



Indonesian army captures resistance fighters, East Timor, early 1990s

Photo by Jill Jolliffe

Life histories, identity and crises of authority in Southeast Asia

Research >
Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is a region afflicted by crises in authority; recent historiography seems to agree on little else. Life histories can show that points of contention, and so resolution, often rest on questions of identity – particularly on a sense of injustice which crystallizes identities in opposition to the state, fuelling demands for autonomy, influence, power and resources.

By Karl A. Hack

Recent literature including Colombijn and Lindblad's *Roots of Violence in Indonesia* suggests that 'reservoirs of violence' are critical in explaining conflict in Southeast Asia. Enforcers – *panglima*, *jagos*, militias, retainers attached to local power-holders persist from the colonial period. Colombijn and Lindblad's thesis mirrors the historiography for South Asia emphasizing the weakness of the Raj, able to function only by tolerating and co-opting local power brokers and 'enforcers'.

Geoffrey Robinson has further refined the concept of 'reservoirs of violence', showing that they persist across times of relative peace. They pattern crises when they arise, but seldom initiate them, as with the paramilitary violence that accompanied East Timor's vote for independence in 1999. Politically, specific militias were products of the Indonesian National Army (TNI) and the 1975-99 occupation. Operationally, their 'repertoires of violence' followed traditions reaching back to seventeenth-eighteenth century *liurai's* (local chiefs) levies and their style of combat.

Another model that has been used to explain Southeast Asian crises is neo-patrimonialism: politics driven by 'cacique' elites, 'bossism', and patron-client ties. This is David Steinberg's approach in his *The Philippines: A Singular and Plural Place* and of key chapters in David Brown's *The State and Ethnic Politics in South-East Asia*. Brown uses the neo-patrimonial model to argue that Southeast Asian polities rely on villagers' support of local elites, and local elites' support of central elites, both motivated by hope of reciprocal benefit. Thus Acehnese in the 1940s-50s aligned with the Islamic political

party *Masjumi* when the latter had influence in Jakarta. But once *Masjumi* was out of power, Acehnese tried to leverage influence through revolt. In this model, it is not 'reservoirs of violence' so much as entrenched styles of politics that have made crises endemic over much of Southeast Asia.

By contrast, Reynaldo Ileto has complained that ideas of clientelism can reduce even Filipino anti-Japanese fighters to the status of clients blindly following elites. All idealism is lost, and Asians are orientalist as the victims of neo-feudal, underdeveloped politics.

Life histories

Life histories have the potential to combine approaches in the historiography. Personal narratives illustrate a central aspect of crises of authority: that points of contention, and so resolution, often rest on questions of identity, particularly on a sense of injustice which crystallizes identities in opposition to the state, fuelling demands for autonomy, influence, access to power and resources. The violence after World War Two was often about how to define post-colonial identities, when groups who had achieved access to 'reservoirs of violence' (by way of Japanese training and arms) entertained different 'imagined decolonisations'.

Chin Peng, Secretary General of the Malayan Communist Party since 1947, is the subject of two recent books: Ian Ward and Chin Peng, *Alias Chin Peng* and C.C. Chin and Karl Hack, *Dialogues with Chin Peng*. Chin Peng shows how Malayan Chinese had several identities to choose from: overseas Chinese with traditional social beliefs, petty capitalists and emigrants, communists, 'Malayan Chinese', and later, 'Malaysians'. Chin Peng's testimony has also confirmed how Chinese support for insurgent struggles was fuelled

by the creation of reservoirs of violence in 1942-45 (armed Chinese supported by rural squatters) and how events affected their sense of identity. Thus support for communism rose and fell with the formation of the multiracial Alliance Party in 1952, the May 1969 racial riots in Kuala Lumpur, and the government's subsequent favouring of Malays.

State responses

Chin Peng's story focuses our attention on government policies for managing ethnic and national identities. Chin Peng was defeated by ethnic divisions in Malaya (winning over Muslim Malays proved difficult, while the multiracial Alliance provided an alternative funnel for Chinese identity) and by government action against 'reservoirs of violence' (rural Chinese were resettled in tightly controlled New Villages). Ultimately, the Alliance, through the elite-led Malayan Chinese Association,

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offered Chinese a more effective avenue for expressing grievances and winning concessions. The Malaysian strategy of accommodating ethnic minority leaderships successfully neutralized potentially oppositional identities.

Successful management of divergent identities can take different forms. Singapore, like Malaysia, retained detention without trial and exercised a policy of negating communist narratives and suppressing radical dissidents. The Malaysian state integrated potentially oppositional identities, at least the most important ones – Chinese and Indian

– on a communal basis through the Alliance and later *Barisan Nasional*. Singapore opposed virtually all alternative forms of narrative – communist, radical, and communal. From 1959 to at least the 1980s, the People's Action Party (PAP) required released detainees to renounce their former allegiances. Singapore also scaled back the influence of the Chinese language. English was made the compulsory language of education, and children were obliged by the 1980s to learn a second 'mother tongue'.

If integrating identities, or allowing them space to express themselves – for instance by allowing schooling and media in different languages – seems vital to avoid crises, how has Singapore managed to minimize problems since 1964? Rapid economic growth enabled non-patrimonial benefits to be distributed to atomised individuals integrated into the PAP's narrative of meritocracy. The PAP also sought feedback, when fed directly to the party rather than the media. This can be seen as a form of 'one-party democracy' that ensures individual and group aspirations are sifted and, to some extent, met.

How can we trace shifts in senses of grievance and identity in relation to states' strategies for dealing with them? One way is by interweaving personal narratives – of rebels, government protagonists and others – to create a picture not of Southeast Asian crises, but of Southeast Asians in crises. For instance, one can contrast the Chin Peng's narrative with Burma's Chao Tzang Yawnghe. Chao is a Shan prince, who moved from Shan loyalty to post-war Burma (his father was President), to Shan revolt. We have his *The Shan of Burma: Memoirs of a life in Exile* as well as good general histories. Chao's story

shows how the Burmese civilian government of 1948-62, then the military after 1962, failed to domesticate Shan, Karen, Chin and Kachin identities and to effectively dismantle, or absorb, 'reservoirs of violence' in its upland regions.

Focusing on interwoven individual narratives may help integrate theories from political science with lived reality and the agency and tactics that shape events. They also suggest that Southeast Asian states are far less prisoners of the past than approaches that focus on embedded culture and political structures imply. The way the state has dealt with crises and groups with competing identities has been critical. In times of relative success – as in Malaysia and Singapore, and during the 1970s-80s Indonesian New Order – each state pursued its methods to close spaces available to selected alternative identities: those of, for example, regionalists, communists and western-style liberal democrats. Yet each went to considerable lengths to integrate more manageable potential opponents at the group and/or individual level.

The best place to see how this competition between state strategies and alternative identities has played out may turn out to be at the level of individuals: of the life story. <

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