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Connecting through colonisation?

Jean-Louis MARGOLIN

Abstract

The 500-year connection between Europe and Southeast Asia has often been told as the story of a slow takeover, then a short apex, followed by a quick demise of European hegemony. However, things were not so linear, or homogenous. Until at least the end of the 18th century, the ability of most Asian societies to master their own destiny remained, by and large, intact. For Westerners, entering Asian networks and accommodating Asian states was a more rewarding strategy than confronting them. In Southeast Asia, Europeans fought against each other with more force than against Asians. Actually, cultural and religious cross-fertilisation, as well as cross-breeding, had been a major phenomenon from as early as the 16th century. Individuals did not act necessarily as Westerners or Asians, and could even sometimes forget their nationality, and Western societies have often been more deeply transformed by Asia than the reverse.

The balance of power did evolve a great deal during the century of large-scale colonisation, from 1850 to 1950. Nevertheless, even then, European influence remained fairly limited as colonial policies were often contradictory, and constantly lacking the necessary funding. Behind the mask of European rule, several indigenous groups improved their status, and made themselves indispensable. The colonial order could be described as a co-production between Westerners and some Asians, albeit an unequal and unsustainable one.

Introduction: the necessity of complexity

The 500th anniversary of the first major encounter between Southeast Asians and Europeans, the storming of the great city-state of Malacca (Melaka) by the Portuguese fleet of Afonso d'Albuquerque in 1511, went wholly unnoticed. That violent episode was the beginning of five centuries of permanent connection, fortunately often more peaceful, between the two most distant extremities of the Eurasian landmass. This paper will not attempt to categorise the various facets of this connection as good or bad, a rather vain exercise for any historian conscious of the complexity of the past. Instead, the issue to be developed is a simple one: how strong, or weak, has the Euro-Southeast Asian relationship been during this half-millennium?

The answer, however, is not simple in any way. The all too common presentation of this period divides it into three phases: (i) a slow capture of Southeast Asia by Europe; (ii) a shorter colonial domination of the whole region, Thailand excepted; and (iii) an even shorter liberation process. That description is not wholly mistaken, but it oversimplifies the story, and overemphasises conflicts that were only a part, albeit a significant one, of a much richer and more complex connection. Furthermore, it exaggerates the ability of Europeans to dominate Southeast Asians, and neglects the many cases of intermixing between them.

This paper intends to give a different picture. Actually, cultural and religious cross-fertilisation, as well as cross-breeding, was a major phenomenon from as early as the 16th century. Societies played an autonomous role, and what took place at that level was often much more interesting and fruitful than what happened at the state level. Individuals did not act necessarily as Westerners or Asians, and could even sometimes forget their nationality. They followed their own personal interests, beliefs, and aspirations. This was particularly true before

the 1850s, when the wholesale seizure of Southeast Asia by European powers was triggered. Over 500 years, connectivity has taken a bewildering array of forms, with interstate relations being just one of them.

This paper is, in many ways, a follow-up to the author's recent book, co-written with Claude Markovits.¹ It is based on a set of questions that should reveal progressively how to address the issue of long-term connectivity between Europe and Southeast Asia. I shall start with the traditional, linear, state-based vision, which the rest of the paper will attempt to contest and replace.

The second part raises some initial, very empirical doubts about the validity of the initial vision. Then follow 12 arguments that will shape, step by step, a new vision. The first three arguments emphasise the fragility of European conquests in Southeast Asia, including the slowness of the process, the failures, the shortcomings of the control, and the swiftness of the final crumbling of power. The next two arguments focus on the twin, inbuilt weakness of the colonial system which were a lack of human resource, and a dearth of financial means. Then three arguments attempt to deconstruct the assumed distinction between Europeans and Asians, i.e. Europeans were divided, between, and inside, nations, and the early growth of crossbreeding, in spiritual as much as in corporeal connections, questions the very notion of an East-West divide.

Three more arguments develop that essential question: in the end, who had been using whom? I shall demonstrate that Europeans, acting in their own interests, nevertheless did strengthen some Asian trading groups, especially the Chinese. They also accelerated the consolidation of some major Asian polities, and reinforced indigenous churches and ideologies. The last argument wonders if the Southeast Asian influence over Europe could have been as strong as the European influence on Southeast Asia. The conclusion focuses on the interplay between colonisation, modernisation, and connectivity.

