



Southeast Asia: An Introductory History

Milton E. Osborne

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This classic work has been the most widely read introduction to the region for more than 20 years and still retains its reputation as a highly readable survey of Southeast Asia's modern history. This newly revised edition is up to date with the constant political and geographical changes in this fluid region of the world. The impact of social change and the pivotal roles played by religion, ethnic minorities, and immigrant groups is illuminated. Clearly written and extensively illustrated with maps, prints, and photographs, the book also includes an introduction to the art of the region and a guide to literature about Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asia: An Introductory History Details

Date : Published April 1st 2005 by Allen & Unwin Australia Pty. Ltd. (first published August 1979)

ISBN : 9781741144482

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Format : Paperback 366 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Cultural, Asia, Travel



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Jan-Maat says

The blurb on the front cover says that it is still (or was at time of publishing) the best one volume history available. I am not such a connoisseur of one volume histories of south-East Asia as to be able to judge, it seems ok, although I did like that there was a chapter on the arts which included novels as recommended further reading. Though perhaps you could judge this book on the basis that it is recommending people, young and old, to go forth and read *The Quiet American* to further their understanding of mid-20th century Vietnam, you might find relying on novels written by Anglophone authors for anglophone audiences something other than an infallible way to understand a largely non-anglophone region of the world, but I do like the idea that history and literature belong together as ways of understanding the world.

I would say, inspired by Asterix, that this book is divided into four parts, the supine beginning, the transformative colonial period, then the transformative Japanese victory over the colonisers, finally Independence and afterwards, in which it is revealed that despite two dynamic transformative periods exercised upon the region by outsiders that much the same old elites are still in charge as in the ancient old sleepy times before the coming of the funny foreign man with his apparently endless desire for spices and rubber goods.

Rather than the phrase introductory history - overview from altitude may describe it better, this means in effect that we come to know some countries by contrast so we know Thailand because it was not colonised and therefore in some ways it is unlike its neighbours which were. The treatment then of any individual country is varied, the Philippines gets about as much coverage as Laos and simply pops in to the text in the colonial period. Also Osborne ends his account unevenly - possibly an affect of this being a multi edition book (I read the 6th) so Vietnam is discussed until circa 1980 but Indonesia to 1965. This is a bit disconcerting.

Something which caught my attention was his description of the unevenness of the colonial experience, for instance the take over of Burma took about sixty years, British rule then lasted for sixty years, while there had been Dutch control over Jakarta for 300 years most of Indonesia had been under Dutch control for far briefer periods of time.

Anyway the essential narrative was that southeast Asia was just lying around for hundreds of years, there was a civilisation in ancient Cambodia but this was a bit flaky and soft round the edges. The region was open to influences from India and China. Vietnam was strongly coloured by its relationship with China. Across the region there were individual immigrants from India and China too, as we know from contemporary popular political discourse immigrants are horrible and ruin everything for everyone so here too down to the present day such immigrants run shops in rural areas, are money lenders, or miners, or casual labourers and generally carry out various specialised economic or social tasks. At the same time obscurer peoples were shifting around, various people coming down from the North from China and Thai speaking peoples moving eastwards so Osborne tells us the current countries of Southeast Asia tend to be a mess of various ethnic groups speaking many languages, historically this didn't matter maybe much, but with population growth there is more competition for farm land, so ethnic tensions can be expected throughout the region, also the tendency of some of the wilder hill peoples to farm, use and market opium may not be regarded with equanimity by central governments. Historically all the regional states tended to be hard in the centre but soft at the edges, with peripheral regions effectively acknowledging the centre but doing their own thing. In the

age of colonialism this meant that European companies or Imperial empires tended to chew off dangling peripheral regions, Thailand perhaps narrowly avoided being gobbled up between the French and the British as it was it lost chunks of itself to Malaysia and to Indochina.

From this though we can see in Malaysia that the communist insurgency was a non-starter because it was rooted only in the Chinese community (which had a long tradition of secret societies) . More interesting was the essential social conservatism and the post independence reveal that politics and society would be dominated by the same land owning elites that colonial authorities had to work with. In the Philippines and Indonesia the full weigh of defence budgets were deployed against Communist groups. While in Vietnam we might see communism itself as a conservative force compared to the social disruption caused by Catholicism, or communism marked a return to Confucian values (either Marx in Confucian garb or Confucius wearing a red coat and white woolly beard 'Ho,ho, ho, Merry Marxmas everybody - have a cigar from father Karl!'). That in Cambodia there was an attempt for a radical return to the completely rural past only confirms a picture of a region deeply ambivalent about change.

