

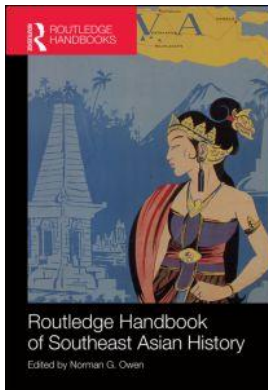
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THE COLONIAL INTRUSION

Boundaries and structures

Remco Raben

Global changes

The late eighteenth century saw a sequence of deep shifts in the political layout of Southeast Asia. On the mainland the demise of the old ruling dynasties in Burma (Myanmar), Siam (Thailand), and Vietnam, and in maritime Southeast Asia the increasing assertion of colonial powers changed not only the political layout and economic patterns, but also the landscape and the lives of the people.

It is difficult to isolate the “colonial” part of change in Southeast Asia. What in everyday parlance is easily attributed to “the West” often has a much more complicated genealogy. This said, it is undeniable that Europeans and European institutions had a growing impact on Southeast Asia in the long nineteenth century. But they did so in an equally undeniable exchange with indigenous people. Asians participated in, and to a large extent even fabricated, the changes in Southeast Asian societies, whether political conceptualizations, the development of social institutions, or the use of technology. Some novelties were not of Western origin, such as Wahhabi Islam; others were formulated in opposition to the West. But it was difficult to escape the imported new forms and claims of the Europeans and Americans. Many in the region shared the fascination with novelties. The first owner of an automobile in the Netherlands Indies was the *susuhunan* (emperor) of Surakarta, Pakubuwono X, in 1894, and by the 1930s more Indonesians and Chinese than Europeans had driving licenses in the colony. In the Philippines, the first car, a Brazier, was owned by the Chinese–Spanish–Filipino Tuason family, in 1903 (Corpuz 1999: 76).

Some trends commonly attributed to Western-led “modernization” had already commenced before colonization. Especially in mainland Southeast Asia, states had embarked on a process of centralization and state expansion. Some rulers were more receptive to change than others. One king who stands out as an innovator was the Siamese King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910), who, it must be acknowledged, had the luxury of not being directly threatened by military assault from European powers. He was not only curious as an individual; he was a fervent modernizer. Chulalongkorn made ten journeys abroad: two to Europe, three to Java, and several to Malaya and Singapore (Sartrapproong 2008).

The colonial intrusion in Southeast Asia cannot be studied in isolation from wider regional, and indeed global, patterns. The previous centuries had seen a growing intensity of exchanges

among various parts of the world. Many rulers were keen on receiving news from the world and were able to get it from the increasing number of travelers and traders at their courts. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, change in Southeast Asia gained pace as a result of intensifying global interactions. The growing streams of Chinese migrants to Southeast Asia, the arrival of Hadhrami merchants, and the expansion of British trade had enormous impacts on life and politics in Southeast Asia. Even if colonialism was not the only cause, its globalizing force did alter the pace and the substance of change in Southeast Asia.

There are many indications that trade was picking up at the end of the eighteenth century. Although the power of the Dutch East India Company had gradually declined in the second half of the eighteenth century, other traders expanded their activity and their range of action. Shipping registers of several Southeast Asian port cities bear witness to a growing presence of British (Calcutta-based) traders, but also Chinese, Arab, Balinese, Bugis, Acehnese, Danish, and American shippers, as well as merchants from the Malay states (Reid 1997: 62–71).

Several factors were instrumental in the European advance. Adding to the impulse of conquest were the perceived weakness of the Asian polities, the growing competition between Western powers, and the expansion of trade. However, conquest was often not the intended result. Much of the European animation came from private business, whether it was the teak trade in Burma, rubber in Malaya, tin on Bangka, tobacco in Sumatra, or oil in Borneo. European imperialism of the nineteenth century in Southeast Asia was, in the words of the British historians Gallagher and Robinson (1953), to a large extent an “imperialism of free trade.” Formal conquest often followed earlier business inroads, and economic incentives were often crucial in the crystallization of colonial policies. Of course there were many variations, both in the freedom of economic activity and in the role of governments. Whereas the British championed private business, the Dutch for a long time preferred forms of state exploitation.

