

# ASEAN Focus

A BIMONTHLY PUBLICATION PROVIDING CONCISE ANALYSES AND PERSPECTIVES ON ASEAN MATTERS

ASEAN-US  
Relations

Mobilising  
ASEAN Youth for  
Their Future

Tribute to Rodolfo  
C. Severino, Jr.

Bringing People  
Together Through  
Arts and Culture

The Chao Phraya:  
Awash with Life

## Preserving and Promoting ASEAN Cultural Heritage



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ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (formerly Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) is an autonomous organisation established in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security, and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The Institute's research programmes are grouped under Regional Economic Studies (RES), Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS) and Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPPS). The Institute is also home to the ASEAN Studies Centre (ASC), the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre (NSC) and the Singapore APEC Study Centre.

# Editorial Notes

The first quarter of 2019 has seen consequential developments unfold across the region and the globe. US President Donald Trump and Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) leader Kim Jong-un met again in Hanoi on 27-28 February on the back of a landmark meeting in Singapore last June. What started out as a hopeful dialogue for the two leaders looking to cement their “special relationship” was ultimately short-lived due to the failure in matching each other's demands for sanctions and denuclearisation. Empty-handed from the summit, President Trump is aiming for a trade deal in May with Chinese President Xi Jinping. While the spectre of an escalatory tariff war may have receded, how the looming US-China tech war will unfold and what impacts the prospective deal would hold for US-Sino strategic competition, and the region, remain hazy and uncertain.

Compared to the overriding strategic imperative to deal with the DPRK and China, Southeast Asia appears to be an afterthought to US foreign policy even as the Trump Administration consistently emphasises the importance attached to ASEAN in its Indo-Pacific strategy. The US has to step up efforts to re-assert its narrative and visibility in the region as Southeast Asians persist in their downcast view of US reliability and influence according to the ASEAN Studies Centre's latest survey. In this issue, Dr. Tang Siew Mun assesses the current trajectory of the ASEAN-US relations.

Closer to home, election fever has descended upon the region. Thailand's first general election since the 2014 military coup was a critical test to its return to democracy, with some 51 million Thais casting their ballots on 24 March. Meanwhile, more than 190 million Indonesian voters performed their civic duty for the country's first ever simultaneous presidential and legislative elections on 17 April. Identity politics, fake news, and the economy loomed over the presidential race that pitted President Joko Widodo against his rival from 2014, Mr. Prabowo Subianto. Provisional results pointing to a victory for the incumbents should lift any lingering uncertainty not only for the two countries but also for ASEAN as Thailand is the ASEAN Chair this year and Indonesia the largest member leading the pack on the development of an ASEAN Indo-Pacific outlook.

A common thread running through both elections is the power of the youth vote. Around 7 million young Thais, 10% of eligible voters, cast their ballot for the first time while over a third of Indonesia's electorate are millennials. With more than half of the region's population under the age of 30, young people in ASEAN have the potential to effect positive change. Ms. Moe Thuzar looks into the initiatives by the region's youth that contribute to ASEAN community building as well as ASEAN's efforts to galvanise their voice and energy.

2019 is designated the ASEAN Cultural Year under the theme “ASEAN: Oneness to the World” to celebrate and promote the region's rich and diverse cultural heritage. This issue therefore casts the *Spotlight* on the many dimensions of the region's heritage that has transcended time and boundaries. We are honoured to have Mr. Kung Phoak, Deputy Secretary-General for ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) share with us how ASEAN has leveraged the Fourth Industrial Revolution and worked with partners to make arts and culture more engaging and accessible. Dr. Farish A. Noor travels back to Southeast Asia's shared cultural heritage in pre-modern times that should be cultivated as a pathway towards a common ASEAN identity. Dr. Lily Kong presents Southeast Asia's eclectic culinary landscape as a reflection of the region's fusion of its indigenous roots with external cuisine influences. Dr. Arsenio Nicolas examines the adaptations and diffusion of Southeast Asia's traditional performing arts, and the importance of ensuring their continuity. Dr. Stefanie Pillai underscores the necessity of safeguarding the region's languages which are teetering on the brink of extinction. Dr. Ploysri Porananond looks into cultural tourism in ASEAN and the obstacles facing the sector as it continues to expand.

*ASEAN in Figures* supplements these articles by presenting the treasure trove of cultural heritage in Southeast Asia. For *Insider Views*, we feature a dialogue with advocates and practitioners from different facets of the region's cultural heritage – food, textiles, performance, and monuments – who carry the torch of cultural preservation and promotion into the future. Wrapping up this issue, in *Sights and Sounds*, Ms. Anuthida Saelaow Qian takes a cruise along Chao Phraya River which has sustained the Thai people as it winds through time and change. Ms. Hayley Winchcombe's jaunt through Southeast Asia's coffee scene traces the beverage's journey from bean to cup, celebrating the diversity and ingenuity of coffee culture in the region.

Last but not least, we pay tribute to, and honour the work of, the late Ambassador Rodolfo C. Severino, Jr., who sadly left us on Good Friday (19 April). He was highly regarded as the Secretary-General of ASEAN and one of the Philippines' most distinguished diplomats. ISEAS knew “Rod”, as he was affectionately called by his peers, as a scholar, a public intellectual and a most congenial and supportive colleague. He built up the ASEAN Studies Centre as its Founding Head and was generous with his support and advice in retirement. ASC will remember Ambassador Severino as a nurturing mentor, a leader of uncompromising integrity and intellect, and an unfailing champion of ASEAN. We are grateful to Ambassador Ong Keng Yong who succeeded Ambassador Severino in ASEAN's top post in 2003 to lead our tribute to our dear colleague and friend. May you rest in peace, Rod. ☹

# ASEAN-US Relations: Navigating Uncertainty

**Tang Siew Mun** gauges what the future holds for ASEAN-US relations as American staying power in the region is increasingly in doubt.

Doubts on the US' long-term commitment as the guarantor of regional security in Southeast Asia is not a new phenomenon, even during the high time of the Obama Administration's "Rebalance towards Asia" that saw the US intensify engagement with Southeast Asia and ASEAN. However, such lingering doubts of American strategic endurance in the region have become more acute during the Trump Administration. In fact, confidence in the US has been wavering in the last two years. A poll conducted by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in November 2018 showed less than a third (31.9%) of 1,008 Southeast Asian respondents have "some confidence" or "full confidence" in the US as a strategic partner and provider of regional security. With US reliability in question, what does the future hold for the ASEAN-US relationship?

Overall, US ties with the region remain largely positive. But there are worrying signs. While the US is the largest holder of foreign direct investment (FDI) stock in Southeast Asia, its investment flows have been on a downward trend, in terms of both value and share of total inward FDI to the region. American businesses ranked top investor in ASEAN in 2015, making up for 19% of the region's total inward FDI. However, investments declined from US\$23.1 billion in 2015 to US\$18.8 billion in 2016 and US\$4.3 billion in 2017. During the same period, Chinese investments in ASEAN nearly doubled from US\$6.6 billion in 2015 to US\$11.3 billion in 2017.

Against this backdrop, the Obama Administration's initiative to join and expand the Trans-Pacific Economic Strategic Partnership Agreement (P4) into the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Agreement was seen as a game changer in committing the US to the region's long-term economic and strategic future through a pan-Asia-Pacific free trade agreement.

It thus came as a shock to Washington's TPP negotiating partners when bipartisan criticisms against the free trade deal percolated throughout the 2016 US presidential election campaign. Then, the TPP came to an abrupt end with the US' withdrawal in the early days of the Trump Administration. The impression of a presidency "disinterested" in ASEAN grew deeper when President Donald Trump left the East Asia Summit (EAS) ahead of schedule in 2017 and skipped it entirely the following

year. The fact that ASEAN is not a priority for the Trump Administration should not come as a surprise given the president's disdain for multilateral dialogue and processes.

