Albert Lau (ed.)


First presented in 2009 at a conference on the Cold War in Southeast Asia organized by Associate Professor Albert Lau, Department of History, National University of Singapore, the twelve papers in this collection draw on archival sources to throw light on the significance of the ‘Cold War’ as a category of Southeast Asian history. As Lau puts it at the end of the first paragraph of his well-written introduction, the papers demonstrate ‘that the Cold War had a varied but notable impact on the countries of Southeast Asia’ (p. 1). Lau concludes his introduction with a discussion of the formation of ASEAN, which by 2015 includes all the states of the region with the exception of Timor Leste. ‘Ironically, in seeking to polarize Southeast Asia into two ideologically hostile blocs,’ Lau writes, ‘the Cold War inadvertently contributed to the regionalist cause: it allowed Southeast Asian regionalism to come into its own’ (p. 10).

The interesting essays by Nicholas Tarling, Ly Tuong Van, and Ang Cheng Guan add evidence and weight to Lau’s main point about the role of the Cold War in the formation of Southeast Asian regional identity. But even more interesting are the ways in which the collection as a whole illustrates the problematical nature of the categories commonly used in Cold War discourse. Take Albert Lau’s detailed account of decolonization in Singapore between 1955–9, for example. Lau emphasizes the controlling role of the former colonial power, Great Britain, in limiting options for Singaporean nationalists seeking independence. His discussion also places a limit on the ability of the reader to understand the historical forces at work, since he subscribes to the Cold War categories the British used to justify their policy decisions. Lau never questions that ‘communism’ was the primary source of insurgency in Malaya and political instability in Singapore during the 1950s. Yet he illustrates, with vivid quotations from archival sources, the absurdity of British assumptions in 1956 that granting Singapore self-government ‘“would inevitably lead to the domination of Singapore by Chinese in close touch with Peking”’ (p. 46). Lau demonstrates that such an outcome was anything but inevitable, given the skill with which brilliant politicians like Lee Kuan Yew took advantage of the British fear of ‘subversives’ to promote the fortunes of the PAP (People’s Action Party) and his own political rise. It was all a matter of power politics, not ideology. As Lau writes: ‘In the battle for hearts and minds, the PAP played its cards better [...]’ (p. 63). Nevertheless, ‘a Cold War milieu’ and Cold War categories form the framework of Lau’s analysis of what might just as well be described as a battle.

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for dominance between warring Chinese political factions. Accusations like ‘subversive’ and ‘communist’ came in handy when you wanted to imprison your rivals rather than allow them to compete freely for votes in turbulent times.

In their essays on Malaysia and Borneo, Joseph Fernando and Ooi Keat Gin pay a similar, unquestioning deference to ‘communism’ as an explanatory concept. ‘An examination of the Colonial Office and Alliance documents in the period leading to Malaya’s independence provides a revealing insight into the policies and attitudes of the policymakers towards the threat from communism in the context of the Cold War,’ writes Fernando. But was it the same ‘communism’ that threatened British colonial policy makers and Malayan Chief Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman? Was the chief threat to Malay political dominance in the emerging Federation of Malaysia, which would include Singapore, Chinese communism, or a soon-to-be-formed Chinese demographic majority, led by Lee Kuan Yew? In Ooi’s essay on communism in Sarawak in the period 1945–63, the real topic seems to be the question of Chinese identity in Sarawak and how it was formed in Chinese-language schools. The search for a viable postcolonial ‘Chinese’ identity and the defense of Chinese-language education was at the heart of student political activism in Singapore during the same period. To say that ‘[a]ppealing to Chinese sentiments that played on the preservation of Chinese socio-cultural heritage, the all-important perpetuation of the centuries-old Chinese language from one generation to another was the communists’ stratagem to win over the Chinese community and to fortify its resistance to the change in the medium of instruction’ makes it sound as if, were it not for the communists, Sarawak Chinese students would have happily adopted English as their medium of instruction (p. 109). The history of an analogous struggle over language in Singapore, one that is ongoing, suggests otherwise.

Dewi Fortuna Anwar offers a lucid overview of Indonesia’s political history from 1945 to the end of the New Order period in 1998 and the best essay in the collection. Unlike any other author, she emphasizes the complexity of the postcolonial political process in Southeast Asia. ‘Rather than the relatively simple Cold War ideological conflict between the forces of communism and anti-communism, the political conflicts in Indonesia throughout the 1950s were much more complex and ran along several different and at times intersecting lines,’ she writes (p. 137). She also demonstrates why ‘neutralism’ was an impossible choice for Indonesia or any other country in the region during the Cold War (with the exception of Myanmar, which opted out of the post-war international system altogether). With the Americans rejecting neutrality anywhere in Southeast Asia as an acceptable option, offering only token assistance and then actively supporting the rebellions in the Outer Islands, ‘Indonesia was [...]
propelled to look elsewhere for international support, in this case the opposite camp in the Cold War conflict, even if the Indonesian political and military leaders were not communists or sympathetic to communism’ (p. 139).

In their essays on Vietnamese and Thai nationalism, Pham Hong Tung and Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead also do a good job of showing how Cold War factors influenced Southeast Asian developments. In the case of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh’s nationalism was out of sync with the internationalist policies of the Comintern from the start. But in August 1945, despite appeals for support from Ho, the US backed the French; after 1949, Tung argues, Chinese military assistance and Maoist ideology transformed a ‘nationalist’ into a ‘class’ struggle (p. 153). For Mead, the student demonstrations of October 1973 were less an expression of democratization under a pax Americana than the result of factional struggles in which the Thai king, backed by the Americans, played an important part. One of those responsible for the violence on October 14 was Vitoon Yasawat, who is discussed by Sutayut Osornprasop in his essay on Thai participation in the secret war in Laos, 1960–74. Known in Laos as Dhep (‘angel’) 333, Vitoon joined the group of frustrated officers passed over for promotion who sought to oust Thanom and Praphat.

All of the essays in Southeast Asia and the Cold War offer new insights into how Cold War ideologies and superpower rivalry affected the course of events in Southeast Asia. At the same time, they suggest, usually indirectly, that deeper, older political and cultural factors were at work. The question is still open as to whether the ‘Cold War’, as a historical category, helps us to understand changes to the deep structure of modern Southeast Asian history or is merely a ‘thin and flaking glaze’ that obscures as much as it explains.

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