1. The traditional vision: the overwhelming power of Europeans

There are several good arguments in favour of the idea of a strong colonisation by Europe in Southeast Asia. Firstly, its long duration. The first territory in the region to be overtaken by a European power, Portugal, was Malacca in 1511. Almost 500 years later, the last territory to be abandoned by Europeans, again by Portugal, was Timor-Leste, or East Timor, in 1975 (or 2002 when Timor-Leste became an independent country).

Secondly, the European colonial domain was then extended to the whole of Southeast Asia, except for what was Siam, today's Thailand.

The third point is that almost all European colonial powers have been involved in Southeast Asia, including the British, the Dutch, the French, the Spaniards, and the Portuguese. The Germans were not far away in the north-eastern part of New Guinea and in the Marianas islands, which were German territories until 1914. Every European colonial power, except for Italy and Belgium, came to Southeast Asia.

Fourth, today, one can find very visible effects of colonisation. In Singapore and Malaysia, for example, a strong British influence is demonstrated by: the status of English language; the way justice is administered; how parliament works; and the cities' architecture and planning. In the Philippines, people still have Spanish names, and fill Roman Catholic churches. In the major cities of Viet Nam, the French baguette as well as the Vache qui rit (Laughing Cow) soft cheese are ubiquitous at breakfast time.

¹ Margolin, Jean-Louis, and Markovits, Claude (2015), *Les Indes et l'Europe: Histoires connectées, XVIe-XXIe siècle* .

2. Three doubts, one caveat

At the same time, colonial ties loosened quickly following independence, without much regret from either side. Today, China, the USA or Japan are much more influential in most of Southeast Asia than their European counterparts, even when taken together.

Furthermore, it should be emphasised that, although European colonisation in Asia lasted almost 500 years, if one considers specific locations, on a local rather than a regional basis, one is led to the conclusion that for 80% or 90% of the areas colonised in Southeast Asia, the duration of colonisation was much shorter. In most cases, it was less than a long lifespan; a person born just before colonisation in these areas, and who lived for 80 or 90 years, could have died in an independent country.

Another point is that what prevailed in Southeast Asia was a fairly weak example of colonisation, where areas were more often protectorates, with power shared between the indigenous authorities and foreign protector, rather than full-blown colonies. Indochina for example, was made up of five territories with southern Viet Nam, then called Cochinchina, the only French colony. The situation was more or less the same in what is now Indonesia. Outside Java, few territories were directly administered by the Netherlands. In Myanmar, only the central part of the country was fully controlled by the British, while the rest remained much more autonomous. This poses the question of whether the effectiveness of European colonial domination was more apparent than real?

It should be acknowledged that there were two very contrasting phases during the five centuries of European presence. Until around 1850, for more than three centuries, the European sphere of direct domination in Southeast Asia was geographically and demographically limited. After the mid-19th century, the capacity of European powers and colonists to impose their will was much stronger, even if it only lasted until the momentous coming of the Japanese army in 1941-2.

The rest of this paper will develop 12 arguments in favour of the idea of a weak colonial system, that nevertheless was characterised by rich and intricate exchanges between people from afar and Southeast Asian communities. To sum up these arguments, and to allude to a modern concept in international relations, what I aim to do is to develop a theory of the failed colonial state and at the same time, displace the focus from the political sphere to the societal one.

3. The slow, limited and short-lived European domination of Southeast Asia

Was colonial conquest very progressive, or very slow? In the mid-18th century, after 250 years of European presence in Southeast Asia, only limited areas were actually dominated by Europe: Malacca and its port; the Moluccas archipelago in Eastern Indonesia; the western part of Java; and the northern and central parts of the Philippines. Outside these areas, there were only a handful of colonial trading posts in port cities, a few coastal enclaves, and a few small islands under European control. In 1750, the territories administered by Europeans in Southeast Asia could be estimated to have between two and three million inhabitants, with around 600,000 belonging to the Dutch, and most of the rest in the Spanish Philippines, although at the time the Southeast Asian region probably had a population of 25 to 30 million.

Furthermore, the biggest and most active cities, including the economically important ones, were not in Western colonies. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Ayutthaya (before the Burmese invasion) was probably the leading city, followed by Pegu in Burma, Hanoi in Viet Nam, and Mataram in Central Java. Dutch Batavia, or Malacca, and Spanish Manila were smaller.