At the same time, the Trump Administration jumped onto the Indo-Pacific bandwagon with Trump's endorsement of this concept at the APEC Summit in Danang, Vietnam, on 10 November 2017. While details of this concept and its implementation remain sketchy, the US and other Indo-Pacific proponents should take care not to undermine ASEAN-led processes such as the EAS, ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus which have hitherto been the most successful and only functioning regional security mechanisms.

To be fair, there have been some bright spots. Vice-President Mike Pence's visit to the ASEAN Secretariat in April 2017 was the earliest high-level visit by a senior US official in any presidency. But these bright spots are few and far between. ASEAN's shrinking confidence in the US stems from a variety of reasons.

First, two years into the Trump Administration, the region is still searching for clues of a coherent Asia policy that goes beyond taking on China head-on as a strategic competitor and cajoling the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) leadership into giving up its nuclear arsenal. The renaming of the US Pacific Command to "Indo-Pacific Command" has done little to assuage this sense of uncertainty. Similarly, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's announcement of US\$113 million to support the development of digital economy, energy and infrastructure at the Indo-Pacific Business Forum in July 2018 pales in comparison to the "big ticket" announcement by China and other ASEAN Dialogue Partners.

Second, the high number of key vacancies has impaired the visibility of US diplomacy in the region. Unfilled vacancies of senior positions, especially that of the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs – traditionally one of the main US diplomatic interlocutors in regional affairs – has deprived ASEAN of a focal point for dialogue and substantive cooperation. Coupled with the vacant positions of US ambassadors to ASEAN and Singapore, the Trump Administration has inadvertently given the impression that ASEAN and Southeast Asia as a region are not important enough to



accord presence and priority at the highest diplomatic level. This downbeat mood has not been helped by the resignation of General James N. Mattis who, during his tenure as US Defence Secretary, had played a critically important role in anchoring American presence in and commitment to the region.

Third, President Trump's declaration that the US is no longer interested to shoulder the burden of the world's policeman has turned heads in the region. In reference to US withdrawal from Syria, he declared that the US "[doesn't] want to be taken advantage of any more by countries that use [the US] and use [its] incredible military to protect them. They don't pay for it and they're going to have to." Pressure will pile on Japan and the Republic of Korea to increase their financial support for US military presence in their respective countries, and the same question could be asked of ASEAN member states. In other words, President Trump in his transactional mode could put the onus on ASEAN member states to justify US strategic presence in the region and put a price on US security guarantee. These vexing questions, fortunately, are not yet on the table. Yet it is these questions that exacerbate doubts of the US' willingness to underwrite regional security as a public good.

The growing sense of uncertainty about American strategic engagement is not lost on the US. In one of the rare moments of optimism, the US Congress passed the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) on 19 December 2018 which became law upon signing by President Trump on the last day of 2018. The law which appropriated US\$1.5 billion through 2023 to promote US security interest in the Indo-Pacific region also reaffirmed Washington's commitment to the ASEAN-US Strategic Partnership and ASEAN centrality. However, the law's focus on human rights and the promotion of democracy will limit the range of partners the US can work with in the region.

It is noteworthy that ARIA was initiated by the Congress. The Trump Administration is legally required to submit an annual report to Congress on its engagement with

ASEAN, with the 2019 report due not later than end-June. This provision enables Congress oversight over the Trump Administration to keep US engagement with ASEAN on an even keel. ARIA demonstrates that US engagement with ASEAN is not only a domain of bipartisan support but also a component of the US' Asia policy that is on the radar of both the White House and Capitol Hill.

There are ample reasons for the US to remain engaged – and even to up its game – in the region. American economic interest – ranging from MNCs to pension funds and expanding the ASEAN market for US produce and products – could best be protected and advanced if ASEAN remains an open, inclusive and rules-based region with a strong and active US presence. In addition, a visible footprint prevents the further erosion of strategic space to other regional rivals.

Looking forward, ASEAN-US relations will be on “auto-pilot” mode. It will count as a positive development if the US can follow through on existing commitments such as the US Connect projects, in addition to the new Indo-Pacific pledges. In the meantime, the Indo-Pacific Command will continue to serve as the US' primary torch bearer in engaging ASEAN member states both bilaterally and multilaterally. ASEAN's relations with the US will also be influenced by the US-China strategic competition, which is expected to extend beyond the trade war. ASEAN should brace itself for a long tussle between two of its most important Dialogue Partners. Even if Beijing and Washington were to reach a *modus vivendi* on the economic front, ASEAN-US relations will remain low-key as Washington warms up to the US presidential primaries ahead of the closely watched presidential election in November 2020. 🚧

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# Mobilising ASEAN Youth for Their Future

**Moe Thuzar** looks into how ASEAN can engage and empower the region's youth.

There are around 213 million youth (aged 15-34 years) in ASEAN, constituting the region's largest ever youth cohort, and this number is projected to peak at 220 million in 2038. Apart from Singapore and Thailand, the youth population in each ASEAN member state numbers between 25% and 30% of the total population. As the anchor of regionalism in Southeast Asia, with the professed aim of building a people-oriented, people-centred and forward-looking community, ASEAN is increasingly looking for innovative avenues to engage the region's youth, tap into their energy, and help them realise their potentials. Although regional commitments have to find expression via national implementation responsibilities, there are meaningful interventions, regionally and nationally, for the future of ASEAN's youth. The most impactful will be those that focus on facilitating and expanding the exchange of ideas and experiences, with the participation of youth volunteers, advocates and entrepreneurs as instructive guides.

## *Youth Advocacy and Expression in Community-Building*

Young people are an important plank in ASEAN community-building. They grow up in the age of the Internet, and follow regional and global developments via social media and other Internet-based communication platforms. For example, the majority of Facebook users in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam are below 35, who also clock the highest usage. Their ability to communicate across borders enhances cross-cultural understanding and connections. They are bubbling with ideas on how they

can participate meaningfully in ASEAN's regional processes through volunteerism and advocacy.

The first ASEAN-coordinated opportunity for youth volunteers was the humanitarian response for Myanmar after Cyclone Nargis in 2008. Many young people keen to help the disaster-struck villagers wrote to then ASEAN Secretary-General Dr. Surin Pitsuwan volunteering their time and effort. The ASEAN Humanitarian Task Force, operating in Yangon, coordinated the young volunteers' travel and stay in the various villages of Myanmar's delta. Then in 2011, ASEAN youth volunteers – including survivors of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami – participated in the ASEAN Caravan of Goodwill to Japan's Tohoku region, which had suffered the brunt of the earthquake and tsunami that year. The ASEAN Youth Volunteers Programme (AYVP) came into being in 2013, providing a dedicated platform for young volunteers to network and learn. With its permanent secretariat at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, the AYVP brings young people together around regional issues such as poverty, disaster risk reduction, social entrepreneurship, and environment and climate change.

Youth voices in ASEAN on climate action have reached international levels. Nor Lastrina Hamid's voice at the December 2015 Paris Climate Conference rang out on behalf of the youth constituency there. Lastrina has shared that she was representing not just Singapore, but also youth from ASEAN countries. Also at Paris, Lastrina had an initial taste of reaching a compromise of differing



– and at times, confrontational – views towards a shared position. Since then, Lastrina has continued her advocacy for environmental protection and conservation. She is passionate about active communication to bring about large-scale changes towards a sustainable future. Lastrina is walking the talk. She co-founded Singapore Youth for Climate Action in 2016, and continues to advocate for strategic change starting at the national level. Her efforts have inspired the ASEAN Plus Three Youth Environment Forum and the ASEAN Youth Expo. Both platforms prioritised climate action and “green-preneurship” for their 2018 iterations.

