

The Terms East and South-east Asia: A Critical Appreciation

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INTRODUCTION

Before embarking upon defining East Asia, it is probably useful to have an overview of the major regions of the continent of Asia. It is quite common for writers dealing with Asia to exclude the Soviet Union since it tends to identify itself culturally closer to Europe.¹ This is not surprising as the European nationalities have invariably dominated the Soviet Union. The remainder of Asia consists the Asian Crescent (see Figure 1) which has been divided into four major regions:

1. South-west Asia
2. South Asia
3. South-east Asia
4. East Asia

Reflecting changed political circumstances following the break-up of the Soviet Union, the Population Reference Bureau, Washington, using the United Nation's new geographical definitions, now divides Asia into four regions: Western Asia, South-central Asia,² South-east Asia and East Asia. The former Soviet republics that lie in Asia are grouped under Western Asia and South-central Asia region respectively.³ On the other hand, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and Slovakia are included in Eastern Europe while Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are placed under Northern Europe. Thus, the Soviet Union ceases to be classified as a separate region unto itself.

THE TERM EAST ASIA

China forms the heartland of East Asia not only by its real dominance, but also by its huge population of some 1.2 billion inhabitants. The other countries of East Asia are Mongolia, Japan, North and South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao.

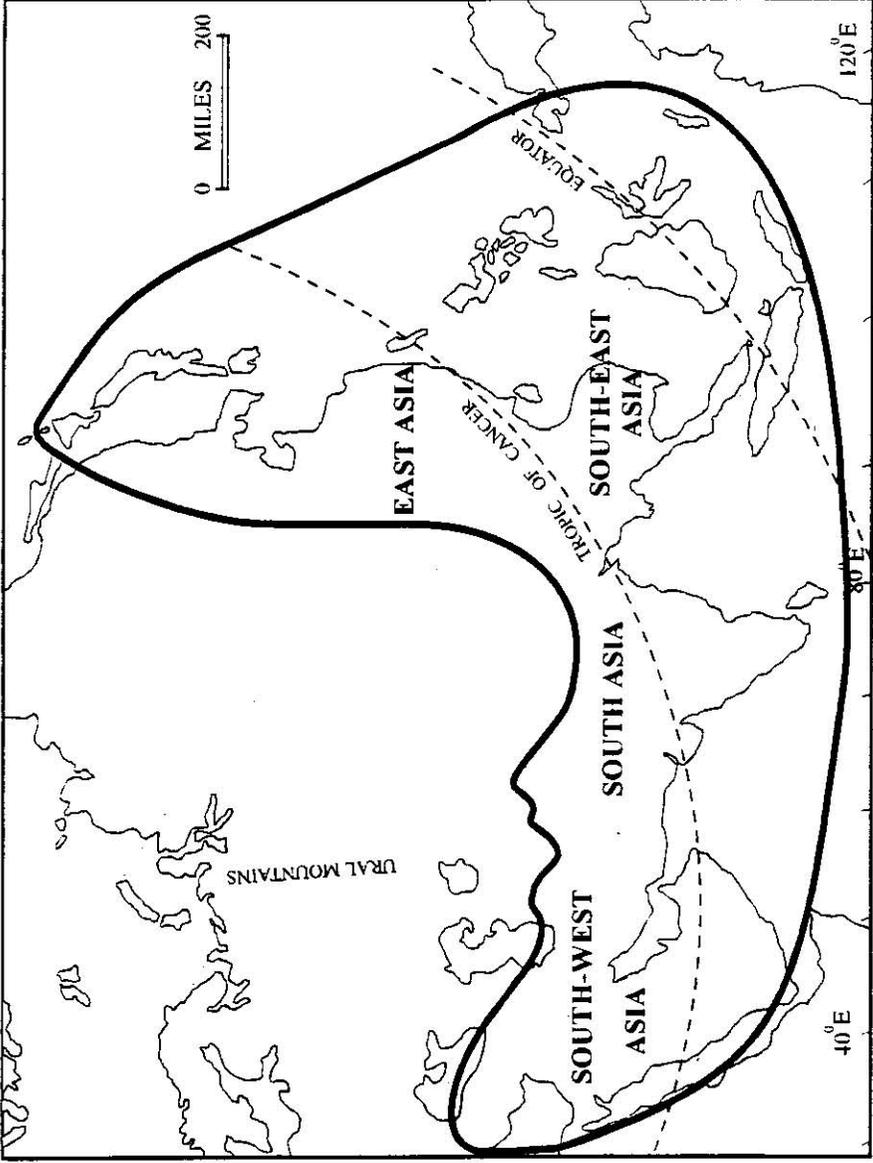


FIGURE 1. The Asiatic crescent (Adapted after A. K. Philbrick)

