

*N*ation-Building
Five Southeast Asian Histories

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History of Nation-Building Series

Nation-Building

Five Southeast Asian Histories



edited by

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Preface

The essays in this volume are the product of a conference organized in Singapore by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in September 2002: “Nation-building Histories: Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore”. Altogether sixteen scholars were invited to take part in a two-day meeting that focused on these five countries, the founder members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). One volume, that on Malaysia by Cheah Boon Kheng, had already been published. Some of the draft chapters of the other four volumes were circulated for the discussants to read and offer comments. All the participants were invited to write up their thoughts, either on the work they had already done or read, or on the general problems of writing nation-building histories, especially of countries recently committed to the tasks of nation-building and issues of writing contemporary history in Southeast Asia. In the end, Cheah Boon Kheng and seven of the discussants agreed to reflect on the questions that the conference had raised. As editor, I included an essay on “Nation and Heritage” I had published earlier and wrote an introduction to place on record some of the broader issues that the whole exercise had helped to illuminate.

After the conference, I had summarized those questions that attracted most comments as follows: When does nation-building begin and how does it fit into the writing of contemporary history? How should historians treat the earlier pasts of each country and the nationalism that guided the nation-building task? Where did political culture come in, especially when dealing with modern challenges of class, secularism and ethnicity? What part does external or regional pressure play when the nations are still being built? When archival sources are not available, how should narrative, social science analyses and personal experience be handled? Each of the ten essays in this volume includes efforts to pose such questions with reference to one of the five countries. It is hoped that their efforts will stimulate interest in the writing of similar histories for the other five members of ASEAN as well as arouse interest in an emerging regional consciousness that will be more than the sum of the ten national experiences themselves.

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