### *Encouraging Young Entrepreneurs*

Encouraging youth entrepreneurship has been a priority aspect of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). The ASEAN Business Advisory Council established the ASEAN Young Entrepreneurs’ Council (AYEC) in 2013. The AYEC platform has generated start-up incubation and internship opportunities across the region, working with and through the respective Chambers of Commerce and Industry and national agencies in the various countries. For instance, in 2015, Malaysia’s Ministry of Trade and Industry launched the MyASEAN Internship programme to facilitate internship opportunities for Malaysian youth across the region and ASEAN youth in Malaysia.

Adding value to this internship programme is the ASEAN Youth Carnival, launched in 2016, to bring together the talents and ideas of young entrepreneurs in the region. As of 2017, 170 interns have gained first-hand experience on the type of skill sets required by employers in the region, as well as the different working cultures. This knowledge will stand the young people in good stead in preparing for the future. Mr. Ken Tun, an entrepreneur in his early forties who heads the Parami Energy Group in Myanmar, believes so. A recipient of the ASEAN People’s Award in 2015 for his work in providing volunteer services to Myanmar’s business community and raising greater awareness about the AEC, Ken feels that empowering young people in Myanmar, especially women, is important in preparing for the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Ken draws inspiration from his participation in global young leader programmes at regional and international business forums, most recently the World Economic Forum (WEF) on ASEAN in Hanoi in September 2018. There, Singapore’s Prime Minister Mr. Lee Hsien Loong referred to the role of the youth in riding the wave of the Fourth Industrial Revolution in ASEAN. Mr. Lee noted that ASEAN’s workforce is young, educated, and technologically literate, with 60% under 35 years old, an asset in the evolving global workforce.

Indeed, young people aged 15-24 hold high shares of their country’s workforce, constituting about 20% of the labour force in the Asia-Pacific region. Conversely, this age group also accounts for almost half of the jobless in the region, according to estimates by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). ASEAN’s youth are thus facing more uncertainty in their job prospects and those with tertiary qualifications face greater job-skills mismatches. The

increasing use of automation and the advent of artificial intelligence may further disrupt employment prospects, affecting youth in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam the most. The 2018 survey by the WEF’s ASEAN Regional Strategy Group found that over half of the youth surveyed in these countries were optimistic about the impact of technology on their jobs and income while youth in Singapore were the most concerned about the potential disruptions that technology could bring.

### *Bringing ASEAN Youth Together*

Various ASEAN entities are doing their part in connecting youth in the region and mainstreaming their needs and voices in ASEAN community-building agenda. The ASEAN University Network (AUN)’s youth platform has several activities that forge and sustain connections among ASEAN undergraduate students on topics ranging from environment and culture to student leadership, as well as industry-related summer study visits. Internship programmes by the AUN and the ASEAN Foundation offer undergraduate and graduate students an opportunity to gain practical experience in ASEAN’s community-building projects. In January 2019, the ASEAN Foundation partnered with the ASEAN Human Development Organisation (AHDO) Foundation to develop a White Paper on ASEAN cross-border internships. These initiatives provide additional support for student mobility in and among ASEAN countries, linking them to wider regional networks and opportunities.

Other flagship initiatives during Singapore’s ASEAN Chairmanship last year such as the ASEAN Youth Community (AYC) and the revival of the Singapore-ASEAN Youth Fund are important additions to regional efforts connecting the youth and preparing them for the future. Both aim to link young people across the region for internships, volunteer and other learning opportunities. The Singapore-ASEAN Youth Fund, for example, continues supporting projects initiated and led by ASEAN youth aged 15-35 to promote entrepreneurship, community service, and leadership development, among others. To date, there are about 200,000 people making use of this fund.

ASEAN is thus a useful supplementary platform for the youth to connect and contribute to the region. ASEAN’s experience thus far shows that a shift in gear across sectors and with private sector participation can do much to combine the energy, enthusiasm and enterprising spirit of the youth. Furthermore, in the digital era where the immediacy of information evokes instant response, the calls to action via the social media networks of all the above-mentioned youth initiatives provide a powerful voice. Any regional initiative in ASEAN for young people across the region thus needs to use the most effective communication tools to get the pulse on what motivates them to action, and how they view – and wish to participate in – ASEAN community-building. 📣

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# Rodolfo C. Severino, Jr. – *The ASEAN Man*

In his heart-felt tribute to former ASEAN Secretary-General Rodolfo C. Severino, Jr., **Ong Keng Yong** celebrates his life of devotion and contribution to ASEAN.

Rodolfo C. Severino, Jr. (middle) and other ASEAN Foreign Ministers at the 33<sup>rd</sup> AMM in July 2000, Bangkok



The late Rodolfo C. Severino, Jr. (Rod) served as the 10<sup>th</sup> Secretary-General of ASEAN from 1998 to 2002. He was in the centre of remarkable developments as the regional grouping coped with the effects of the devastating 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis and the severe 1997 transboundary haze pollution affecting Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. ASEAN was also in the midst of membership enlargement as Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia joined it.

Rod went about his job with considerateness, a calm demeanour and a professorial style that endeared him to many. His knowledge of the beginning, functioning and ideals of ASEAN is unmatched to this day. Mr. Goh Chok Tong, the Prime Minister of Singapore during the time Rod was the Secretary-General of ASEAN said: “Rod was a fair man who tried to keep ASEAN going in spite of the ‘tom yam effect’ of the Asian financial crisis ... He was a professional who worked quietly, effectively and without flamboyance.”

Rod was passionate about ASEAN. In one media interview conducted by the *Philippines Graphic* magazine, during the time when Rod was Secretary-General, he was quoted as saying: “The correct story of ASEAN must be told to all. It must be told to the peoples of our region to whose lives the work of ASEAN must be made relevant. Otherwise, ASEAN will miss its mission. Ours is a good story to tell!”

It was this penchant to tell the ASEAN story that opened another illustrious chapter in Rod’s love story with ASEAN when he brought his deep knowledge and impassioned energy to the then Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS). As Visiting Senior Fellow and then the

Founding Head of the ASEAN Studies Centre, he brought the all-important policy and political dimensions into the academic studies of ASEAN. Banking on his insider knowledge, Rod was prolific in writing about ASEAN after he completed his tenure as the Secretary-General. In fact, he holds the distinction as the most published author of analytical books and essays on ASEAN among the 14 Secretaries-General of ASEAN to date. His masterpiece is *Southeast Asia in Search of an ASEAN Community*, first published by ISEAS in 2006. The book represents his experiences and insights after several decades of dealing with ASEAN affairs. It is an essential reading for anyone interested in the development and evolution of ASEAN and Southeast Asia.

Through another ISEAS book titled *ASEAN Regional Forum*, Rod made an important contribution to the understanding of the ARF. He detailed how ASEAN member states came together to establish the Forum. They had capitalised on propitious geopolitical developments and the indulgent mood of major powers to go along with an innovative regional architecture in Southeast Asia. Ever the idealist caught in the trappings of a realist world, Rod lamented the shortcomings of the ARF but recognised that ASEAN-led mechanisms would be at the mercy of major powers impinging on Southeast Asia.

A heart-warming project on the occasion of ASEAN’s 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2007 was Rod’s *Know Your ASEAN* booklet which has been translated into many ASEAN languages. Rod explained 40 essential facts about ASEAN to younger audiences in the region. This publication has been reprinted many times since then. Rod’s tireless efforts to raise awareness of ASEAN is his most enduring legacy as we build the ASEAN Community.

In the *Philippines Graphic* interview, Rod was expansive about why ASEAN survived so much political and economic turmoil, and this is instructive for us going forward in the present age of disruption. To Rod, the main reason for ASEAN’s enduring strength is the stake that each member state has in the viability of the grouping. This stake goes beyond the results of the economic and other forms of cooperation that ASEAN has been undertaking over the past five decades. He asserted: “ASEAN is more than an association of states. It is also a process, a spirit, a state of mind.”



