

By Invitation

# My new love: South-east Asia

History has come full circle. Now, Europe represents the past, South-east Asia the future.



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I am in love again.

Yes, I have found a new love. When I was young and dreamt of travels overseas, I had no doubt in my mind where I wanted to go if I could ever afford it. I would take off to London and Paris, New York and San Francisco. All four cities were great beacons beckoning me. Looking back at my early life, it is not surprising that I was in love with these Western cities.

I spent the first 15 years of my life, from 1948 to 1963, in a British colony. Like many in my generation, we were both politically and mentally colonised. None of us questioned this deeply ingrained assumption: The West was best. I will never forget a conversation with a primary school classmate, Morgan. I asked him where he would like to go when he grew up. He replied: "London." I asked: "Why London?" He replied: "Because in London, the streets are paved with gold."

The corollary of this mental colonisation was that we also believed that we Singaporeans were unfortunate, as we were trapped in a poor, backward region. Europe represented the future. South-east Asia represented the past. Now history has come full circle. Europe represents the past. South-east Asia represents the future. This should be an obvious point. Yet, I am prepared to take a bet that most of my fellow Singaporeans would disagree. Given a choice, they would rather visit London or Paris, not Jakarta or Ho Chi Minh City.

To understand the larger metaphysical importance of South-east Asia, one must first understand where we stand in world history. As I have now documented in several books, we are now reaching the end of a 200-year cycle of Western domination of world history. Economic historian Angus Maddison has told us that the two largest economies of the world from the year one to year 1820 were China and India. It was only in the past 200 years that Europe and America took off. But against the backdrop of the past 2,000 years, the past 200 years have been a major historical aberration. All

aberrations come to a natural end. Hence, the resurgence of Asia is a perfectly natural phenomenon. The 21st century will undoubtedly be the Asian century.

## LABORATORY OF WORLD CULTURES

The best place to watch this Asian century unfold is South-east Asia. Why South-east Asia? South-east Asia is the most special place on planet earth. It is the only place on planet earth that has experienced the impact of four major world civilisations: Indian, Chinese, Muslim and Western. Hence, as the world moves on from a mono-civilisational world dominated by the West to a multi-civilisational world of many thriving civilisations, we need to look for a multi-civilisational laboratory that will reveal what a multi-civilisational world will look like.

There is only one multi-civilisational laboratory in the world: South-east Asia. This is why when you visit London and Paris and send postcards, you are sending postcards from a once-glorious past. However, if you visit Jakarta and Ho Chi Minh City, or Yangon or Bangkok, you are sending postcards from the future. South-east Asia is the go-to place to understand the new 21st century world. This is also why Dr Jeffery Sng and I decided to devote an entire chapter of our recent book, *The Asean Miracle*, to the four waves of history that have swept through South-east Asia over the past 2,000 years.

Some may think that this history is dead and buried. Indeed, the first dominant wave to hit South-east Asia, the Indian wave, lasted a thousand years and petered out about a thousand years ago. When the Indian rulers became preoccupied with the overland invasions from the north-west, they lost their maritime connections with South-east Asia. However, the Indian wave remains deeply embedded in the South-east Asian psyche. President Suharto was a Muslim ruling the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, Indonesia. Yet, when he wanted to make a statement on how well Indonesia was progressing, he chose to erect an enormous statue of the Mahabharata warrior, Arjuna, in the heart of Jakarta in 1987. How did a civilisational wave that disappeared a thousand years ago continue to exercise a magical influence on Indonesian minds?

Thailand is a deeply Buddhist country. It reveres its king. However, if you observe Thai court rituals closely, you will notice that many are conducted by Hindu Brahmin priests. One great mystery



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of South-east Asian history is that, despite the fact that China is geographically closer, nine out of the 10 South-east Asian societies have an Indian cultural sub-structure rather than a Chinese one. Jeffery and I will try to solve this mystery in our next book on these four waves of history.

Even more remarkably, the Indianised kingdoms of South-east Asia used to pay tribute to China, not to India. In short, South-east Asia has had close links with China and India for thousands of years. This may also explain why many of the links between China and South Asia went through South-east Asia. The famous Chinese monk, Yijing, travelled to India via South-east Asia, spending six months with the Srivijayan kingdom and passing through Malayu (Jambi) and Kedah. South-east Asia gave him a chance to get immersed in Indian culture before going to India.

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time has come for the Arab societies to learn lessons from South-east Asia.

## NO BETTER PLACE

This is why I have fallen in love with South-east Asia all over again. As a child, I used to believe that I was unfortunate in being born on the wrong side of the world. Now, at the age of 68, I realise there is no better place in the world to be than in South-east Asia. We will see amazing historical turns all around us for at least the next hundred years.

All this, of course, makes the extraordinary ignorance of Singaporeans about South-east Asia very depressing. Can you imagine sitting on the doorstep of heaven and not realising that you are there? What a wasted opportunity. When Jeffery and I launched our book on Asean last month, we were shocked to discover that so few Singaporeans knew that Asean was the most successful regional organisation in the world after the European Union. And if the EU breaks up, as it is likely to do, more and more regional organisations will come to Asean to learn from it. Singaporeans will not even be aware that this is happening.

Such ignorance is very dangerous. Geography is destiny. Ultimately, Singapore's fate will be determined by developments in South-east Asia. We ignore South-east Asia at our peril. At the same time, there are rich opportunities in Asean. The Committee on the Future Economy was right to highlight that the Asean Economic Community and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership could boost Singapore's economic growth significantly.

All this means that we need to make a national effort to ramp up the knowledge and understanding of South-east Asia among Singaporeans. One good place to start is the new National Gallery of Singapore. It is probably one of the most beautiful museums in the world. And it has "the world's largest public display of modern South-east Asian art", including pieces such as Raden Saleh's *Wounded Lion* (1839), U Ba Nyan's *Rangoon Harbour* (c. 1930s), Nguyen Phan Chanh's *The Singers In The Countryside* (1932), Fernando Cueto Amorsolo's *Marketplace During The Occupation* (1942), Chua Mia Tee's *National Language Class* (1959), Latiff Mohidin's *Pagodas II* (1964) and Pratuang Emjaroen's *Red Morning Glory And Rotten Gun* (1976). The best way to understand the souls of countries is through their art. The extraordinary cultural diversity of South-east Asia, a diversity that no other region can match, surfaces in the art of the region. And many Singaporeans have still not set foot in the National Gallery.

If you fall in love with South-east Asia, you will also experience a new joy in your life. And you will wake up every morning saying: "How lucky I am to be living in the heart of my new love!"

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