Industrialization was a powerful motor for European colonial ambitions, especially as the nineteenth century moved onward. First of all, it provided the European powers speed and the means to employ military power efficiently and decisively. It also created a demand for new products such as oil and tin. And it gave the Europeans a justification for feelings of cultural superiority. Industrialization in Southeast Asia itself was late and modest, as the economy remained geared to providing the raw materials for industries elsewhere.

Expanding empires

European conquest was made possible by the relative weakness of local polities in Southeast Asia. However, we should be careful not to see it as a determined policy or an inevitable outcome. There was no concerted drive for total annexation; the wars of conquest could be very costly and lengthy affairs; and the results were enormously diverse, ranging from direct control and comprehensive intervention to indirect rule and a hands-off approach.

Dynamics would vary strongly between areas. There was at first a crucial difference between the experiences of the mainland states and those of insular Southeast Asia. In the Indonesian and Philippine archipelagos, the most powerful kingdoms were subdued or erased early. The Spanish controlled much of the northern and central Philippines by the late sixteenth century. In Indonesia, the situation was more complicated: the VOC (Dutch East India Company) took possession of only a few strategic places, forced out competitors, subdued the vigorous coastal polities of Makassar and Banten (Bantam), and succeeded in channeling much of the important trade towards its own establishments. Territorial control was limited. Only in the course of the eighteenth century did the Dutch expand their

territory over Java, as a result of their increasing entanglement in the affairs of the kingdom of Mataram.

The Southeast Asian mainland was not left untouched by the Europeans – there was a vigorous slave trade with Arakan (Rakhine), and Ayutthaya (Ayudhya) under King Narai (1656–88) harbored a fairly large European presence – but the European powers did not have the means or intention to dominate affairs there. Most of the Europeans were forced out of Ayutthaya by the late seventeenth century, and Arakan declined in the same period. Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam saw occasional Western traders, adventurers, and missionaries, but remained largely outside European grand strategies until the mid-nineteenth century.

This situation started to change in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The British demarcated their sphere of influence in the Malay waters in a gradual two-pronged advance of private business and government protection. Looking for a stronghold along the sea route to China, in 1786 the British rented the island of Penang from the sultan of Kedah, who saw the British as allies against the threats from Siam and Burma. It was the start of an increasing British intrusion in Southeast Asia, leading to the occupation of Java and most Dutch colonies in the region during the Napoleonic wars, and to the founding of Singapore in 1819. In the aftermath of the wars, British and Dutch staked out their spheres of influence, drawing a virtual boundary between Sumatra and the Malay peninsula in the 1824 Treaty of London. British expansion into Southeast Asia was not planned, at least not in London or Calcutta, nor can it be attributed to a single purpose. The result, as so often in the history of empires, was one of a “thickening” of the British presence, with various causes – the blooming trade with China and the increasing urge to control sea lanes, the growing importance of the tin trade in the Malay waters, and the expansion of the British trading networks, with the concomitant need to protect all these interests.

Over the course of the nineteenth century Southeast Asia experienced its own modest scramble for territory by the European powers, less vigorous and more protracted than the one in Africa. Up to the 1820s, the only extensive European territories in the region were the Spanish possessions in the Philippines and those of the Dutch in Java. Besides that, there were only pockets of colonial rule in Singapore, Melaka (Malacca), and the islands in the eastern archipelago, and a smattering of European traders and missionaries on the mainland. Less than a century later, all of Southeast Asia except Siam had been brought under the formal authority of Western powers. The scramble proceeded by fits and starts; its chronology was often warped, its motivations were disparate, and its effects uneven and changing. But patterns of conquest were almost everywhere similar: a gradual advance, a reluctant colonizer, and a preference for indirect rule.

Even if the European apportionment of Southeast Asia changed the map entirely, the colonial presence was strikingly uneven – a fact that is often overlooked in our present-day emphasis on nationally shared experiences. The annexation of Burma by the British took 60 years, that of Indonesia by the Dutch 300. There was no one decisive moment when European strategies shifted, although the French assault on Vietnam in 1858 offers the clearest example of a formal imperialist policy. (Earlier the French had shown interest in Vietnam as a springboard to China, but they embarked on a process of gradual annexation only after threats to Catholic missionaries in Vietnam.) The British territorial involvement in the Malay Peninsula was late and reluctant, resulting in a patchwork quilt of sultanates under British suzerainty and small areas under direct rule. Dutch and Spanish expansion consisted primarily of pacification and internal colonization of existing spheres of influence.