In Rod's view, ASEAN is not meant to be a supranational entity like the European Union with the power to make law or policy for member states to comply with. ASEAN "has to be measured against the purposes it has set for itself and the limitation that it has imposed upon itself. ASEAN has to be judged by the results that it has produced in pursuit of those purposes and under those limitations, not against the wishes or expectations of others."

For Rod, ASEAN is a family. There are differences inside the family. There is also the underlying consciousness that the problem of one in the family is the problem of all. Family members must stick together to deal with the trouble facing one of them as it can legitimately be the concern of the rest in the family. There will always be pressure on member states to distinguish between what is national sovereignty and what is regional purpose.

Rod highlighted that ASEAN has "shown a willingness to express or demonstrate concern over internal developments" in a member state if those are likely to spread to other member states, producing negative results, and affecting their well-being. ASEAN member states have "shown that their preferred method of manifesting concern is that of friendly, quiet advice, searching but respectful questions, and mutual assistance, rather than that of public posturing or intrusive action."

According to Professor Mely Caballero-Anthony at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Rod would always emphasise the need for regional solidarity to manage difficulties faced by the grouping. She said: "Rod took great pains to explain that ASEAN was not built to address the kinds of issues that seemed to come from rapid globalisation. Nonetheless, Rod argued that the problems facing ASEAN were becoming regional and transboundary in scope, and that ASEAN must handle these challenges in a coordinated and cooperative way. Rod said that ASEAN's quest for regional economic integration also exposed its member states to wider economic distress like the Asian financial crisis. The irony was that while economic integration was a 'source of strength', it was also 'a weakness'. Despite this, Rod wholeheartedly supported

the decision of ASEAN leaders to push ahead with the ASEAN Free Trade Area and the ASEAN Investment Area as he felt that this is the future."

Rod was mindful of his mandate when assisting ASEAN member states to respond systematically to the various challenges and crises. He was non-intrusive in the areas where he thought ASEAN member states had absolute decision-making power. Rod led the ASEAN Secretariat team to provide all the necessary support to follow up on decisions, reach out to ASEAN Dialogue Partners, and connect with the private sector and civil society. He talked up what ASEAN was doing to shore up business and investor confidence in ASEAN. He saw his mission largely as helping the wider audience interpret ASEAN's role at a time when the organisation faced multiple challenges – of membership enlargement, of economic integration and of identity.

Rod never retired from ASEAN. As the ASEAN chief, a scholar or an author, he took it upon himself to share his institutional memory and intellectual contributions to public discussions on ASEAN, actively engaging broad-based audiences that included policy makers, businessmen, journalists, academics and researchers, students and young people. The message was always consistent: We all share the responsibility for ASEAN to live up to its potential, and to this end, we need to understand the nature of ASEAN and what it can or cannot do. Rod, in his own words, summed up his efforts throughout his life as trying to "project an image, an idea of ASEAN that tends to correct the pendulum swings of perceptions", to bridge the gaps of disconnect so that "people would come to appreciate not only the value of ASEAN but also what it could still do."

Rodolfo C. Severino, Jr. is truly *the* ASEAN man. 🇵🇭

**Amb. Ong Keng Yong** is the Executive Deputy Chairman of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), and Ambassador-at-Large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore. He was Secretary-General of ASEAN from 2003 to 2007.

Rodolfo C. Severino, Jr. at a speaking engagement in 2010



# Bringing People Together Through Arts and Culture

**ASEAN Deputy Secretary-General Kung Phoak** shares ASEAN's efforts to promote culture and arts as a meaningful people-to-people enabler.

Together with economic growth and social progress, cultural development was prominently featured in the Bangkok Declaration that gave birth to ASEAN in 1967. More than 50 years on, ASEAN's cooperation in the arts and culture has made our region a rich and fertile ground of cultural vibrancy and dynamism. Cultural and heritage tourism are also growing in popularity among travellers in the region. ASEAN's efforts in promoting cooperation in culture and arts as an enabler of tolerance and mutual respect is more relevant today than ever, especially in this era of cultural pessimism and nativism that are growing worldwide. In keeping with the digital age, ASEAN cooperation also seeks to ride on the emerging trends of the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution (4IR) to make arts and culture more engaging and accessible.

ASEAN embarked on cooperation in the arts and culture early on in its formative years, with the establishment of the ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information (ASEAN-COCI) in October 1978, and the launch of the ASEAN Cultural Fund by ASEAN Foreign Ministers in December 1978. ASEAN-COCI has implemented a multitude of activities including flagship projects which have inspired and excited many audiences in ASEAN and beyond. Activities span cultural showcases, preservation and conservation of tangible and intangible heritage, creative industry, exhibition, library, literature, museum,

performing arts, contemporary arts, food and cultural festivals, and policy dialogue and coordination.

## *ASEAN Culture Year*

Thailand as the chair of ASEAN has designated 2019 as the ASEAN Culture Year, with the theme "Diversity, Creativity, Sustainability". In the pipeline this year is the Best of ASEAN Performing Arts – a longstanding initiative annually since 2008 – where dancers and musicians from ASEAN countries collaborated to stage a cultural extravaganza that showcases the best of traditional and contemporary dance. To promote a common voice in bringing the best of ASEAN performing arts beyond the region, a cultural showcase for global audiences is also being planned for the ASEAN Cultural Year in 2019.

## *Riding the 4IR Wave for Arts and Culture*

The 4IR, with its emerging technological trends, has brought to bear profound changes to the quality of life across Southeast Asia. ASEAN regional cooperation in the arts and culture must also capitalise on these emerging trends to stay relevant, especially in reaching out to the young generations. New and social media play an important role in raising interest and awareness especially among the younger generations about arts and cultural offerings. 55.1% of the global population is now connected to the Internet, while in ASEAN, the rate is higher – with

Performance at ASEAN cultural meetings

ASEAN Secretariat

64% of the population going online. By this year, 80% of the Internet traffic will be based on video consumption. In this digital age, ASEAN must therefore take advantage of SMART technologies including virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI) to present arts and culture in refreshing ways that can better engage the wider audience, especially digitally-savvy youths and children.

#### *ASEAN's Partnership*

ASEAN is working with its partners to promote arts and culture in an innovative and creative way. For example, ASEAN and the Republic of Korea (ROK) are collaborating to showcase UNESCO cultural heritage sites of all 10 ASEAN countries using VR. The immersive experiences of Angkor Wat, Borobudur Temple and Bagan can now be enjoyed at the ASEAN Culture House in the ROK's bustling commercial and culture centre of Busan. Likewise, ASEAN is working with Japan on an interactive portal to archive and digitise cultural artefacts so that these national treasures can be viewed and appreciated by many more in the region and beyond. Collaborative efforts are underway with China to promote and preserve the dying art of folklore. Through these initiatives, ASEAN is leveraging the growing digital connectivity to reach out to a larger audience, sharing with them ASEAN's robust cooperation in the arts and cultural sector as well as the beauty and diversity of the region's cultural heritage.

#### *Making the Arts and Culture More Accessible and Inclusive*

The prevalent use of social media to share cross-cultural experiences has given rise to cultural tourism which in turn strengthens the development of small and medium-sized cultural enterprises (SMCEs), especially to target travellers seeking interesting keepsakes and handicrafts. ASEAN is stepping up cooperation in developing SMCEs with initiatives such as the SMCE Caravan where industry practitioners and policy makers exchanged views and ideas on how to further enhance the promotion of SMCEs in the region.

Arts and cultural cooperation must also become more inclusive. To create a culturally-aware society, it is important to create the most conducive environment for people to be part of the culture itself, making it closer and accessible to the society. An important aspect of this effort is to bring the arts and culture to the disabled and the underprivileged. To achieve this, the arts and culture sector in ASEAN will work towards greater cross-sectoral collaboration with other sectoral bodies within ASEAN and external partners such as UNESCO to make arts inclusive and accessible.