The great leap forward of European domination took place very late, mostly during the last quarter of the 19th century and the first years of the 20th century. The hardest and most devastating colonial war, both for the local population and for the colonial army, was waged in Aceh, at the northern tip of Sumatra. It took 30 years, from 1873 to 1904, for the Dutch to overcome the stubborn resistance. The British conquest of Upper Burma in the late 1880s happened at the same time as the very difficult French conquest of Tonkin, the northern part of Viet Nam.

Even as late as the 1900s, there was still heavy or sporadic fighting in Bali, Flores, Sulawesi, and Borneo between the Dutch and local chieftains. The European conquest of Southeast Asia was only completed just before the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. When the Japanese army came to the region in 1941-42, it took just a few months for it to capture what had taken Europe 400 years. The reality for most colonised territories was that Western domination only lasted some 30 to 60 years.

The second argument is that Europe was not, in any way, predestined to dominate Southeast Asia. It was not an easy task to take over the region. There were many setbacks, any of which could have led to the failure of any hope of European hegemony. It took the Spaniards more than three centuries to overcome the armed opposition of the people in the far South of the Philippines, even though Manila had been founded by the Spaniards in 1571, and the Muslim polities surrendered only a few years before the end of Spanish rule in 1898.

Economic colonisation suffered similar failures. Although the Dutch were a prominent power in Southeast Asia during the 17th and 18th centuries, they failed to impose a monopoly on some of the most valuable of colonial products, such as Sumatra's pepper. The local sultans constantly cheated them through smuggling, with British traders their most common accomplices.

The resources available to the European powers increased significantly during the latter part of the 19th century. The 1,300-strong expeditionary force, sent by France to Siam in 1688, was, at the time, an enormous European army. But in 1885, when the French attacked Tonkin, they were able to field some 30,000 soldiers, the same as the the British in Upper Burma at that time. Nevertheless, in those parts of Southeast Asia considered unimportant, the effectiveness of Western domination remained problematic. On the large Boloven plateau, in Southern Laos, a revolt lasted from 1901 until 1936, and initially the French were almost expelled from the area. The sultan of Jambi (Sumatra), deposed by the Dutch in 1859, took refuge in the hills (*ulu*), and controlled the area until 1907.

Lawless zones in many mountains, swamps, jungles and upper segments of rivers lasted until the First World War, or later. Piracy, smuggling, counterfeit currency, and arms trafficking, even the slave trade, diminished only around 1900, when the colonial police forces became more efficient. Until then, it was common for commercial ships to be attacked by pirates, even a few miles off Singapore harbour.

The third argument is that in the latter phase of the colonial period, the decolonisation of Southeast Asia by Western powers took place with a surprising ease – with the exception of the bitter and prolonged France-Indochina War (1946-54), and the Dutch-British-Indonesian war of 1945-49. The most striking fact is that the French shied away from using the main force of its army, with its expeditionary force made up of mostly colonial units from Africa and the Foreign Legion, which was largely German at the time. A few years earlier, in 1942, the Japanese had been able to take over the whole of colonial Southeast Asia, with a very small number of troops, and with limited actual fighting. The Malays, astounded, exclaimed: "*Orang puteh lari!*" (the white people flee away). If their colonial domains were so meaningful to the Europeans, why did they deploy so few men, and so little money, to retain their Southeast Asian colonies?

4. The weak colonial state

The fourth argument **stresses the** weakness of the European presence in Southeast. To impose one's rule, the first requirement is to have sufficient human resources. Earlier, I mentioned the strength of some late 19th century military ventures, but once the war was finished, the new colonial territories were left with very small military, or police, forces. In 1915, the garrison of Singapore was only a few hundred strong. Consequently, when an Indian regiment of the British forces mutinied, with the help of German Navy war prisoners, they almost captured the city in just a few hours. The revolt was only crushed with the support of crews from Japanese ships, as Japan was then an ally of the British. Effectively, the Japanese took back Singapore for the British.

The picture for civil administration is very similar. In 1931, Cambodia had only 28 French civil servants, two or three for each province. In the Netherlands Indies, a much more populated colony, with around 60 million people at the time, there were exactly 277 Dutch civil servants in 1900. Of course, many more local auxiliaries, including Dutch citizens, should be added, but they had no decision-making powers.

