

BOOK REVIEWS

Southeast Asia: Tradition and Modernity in the Contemporary World.
By Donald G. McCloud. Boulder, CO.: Westview Press, 1995. 360pp.

In the early 1980s, Donald McCloud took up the daunting task of writing a book reflecting on the interactions of tradition and (Western) modernity in Southeast Asia and the creation of a regional identity. The book under review is sometimes provocative in attempting to bring order to the manifold problems involved in such an investigation. Not surprisingly, its arguments are not always convincing. It is essentially an updated and expanded version of McCloud's 1986 book, *System and Process in Southeast Asia*. Although the rest of the text has not been changed substantially, two new chapters make more explicit the twin messages of the original volume: first, that Southeast Asia forms a recognizable region and, secondly, that in the past Southeast Asia had managed to successfully adapt and assimilate outside influences without fundamentally altering the social and political natures of the societies. The concluding prophecy, based on an analysis of the past, that "externally derived concepts and institutions will (continue to) be blended with the indigenous ... and fitted to local sensibilities and needs", (p. 338) has not changed. There is nothing remarkable or new about either the messages or the conclusion. Based entirely on secondary sources, the book does not contain a bibliography but a perusal of the "notes" suggests wide, if to this reviewer rather indiscriminating, reading.

In order to demonstrate that Southeast Asia is a viable regional unit, the author applies the concepts of political systems analysis, including the vocabulary (for example, boundaries, states, environ-

ment, interaction), to historical development. The systems model, McCloud tells us, provides an organizing framework for comparing patterns in the internal and foreign policies of traditional and contemporary systems and helps to clarify elements of historical continuity. It is a model fraught with danger. Even though the author talks of "the evolution of neotraditional values" (p. 18), he does not see a continuity of cultural development and of traditional patterns of political behaviour from early pre-colonial times to the present. Indeed, the continual stress on historical diversity while talking of Southeast Asia as a region suggests that McCloud himself shares the terminological ambivalence felt by so many scholars. Furthermore, McCloud's argument implies that the colonial period was an aberration or hiatus in Southeast Asian development. Colonialism, he argues, temporarily changed the course of Southeast Asian development, but the post-colonial states have created a modern system legitimized by its indigenous cultural and political traditions. State behaviour in traditional Southeast Asia was conditioned by relationships between the rulers and the ruled and by the state's relationships with China, India, and other states external to the region. A similar situation exists today. Rather than being absorbed into a global culture (presumably, McCloud means Western culture), Southeast Asia is absorbing those features from the West which will enable it to cope better with the realities of the modern world as these are locally perceived.

This pattern of analysis is seen in the book's organization. Four chapters deal with the pre-colonial period, eight with contemporary Southeast Asia. The historical first half of the book is sketchy and flawed by two factors. First, despite a few revisions, the author still relies heavily on older sources and has not taken into account more recent scholarship. Secondly, he applies the terms and, hence, the definitions of contemporary Western political science to the societies of pre-colonial Southeast Asia. The term "state", in particular, is sometimes used synonymously with "culture". The success of McCloud's endeavour depends upon his demonstrating that Southeast Asia possessed a commonality of traditions in the pre-colonial days. However, his emphasis on cultural and political diversity and his presentation of evidence suggests the opposite. The colonial period is treated in one twenty-page chapter, "Colonial Interlopers and System Disjunction". The argument that colonialism was simply a temporary break in Southeast Asian development disregards a great deal of evidence to the contrary, particularly recent economic and cultural history of the region. McCloud places little stress on the fact that the countries of post-independence Southeast Asia were created by the colonial authorities. To forge a nation out of the artificialities of the new country

required the invention of a past unity bolstered by traditions that were often invented. McCloud's brief discussion of nationalism in colonial Southeast Asia would have benefited from taking into account the writings of Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm (on "invented" traditions) and others, which do not appear to have been consulted.

The last eight chapters of the book deal with the independent countries of Southeast Asia. They could well stand alone as a separate book. The scholarship is more thoughtful and the writing more precise than in the earlier chapters. McCloud is in his element dealing with foreign policy and international relations. Foreign policies inside and outside the region, the complexities of the bi-polar world and the Cold War, the development of a framework for regional co-operation, ASEAN, policy responses in a multi-polar world, are handled with perception and clarity and provide a good introduction to contemporary regional politics. McCloud shows how regional co-operation has been formulated largely through personal leadership and the importance of summit-style diplomacy in ASEAN conducted by key national figures. This is certainly true. The importance for international decision-making of personal leadership and summitry, however, are not characteristics unique to the style of Southeast Asian politics and diplomacy and it is doubtful if their roots are to be found, as McCloud believes, in traditional (pre-colonial) state relationships. On the other hand, McCloud is undoubtedly correct when he says that the Southeast Asian nations are taking concepts and institutional forms from the West and fitting them with local sensibilities and needs. As a broad statement of tendency, this is certainly in line with traditional practices of adaptation and absorption of foreign forces. Even so, one has to ask whether, given their histories and social structures, countries such as Indonesia or Thailand could react to Western pressures in any other way and still maintain some form of national autonomy?

This book is a stimulating attempt to come to grips with the problems involved in trying to discover the relationships between culture and politics. To show a direct link between pre-colonial Southeast Asian culture(s) and late-twentieth century political and diplomatic developments within a regional framework is perhaps impossible. That this book is not wholly satisfactory reflects the enormity of the task. It does raise questions and suggests a way of approaching the problems.

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