ASEAN is also cognisant of the importance to better preserve the region's rich heritage in the face of challenges brought about by environmental degradation and climate change. In collaboration with ASEAN's Dialogue Partners such as China, Japan and the ROK, a number of workshops have been organised to discuss effective disaster risk management for cultural heritage sites. An example of these long-standing collaborations is the annual ASEAN Plus Three Workshop on Cooperation for Cultural Human Resource Development organised and hosted by China.



ASEAN Secretary-General Lim Jock Hoi at the Mini Noodle Festival

Cultural industry programmes to support restoration efforts for sites hit by natural calamities such as Typhoon Haiyan and earthquake in the Visayas Islands of the Philippines have also been put in place in the past.

#### *Arts to Promote a Culture of Prevention*

In this era of cultural pessimism, it is paramount that ASEAN continue to promote and celebrate the region's shared values of cultural pluralism, and foster a common voice in tackling extremism, lack of tolerance and respect for life as well as social disharmony and distrust. Recognising the importance to promote social harmony and mutual trust, ASEAN leaders adopted the Declaration on Culture of Prevention (CoP) for a Peaceful, Inclusive, Resilient, Healthy and Harmonious Society at the 31<sup>st</sup> ASEAN Summit in November 2017. Emphasising a preventive approach in regional cooperation, ASEAN is moving forward with efforts to implement CoP key thrusts, including to promote a culture of peace and inter-cultural understanding as well as a culture that supports the values of moderation.

In the past five decades, ASEAN's regional endeavours and active collaboration in the arts and culture have contributed to a culture of peace and a sense of togetherness. Through a long list of initiatives in culture and arts such as the ASEAN Contemporary Dance Festival and Oral History Workshop, ASEAN has developed greater understanding and appreciation of the region's diverse yet connected cultural heritage, thereby promoting cross-cultural communications as well as the community spirit and camaraderie amongst the peoples in the region. These efforts to link communities across national boundaries have defied past presumptions about the risk of balkanisation in Southeast Asia. They have brought the peoples in the region closer together as ASEAN strives to build a collective shared ASEAN identity towards "One Vision, One Identity, One Community". ASEAN will continue efforts to provide innovative cultural offerings that put the people at the centre, celebrate the region's unique cultural diversity, and preserve our cherished traditions and heritage for posterity. 🍜

**Mr. Kung Phoak** is the Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN for ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC).

# ASEAN's Common Cultural Heritage: A Normative-Cultural Bridge We Should Not Neglect

**Farish A. Noor** weaves Southeast Asia's shared cultural heritage in pre-modern times into the forging of a common ASEAN identity today.



Cambodia's *Lkhon Khol Wat Svay Andet* – on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding

CYIRohta@Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts of Cambodia

Taoists, Confucianists and more. In terms of linguistic diversity it is one of the richest and most diverse on the planet. Thus to aim for unity in terms of singularity would be a futile task: Southeast Asia is too complex and plural to be reduced to essentials.

And yet the region is rich in terms of its common shared culture and the cultural patrimony that has been left to this present generation of ASEAN citizens. Our shared common material history – from the foods we consume to the clothes that we wear – bears traces of this long process of cultural exchange from the past, where common themes were shared and appreciated by peoples who were themselves mobile. The question therefore arises as to what ASEAN has done to celebrate this common cultural heritage and what can be done with it in order to promote a deeper and keener appreciation of Southeast Asian identity now and into the future.

## *Material History as Boon and Bane*

To think of our common material culture as a natural 'bridge-builder' between the communities and states of ASEAN would be a mistake, for we have to remember that ASEAN today is still largely a meeting of nation-states at an inter-governmental level. In that sense, the manner in which ASEAN states have seen culture, and the way that these states have appropriated culture as a tool in statecraft means that culture is less seen as a social phenomenon that is fluid, dynamic and evolving, and instead seen in material terms as things that can be objectified and subsequently commodified as well.

Here lies the irony of the situation that we see in the ASEAN region today: Instead of looking at our material culture and material history as proof of the manner in which societies can adapt, adopt, integrate and move with the times, culture is seen as a thing that can be ostensibly defined and 'claimed' as part of the patrimony of individual states. The way in which Southeast Asians today argue over things such as cloth, food, recipes, music, dance, etc. shows an eagerness on the part of some state actors to 'claim' these things as exclusively their own; and to 'brand' them as national products that carry with them the patent of the nation in question.

The question as to what constitutes 'Southeast Asia' and where its borders lie is one that has bedevilled historians and political scientists for ages, and is unlikely to be answered soon. But this does not mean that Southeast Asia does not exist, or that we doubt its very existence. It is not nonsensical to speak of things such as Southeast Asian food, Southeast Asian dress, Southeast Asian architecture, and so on. Intuitively we know that such terms do have a meaning, though they may not have a set, fixed reference that can be ostensibly defined simply by pointing at some chosen examples.

This confusion is the result of Southeast Asia's own complex, dynamic, convoluted and overlapping history/histories; and is also the outcome of the region's demography and geography. It is the result of living in a region that comprises both a mainland and an archipelago that straddles the distance of Europe, and one that has always been at the crossroads of Asia. As such, it is not surprising that Southeast Asia bears the historical-cultural imprint of centuries of human contact, trade, settlement and migration from all corners of Asia, and it could even be said that the whole world – from East Asia to Western Europe – can be found in Southeast Asia today. Every major religious grouping now resides in Southeast Asia, which includes Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists,

*“A sense of shared history and an awareness of a shared destiny may not be a guaranteed antidote against centrifugal forces that may pull ASEAN apart, but it can at least serve as a buffer against such tendencies towards fragmentation and hostility.”*

Historians would react to such moves by noting that much of what we take for granted as ‘ours’ in Southeast Asia is in fact the result of cultural borrowing, sharing, common development and cross-cultural fertilisation. Our languages in the region are heavily impressed by the imprint of Sanskrit, our folklore and legends show traces of cultural cross-referencing and inter-textuality as they were developed long before ‘Southeast Asia’ was even seen as a distinct unit and when our ancestors lived in a freer and more fluid Asian continuum where ideas, themes and tropes travelled from the Arab lands all the way to China and back. In terms of the material arts for which Southeast Asia is famously known for, it should also be remembered that things such as *batik* cloth, our cuisines, our silverwork and goldwork, among others, were all produced long before the era of modern nation-states and long before our ancestors even conceived of the region they lived in as a political unit.

For the nation-states of ASEAN to overcome this state-centric tendency towards making exclusive claims on cultural patrimony, they would have to begin with the realisation that the states of ASEAN today were all conceived and developed in the broader and older cradle of Southeast Asia, and that it was Southeast Asia that was the birthplace of the states of ASEAN as we know them today. This entails having to seriously question some of the fundamental premises upon which ASEAN rests, notably its Westphalian bias and

the manner in which it places the state – as opposed to society – at the centre stage of human history.

#### *Repairing the Forgotten Bridge*

Our common cultural patrimony and material history can instead be seen as a kind of normative cultural-historical glue that binds us closer together, while not reducing us to a singularity or dragging us closer to the pitfall of cultural reductivism and/or essentialism. But this means that we need to know, understand and appreciate our common culture/s as the patrimony of Southeast Asia as a whole, and recognise that we happen to be citizens of ASEAN as well. Rather than looking at particular forms of music, dance, craftsmanship as ‘ours’ or ‘theirs’, an epistemic leap has to be made to another register altogether where we see these things as part of ‘our’ common shared history and identity.