Mainland Southeast Asia was dominated by three strong, expansionist empires in the early nineteenth century. Their territorial and martial ambition made them clash with each other

and with the British and French. For centuries the Siamese had seen Burma as their principal foe, with much reason, as it had been Burma which had invaded Siam in 1765 and 1767, laid waste to the entire country, and ended the Ban Phlu Luang dynasty. In the nineteenth century, however, it was not Burma but Vietnam that formed the greatest threat to Siamese ambitions. In 1802 Vietnam was reunited under the Nguyen, after a drawn-out civil war that had lasted 30 years. The Nguyen emperors then tried to expand their power over the neighboring states of Cambodia and Laos, which also came under pressure from Siam, reasserting itself under the Chakri dynasty since 1782. Siam developed into an imperialist state in its own right, moving gradually eastward into the territory of Lao and Khmer principalities and south into the Malay Peninsula.

Into this arena the European powers were drawn. Siam's expansionism brought it into conflict with several states in the Malay Peninsula, where it tried to regain control over its former vassals, Kedah and Perak. Avoiding war, the British in 1826 concluded a treaty with Siam, dividing the northern Malayan states under their spheres of influence, just two years after Britain and the Dutch had made a similar division of spheres between Sumatra and Malaya.

Direct conflict between two expanding powers, Burma and the British, led to war in 1824. Since their ascent to the Burmese throne, the Konbaung kings had expanded their territories northwestward to Manipur and, beyond, Assam. At the same time the power of the British East India Company was growing in India, and it became concerned about Burmese ambitions. When the British started to support rebels in the coastal area of Arakan, war broke out. After the quick success of a British fleet in conquering Rangoon (Yangon), the war moved inland. When British forces almost reached the Burmese capital at Ava, King Bagyidaw (r. 1819–37) sued for peace. The East India Company acquired the coastal areas of Arakan and Tenasserim. Two more wars between British and Burmese followed in the nineteenth century, ending with the complete annexation of the kingdom by the British in 1886.

The first Anglo-Burmese war had an enormous impact on the region. The British were drawn deeper into Southeast Asia, and the Southeast Asian states began to experience the effects of the Western intrusion and were forced to consider risks and remedies. The Chakri rulers in Bangkok now faced a formidable neighbor. Soon they realized that in order to survive they had to bolster their authority and modernize the army and administration. This gave an extra impulse to the territorialization and eastward expansion of Siam, bringing it into conflict with Vietnam in 1842–5 and establishing its suzerainty over Cambodia and the Laotian polities.

East of Siam, in what came to be known to the Western powers as Indochina, the colonial intervention came late. Whereas British interests in Burma were first and foremost inspired by the prospect of profit and the resulting tensions with Burmese rulers, the French conquest of Indochina was triggered by a combination of Napoleon III's quest for a piece of the Southeast Asian cake and the defense of the interests of the Catholic mission in Vietnam, which came under severe pressure from the court in the 1850s. Cochinchina (southern Vietnam) was occupied in 1862 after four years of struggle, and turned into a full colony. The wars with the Vietnamese continued, however, and only after long campaigns in the north, which even brought the Chinese into the war, did the French establish protectorates over Annam and Tonkin in 1883. In Cambodia, the French entered on invitation of King Ang Duong (r. 1841–60), who was looking for a counterweight against Siamese encroachments, and Laos was annexed after a war with Siam in 1893.

While the imperialist motivations of the British and French have never been doubted, those of the Dutch in insular Southeast Asia have been the topic of recent debate among

historians. Indeed, the Dutch had experienced a severe contraction of their colonial possessions in the late eighteenth century. In the Netherlands Indies, from 1800 under direct rule of the Dutch government, colonial rule concentrated on Java; it was formal policy to abstain from conquest and annexation in the Outer Islands. However, the “thickening” of Dutch interests and increasing interference in the margins of Dutch-ruled areas resulted in creeping annexation. In the words of Dutch historian Elsbeth Locher-Scholten (1994: 97), “empire was forged in the periphery, or even in the periphery of the periphery.” Conquests accelerated in the last decades of the nineteenth century and ended with the complete “pacification” of the Indies by 1910.