Much earlier, in 1687, at the peak of its power, the famous Dutch East India Company (VOC), had only 11,500 employees, scattered between Ormuz (in today's Iran) and Nagasaki in Japan, with the vast majority being sailors and soldiers. Western communities in Asia were miniscule, even at their peak just before the Second World War. In 1940, they represented between 0.1% and 0.4% of the general population. Of course, in some towns, especially the capital cities, the percentage could be significantly higher. But even in such heavily Westernised cities as Singapore or Batavia, present-day Jakarta, people classified as Europeans or Westerners (not only the British or Dutch, but a definition which included many mixed race people, and also other Europeans, Americans and even Japanese) never reached more than 1.5% of the population. In 1940, there were 42,000 Europeans in the whole of French Indochina, then 25-million strong.

One reason for the weakness of the European presence, especially until the late 19th century, was the mortality rate. In 18th century Batavia, the life expectancy of arriving Europeans was six months, whatever their age. It meant that, after six months, half were dead, with the majority dying from malaria. After they survived these six initial months, they had a good chance of surviving ten years or more, but were often very much weakened by recurrent bouts of the disease. The main malaria epidemic in Batavia lasted 60 years.

Europeans who went to the colonies, especially in the earlier periods, were fairly unusual people, often outcasts. Many wanted to flee their home country because they were facing imprisonment, or because they were in conflict with their families, or because they were desperately poor. You had to be in terrible circumstances, or even a bit crazy, to do something so suicidal. This resulted in an all-too common, get rich quick, culture with the inevitable consequences: greed, dishonesty, corruption, lawlessness, and violence. Another consequence was the necessity to recruit many local auxiliaries, as colonial rule could only survive if enough Asians participated. It would be far-fetched to pretend that colonial domination did not exist, but it was Asians themselves, through a huge army of junior civil servants, soldiers and business associates, that made the colonial machine work.

The fifth argument is the constant lack of financial resources available to colonial governments. It was almost 'mission impossible' to consolidate the primary aim of colonies, namely making money for their masters, with the desire to promote education, health services, and general welfare, what the French called their mission civilisatrice, (civilising mission). A further complication came from the European colonists themselves. The majority of them were less concerned about spreading Christianity or Western civilization, than about living a luxury

life, acquiring slaves, before the abolition of slavery, and getting concubines and mistresses, although most of them never realised their financial dreams.

Colonial governments and concerned individuals conceived many development projects for improving infrastructure, education and health. But from Paris, London or The Hague almost always came back the same answer: "No money!". Colonial history is a cemetery of white elephants. It is only in the very last period of colonisation, between 1930 and 1950, that the situation changed somewhat. Investment in education, especially, increased significantly, if only as a response to the pressure of the growing nationalist movements. The colonies started to function a little better, more like modernized countries, just before they disappeared for good, first through the Japanese conquest, and then through independence. It was an exemplary case of too little, too late.

5. Deconstructing the East/West divide

The sixth argument suggests that the notion of European should be deconstructed. One should not forget that, during the colonial period, the worst, and most constant, enemies for Europeans were other Europeans. European countries were often at war, and these wars spilled over into Asia. Europeans did not shy away from alliances with Asian princes to better attack or fend off other Europeans. In 1606, Portuguese Malacca was besieged by the coalition of the Dutch and the Johor Sultanate. In the 1880s, rumours of an imminent French-Burmese treaty triggered the British intervention.

Christianity was not a factor of unity. Before the 19th century, the main enemies for a Roman Catholic were not Muslims, even less the Buddhists but Protestants, and vice versa. Europeans were never much at ease with Muslims, as Islam was repeatedly used as a war cry against them. In Batavia, for example, the indigenous Javanese were not allowed to live inside the city walls. However, Europeans never seriously attempted to stop the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia. As early as 1556, the Jesuit missionary Luis Frois complained that Muslim preachers could travel more easily, and spread their faith faster, in the Indonesian archipelago by using Portuguese ships, whose captains only cared for the passage fee.

Europeans in Southeast Asia were never part of a monolithic culture. Some played a prominent role in the development of protests against colonial rule, such as the Indo-Dutch author Multatuli (Eduard Douwes Dekker), whose novel *Max Havelaar*, published in 1860, had a strong enough impact to change the colonial policy of the Netherlands. Even among colonial officials, it would be wrong to underestimate the ability of some to make the colony their second homeland, and even their first. In the 1900s, Dumoutier, the director of education in Tonkin, Viet Nam, so much admired the Sino-Vietnamese culture that he strived to change as little as possible of the traditional way of teaching. He cultivated an idealised vision of Confucianism, which, according to him, represented a recourse to the shortcomings of Western modernity. This approach could be defined as a type of reverse acculturation, less rare than one might think. The great figures in the history of France were also indigenised to some extent. Vietnamese history textbooks of the inter-war years showed Joan of Arc, Bishop Alexandre de Rhodes (the inventor of quoc ngu, the Romanised Vietnamese script), and the revolutionary army organiser Lazare Carnot, as all exemplifying the Asian ancestral virtues of loyalty, fidelity, modesty, eagerness for study, and benevolence.