Neither religion nor folk beliefs feature much, and it is interesting how in an introductory history how lightly actual people and their concerns or way of seeing the world press upon its pages.

Osborne's picture at the close of the book is of rapid population growth and urbanisation coupled with the exploitation of natural resources in societies in which leadership is exercised by technocratic and military elites all of which suggests future violence and ecological disasters, of course this may simply be an optimistic impression caused by looking out of the wrong side of the aeroplane as it flies across the region in 240 pages with the occasional photograph.

Julian Haigh says

After looking around for sometime, this was the best introductory to Southeast Asian history. A bit dry for sure, and it didn't have much info prior to 1500 or so. Perhaps just because with the Europeans a lot more was recorded, but the result is a book more about Europe's effect on the region rather than about the local cultures themselves. Regardless, a nice start to reading more about the area!

Keith says

Very helpful introduction to a region I hitherto knew little about. Osborne gives the big picture and looks for similarities and differences but as if lecturing to students about pitfalls of other academics at times. And the book is a bit repetitive in places. As if he doesn't expect everyone to read it right through! Inevitably for a book of its compact size, it rather skims across the histories of different periods.

In his helpful section on literature of SE Asia Osborne nevertheless makes no mention at all of acclaimed Indonesian writer (who also spent years on a prison island for his political views) Ananta Toer Pramoedya, an omission which seems to be rather an oversight.

All in all I'm glad I read this book to get a good overview, and way to make sense, of the region. Hoping to read some more histories of SE Asia but it certainly helps me to understand the news of this important and dynamic part of the world.

James says

This author's writing style is too academic for a narrative history and is missing the footnotes for an academic one, the worst of both worlds. I couldn't finish it, my eyes were turning into raisins. Does have an extensive bibliography.

I will continue my search for histories of this region that are a bit more fun to read.

Siti Aishah Ikmal Hisham says

It's a bit of a slog to get through, but I suspect that it's a necessary evil as it does aim to be a serious, academic treatise covering the history, politics and culture of largely heterogenous, complicated region in only one volume.

Aaron Kadkhodai says

Not particularly fun to read, but a good crash course on SE Asia history. I decent first foray into the region. I found the writing a bit dull and wordy.

Ian Casey says

A book that makes it to its twelfth edition must be doing something right, as has Milton Osborne's introductory history of Southeast Asia. First published in 1979, my copy is from 2016.

The word 'introductory' is correct, as the subject is massive for a relatively short book. There are also severe limitations on our knowledge of much of the course of this history. Written records and other documentary evidence is scarce prior to European colonisation, and indeed for a long time thereafter. Nor would we wish to rely too heavily on European rather than Asian perspectives. And even as recently as the 1970s in Cambodia, much of the detail of its history remains shrouded in a cloak of mystery.

Within these restrictions, Osborne does a decent job of outlining what we do know of the development of a region that is geographically massive, ethnically, religiously, and politically diverse, and which in recent decades has become highly populated. Six nations in the region have over 30 million people today and four rank in the world's top twenty for population.

It is therefore a synthesis that points to the key issues for further reading in given disciplines rather than thoroughly explaining any of them. It touches on some of the key figures such as Lee Kuan Yew, Ho Chi Minh, Norodom Sihanouk, Ferdinand Marcos, Mahatir Mohamad, Sukarno, and Suharto but without overemphasising individuals. It discusses economic matters by giving examples such as tin, rubber and rice. The complexities of race relations are often indicated, as for example with the differing roles of Chinese, Indians, and ethnic Malays in Malaysia.

Much attention is given to the radically different paths to independence from colonialism, and to the

subsequent major breaks from the 'post-colonial settlements', which is to say how the first attempts at native government were frequently overthrown as steps on a long journey towards the relative political stability the region enjoys today. Thailand is often compared and contrasted as a unique case, never officially colonised but having to make many concessions to foreign powers to maintain its independence.

The extensive appendix and suggested reading list make no attempt to be exhaustive (as that way madness lies) but are nevertheless a goldmine of fiction and non-fiction material for further exploration of any narrower aspects of the subject matter that strike the reader's fancy.

There are far more typos here than I'd expect to see in a thoroughly proofread academic text - particularly with words omitted, used twice in a sentence incorrectly, or with the wrong tense or suffix. It's not a killer but it is a distraction.