At a time when the ASEAN region is facing a host of external variables and pressures – on matters related to broader geo-economic and geopolitical significance – some sense of a common ASEAN identity has to be developed to bring the nations of our region closer together. Another troubling trend of late is the rise of forms of exclusive nationalism where attitudes towards ASEAN range from indifference to rejection, and that in the long run would be detrimental to ASEAN’s interests as a whole. A sense of shared history and an awareness of a shared destiny may not be a guaranteed antidote against centrifugal forces that may pull ASEAN apart, but it can at least serve as a buffer against such tendencies towards fragmentation and hostility. But this can only happen if we recognise that our common cultural heritage happens to be a normative cultural bridge that we have neglected for some time. ❧

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Thailand's *Khon* performance – on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity

Wikimedia Commons

# Tuning Traditional Music to Contemporary Trends

**Arsenio Nicolas** maps the course of traditional performing arts in Southeast Asia and advocates for their conservation while creating new music.

The history of music in Southeast Asia dates back to ancient times when the Austronesians, Austroasiatics, Tai-Kadai, Hmong-Mien, Mon-Khmer, and Sino-Tibetans settled in the region, bringing with them not only their languages but also their songs, musical instruments, dances, rituals and ceremonies. Deeply entrenched in history and culture, these traditions have also undergone profound exchanges and changes, diversifications and transformations over time.

Many musical instruments in Southeast Asia are evocative of the natural landscape and spiritual life of its early settlers. The oldest and most common musical instruments are made of bamboo, a plant that is found across the region. With soft and gentle sounds, bamboo instruments are played in expressing human feelings and fostering artistic communications among villagers. The bronze gong ensembles are revered among village communities for communicating with the spirit world. Village rituals since times past invoke this kinship between the human and spiritual realms.

Musical instruments also reflect the continuing process of cross-cultural and inter-regional exchanges that transcend both natural and political boundaries. Variants of bamboo and wooden instruments in the region such as panpipes, pipes-in-a row, zithers, scrapers, stamping tubes and sticks, quill-tubes, buzzers, xylophones, blades, mouth harps, percussion beams and planks, and rows of sticks can also be found in South China, parts of India, and Oceania. Today, these musical instruments continue their journey to other parts of the world, assimilating and adapting to their new surroundings. For example, the Javanese and Balinese

*gamelans* are studied and played today in Japan, China, Korea, Australia, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Europe, and the US. Thai music concerts are also widely enjoyed in these parts of the world.

Traditional music and performing arts have found new powerful media of transmission with the advent of the digital age. Although claims of cultural ownership over music and dance occasionally appear on social networks and media platforms, the ubiquity of the Internet has in fact benefitted the general public, with access to worldwide images and sounds. The rapid growth in online connectivity, with mobile phones, social media, and the Internet has enhanced interactions between musicians and audiences. Rituals and ceremonies in the temples of Bali, the courts of Java, or the mountains of Luzon, Sulawesi, Vietnam, and Borneo, as well as processions and street parades involving thousands of dancers in Surakarta, Singaraja and Banjar (Indonesia), Kalinga (the Philippines), and Thailand can now be viewed live on webcasts. Recently, the Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta (Indonesian Institute of the Arts) celebrated its 14<sup>th</sup> World Dance Day on 28-29 April with 200 performing groups of 6000 dancers.

In the process of reaching out to new audiences and adapting with changes, however, some elements of indigenous music have faded away. Modernisation has taken its toll on the region's musical heritage through several factors such as the concept of modernity in music-making and Western cultural influences that started since the colonial period. The influx of popular and Western music has increasingly eroded the space and demand for traditional music. Modernity has also found its



Gamelan orchestra at a cremation ceremony in Bali

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expressions in the form of *avant-garde* music, theatre, dance, and film. Various forms of reconstitution and fusion today reveal the tensions between tradition and modernity that have always been a significant structural principle in the conception of the musical arts.

Additionally, urbanisation and the migration of young people into urban areas have contributed to the discontinuity in generational transmission of traditional music, and hollowed out the communal environment where traditional music once thrived. Village rituals and ceremonies play an important role in preserving ancient religious systems where music, dance, and theatre were essential as part of agricultural life, trance and curing rites, and communal well-being. Religious rituals used to be the most dynamic means for the continuity of musical traditions in villages, temples, mosques, and churches. However, many of these musical traditions have disappeared as many people have converted from local beliefs, and their missionaries prohibit old practices. The way people practise their religious beliefs has also evolved, both in rural and especially in urban areas where different religious communities co-exist, and where communal living has given way to a more individualistic lifestyle. The onslaught of mass media and the Internet has also accentuated the de-sacralisation of ritual spaces, leaving many musical traditions behind as memories of the past.

As part of the globalisation drive in the cultural and musical scene, many artists have collaborated with other musicians from around the world to produce experimental musical forms. In most cases, there is no single composer and one music system becomes more dominant than the other. Many orchestras in the region use various musical instruments tuned to a common Western tuning system, thus relinquishing their Asian musical roots. The fusion of Asian musical ensembles with Western musical instruments has also forced the tuning of gongs, xylophones, metallophones, and singing to the Western diatonic scale, where these instruments lose indigenous resonances, sonorities, and timbres.

Tourism expansion for economic development has also threatened to erode the culture and space for the traditional performing arts. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bali was home to foreign scholars, artists, musicians, and dancers. Today, it has become the playground of big corporations building hotels, resorts and villas. Rice fields are converted to accommodate increasing tourist numbers, radically altering village landscapes. There exist today two Balis – one for the Balinese, and one for tourists and investors. In big centres like Kuta, Denpasar, Sanur, and Ubud, foreign musicians are now staging alternative shows to the traditional touristic performances. Similar scenes are found in Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

ASEAN has devoted its attention and efforts to preserve and revive traditional performing arts since early on. The ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information (COCI) was set up in 1978 to foster cooperation, awareness, and growth in the spheres of culture, the arts, and information in the region. The ASEAN Foundation runs its Arts and Culture Programme that covers the performing, visual,



Lao performers dancing to *khaen* music

Jean-Pierre Dalbéra@Flickr

and fine arts, including theatre, dancing, music, and singing, among others. In addition, the Southeast Asian Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts (SPAFA), an institution under the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO), has also dedicated its work to supporting the research, conservation, and practice of the region's shared heritage in the performing arts. One of its recent projects is to tell the heroic tale of *Panji* (a 14<sup>th</sup> century Javanese legendary prince) through different local versions across Southeast Asia, similar to the spread of Indian epics in Southeast Asia, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, to highlight the region's shared heritage.

Apart from regional institutions, the academia engaged in teaching and researching the region's musical scene has played a constructive and critical role. Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, schools of traditional music have been set up in Java, Bali, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, producing artists, musicians, educators, and workers in cultural industries. Today, music education at all levels continues to attract young artists to pursue a career in the arts, and their study is further enhanced by the availability of materials from online databases and archives. Facility for cross-cultural references and exchanges is also available as music studies programmes in Cambodia, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam are now linked in inter-university seminars, with diverse curricular offerings that reflect the rich musical traditions of each country.

As the musical scene of Southeast Asia evolves and transforms with time, greater attention and resources should be directed to keeping alive the region's music traditions in its myriad forms. Music loss is the loss of part of our history and our legacy. Without adequate preservation efforts, the region's musical heritage that is fading away will leave permanent lacuna in the fabric of values that define who we are and where we come from. The sources for new musical thoughts and ideas are embedded in these ancient traditions from which one may draw inspiration. Music in Southeast Asia has flourished as it is rooted in what music means for the people of the region, including its philosophy, spirituality, and symbols that radiate the sounds of peace and tolerance amidst a world of diversity and linkages. ❧

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# Language Endangerment in Southeast Asia

**Stefanie Pillai** highlights the need to preserve the region’s linguistic tapestry as more languages face the threat of extinction in Southeast Asia.

South East Asia hosts more than one thousand languages from different language families (e.g. Austro-Asiatic, Austronesian and Sino-Tibetan). Most of these are indigenous languages, but they also include languages and dialects from different parts of Asia, especially from India (e.g. Tamil, Punjabi and Gujarati), China (e.g. Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien and Hakka), and Creoles (e.g. Chabacano in the Philippines, Baba Malay and Malacca Portuguese or Papiá Cristang in Malaysia and Singapore, and Tetun Dili in Timor Leste). Adding to this tapestry of linguistic diversity are sign languages and languages of recent migrant workers.