The seventh argument is the challenge of differentiating between who is European and who is Asian. For example, from the late 16th century, many European mercenaries, mostly Portuguese at first, worked for various Asian powers, especially during the wars between Siam and Burma. It should also be remembered that, until the late 19th century, the Europeans in Asia were almost all male. Most of them took Asian women as their concubine or wife. They customarily used these women to extend their local network, or to carry out trade in local markets. There soon appeared a new population of "Black Portuguese", mixed race people,

often with Indian or African, as well as European, ancestors. They kept their Christian faith as well as some customs, dishes, and words derived from Portugal, and considered themselves genuinely Portuguese. In 18th century Ayutthaya, where they occupied a neighbourhood, the French and British merchants did not consider them Europeans, and even despised them. Until the late 19th century, religious affiliation was considered more meaningful than bloodline or skin colour. It was a lot easier for an Asian Christian of the appropriate denomination to become the wife of a European, or a soldier in the colonial army.

In the Dutch Indies, most citizens of the Netherlands were mestizos, born in the archipelago, and they made up a good part of the elite. The role of intermediaries or go-betweens, indigenous people who were more or less Westernised, is of particular importance, because it was their swing towards the anti-colonial camp that finally tipped the balance in favour of independence. These men, and women, would have wanted to be recognised as equal, but they could never overcome the racial barrier erected by the colonists to protect them from competition.

All this underlines how appropriate it would be to introduce the notion of multiple identity, which is quite common now in Europe. A person often has to endure complicated trajectories in his or her life, conditioned by birth, location, religious affiliation, as well as occupation, sensibility, opportunity, education, sexual orientation, age, and so on. It is actually very common to have different identities at the same time.

Singapore offers fascinating examples of this notion. In 1900, the Chinese elite formed the Straits Chinese British Association, which was nicknamed the King's Chinese. They were members of several official institutions, such as the Legislative Council, or were nominated Justices of the Peace. During the First World War, they offered an aeroplane to the British army. At the same time, they maintained a strong connection with China. Thus, when a Chinese consulate was established in Singapore in 1877, they bought honorific Mandarin titles for themselves and even for their ancestors, to increase their prestige, as traders were traditionally despised in China.

The life story of Lim Boon Keng, the first Singaporean Chinese to get a degree in medicine from Edinburgh University in 1892, speaks volumes. He was a Christian, but simultaneously he spearheaded the Confucianist revival movement in his Fujianese home town. He was especially active in building and financing modern Chinese schools there.

The example of the indigenous people from Pondicherry (South India), a French territory since the 17th century, is interesting too. Most of them were not French citizens, but French subjects, and so there was a huge gap between them and the resident Europeans. They were allowed to vote, but in a separate electoral college. But when some of them moved to Cochinchina (southern Viet Nam), usually to work as junior civil servants, they were assimilated as Europeans, and so could vote in the same electoral college.

The eighth argument notes that European goals and strategies were full of contradictions. In the Dutch East India Company, there were two centres of power: the 17 Gentlemen in Amsterdam and the Indies Council in Batavia, in theory its subordinate. The main business, around 1750, was in tea, with a lot of competition between the Dutch and the British. It was therefore in Amsterdam's interest to import tea produced in southern China by the fastest shortest sea route. However, that meant disrupting the flow of Chinese junks sailing to Batavia, which brought goods and workers essential to the prosperity of the Dutch in Java.

Much later, just before the First World War, rubber was fast becoming the most valuable commodity exported by Southeast Asia, and the first producer was Malaya. The location of the main rubber market had to be decided. Should it be London where the world price would be fixed, and where the future prices on the upcoming production would be traded, or Singapore?

The British in Singapore, with the support of other local business interests including other Westerners and the Singapore Chinese, fought against the British in London in what developed into a harsh commercial war.

