

History of Nation-Building Series

Malaysia

The Making of a Nation

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Introduction

Wang Gungwu

The Series

This volume is the first of a series of histories on nation-building in Southeast Asia. The idea of having such a series had its beginnings in Bangkok at the 14th Conference of the International Association of the Historians of Asia (IAHA) in 1996, where I noted that nation-building in Southeast Asia began fifty years ago and suggested that it was time for historians to write about that phenomenon.¹ Most books on the region's new nations have been written by journalists and social scientists. I wondered whether historians would tell the story differently. Decades of anti-colonial nationalism came to a climax with the Japanese invasion of 1941–45. New states like those of the Philippines, Indonesia and Burma were born immediately after the war, followed soon by those of Malaysia and Singapore. The independence of a unified Vietnam was delayed by a bitter war and this held back the liberation of the two other Indochina states, Cambodia and Laos, but the independence of all three was only a matter of time.

Many of the protagonists of the early phases of nation-building have described their roles in this new process. Political commentators and journalists provided up-to-date accounts and analyses. But historians of the region have been concerned not to write prematurely about this subject. Many were, like me, fascinated by the first generation of nationalist leaders, men like Sukarno, Tengku Abdul Rahman and Ho Chi Minh, followed by Lee Kuan Yew, Soeharto, Ferdinand Marcos and Ne Win, but hesitant to take on full-length studies about them. These men had offered their different peoples sharply distinct visions of their countries' future. Would historians

wait, as they are wont to do, for all sources to be available before they began research on their countries? How long would it be before the story of each country in Southeast Asia is told by the historians themselves?

When I returned from the Bangkok conference, I brought the question to the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) and was gratified when the then director, Professor Chan Heng Chee, encouraged me to try and find out. With that support, I approached five of the leading historians of the original members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN in 1968 consisted of Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore). They were Taufik Abdullah, Charnvit Kasetsiri, Reynaldo Ileto, Cheah Boon Kheng and Edwin Lee. We met to discuss the feasibility of a joint project to write the contemporary histories of these five countries. They agreed that this was worth doing and I sought ISEAS and other funding to allow us to proceed. The support we received enabled us to meet and hold a series of meetings to define the scope of the project.

We began our meetings by focusing on the common features of the Southeast Asian "nation-state". We knew that there had been attempts to study the early products of new nationalisms in the region. It was clear that some of the peoples of each country were less prepared than others to be citizens of these nation-states. Furthermore, the unfamiliar models taken from Europe have seemed alien, and each of the leaders who advocated using these models often had great difficulty explaining why any one of them should be adopted. We also noted that historians in these countries have closely observed the stresses and strains that were generated, and some have felt the urge to study the actual business of nation-building more systematically. The five historians who met to discuss this phenomenon felt that they would not wait any longer before they began their task. They agreed that they would use their historical skills to take on this project.

We began with questions about what kind of a series we should write. Very early, we agreed that each country had its own story and each author would write a volume about his own country. At the same time, we should try to find out how much the five countries had in common and whether we should adopt a common approach to the subject. From the discussions over several months outlining the main features of the nation-building story in

the region, it became increasingly clear that there were several kinds of stories here. Despite their coming together in a regional organization like ASEAN, each of the five had very different experiences inside their countries. While this fact itself was no surprise, it was astonishing how contrasting their respective stories were. The more we surveyed what each country had to do to attain their nationhood, the more it seemed that the ingredients they had to start with forced their leaders to seek very different routes to achieve their goals. We concluded that it would be a mistake for us to try to treat them as if they were different examples of similar models. Although the foreign models that each country used may have appeared to share common characteristics, what each country inherited from previous regimes at the point of independence was so different that we had to think afresh what needed to be done to capture the essence of each experience. We agreed that these differences justified our adopting distinct and separate approaches to each story. Ultimately, each volume would follow the dynamics of change that each country encountered and allow that to determine the shape of the history that the country deserves. This series of histories is the result. The writing has taken somewhat longer than we first anticipated. We are grateful to Professor Chan Heng Chee's successor, Professor Chia Siow Yue, for her sustained support for our project.

In addition, the Lee Foundation, Singapore, and the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, Taipei, helped to fund the project and I would like to thank them here for their generous support.

Let me place the series in a broader context. The study of modern nationalism was the work of European historians. The historians of the American and French Revolutions were the first to underline its global significance while others turned back to study the evolutionary stages of earlier nations like Britain, Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands. Later, historians worked with linguists, philosophers and lawyers to shape narrower kinds of nationalisms in Central and Eastern Europe. Their work stimulated social scientists later to embark on theoretical explanations of what the nation-state system meant to the world. The work of historians, however, continued to be influential, most of all by providing ideas for many of the Asian nationalists of the 20th century. Those who studied in