Special features of this eastern part of Asia are:

1. It contains one-fourth of the world's population.
2. Its culture is dominated by common values such as Buddhist Confucious religious beliefs, ancestor worship, and a script that has some broad similarities.
3. This area contains some ancient civilisations and is currently undergoing very rapid social and economic changes, indeed in many respects it is today the most rapidly growing region in the world.
4. The potential superpower (or superpowers) to emerge in future may well emerge in East Asia, within the next two or three decades.

THE FAR EAST

East Asia together with part of South-east Asia has in the past been commonly referred to as the Far East. But although many writers will refer to East Asia as the Far East, its meaning may well be questioned. While for Europeans it may convey the right meaning, for persons living in the United States of American the term is a misnomer. To the North American citizen the Japanese/Korean/Chinese/Philippines coast lines are the Western or the Asiatic shores. Norton Ginsberg wrote in 1958:

“The limits of the America drang nach Western have not been the eastern or North American shores of the Pacific, but in a sense, especially since the Pacific War, the western or the Asiatic shores. However, East Asia is both the farther east and west, when accessibility in terms of the North American ecumene is considered” (Ginsberg 1958, 47).

Another American geographer, Glen T. Trewartha also uses the terms East Asia and the Far East to describe the region comprising China, Korea, Japan and Taiwan. Together, they bear “the imprint of Sinitic culture. Largely middle-latitude in location, much of the Far East's diversity is latitudinal and climatic in origin” (Trewartha 1972, 261).

Pierre Gourou, the French geographer in his book “Man and land in the Far East,” however, includes Vietnam alongside China, Korea and Japan in his definition of the Far East. Since the work is based on research done in the 1930s, Gourou refers to this region as the peasant lands where “Religious beliefs are similar, with an agrarian animism that appears beneath a varnish of Buddhism, Taoism or Confucianism” (Gourou 1975, 1).

The Chinese, who make up the heartland of the Far East, may very understandably protest at being called part of the Far East for they have

in the past, so often proudly described their country as the "Middle Kingdom", surrounded by barbarians.

THE TERM SOUTH-EAST ASIA

According to the late Professor Charles Fisher, the term South-east Asia was accepted as a "collective name for the series of peninsular and islands which lie to the east of India and Pakistan and to the south of China" (Fisher 1971, 3). This region (see Figure 2) comprised the six ASEAN (Association of South-east Asian Nations) countries (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand), together with Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Laos and reunified Vietnam. Likewise, Professor L. Dudley Stamp in his regional geography of Asia treats South-east Asia and the East Indies as a separate geographical region (Stamp 1959).

Spencer and Thomas (1971, 346-48) refer to South-east Asia as a cultural shatterbelt to emphasise its mixed cultures which include early remnants of Indian and Chinese influences overlaid by elements of European culture. They include, within South-east Asia, lands that lie "east of India and South of China", extending up to the eastern half of New Guinea. Prof. E.H.G.Dobby, a British geographer, in his regional study titled "Southeast Asia", is the only important geographer to view the regions as being part of Eastern Asia. According to him the term South-east Asia can be used "to describe those territories of Eastern Asia which lie south of the Tropic of Cancer (Burma, Siam, Indochina and Malaya) and the nearby islands spreading eastwards from the Asiatic continent towards New Guinea" (Dobby 1956, 17). His inclusion of South-east Asia as part of Eastern Asia is somewhat strange and he offers no particular explanation for including it as part of Eastern Asia. Despite his above statement, he generally goes on to treat South-east Asia as a separate geographical unit as suggested by the title of his book.