In the Philippines the age of imperialism was marked by a gradual assertion of Spanish power in new areas, mainly the Sulu archipelago and Mindanao, although it continued to face fierce resistance. On the main islands, especially Luzón, commercial agriculture expanded after British and American trading houses were allowed in Manila.

Apart from Burma, which ultimately was incorporated into British India, as no suitable king could be found, everywhere local rulers were maintained: in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, the Malayan sultanates, and numerous areas in the Netherlands Indies, royal houses still upheld fictions of rule. We could say that the old rulers were mere figureheads, but this would contradict contemporary perceptions. Many rulers managed to continue at least nominal rule under colonial suzerainty – sometimes with important consequences at the time of decolonization – and inhabitants of the kingdoms still looked up to their old dynasties as sources of ritual authority.

The sole country to escape colonial annexation was Siam. Its survival as an independent state can mainly be attributed to geopolitical contingency, but good negotiating power and timely reform were certainly instrumental too. In the first place, the nineteenth-century Chakri rulers, starting with Rama III (r. 1824–51), started to centralize power in the kingdom and strengthen the bureaucracy, which tightened its grip on the kingdom and its tributary fringes. Yet only a few years after the European show of power in the first Opium War in China (1839–42), which impressed many rulers in the region, the British pressed the Siamese court for abolition of taxes on trade and extraterritoriality for British subjects, culminating in the Bowring Treaty of 1855. In the following years, other powers could claim similar privileges there.

The treaty sparked a heightened awareness of Siam’s vulnerability vis-à-vis the Western powers. King Mongkut (r. 1851–68) formulated the need to learn from the Europeans and developed a deep interest in things Western. But it was his son, Chulalongkorn, who embarked on a long process of reform and modernization with the aim of preserving his kingship and his realm. Symbolic of his new visions for Siam were his many voyages: not to confirm his supremacy and status as *chakravartin* (universal ruler), but to see and learn. His first journey, three years after his coronation, brought him to Singapore and Java, with a marked interest in schools and railways. In his welcome speech to the king, the Dutch director of the civil administration extolled “the benefit of the light of Western civilization,” and added, “Here in the Far East there is still almost every thing to do in this respect: the ground has hardly been broken.” The king, in his turn, emphasized his ambition to work towards the greater prosperity of Siam “by the development of its mineral and agricultural production” (Sartraproong 2008: 89–90). King Chulalongkorn could not fail to be impressed by the Dutch colony.

With the British and French display of power in Burma and Indochina, the feeling of emergency in Siamese court circles heightened. Part of Chulalongkorn’s strategy of survival was to develop and modernize, a transformation he seriously pursued after 1887. In contrast

to the Burmese and Vietnamese rulers, he had the time and opportunity to do so, as Siam's sovereignty was never directly endangered. Positioned between the colonies of Burma and Indochina, it could survive because of British and French reluctance to risk war by annexing it. But continued sovereignty came at a price. By the late nineteenth century foreign advisors – Japanese among them – achieved enormous status at the Siamese court. And after the Bowring treaty the country was opened up to British merchant houses, which at least until the turn of the century would completely dominate shipping, exports of rice, and the exploitation of teak forests (Falkus 1989).

Exploitation

If the pattern and pace of colonial conquest diverged strongly, the intensity and purpose of Western presence also varied widely. The colonial presence was most intensive in the port cities – often in European hands well before 1800 – and in areas of cash crop production and, later, industrial activity. We should not, however, underestimate how widely the impact of the European presence was felt. This can be illustrated by the fate of the extensive woodlands that covered most of Southeast Asia in the early modern era. For instance, the British victory in the first war with Burma brought the coastal region of Tenasserim into the global trade system. Within a few years after annexation, the government abandoned its monopoly and let timber traders exploit the enormous reserves of good-quality teak. The small village of Moulmein quickly developed into a lumber and shipbuilding center.

