IPS-Nathan Lecture Series

Lecture V —
Before Nation and Beyond:
Places, Histories and Identities

Opening Remarks by Professor Tan Tai Yong
6th S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore

9 April 2019
Shaw Foundation Alumni House
National University of Singapore

Introduction

In my previous lectures, I have attempted to link several aspects of Singapore's history to the region, through the concept of maritime engagements, hinterlands, as well as the constitution and functioning of social and commercial networks. Through these, I have raised questions of locations, identities (national vs communal), histories, as well as ideas of statehood and nationhood. All this is to suggest that Singapore's history is intimately tied to the region, and an understanding of the history of Southeast Asia, especially of the changes in the past century, can do much to illuminate the history of Singapore.

For tonight's session, I would like to focus on the nature of nation states, identities and histories in Southeast Asia (including Singapore). I am deeply honoured to have with me Professor Wang Gungwu, one of the most distinguished scholars of Asian history, to discuss these key historical themes. I will introduce Prof Wang in a while.

To set the stage and to provide the framework for the discussion, I will briefly sketch a couple of key developments in the region that were

instrumental in determining the shape of Southeast Asia as we know it today: these are the processes of decolonisation and the consequent rise of nationalism and new states in the wake of the European empires.

Decolonisation

Decolonisation is a critical facet of Southeast Asian history. Contemporary Southeast Asia emerged from colonialism — essentially with the imposition of the western concept of statehood and national frontiers.

The very idea of Southeast Asia as a region emerged from British strategic considerations during the Second World War. It arose from the "need to name a geographical entity on a map",[1] as a possible theatre of War. The term was then used to denote Mountbatten's Command in Colombo, which was called the Southeast Asian Command. The term got entrenched during the process of decolonisation, as the departing

[1] Russell H. Fifield, "Southeast Asia as a regional concept", in *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 11, No. 2, (1983), p.1

European powers came to think of the future of their colonies as a region.[2] It later became a Cold War construct.

Moving away from the regional level, the response of local populations and their respective leaders to departing colonial powers effected change across different countries in the region. Nationalist organisations profited from the European loss of power to the Japanese during the War, and whether these nationalists cooperated with the Japanese (as Aung San and Sukarno did), or fought against all forms of colonialism (as Ho Chi Minh did), they fought for eventual independence from colonial rule.

While the colonial powers all wanted to regain their empires after the War, they knew that the post-war international climate and local conditions in their erstwhile colonies had changed. They were aware that they would not be returning to a power vacuum following the defeat of the Japanese; as the Japanese forces receded and European influence had not fully returned, the nationalists seized the moment and stepped into the gap.

[2] Ooi Kee Beng, *The Eurasian Core and Its Edges. Dialogues with Wang Gungwu* (Singapore, 2015), p.94.

The process of decolonisation varied throughout Southeast Asia. In Indonesia, Burma and Vietnam, the momentum of the revolutionary movements and the political and tactical weaknesses of the European powers brought about a relatively quick and bloody end to empire in the French and Dutch territories.

The British were able to delay the departure from their Southeast Asian colonies and to achieve the outcomes they wanted — a peaceful transfer of power to local leaders who were prepared to keep their new states within the Commonwealth.

The United States, which was allied with the British during the Second World War, tended to see the process of power transfer through the lens of the emerging Cold War. It was deeply suspicious of left-wing movements in the region, and while it had limited direct engagement in Southeast Asia, the US had a major influence in the process of decolonisation. US policies alternated between the encouragement of gradual emancipation, and grander plans for development, regional stability and state-building (in the image of the US). Like the European

powers, the US affected the geopolitics of Southeast Asia, shaping identities that went beyond national boundaries.[3]

Nationalism and modern states

The end of the War saw the rise of nationalism in different parts of Southeast Asia. Colonialism eventually spawned the impulses for self-determination — first as resistance to colonial regimes, then as mass-based anti-colonial movements, uniting often disparate local populations, with their diverse concerns and grievances, to a common cause under the banner of nationalism, however vaguely defined.

