

# Southeast Asia in Diasporic Perspective

Richard A. Long

***In the last two decades, the terms “diaspora” and “diasporic” have come into increasingly frequent use in scholarly discussions of both transient and permanent communities which have been created as a result of group migrations to new settings. RICHARD A. LONG, Atticus Haygood Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies, looks at Southeast Asia in its migratory nature.***

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The Greek word, diaspora, was used in Hellenistic times to refer to communities of Jews in Alexandria and elsewhere who were “dispersed” from Palestine. It is with this and the larger sense of Jews dispersed throughout the world that the term entered the English language in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Following World War Two, scattered uses of the term to apply to other dispersed peoples began to occur, and in the seventies a persistent use of the Western Hemisphere began (The present writer was the creator of the New World Festival of the African Diaspora in 1978). By the 1980’s, references to other older diasporas such as the Armenian and to newer ones such as “South Asian” were common.

The intense interest in ethnic studies in the United States spurred by the civil Right and Black Consciousness Movements in the 1960’s, culminating in the publication of the Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups (1980), led naturally to increased interest in

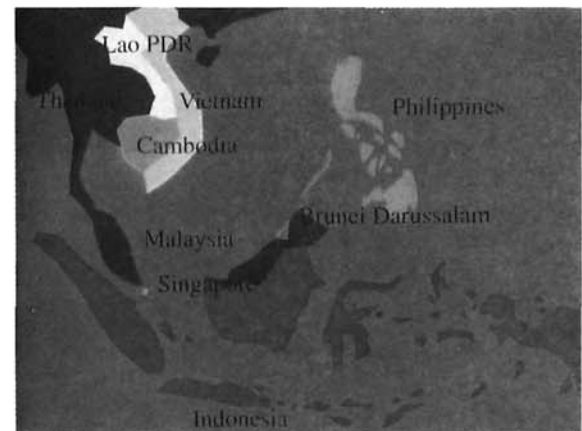
and theorizing about the “longitudinal” dimensions of these groups, and hence diaspora studies arose.

Factors which came to be considered included place of origin or homelands (both actual and idealized or mythic); reasons for migration such as the quest for economic advancement; disaster (war, famine, catastrophe), or force (enslavement); and whether a diasporic community was to be considered transient (sojourners) or permanent (settlers). Diasporic communities were perceived to be in inevitable dialogue with their source (homeland) and site (current geopolitical location).

Mainland and island Southeast Asia have been, seen in this perspective, sites of diasporic communities for a millennium and a half or longer. As a source of diasporic communities, the historical depth of Southeast Asia is slight, extending back, with a

notable exception, only a century. However, the intensive and extensive migrations of Southeast Asians during the last two decades place the region emphatically in the mainstream of diasporic activity and study.

In the consideration of diasporic phenomena, both in Southeast Asia and globally, the following period classification should prove a useful one:



1. The pre-modern age - the period from the beginning of the common era (Roman Empire, Han Dynasty) to the end of the fifteenth century.

2. The maritime age - the period of trade and early plantation agriculture initiated and sustained by European trans-oceanic activity (1500-1800).

3. Age of colonization - the period of European colonial implantation and rationalization of world commerce (1800-1940).

4. The post-colonial age - the period of upheaval initiated by World War Two, and continued through the Cold War, localized conflicts, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union

#### **Southeast Asia as Site**

During the pre-modern age, the Chinese empire - particularly its southern provinces - was a source of diasporic communities in Vietnam, Cambodia, and, to a lesser extent, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Ayuttaya (Thailand). The vivid contemporary account, *The Customs of Cambodia*, by the diplomat Chou Ta-Kuan, pro-

vides an early account of a Chinese diasporic community. The South Asian (India) impact, both on the mainland and in the islands, is attested by the "Indianisation" which was the life-long preoccupation of Georges Coedes. Arabic communities, too, are well attested in Southeast Asia in the pre-modern period, particularly on the island of Java and in the Straits of Malacca.