6. Who has been using whom, or the irony of history?

The ninth argument asks 'Who has been using whom?' Evidence abounds that the Westerners did not always have the upper hand in Southeast Asia. When the powerful VOC dealt with significant Asian powers, not only China or Japan, but also Burma or Siam, it had to accept draconian conditions in order to trade. These included buying commodities at prices that included huge royalties, strict quotas and various prohibitions. Monopoly trade was for the Asian sovereign, not for the VOC. Consequently, several trading posts became unprofitable, and without hope of redress, the VOC ultimately had to leave, from Burma in 1679, and from Siam in 1767.

For a long time, it has been argued by many that the compradores, a Portuguese word describing Asian merchants closely associated with Europeans, were submissive collaborators of Western imperialism. It is now admitted that they were often at least as rich and powerful as their European counterparts, and that they played an essential historical role, as they were the true interface between the West and Asia. Occasionally, even at the high noon of European power in the late 19th century, they felt strong enough to chase away, or marginalise, foreign competitors from important sectors of the colonial economy. The Europeans had to associate with Asians because they lacked the money, territorial knowledge, and workforce to manage the mines and plantations.

The all-important export industry of sugarcane was introduced in Java in the early 18th century, around Batavia. It was completely dominated by Chinese businessmen, who in 1710 owned 79 of the 84 sugar factories. The VOC needed to make some profit in the industry, and ultimately got so scared of the growing role and numbers of Chinese in the sector, that in 1740, Governor Valkenier sponsored a terrible massacre of Batavia Chinese. Just a few years later, the VOC had to implore the Chinese traders to come back, as Batavia trade had grounded to a standstill.

In 1775, around 60% of the sea trade in Java was controlled by Asian traders, most of them Chinese, and also many Arabs. A century later, rice was by far the biggest export of French Indochina. Most of the trade, from the collection in villages to export trade to Southern China, belonged to the Chinese from Cholon, the sister city of Saigon, in Cochinchina.

It leads some historians to raise a provocative question: could it be said that a version of an overseas Chinese economic empire developed under the guise, and protection, of European flags? It is not just a metaphoric image. Around 1900, some Southeast Asian Chinese traders raised the British flag when they were in Chinese waters, as a protection against the harsh ways of the local dignitaries of the Qing Dynasty.

The tenth argument suggests that most commonly, Europeans acted to reinforce the major Asian powers, at least from the 16th to the 18th century. The Europeans felt vulnerable, and therefore wanted to befriend those indigenous states that could be considered the most efficient and most promising, even if it meant contributing to the building of their next

formidable adversary. They sent missionaries and embassies to these states, and the resulting alliance treaties played in favour of the rising Asian powers, as well as contributed to the simplification of the political map of Southeast Asia, to the detriment of smaller, more isolated states. The behaviour of European mercenaries was similar, as they sold their services to the richer, more stable polities. During this phase Westerners did not try to divide and rule.

This approach was less obvious in the 19th and 20th centuries, as Europeans felt much stronger. The new phase was introduced by an unprecedented event, when, in 1812, the British stormed the Mataram court in Central Java. This was something that the Dutch had never dared to do, even as the Mataram rulers repeatedly tore apart signed treaties, and massacred a Dutch garrison in 1686. Nevertheless, the Europeans had much to offer to some traditional elites. Before the British imposed protectorates all over Malaya in the late 19th century, the Malay sultans enjoyed almost unlimited power. However, their life expectancy was often limited to three to five years, as most of the sultans ended up murdered by people from their own, extended family, or by their close associates. Their power became more limited with the British, but their life expectancy on the throne made a big jump to 30 or 50 years. What is best: to be all powerful, but only for a few years, or to be less powerful, but still very rich, for 50 years? The answer is, of course, subjective, but the question deserves to be asked. At least one present-day country, Cambodia, was probably saved from oblivion by French colonisation. It was on the verge of being split between Siam and Viet Nam in the mid-19th century, but for its own selfish interests, France allowed Cambodia to survive.

The 11th argument **is that** the Europeans, in their colonies, were less enthusiastic supporters of Christianity and the spread of Western culture, preferring to reshuffle indigenous religions and revamp, or wholly invent, new national ideologies. To consolidate Cambodia, and of course their domination over it, the French strove to separate the Cambodian Buddhist church, the Sangha, from the Thai Sangha. Until then, most learned Cambodian monks had gone to Bangkok to further their studies and acquire prestige. From the 1930s, however, newly 'nationalised' Buddhism was at the forefront of the fight for Cambodian independence.