At an increasing pace, Southeast Asian woodlands gave way to commercial agriculture of mostly, but not exclusively, European entrepreneurs. Java, Burma, and parts of the Philippines were the most directly and intensively affected. The teak forests of the lowland in Java's north coast had already been decimated before 1800 to provide timber for shipbuilding industries. More often the woodlands were simply cleared to make space for rubber, tobacco, tea, sugar, or coffee plantations.

In Luzón and Java the Spanish and Dutch authorities developed a strictly mercantilist policy of cash-crop cultivation, inspired in the Dutch case by monopoly systems under the VOC. In Luzón, the Spanish started a system of compulsory cultivation of tobacco at fixed prices in some districts, combined with the complete prohibition of its growth elsewhere, so that all smokers (and exporters) had to buy their cigars from the government monopoly. The area of legal cultivation greatly expanded until the system collapsed in the late nineteenth century under the incapability of the government to pay the farmers.

The Dutch pursued a similar policy on Java, but on a much grander scale. After 1830 the government instituted a massive program of rural administration, resettlement, and forced delivery of export crops at fixed prices. As a rule, one-fifth of cultivable land in each village was to be tilled to grow cash crops for the government, with an equal proportion of labor to be devoted to tilling, processing, and transporting the crops. This so-called *Cultuurstelsel* (cultivation system) won the Dutch the admiration of many other colonizers, who saw in it the optimum of rationalized exploitation. The impact of the *Cultuurstelsel* was enormous and at times disastrous. Due to resettlement and the conversion of rice land into sugar, indigo, and coffee plantations, in the 1840s the rural people of Java were hit by extreme famine, costing thousands of lives. Moreover, the Javanese saw nothing of the profits: they went into the coffers of the Netherlands government. The peasants were paid a fixed price, in money, which effected a monetization of the Javanese economy and turned the Javanese nobility into salaried servants of the colonial state.

Despite its remarkable success in exploitative terms, after 1870 the *Cultuurstelsel* gave way to gradual liberalization. The policy change was not particularly based on humanitarian principles but came about under pressure of a new political wind blowing in the Netherlands, championing economic liberalization. The government slowly withdrew its monopolies and encouraged private business to take on the exploitation of cash crops.

Whereas the old sugar- and coffee-growing areas were concentrated on Java, several new areas were opened up for commercial agriculture and mining. In northeastern Sumatra, Dutch planters started in the mid-1860s to grow tobacco on the lands of the sultan of Deli, who profited greatly from the lease of vast areas to the foreign businesses. Local peasants were pushed to the margins and prevented from cultivating market crops. Labor on the plantations was provided by contract laborers from China and Java: already about 100,000 of them in 1900. Later, rubber made its way into Deli and other areas on Sumatra and Kalimantan (Borneo). Rubber was not the sole prerogative of colonial enterprises, but was taken up by local smallholders too, who produced much of the output by the 1920s.

The Sumatran patterns were replicated on the other side of the Melaka Strait, in Malaya. European and Chinese planters, the latter coming to the Malay states in increasing numbers, first concentrated on sugar, pepper, and coffee, but later turned to rubber. The India Office and some individual officials in Malaya experimented with rubber plants coming from South America in the 1870s; trees were first raised in Kew Gardens and then sent to Ceylon and Singapore. The popularity of this new product was enormous. Large-scale planting and tapping only started in the late 1880s and 1890s. As in Deli, the area of rubber cultivation quickly expanded, covering some 2.1 million acres by 1940. In contrast to the Netherlands Indies, however, the Malays were discouraged from starting smallholder rubber farms. A division of labor developed by which imported coolies worked the plantations and indigenous Malays grew rice to feed them.

Business was the main catalyst of colonial intrusion in Southeast Asia. It created enormous dynamism in the region, triggered new patterns of labor migration, changed social institutions, affected the status of local elites, and had dramatic ecological effects. And it often preceded formal colonial annexation. In most colonies, private business and colonial administration often operated shoulder to shoulder. Even if aims and purposes sometimes clashed, there was no doubt that the economic interest of metropolitan business was paramount.