The term South-east Asia is, however, of recent origin. It was first used by the India historian, K.M. Panikkar fifty years ago in his book. "The Future of South-east Asia" (Panikkar 1943). From then, on it was accepted as a collective noun to describe "the peninsular between India and China together with the Indonesia and Philippine archipelagos" (Fryer 1970, 2). Once the term South-east Asia was adopted by the Allied Supreme Command during the Second World War, its usage became common. Since then, scores of books and hundreds of research papers about South-east Asia have been written by geographers, historians, economists, political scientists, etc. In fact, several universities around the world have set up centres dealing with South-east Asian Studies. Probably the most well-known of these centres to emerge in Asia is the

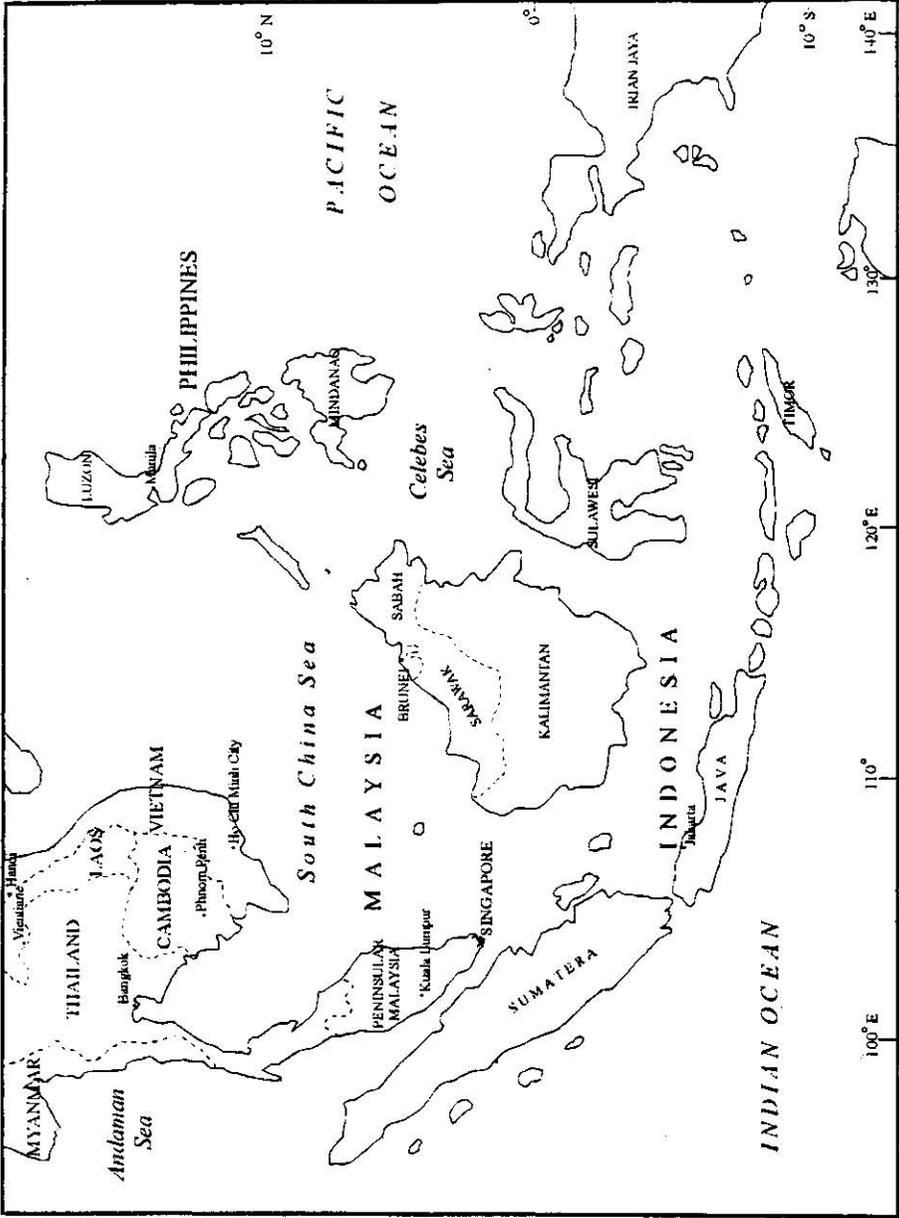


FIGURE 2. South East Asia region

Institute of South-east Asian Studies which was established as an autonomous body in May 1968 in Singapore. It was headed by a geographer, the late Professor Kernial Singh Sandhu, for about two decades and during that period it emerged as a leading regional research centre for scholars dealing with South-east Asia.

In 1967, five of the ten countries of South-east Asia met in Bangkok and formed the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN). Since then Brunei has joined this most successful Third World regional grouping and it must be only a question of time before the Indo-Chinese states of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, as well as the isolationist state of Burma, join this association and so enable it to realise its full potential.