Of notable concern is the fact that many indigenous languages and those spoken by minority communities in the region are in danger of dying out. Some, like Dicamay Agta (Philippines), Lelak (Malaysia), Loun and Mokse

(Indonesia), and Wewaw (Myanmar), are already extinct. According to *Ethnologue*, almost one hundred languages in Southeast Asia are classified as being in trouble or as dying, which means that there is little or no inter-generational transmission and the number of fluent speakers is dwindling. Among these are Bontok (Philippines), Lavi (Laos), Lisela (Indonesia), Somray (Cambodia) and Tutong (Brunei). A large number of languages in Southeast Asia are spoken by smaller groups of people, i.e. indigenous, ethnic or creole communities, in relation to the majority of the population of these countries.

Languages do not exist in isolation as they are part of the social, economic, linguistic, political and physical landscape, and its very survival is affected by many inter-related factors. Firstly, the notion of what constitutes a language can be contested, and statistics about the number of languages may not be representative of actual languages that are spoken in a country. In some cases, a language may not be accepted or officially recognised by the state, and there may be tensions between linguistic descriptions, cultural identification, and official acceptance and recognition. This in itself can lead to the decreased use of a language and a shift to another language, which has happened in most ASEAN member states.

With the exception of Singapore, there is usually only one official language in most ASEAN countries, which tends to be the only or main medium of instruction in schools (e.g. Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam). To have better access to education and job opportunities, indigenous and ethnic minority people may switch to the official language up to the point that they stop using their heritage language as a home or first language. In some cases, there may be a direct or indirect suppression of using and learning other languages in the name of national identity and linguistic (and in some cases, cultural and religious) assimilation. In most cases, the national language, or more likely an informal spoken variety of it, is generally used as an intra-national lingua franca (e.g. Brunei Malay and Tagalog-based Filipino). In Singapore, the local variety of English, *Singlish*, is commonly used. The local variety of English is also used in urban areas of Malaysia and the Philippines, where weaving seamlessly in and out of English and a local language or languages among bi- and multi-linguals is a common phenomenon.

## Endangered Languages in ASEAN Member States

ASEAN Member States	Nearly extinct languages <i>(Number of population speaking the language)</i>
Cambodia	Samre (200)
Indonesia	Benkala Sign Language (41); Lengilu (4); Amahai (50); Emplawas (250); Hoti (10); Hulung (10); Ibu (35); Kamarian (10); Kayeli (3); Loun (20); Naka'ela (5); Nusa Laut (10); Paulohi (50); Piru (10); Salas (50); Burumakok (40); Duriankere (30); Dusner (6); Kanum, Bādi (10); Kayupulau (50); Kehu (25); Kembra (20); Kwerisa (32); Liki (11); Mander (20); Mapia (1); Masimasi (10); Massep (25); Mor (25); Morori (50); Namla (30); Saponi (4); Tandia (2); Woria (6)
Laos	Arem (20)
Malaysia	Mintil (40); Punan Batu (30); Sian (50)
Philippines	Agta, Alabat Island (30); Agta, Isarog (6); Arta (15); Ata (4); Ayta, Sorsogon (18); Ratagnon (2)
Thailand	Mok (7)
Vietnam	Arem (20); Gelao, Red (20); Gelao, White (20)

Source: *Ethnologue* – data compiled from studies undertaken between 1975 and 2007



The status of languages is a contributing factor for language shift. For example, the emphasis on English in some Southeast Asian countries has pushed local languages further to the fringes, given the perceived socio-economic value given to English. In Singapore, Malay is not a dominant language for intra-national communication despite it being the national language. In the Philippines, English is perceived as a language of prestige and a tool for social and economic mobility. The situation in Malaysia is similar as English is seen as a key resource for employability. English has become the first language of subsequent generations in some Indian and Chinese, and many Eurasian (mostly of Portuguese and Dutch heritage) families. In a sense, this creates an English-speaking elite, often at the expense of local languages. This phenomenon is also observed in Brunei.

Physical and economic disruption is another factor that contributes to language loss. As traditional dwelling places or ancestral lands are taken over for cash crops, logging and mining, communities are displaced or relocated. This situation, which can be observed in the Philippines and Malaysia, not only disperses communities, but also disrupts their livelihood as well as their cultural and traditional practices. Such disruption decreases opportunities to use their heritage language and transmit it to the next generations. In some cases, the young leave their villages for education and employment, leaving only the old behind. When old people pass on, so does the language.

Most efforts in terms of research and especially language documentation of endangered languages, such as those in Malaysia and Indonesia, tend to be carried out and supported by institutions outside of Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, this often results in inaccessible records of the language and can hamper future revitalisation efforts. One rare exception is the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia (RILCA) of Mahidol University which has managed to carry out revitalisation projects for minority languages such as the Patani Malay-Thai Bilingual/Multilingual Education programme in southern Thailand. Another notable example is the Philippines' Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy. Similarly, Singapore has a Mother Tongue Language Policy, where it is compulsory for students to study Chinese, Malay or Tamil depending on their ethnicity. Those of mixed parentage or from other ethnic groups can select one of these three languages. In Malaysia, there is a provision to offer languages under the Pupils' Own Language (POL) policy in national schools although it is not compulsory, based on demand and a minimum number of students, and generally restricted to Tamil and Mandarin. Thus, despite these efforts, such programmes cannot possibly cater to all the language communities in a country.

There is an obvious tension between the need for a unifying language for national identity and the need to respect and celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity. If the ideal scenario for nation-building is perceived to be a shared vision and ideology via one language, this can lead



Malacca Portuguese children at the Portuguese Settlement in Melaka, Malaysia

Foshidah Kasby

to rejection of local languages or a general lackadaisical attitude towards them. The documentation, preservation and revitalisation of languages is generally not seen as a priority area, and thus, resources including financial support are rarely channelled to such programmes. This results in the loss of many indigenous languages unique to a particular country.

From a broader perspective, languages are more than mere artefacts to be collected and archived. They embody and express the identity, knowledge systems, cultural traditions and practices of their communities. The suppression of local languages and forced or gradual shift to another language, and even worse, assimilation into a majority language can have adverse results. Instead of a sense of belonging, people can feel isolated and socially and economically disadvantaged. There needs to be more awareness that the expression of one's linguistic and cultural heritage or heritages is just one facet of one's identity. Thus, one can have a Punjabi or Chinese heritage and a Thai or Malaysian or Singaporean national identity all at the same time. Having several languages (including different varieties of a language) at our disposal means that we can express and construct different identities.

The recognition and acceptance of linguistic diversity is a good start, but these alone will not sustain languages. Adequate resources and knowledge-sharing with language communities are essential for the preservation of local languages. Language and multilingual education are not easy due to the big number of languages involved, the spread of languages over large areas or in remote areas, the small number of speakers, and the lack of information and research on the language. With 2019 being declared by the United Nations as *The Year of Indigenous Languages*, we are reminded that, "Languages play a crucial role in the daily lives of people, not only as a tool for communication, education, social integration and development, but also as a repository for each person's unique identity, cultural history, traditions and memory." 📖

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# Food in Southeast Asia: Heritage, Hybridity and Contestation

**Lily Kong** shares her thoughts on the hybrid nature of Southeast Asia in absorbing myriad culinary influences into a vibrant, kaleidoscopic food scene.

In 1962, Charles Fisher, a British geographer, wrote about the similarities between Southeast Asia and the Balkans, indeed, asking the question if Southeast Asia might be likened to the “Balkans of the Orient”. Amongst the reasons he wrote thus was the fact that Southeast Asia occupies a similar border region as the Balkans does – in this case, between a predominantly Indian cultural realm of southern Asia and a preponderantly Chinese cultural realm of eastern Asia. The risk of balkanisation thankfully did not materialise as peace has prevailed in modern Southeast Asia despite all these faultlines. However, this particular geographical reality has had multiple implications for the region’s cultural heritage, including its food heritage.