Not only foreign entrepreneurs benefited: elites and those in mediating roles also profited from the European intrusions. On the other hand, European businesses and government in many ways negatively affected the freedom of action of the indigenous merchants and farmers. Although colonial enterprises had introduced the Southeast Asian economies into the global markets, often by force, the adverse effects were great. Apart from the immense ecological ramifications, indigenous peasants were excluded from the best agricultural lands and forced into marginal economic roles, which severely hampered the development of an indigenous business class.

In the French empire, protectionism was a central tenet. After a few decades of liberal policies, in 1892 Indochina was included under the Méline tariff, which integrated it into the trade system of France and its empire, protecting both from foreign competitors. But the French also developed an unequal tariff system, protecting manufacturers in France from cheap colonial imports while allowing them to freely export goods to the colonies; this system remained in force until World War II (Nørlund 1989: 4–5).

Movement

Intrusions were also of another kind. The areas of exploitation, which were often located inland, were opened up by railway lines. Again private entrepreneurs were crucial in the early stages of the railways. The rail networks betray the economic interests of colonial business, and visually demonstrate their integrative effects. Present-day railway networks are for large parts of colonial provenance, showing how much colonial geographies and infrastructure have left their imprint upon the post-colonial countries of Southeast Asia.

The first railway in Southeast Asia was built in Java, and started operating in 1867 – just 14 years after the opening of the first railway in British India. The Java track ran between the sugar and coffee lands in the “Principalities” of central Java and the important harbor city of Semarang, and was financed privately by the planters in the Principalities. In the next decades, other initiatives followed, especially along the north coast of Java, connecting areas of sugar, tobacco, and coffee cultivation to large harbors and through them to world markets. By World War II, Java had the most dense railway network in Southeast Asia, partly run by private companies.

Other colonies were slower in developing their rail systems. The speed and geographic scope of railway development are illustrative of the colonial policies and grand strategies of the regimes. Trains primarily served economic goals and their construction was often financed by private business. In Burma, railways started to operate in 1877 to facilitate the haulage of rice from Central Burma to the coast. Malayan railways were developed from 1885 onwards to connect inland tin mines with ports, but were later extended to major agricultural areas as well.

The railway networks reflected political realities as well. Railways were built in Cochinchina and Tonkin separately; a line connecting Hanoi and Saigon was only inaugurated in 1936. The first railway line started in 1881 in the south, but construction speeded up after the arrival of the ambitious governor-general Paul Doumer (1897–1902), who aspired to consolidate the Union Indochinoise and strove to boost its economy. The railway lines would form “the foundation for penetration into China” (Starostina 2009: 185). Doumer’s plans also included a 855 kilometer railway line connecting Hanoi to Kunming in China, via Lao Cai. The Chinese stretch of the railway, financed by the French colonial government, ran over 465 kilometers of mainly mountainous terrain, necessitating hundreds of spectacular technological solutions to mount ridges and bridge gorges. It was built at an amazing pace in six years by about 60,000 Chinese laborers; some 12,000 of them perished during the construction. Opening in 1910, it is one of the few regional examples of a cross-border railway line – the other being the two lines connecting Siam and Malaya.

A similarly ambitious project was the Dutch railway in West and South Sumatra. It started with the discovery of extensive coal fields in the hinterland of West Sumatra in 1868. After 20 years of discussion and lobbying, the government decided to turn the mine into a state company and exploit it by railway. Dutch state railway engineers formed a powerful lobby in the decision, as, apart from job opportunities, building the line would offer a great occasion for railway heroism. They went lyrical about the technical problems that had to be overcome. After the line opened in 1894, lobbying continued to construct new tracks in South Sumatra, connecting Palembang to the mine area near Lahat. The railways became showpieces for the Dutch engineers, as the Hanoi–Kunming line was for the French (Colombijn 1992).

Trains were a hugely popular means of transportation for millions of Southeast Asians, and appealed to the modernist imagination of many. Trains were symbols of power, progress, technology, and of course speed. They brought urban centers within reach, opening up the

country and facilitating the enormous urbanization of the twentieth century. New nodes of activity and settlement emerged. New centers sprang up in the affected areas: Moulmein in Tenasserim, Kuala Lumpur in Malaya, Medan in Sumatra, Surabaya in Java. At first many were mere frontier towns, attracting the adventurous and greedy, but they gradually developed into busy colonial cities, attracting local and foreign Asian merchants and labor. Few old dynastic centers were strategically located to be useful in the new colonial geography. Burmese Ava, Vietnamese Hue, Javanese Yogyakarta, and many others had to cede prominence to the seats of colonial capitalism in Rangoon, Saigon, and Surabaya.