Viet Nam, for its part, was traditionally very strongly connected to China, linguistically, ideologically and in the accepted version of history. The French did their best to cut off that connection: they supported the rise of *quoc ngu* over Chinese script; they taught Vietnamese history in schools, with no more tales of Chinese dynasties; and they sponsored the rediscovery of national, preferably anti-Chinese, heroes such as the Trung sisters, all the more suitable as they could be assimilated to Vietnamese equivalents of the French heroine Joan of Arc.

In Malaya, Richard Windstedt, an important colonial administrator who was wholly devoted to the glory of the British Empire, published the first significant *History of Malaya* in 1935, a book still influential among Malays.

The most effective way of analysing the colonial societies is to see in them a joint production between Westerners and locals. Thus Malay intellectuals were quick to adopt the notion of race introduced by the British, so as to redefine and strengthen their own identity. Until about 1860, *bangsa Melayu* had meant those who descended from some of the royal lineages of Sumatra. However, after a lively press debate between 1888 and 1894 to determine whether the Jawi Peranakan (Malay peninsula Muslims of Indian origin) might, or might not be, considered as Malays, the term took on a distinctly national flavour, and a progressively racial one.

The main difference with the British prototype of race was that Malays asserted the centrality of Islam. In both versions, however, the assumption of the concatenation between language

and ethnicity was very strong, although Malay language had developed as a lingua franca between diverse groups of people. There was also a Malay-British consensus to leave the Indians and the Chinese on the political margins, something which would have serious political consequences for the unity of the future Malaysia.

Knowledge and concepts developed in the European colonial context could even be accommodated by the intellectuals of a colony to describe, and glorify, their country's past. The Cambodian protectorate (1863-1953) is a particularly good example of this phenomenon in relation to France.

There is much evidence of this, including the Khmer dancers sketched by Auguste Rodin, and the lifesize reproductions of Angkor Wat, and other ancient monuments, that were the highlight of several exhibitions organised in France. The revival of a nation's glorious past, now supposedly adrift, presented a justification for French imperialism.

Inspired by these colonial, some would say, orientalist, myths, a national culture of Buddhism developed from the early 20th century. The language was purified and schools were thoroughly renovated, as a result of an acceptance of a modernity that originated in France, and in the worship of a Cambodian nation that, for the first time, defined for itself its territory, borders and enemies. It was not an acculturation, or a graft, and even much less a gesture of submission, or an act of resistance. Rather it was the meeting of two dynamics, that of the West in search of dreams and greatness, with that of a small nation in search of its identity and revival. Each one had its set of ideational tools, and also its own political and economic aspirations.

This construction, simultaneously common and conflictual, was for Cambodians neither intentional, nor planned nor merely consented. Asians often had to deal with situations they did not want, and one can find here the fundamental inequality between colonisers and colonised.

The relationship between the colonialists and the indigenous population was much more ambiguous than what was asserted by both the colonialist narrative, i.e. the civilised white man tending to the uneducated native with a fatherly hand, and the anticolonial discourse where colonists imposed an unprecedented system of oppression, exploitation, and loss of cultural identity on helpless natives.

7. Cultural and human exchanges: Europe under Southeast Asian influence

Finally the twelfth argument asks what has been more decisive, in the long run: the action of Europe on Southeast Asia, or the retroaction of Southeast Asia over Europe, and the West? For a long time, the answer would have seemed so obvious that the question itself could have been perceived as strange, if not stupid.

Admittedly, Southeast Asia has been less influential in Europe than India or China. No Southeast Asian thinker has ever been admired and discussed by Western philosophers. Until recently, very few Southeast Asian books have been translated into Western languages. There is no local equivalent of *chinoiserie* or *japonisme*; there was no integration of Javanese, Siamese or Vietnamese architectural or decorative patterns into European classical architecture and art de vivre.

However, the importance of spices, most of which were imported from the Moluccas or Sumatra, to European trade and cuisine for many centuries, should not be overlooked. Belatedly, in the late 19th to early 20th centuries, Southeast Asian aesthetics became much more prominent, through the *Angkor craze* in France, or through *Bali mania* in the Netherlands.

French composer Claude Debussy was so impressed by a Javanese gamelan orchestra he heard at the Paris 1889 international exhibition, that he used it in his research aimed at a renewal of European music. More generally, Indochina was considered as the pearl of the French colonial empire. Malaya was the “dollar arsenal of the British empire”², and, of course, Indonesia was by far the biggest territory of the Dutch overseas domains; some 4% of the Netherlands citizens were living there in 1941.