The maritime age saw both

continuation and extension of Asian diasporic communities in Southeast Asia as well as the development of European sojourner communities: the Portuguese and later the Dutch in Malacca; the Dutch in Java; and the English in Penang.

The location of seventeenth century foreign communities in Ayuttaya is designated on contemporary maps of the city as the work of Dr. Piriya Krairiksh reveals in detail.

The age of colonialism is witness to accelerated diasporic growth occasioned by the creation of new economic activity such as rubber planting and tin mining. The former drew Indians to Malaysia, while the latter was responsible for the explosion of Chinese settlement there. Chinese settlement also continued along established patterns in Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines.

#### ***Migrations of Southeast Asians during the last two decades place the region emphatically in the mainstream of diasporic activity and study***

While European settlement expanded in several areas and French, English and Dutch were established as languages of administration and education, Europeans were still largely sojourners. The same may indeed be said of many of the Chinese and Indian cohorts, sojourners who were often transposed into settlers through intermarriage with host populations.

The Chinese diasporic communities have been and remain the object of a vast amount of scholarly work. A

concise bibliography of such studies is provided in Theresa Chong Carino's *China and the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia*.

#### **Southeast Asia as Source**

During the maritime age, Southeast Asia became a source for diasporic communities with the forced transportation of farmers from Java to South Africa by the Dutch. It was only after the middle of the Colonial Age, however, that Southeast Asia became prominent in the global context as a diasporic source.

Severe labour shortages in Suriname (Dutch Guiana) on the Caribbean coast of South America induced the Dutch colonial authorities, repeating their South African initiative, to send peasants from Central Java to Suriname beginning in 1890 and continuing to 1939. In 1960, there were 40,000 Javanese in Suriname, constituting 20% of the population. An interesting aspect of the culture of this community is explored in Wolfowitz's *Language Style and Social Space*.

The movement of Filipinos to Hawaii and to the continental United States, following the acquisition of the Philippines by the United States in 1898, is a major part of the diasporic picture in the twentieth century. By the end of World War Two, there were 125,000 Filipinos in Hawaii, and a similar number in the continental United States. It is estimated that the number of Filipinos in the United States, including Hawaii, will reach two million by the end of the century.

The Vietnam War, probably

the most traumatic of post-colonial conflicts, was the catalytic event for the creation of diasporic communities of Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians in the United States, Canada, France and elsewhere. Over 200,000 Cambodians are now in the United States and Canada, and the numbers of Vietnamese exceeds one million.

There are, for course, subdivisions among these refugees, collectively called Indo-Chinese, which is a very misleading designation. Among the Vietnamese, a distinction is often made between North and South Vietnamese, and the Sino-Vietnamese constitute a further subdivision of the North Vietnamese.

Ethnic minority peoples such as the Hmong have little sense of the nation-state as homeland, and constitute a distinct category in "Indo-Chinese" diasporas.

Among diasporic communities, motivated by economic factors, are the groups of Filipinos found in the Middle East and Australia. Parallel groups of Thais are now in these areas as well. A significant Thai

presence in the United States is also noted.

On the other hand, Indonesia, Malaysia and Burma still figure much less prominently on a global scale as sources of diasporic communities.

### Diaspora Studies and Southeast Asia

As site and source of significant diasporic communities, Southeast Asia would seem ideally situated to take a leading role in the elaboration of diasporic studies. Such studies may be the object of colloquia and symposia, course offerings and research in universities, and specialised institutes and programs, both in and outside academic settings.

Indeed current activity in diverse venues may already be assigned the rubric of diaspora studies. The December 1994 conference on the Ramayana held at Thammasat University in Bangkok under the aegis of the University Center for Indian Studies is a case in point.

Diaspora studies in Southeast Asia should proceed both in a climate of regional

cooperation and with awareness of the tenor of such studies elsewhere.

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*Indians in Malaysia - A marriage*  
Photo by Florence Pichon