BOOK REVIEWS

In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History. Edited by David Joel Steinberg et al. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1987. Pp. xi, 590.

When it first appeared in 1971, this great piece of historical scholarship was warmly received by the established authorities of the time. And well it should have been, for it undoubtedly presented in concrete and convincing terms the reality of a regional and comparative approach to the study of Southeast Asia for the first time after almost a decade of debate among scholars of the subject. If anything, it ought to have served as the catalyst for indigenous historians in the region to get together and attempt further work along the same lines. Alas, such fond hopes have yet to be realized and even the individual country studies of politics and government that have appeared over the past five years are, regrettably, pedestrian in comparison to the bold vision and impeccable quality of this now indispensable volume. It is also somewhat curious to note that, while the leading scholars in the field at that time unanimously commended the authors of the book for their originality and high standard of scholarship, some of the younger researchers were rather more sceptical about it, particularly with regard to the authors' political orientations. Now, sixteen years later, with the original version having been revised and reprinted, albeit with the bulk of its contents more or less intact, one does feel constrained to ask why the earlier critics did not themselves produce any comparable work of their own during the long interval.

The major difference between the 1987 revised version and the original is the new sections on Burma throughout the text which were made possible by the inclusion of Robert Taylor of the London School of Oriental and African Studies in the team. As the substantive contribution

of the book remains undiminished to this day, this reviewer will not attempt to re-emphasize the glowing tributes that have been so deservedly paid to it when it first appeared by such eminent scholars as Harry Benda and John Legge. Indeed, having himself used it as a text in honours classes for almost a decade the only appropriate comment left to be made of its usefulness for teaching purposes is that it is still a little too challenging for the average student! In addition to the sections on Burma, however, the entire Part Five, which is the final major section of the book, has undergone some considerable rewriting both in content and structure. Its title has changed from "The Preoccupations of Independence" to "Southeast Asian Nations in a New World Order", and has been expanded from the original four to nine chapters in the revised edition. The authors take collective responsibility for the entire rewriting of this new Part Five, although several of them were involved individually in some of its new parts.

Both structurally and intellectually it seems to have been a wise thing for the authors to have developed their ideas on the recent history of Southeast Asia further in the revised edition of the book by expanding Part Five. Quite clearly, there was a need to accommodate some analysis of the massive pressures, both internal and external, that the region was exposed to in the four decades of the post–World War II period and this has been done, as with the rest of the text, on a country-by-country basis, thus neatly concluding the historical continuity of the study. Instead of ending there, however, the authors went on to attempt an overview of the contemporary scene and make some projections about future trends in a final chapter entitled "Transforming Southeast Asia", which, we are told in the Preface, was mostly the work of Taylor and Chandler. This, unfortunately, appears to have been something of a pity for it is very much out of character with the studied and meticulous style of the rest of the book. For one thing, it is inevitably flawed by too much generalization, with the result that the stark differences between the Indochinese states and Burma, on the one hand, and member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), on the other, are glossed over,

notwithstanding a conscious attempt to treat them separately in the analysis.

Moreover, there is an underlying patronizing tone in the interpretation of Southeast Asia's socio-economic modernization and its political consolidation during this difficult period, best illustrated, perhaps, by their verdict that "in very general terms the era could be seen, at the end of the 1980s, to be characterized by a gradual drift toward greater authoritarianism" (p. 450). Indeed, judged from the jealously objective approach towards the pre-colonial past, it seems quite incredulous that the book concludes on the note that "by the end of the 1980s, it was fair to say that the daily lives of the men and women of Southeast Asia were more thoroughly affected and overseen by government agents and agencies than ever before in the region's history" (p. 451). While one may readily concede that there have indeed been "tendencies throughout the region towards democratic authoritarianism as well as national uniformity in views as well as knowledge" (p. 455) over the past four decades or so, it is quite another thing to depict the situation repeatedly as one in which "authoritarianism . . . has entrenched itself" (p. 456). In fact, the authors themselves freely admit that "the governments of the region have had to become more aware after forty years of transforming Southeast Asia that power does not always or uniquely grow out of the barrel of a gun" (p. 463). To be fair, however, it must be said that but for these apparent value-judgements in the analysis of change, the last chapter can be considered to be a *tour de force* in its succinct and perceptive enumeration of the major trends in the region during the contemporary period.

As with most reviews, it is customary also to point out a few factual errors which, hopefully can be corrected in future editions. It is quite incorrect, for example, to say that "Washington . . . encourage[d] several states of Southeast Asia to form an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967" or that "Burma chose not to join the association" (p. 445). Both the role of opposition groups in labour issues (p. 447) and that of environmental protection groups in politics (p. 449) are presented in

a somewhat over-simplified and misleading light. Burma (p. 462) was not the only country to have been "so bold as to conscript doctors into the armed forces" as both Malaysia and Singapore have practised some form of compulsory military or government service for their medical and dental graduates since the 1970s. But these are no more than quibbling instances and the purpose is not to detract from what continues to serve the cause of Southeast Asian scholarship as one of its outstanding bench-marks.

CHANDRAN JESHURUN

CHANDRAN JESHURUN, former Professor of Asian History at the University of Malaya, is a Senior Fellow, and Co-ordinator of the Regional Strategic Studies Programme (RSSP), at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.