Colonial troops, and contract colonial workers, played a wholly unexpected, as well as considerable, role in the First World War and at a lesser level, the Second World War. The French recruited nearly 100,000 Vietnamese, soldiers and workers, for the home country. The British used mostly Indian troops, as well as around 100,000 Chinese workers, many of them on French soil. The majority of American soldiers fighting in the Phillipines in 1942 against the Japanese were actually Filipinos.

Finally, after independence, a huge number of Southeast Asians, including many mestizos, left for Europe, most of them to their former colonial masters’ countries. South Moluccans left after the crushing of their hopes of autonomy in 1950. Eurasians, with Dutch citizenship, were expelled from Indonesia in 1958. Over 100,000 South Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians left their home country for Europe after the 1975 Communist victory. In the last 70 years, many more Southeast Asians have gone to live in the West than Westerners went to Southeast Asia in the preceding four centuries.

Conclusion: Colonisation, modernisation, connectivity

What if Europe had not colonised Southeast Asia? Would Southeast Asian history have been completely different? Considering the Asian countries that Europe did not colonise, such as Japan, China, Iran and Siam, could it be said that they changed less than the colonies, over the same period, or that their polity and economy were less modernised? Comparing Myanmar and Thailand, two countries with many similarities before the mid-19th century, it is difficult to decide which one changed most in colonial time.

In truth, the effects of colonisation are very difficult to distinguish from the effects of Westernisation. Just as, in earlier centuries, the vehicle of modernisation could have been Indianisation, Sinicisation, or Islamisation. Westernisation itself did not necessarily pass through colonisation. In Viet Nam, the first mass conversions to Christianity took place in the 17th century, and Father Alexandre de Rhodes gave birth to quoc ngu long before the first French soldier set foot on Vietnamese soil.

Did colonisation at least accelerate the modernisation process? The answer is not in any way evident. The relative success, or failure, of modernisation in a country is not connected to the length of colonial domination, or to cultural proximity, or to the intensity of colonial suppression. It actually worked best in small or medium-size new territories, largely devoid of a vast indigenous population, and where the majority of inhabitants soon became immigrants, places such as Singapore, Hong Kong, West Malaya and Northeast Sumatra.

The human configuration there was closer to contemporary California, Argentina or Australia, than to more settled countries such as China, India or Viet Nam. On the other hand, in bigger, more populated countries, with ancient and active indigenous merchant groups, the impact of colonisation was more limited, or even negative. The cosmopolitanism of a society could actually be reduced through the exclusion of competitors, Asian or European. The strong Southeast Asian tradition of free trade could be undermined at least for a time, by the new colonial masters, who, for example, imposed new, hefty trading fees on Asian traders, as well

² Title of a broadcast on BMBC radio station in Singapore by Professor T.H. Silcock in 1940

as various monopolies. Manufacturing industry was sacrificed to the production and commerce of commodities, or to short-term financial speculations. The majority ethnic or religious groups were the victims of distrust, for political reasons, and were largely excluded from the most modern and profitable economic sectors. These countries, such as Japan or Siam, could possibly have become modernised, or even Westernised, earlier, and with less internal tensions, if they had not been colonised.

If European colonisation was so full of failures, then should we replace the word colonisation with occupation, as for example South Koreans do today regarding Japanese colonial domination? What they stress is that the Japanese wanted only to exploit and oppress Korea, not transform it. I shall not enter the debate on Korea, but, in Southeast Asia I do think that there was a real will to reform and transform the colonial societies. Those colonial administrators and metropolitan ministers who talked about their *mission civilisatrice*, their ethical policy, as in the Netherlands, or to quote Rudyard Kipling, the “white man's burden”, should be taken seriously.

The problem is that colonies almost never had the means of delivering these grand policies. The educational legacy of colonisation has been significant, if tardy and limited. The effect on today's foreign language abilities are visible, especially in the former British or American colonies. The political and institutional legacies are also important. Essential notions such as civil society, rule of law, political plurality, press freedom, secularism, and independence of justice, came to Asia with colonisation, even if the colonial governments and elites did not always respect their own principles.

As both colonisation and decolonisation start to fade away into an already distant past, especially for younger generations, the results of the long European presence in Southeast Asia may be assessed in a more sober way. Colonial times appear to be less detestable than simply mediocre, as so few of their promises were actually fulfilled. However, something positive could remain from them: a deepening of a multifaceted connectivity.

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