The use of the term South-east Asia is justified as this area forms a fairly well-defined geographical region lying to the south-eastern of the Asian landmass. The area is characterised by its easy accessibility by water that has resulted in "a constant convergence" of people in this south-eastern fringe of Asia. Its location between the two great Asian cultures (China and India) has meant that much of the historic movements of people and ideas came from there. Over the last two centuries, as human mobility increased with the advent of modern technology, it has also been affected by influences from other places, notably European and American.⁴ As such South-east Asia has always been what the historian Brian Harrison described as "part of something bigger than itself", always playing "a passive role in history, one which has meaning and significance only against the background of the history of Asia as a whole" (Harrison 1972). The region developed into a plural society, 15 as described by Furnival (1957), over the last few hundred years when it came under colonial rule (the sole exception being Thailand). Since gaining independence in the years following the end of Second World War, it has been trying to work out "the consequences of problems presented to it either by the rest of Asia or by Europe". These facts suggest clearly that South-east Asia cannot be part of East Asia nor can it be part of South Asia.

In the past, especially in the 19th century, this area was referred to by Europeans as Further India or simply the Far Eastern Tropics. The Indians and the Chinese used to refer to this region as Suvarnabhumi and Nan Yang, respectively. Certain atlases have captioned this area of South-east Asia as the East Indies.⁵ The latter term has been used for a long time, but strictly speaking it refers to Insular South-east Asia or, to put it differently, South-east Asia without the mainland region. This can be better appreciated when one recalls how the term West Indies is applied to the collective group of islands found in the Caribbean Sea, lying roughly to the south and south-east of Florida Peninsular; it does not include the mainland Latin American countries. E. H. G. Dobby,

however, limits the use of the term East Indies to the Indonesian Archipelago.

CREEPING CONFUSION

Recently, some who are not geographers, have used the term East Asia to include South-east Asia as well. The World Bank uses the term East Asia loosely to include the various countries of East Asia (excluding Japan) as well as those of South-east Asia. This is most unfortunate. More recently, in late 1990, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, proposed the setting up of an East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC) whose membership would include East Asian as well as South-east Asian countries.⁶ Surely a more appropriate name for this grouping would be the East and South-east Asian Economic Caucus. This would not only clearly reflect the bloc's exact geographical boundaries but would also aliminate doubts about the countries it envisages within this economic bloc. The two regions currently enjoy the highest economic growth rates in the world.

CONCLUSION

I venture to suggest that the term East Asia should be used exclusively for the countries with Sinitic culture, i.e. China, Japan, Korea (both North and South), Mongolia and Taiwan. The eastern part of the former Soviet Union may be included in this region to reflect the new political realities. Likewise, the term South-east Asia should be strictly applied to the series of peninsular and islands that lie to the east of the Indian sub-continent and to the south-east of China.

Today, both these regions are exhibiting unusually high rates of economic development while the rest of the world's economy expands more slowly. While there are moves to create some sort of an economic trading bloc between these two regions in response to the North American and European trading blocs, it is essential to remember that East Asia and South-east Asia are two distinct regional concepts. To include South-east Asia under the broad heading of East Asia is unjustified, just as it is unacceptable to include South-east Asia under the broad heading South Asia. To maintain its distinct individual as well as independent identity, it is important for South-east Asia to stress its distinct regional character from that of its neighbours, the gigantic Asian regions, East Asia and South Asia. This will enable it to maintain its individual character and perhaps prevent it from coming under the hegemony of the emerging Asian superpowers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author is grateful to Professor Emeritus Robert W. Steel for his criticism of the original draft.

NOTES

1. Sometimes the terms Central Asia is employed to refer to Mongolia, parts of south-western China and parts of south-eastern Soviet Union.
2. According to the 1994 World Data Sheet, "In 1994, the United Nations announced one of the most sweeping changes in how it classifies the world's countries by geographic regions and subregions". The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, not only gave rise to 15 newly independent states but it also created a geographic problem. "The Soviet Union had always been treated as a region into itself, although it spanned across both Europe and Asia. With the breakup of the Soviet Union, geography could no longer be ignored".
3. The Transcaucasian republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are now placed under Western Asia. The five republics of Central Asia – Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – are now shown under the old Southern Asia region, now renamed South Central Asia. Consequently, Asia gains 70 million population while the continent of Europe gains thrice as much population, 214 million.
4. According to Dobby, there was a phase when the people of South-east Asia were "overwhelmed by the technological superiority of Europeans and Americans" (p.397).
5. For example see Philips' Modern School Atlas for Malaysia and Singapore (1965) Sixty-second edition, George Philip and Son Ltd., London, p. 64.
6. The idea of East Asia Economic Caucus was first introduced by the Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamed in December 1990.

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