Nationalism in Southeast Asia did not always emerge from some local, organic effervescence; it was for the most part generated by antagonism towards an alien and oppressive world order to which the local population had been subjected. However, as the ideas of nations and states were western modern concepts, they did not always sit well with local circumstances and polities in Southeast Asia. Still, nationalism

[3] M. Frey, R.W. Pruessen, Tan T.Y (eds), *The Transformation of Southeast Asia. International Perspectives on Decolonisation* (Singapore, 2004).

as a political idea had be domesticated because local elites who had benefitted from western education, provided as a means to co-opt them to serve the colonial system, would use what they had learnt to perpetuate the ideals of community, self-determination and destiny for their own political purposes. Thus, as modern Southeast Asia emerged from the demise of the European empires, western ideas of statehood, national identity, democracy, territorial sovereignty and political boundaries were embraced as the natural order of things in a land that did not have any of these historical precedents,

With the emergence of states as the organising principle of the new international order, political frontiers, which were uncommon, if not unknown, in the region were imposed on the political map of postcolonial Southeast Asia. This contrasted significantly from the old system, where the ambit of the state and structure of authority were determined by the power and influence wielded by the ruler and not by the delineation of boundaries on a map. It has been pointed out that what counted in Southeast Asia was allegiance. Whom, rather than what, did the state

comprise? “The boundaries of states were rather inexact. Instead, where the people went, there went the state”.[4]

It was largely in the 19th and 20th centuries that frontiers and political boundaries took their current shape. In mainland Southeast Asia, agrarian systems had given a particular shape to states that had been in existence over some centuries. The Burman, Thai, Vietnamese and Khmer states were recognisable entities before the Europeans determined their frontiers. The cultural characteristics that defined large proportions of their population, even though minority groups co-existed in their midst, persisted amidst the drawing of national boundaries.

Maritime Southeast Asia did not have the historical continuities of the agrarian-based polities of the mainland, and their frontiers were more decisively shaped by the Europeans. In these cases, political independence was not achieved through the expressions of national identity that were predicated on cultural homogeneity, but by anti-colonial struggles and changes to the international order.

[4] Nicholas Tarling, *Nations and States in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, 1998), p.47

As a consequence, in maritime Southeast Asia, the state preceded the nation. Singapore and Indonesia are classic examples of this phenomenon. I have already spoken at length about Singapore in my previous lecture. The political scientist Benedict Anderson pointed out: "the 'stretch' of Indonesia … does not remotely correspond to any pre-colonial domain … its boundaries have been those left behind by the last Dutch conquests".[5]

As a result of these new frontiers, newly formed Southeast Asian nation states such as Myanmar, Indonesia, Malaya and Singapore faced challenges of defining national identity amidst ethnic diversity. Many contemporary issues in Southeast Asia stem from these developments — Muslim separatism in the Philippines, Singapore-Malaysia relations, Burman majoritarianism. Even as there are tensions between competing ideologies and identities — ethnic, religious, national — there is also continued debate over shared culture and histories that transcend national boundaries (e.g., the evolution of *Nusantara* as a concept, and the overlapping heritage of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia).

[5] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, 1991), p. 120

Professor Wang Gungwu

As an historian, I often delight in saying that the present cannot be understood without a knowledge of the past.

I am therefore delighted to introduce my history guru and mentor, Professor Wang Gungwu, our foremost historian and world-renowned authority on Chinese and global history.

Professor Wang's experiences, where he lived and studied — in Malaya, China, Singapore and Australia — influenced and stimulated his views and deep understanding of the major changes that transformed Southeast Asia in the past 50-60 years.

Professor Wang is well-positioned to offer insights on decolonisation and the rise of nation states in Southeast Asia, among other themes, and I am delighted to welcome him on stage.