I've read historians with more engaging and smoothly flowing prose, and with greater clarity of thought, but nevertheless this is a solid starting point for understanding the region.

Chris says

This is a good, factual overview of the history of Southeast Asia. Osborne covers a lot of ground, giving an overview of the 8 current nations in SE Asia: Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. Going all the way back to the 'classical' historic period, through the evolution of their respective societies and up to current time (book published in 2013), which more recently has largely been driven by European colonialism.

The book reads like a textbook and is a bit dull in some parts. However, if looking for a comprehensive history, Osborne does a great job weaving in the history of 8 different nations, ably highlighting the parallels and differences between the different states.

The biggest overarching theme and struggle in this book is how to present the impact of colonialism. It is (almost painfully) obvious that Osborne is terrified of demeaning local culture and the impact the indigenous people of SE Asia have had on their current societies. Any time Osborne mentions an effect of colonialism, good or bad, he jumps to caveat / hedge any statement to make clear that SE Asia is not a mix of societies solely formed and dominated by Europeans. The result is a balanced view, which does a good job forcing the reader to debate the positive and negative impacts of foreign invasion / domination / exploitation vs. development / technological advancement / investment themselves. I really enjoyed this presentation as it forces the reader to think through complicated questions regarding the legacy of colonialism. This also very much helps clarify the context for current events in the region given most of these countries gained independence / were formed in the modern sense in my parents' lifetime.

I read this before traveling to Malaysia / Asia for two weeks and thought this was an excellent primer on the history of the region. I would not necessarily recommend this as a light, interest read as it does read like a text book but if you are looking to read up on the region and don't have much of a background, this is a great place to start.

satej soman says

Despite labeling itself an 'introduction', this history presumes existing knowledge of the classical civilizations of SE Asia. Still, it argues convincingly that SE Asia should be considered a cultural, political, and economic region in its own right, rather than an imitator of Chinese, Indian, and Western cultures.

The book's lack of detail on classical political entities in the region undermines its claim that developments in the region are part of trends that date back millennia. For the time periods it covers well (the 18th century onwards), it does a pretty good job of summarizing the changes in a set of diverse countries, with a handful of topics oddly glossed over (e.g. Kapitan Cina, Khmer Rouge).

Ross says

Good quick overview, but was a little disappointed. Osborne points out very early in the book that the cultural, political and social trajectory of SE Asian civilization(s) is driven more by the underlying momentum of millennia of local history and less by the two hundred year interregnum of colonialism. But yet, the access to local sources on all aspects of history seem to very light. In the final addendum on art and literature, the literary references are almost exclusively from the point of view of non-SE Asians writing about the region in fictional forms.

I was hoping for a more comprehensive bibliography. Still a useful historical overview of the region and the key forces that are driving current SE Asia development.

Alison Muntz says

Good introduction to the region.

Olivia says

Read for politics of Southeast Asia class at University of Michigan

Brad Heap says

Interesting book, certainly only an introductory history and moves very quickly through history. The author treats each current country in isolation which is a disappointment as it makes the book slightly disjointed and you don't get an overview of the region as whole very often. The appendix at the end of the book is one of the best chapters in the book.

Arnav Sinha says

If you are as fascinated by Southeast Asia as I am, but have picked up information on it mostly through short trips to the region, episodic readings on Wikipedia, and some moderately good fiction, this book can prove a useful historical and political summary. Some familiarity with the region's past and present would probably be helpful before you dive into this whirlwind tour. But even if you are a complete newbie, the story here is simplified enough to not leave you entirely baffled. That's a plus for the book and the author.

On the negative side, this book is in dire need of an editor. On way too many occasions it reminded me of (some) reports I used to submit in college. To hide the lack of work done, I would use as many words as possible to bulk up the report and reach the word limit. But the professor would generally see through the charade and grade me accordingly. I am not sure why Osborne has copied my failed trick.

Nathan Paul says

I found this to an incredibly well researched and thought out book that is excellent for anyone who is interested in the region. Osborne develops his interpretations of the data presented carefully and logically, offering the reader multiple perspectives about what has occurred. Having traveled to many of the countries of the region, this book is an excellent way to gain well organized information about how this part of the world came to be how it is today. It can be a bit dry at times, but the author's compare and contrast methods and case by case analysis make this book well worth the investment. Because of this book, I am now searching for other books that follow this similar concise format for other regions of the world.