Attached to the new centers were webs of recreation – hill stations, bathing establishments, hotel resorts. Maymyo (Pyin U Lwin) and Kalaw in Burma, Dalat in Vietnam, Bokor in Cambodia, Maxwell Hill (Bukit Larut) in Malaya, Baguio in the Philippines, and Garut and Batu in Java were among the dozens of hillside resorts and towns founded by colonials who wanted to escape the discomfort of the hot and humid lowland cities. In this way the geographies of Southeast Asia were rewritten.

Minds

Trains and steamships changed the world views of many Southeast Asians more than the cultivation system or plantation labor did. Many railway lines were built and operated by local laborers and became the pioneering ground for novel forms of collective action. The railway workers in Indochina and the Netherlands Indies started to organize themselves into unions after 1900. They became the breeding ground for radicalism in the colonies, heading a long list of groups – ranging from cultural associations to women's organizations, unions, boy scouts, and, somewhat later, political parties – defending their collective interests. This radically altered the relationship between government and subjects.

Meanwhile, as a consequence of changing power relations since the early nineteenth century, local perceptions of the Europeans had started to shift. Earlier discourses of strangely behaving, alcohol-drinking, and cunning Europeans made way for the acknowledgment of European superiority in terms of power and, with it, the awareness of local weakness. One effect of the stronger presence of the Europeans was to create doubt about the potency of indigenous culture and institutions. Thus a Javanese text of the early nineteenth century blames the Javanese for being weak and stupid (Kumar 1997: 389). The other side was admiration – sometimes bitter, often envious, but seldom wholehearted – for the Europeans, their political clout, their technological ability and at times their culture as well. In the first Javanese-language newspaper, *Jurumartani*, started in 1864, contributors extolled the potency of the Dutch and their knowledge, which was to be preferred above the classical Javanese texts. One author sent in the poem:

The Dutch people are different,
for immeasurable are their capabilities
and truly of great usefulness,
growing ever greater
in committing themselves to learning,
aiming to advance
towards higher wisdom

Ricklefs 2007: 141

Inspiration was offered by the obvious privileges the colonial elites had, emulation was frequent, but total assimilation was often unwanted and practically impossible, given the exclusionary arrogance of the Western elites.

Elsewhere, elites at the old royal centers bowed before the superior power of Western armies. They grudgingly admitted the vitality and power of European cultures and struggled with the awareness of their own weaknesses. This does not mean that foreign rule was considered legitimate or desirable. Large-scale armed rebellions were frequent, especially in the mainland colonies, until the end of colonial rule. But they were seldom life-threatening to the regimes. To a large extent, the frustrations and objections of old elites and peasants would be overshadowed by the aspirations of a new elite. In the end, it would not be the descendants of the old nobility who emerged to take part in “modern” life and pursue careers in schools, offices, and business, but the children of colonialism – those who, to a great extent, were educated in the new schools and had adopted the concepts and expectations of colonial society.

By the early twentieth century, Southeast Asia was in for another sea change: the expansion of the state, the proliferation of social organizations, the impact of new technologies, and the rise of mass consumption. In contrast to a century before, by this time the European models were hard to ignore. In education, collective action, political ideals, bureaucratic procedures, and consumers’ desires, Western patterns were not always readily copied or emulated, but were enormously influential nonetheless. The great changes in this period of colonial intrusion could be and were claimed by the West, but they were more a result of interaction, translation, and interpretation than of simple grafting and copying. As elsewhere in the world, old ways were not completely discarded and replaced by “Western” culture, but took on new forms.

In the course of the nineteenth century, then, the face of Southeast Asia had been completely changed by the colonial intrusions. Pre-colonial and early colonial fluidities had given way to fixed borders, states were increasingly centralized and formalized, the lives of millions were affected by the new economies, and the ecological effects were immense. Moreover, the Western claim of superiority and progress had been firmly planted into the discourses of the time.

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