for Indonesia (see pp. 256-61). Still, he does try to extend his vision for Southeast Asia beyond the level of the state by suggesting that the Andaman islands should be treated as a part of the region (p. 496-97), though he gives us precious little to justify his argument. Furthermore, despite copious references to such polities, the necessary brevity with which he must treat them, and his foregrounding of the agency of the European interlopers, ensures that we are once more gathered on the decks of Van Leur's ships.



The sense of being a complete outsider to the world that Tarling describes is made all the more palpable, not only by the absence of any indigenous agency, but also by a paucity of indigenous sources. This is highlighted in his consideration of the role of religion: for example, his evaluation of the role of Islam in the island world is the simplistic colonial view, with 'orthodox' Islamic pilgrims returning to overturn syncretic local mysticism (p. 312 ff.). Of course, this is a failing in the literature in general, and I have no grounds to comment on his characterization of the other religious traditions of Southeast Asia.

Perhaps the most daunting prospect facing the historian of Southeast Asia is the extensive repertoire of languages required – European and Asian – to do justice to the peoples, cultures, and environments it encompasses. This is indeed a big task, and few of us can hope to come close to the accomplishments of George Coedes, Denys Lombard, Oliver Wolters, and A.H. Johns in this respect. Tarling does, of course, possess significant linguistic skills, but to wait until page 91 for the first proffering of some Malay (where Sultan Hashim of Brunei is referred to as 'the frog under the coconut shell') leaves the reader with serious doubts as

to his capacity to do more than synthesize existing accounts. A survey of the footnotes and bibliography does little to placate such fears, and it is further an annoyance to find the author referring to his own works rather than to the original sources presumably cited within them.

One might well ask what is so modern about this history. Tarling obviously felt that it was time to push the existing narrative beyond the boundaries of the quest for independence, though he never walks away from an evolutionary view of nationalism, or of the national implications of this process of transition. In the sections on post-war Southeast Asia, we come to hear more Southeast Asian voices, but these are the voices of the new rulers: whether as Sukarno shouted 'to hell with your aid' or Lee Kwan Yew 'wept' at Singapore's exclusion from Malaysia (p.135). In his periodizations thereafter, Tarling adopts a schoolmasterly tone as he catalogues the decline into authoritarianism, and reflects inevitably on lost opportunities.

Tarling's last and shortest section on historiography is more than an appendix, and it is one on which he has clearly thought at length. Herein he demonstrates an awareness of many of the approaches to the writing of Southeast Asian history, and highlights the need to avoid the traps of Asia-centric, Eurocentric, or present-minded approaches. He furthermore advocates a history that seeks to 'juxtapose European records with other kinds of evidence' (p.512). It is to be regretted then that such reflections – which are by no means new, having been first raised by Smail – seem not to have been fully applied to the preceding chapters. Indeed, despite the apparently innovative thematic approach, the reader might ask what this book has to offer as compared, say, to the works of Tony Reid or Steinberg's *In Search of Southeast Asia* (currently under revision). To write a history of Southeast Asia is indeed a risky enterprise – whether on an individual or team basis. As a reference work, this book has much to offer, but I would urge caution in adopting it for use in teaching, or in trying to get much more than a distant gaze on what is a truly complex region. ◀

- Tarling, Nicholas, *Southeast Asia; A Modern History*. Oxford etc.: Oxford University Press (2001), pp.xi, 555, 5 maps, ISBN 0 19 558397 3

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