The complexity and richness of the region has resulted from cultural hybridisation as myriad peoples of different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds come into contact, sometimes through encounters of the sword, at other times, through trade and other migratory impetuses (such as escape from poverty). Such contact was sometimes cursory and functional, at other times contentious, and still other times, resulted in deep ties, such as through mixed marriages. The effects on custom, practice, language and food remain today as part of a distinct cultural heritage emblematic of the region.



Khao soi gai (Curry chicken noodles in Thailand and Laos)

Deankez@Pixabay



Ohn nō khāo swè (Curry chicken noodles in Myanmar)

Gary Stevens@Flickr

## Cultural Hybridity and Heritage

Despite views otherwise, some scholars have pointed to Peranakan culture as the result of cultural hybridisation between Chinese and Malays, in turn the consequence of inter-marriages between these two ethnic groups. Evidence of this inter-Asia creolisation is to be found in language and cuisine. A signal example of such cultural hybridity is to be found in the iconic Peranakan food and its naming. The names of dishes in Peranakan cuisine are generally in the Malay language, but sometimes interspersed with Hokkien terms. The soup dish known as *bakwan kepiting* is a case in point. This is a clear soup of meatballs made of minced pork (*bakwan* in Hokkien), crab (*kepiting* in Malay) meat and bamboo shoots. The Chinese element in this dish is pork – a commonly-eaten meat for the community, but a taboo for Malays, who are Muslims.

A second example of inter-Asian hybridisation is the popular food “*laksa*”. The term stems from the Sanskrit word ‘*laksha*’ which means ‘hundred thousand’, referring to the long list of ingredients called for in the dish. Apart from the influence of ancient India in its name, Chinese influence is evident in the use of rice noodles, while fresh spice paste stems from Malay influence. Different versions of *laksa* also exist in different parts of Asia. The version in Penang uses tamarind in the gravy, and is known as *Assam Laksa*, while the version in other parts of Malaysia and Singapore uses coconut milk for its base.

Beyond the inter-Asian influences, Eurasian cuisines in Singapore and Malaysia are a fusion of European and Asian styles, derived from the mixed marriages between Portuguese women and the men of Malacca. This gave rise to Portuguese Eurasians who cooked food that merged the flavours and tastes of Asia with those of the European Portuguese known as *Cristang* cuisines. Portuguese cuisines evolved into spicy hybrids with the introduction of onions, garlic and chillis.

Another example of inter-continental influence is to be found in Vietnamese food. Bordered by China in the north and dominated for a good thousand years by the Chinese (111 BC to 938 AD), Vietnam evidences Chinese influence in its emphasis on rice and noodles as part of its staple. However, other influences are also apparent. Portuguese traders arrived in Vietnam in 1535 and introduced many new foods, amongst them potatoes and chilli peppers.

French traders and Catholic missionaries established posts in Vietnam in 1600, which have had a marked influence on the Vietnamese' tastes in food, particularly French bread and patisserie and also dairy products such as milk, butter and yoghurt. Evidence also suggests that Chinese and French influences were mutually reinforcing, such as in sausage making. Today, the Vietnamese have a sausage that is uniquely their own, called *Chả Lụa*.

### **Food Heritage and Its Contestations**

While the various hybrid foods contribute to the heritage identity of the region, food heritage does not go uncontested. Such contestations occur at various levels. First, contestations are evident across migrant communities that are divided by state boundaries. A good example is that between Singapore and Malaysia, where historical migratory flows occurred at a time when both were not yet separate political entities. Thus, popular foods such as chicken rice, fried *kway teow* and *satay* have been claimed by both sets of citizens as constituting their respective heritages. In reality, it is difficult to separate these foods along present-day state boundary lines.

Second, contestations also emerge over the authenticity of foods prepared by locals and foreigners. In Malaysia, for example, the government banned foreign workers from working as main cooks of Malaysian hawker food to preserve the 'local taste'. The ban was supported by many locals, who believed that foreign cooks do not possess a certain 'practical consciousness' – a kind of non-reflective knowledge gained through the experience of growing up in Malaysia. Such a quality is believed to be non-transferable.

Third, the effect of tourism is such that local foods may be modified to suit tourist tastes, and are thereby thought to lose their authenticity, and rejected by locals. For example, in Vietnam, local Hoianese have contested invented culinary heritage in their home town. In fact, at the start of the 1990s, with the onset of tourism, there has been an expansion of tourist-oriented restaurants in Hoi An claiming to serve local specialties/foods, but it has been observed that many were not unique to Hoi An and/or had foreign roots. These proclaimed local specialties of Hoi An were adapted, simplified, and outsourced to accommodate tourists' palettes, and were avoided by locals who thought they were expensive and inauthentic. This way, local Hoianese expressed their own cultural capital and local knowledge, distinguishing themselves from foreign tourists. Conversely, the growth in tourist attention to these 'local specialties' simultaneously led to a renewed local interest, particularly among the Hoianese middle-class who wanted to express affinity with the affluent modern tourists, and embraced the commodified "food heritage" as a means to express class superiority among the middle-class and to distinguish themselves from the lower-class Hoianese.

### **Food Heritage and Functionalism**

Food heritage also plays a functional role for states through gastro-diplomacy which involves the use of food and cuisine as part of cultural diplomacy to enhance soft power and nation branding. The Thai government, for example, promotes Thai food through its 'Global Thai' plan. This

project aimed to increase the number of Thai restaurants globally from around 5,000 to 20,000 within five to six years over the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To facilitate the growth of Thai restaurants worldwide, the Thai government provided substantial loans, supervised and oversaw the establishment of restaurants, created business links between global Thai restaurants and the Thai food industry, helped to establish Thai cooking schools to train and supply Thai chefs, and made official intervention where necessary to preserve the authenticity of Thai restaurant foods around the world. All this was done with the aim of developing tourist interest in Thailand and deepening relations with other countries. Similarly, through the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE), the Malaysian government launched the Malaysia Kitchen for the World campaign to "bring Malaysia to everyone".

### **Reflections**

The diversities and complexities of Southeast Asia are reflected in myriad ways. As Charles Fisher observed, there are the geographical diversities of peninsulas and islands, mountains and lowlands, great rivers and valleys that – without being geographically deterministic – do nevertheless shape cultures. Together with the region's location bordering the major Indian and Chinese civilisations, the European imprints through colonialism, and multiple influences through globalisation, the region is culturally complex and kaleidoscopic. Nowhere is this more evident than in its food heritage - its hybridisations, heritages, contestations and appropriations. Through food, we have a lens to the histories, geographies, politics, economics and societies of this fascinating region. 🍴

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# Cultural Tourism in Southeast Asia

**Ploysri Porananond** juxtaposes the region's cultural heritage – integral to tourism development of Southeast Asia – against emerging challenges that could erode it.

Tourism features prominently in economic development policies across Southeast Asia. A significant part of this drive centers on the promotion of cultural heritage and ethnic traditions as points of interest to attract foreign visitors to the region. The 1960s saw Thailand and Indonesia taking the lead in such initiatives, with other Southeast Asian countries following suit in later decades. The Tourist Organisation of Thailand (TOT), established in 1960, pioneered the promotion of traditional culture for tourism purposes. The Singapore Tourism Board, established in 1964, also sought to adapt local culture and ethnic traditions into tourist attractions. Similarly, Indonesia's Bali Tourism Development Master Plan (1969) steered Balinese cultural artifacts and architecture, arts and craft, and performances towards becoming key tourist attractions. Tourism development in Vietnam in the mid-1980s, and in Laos and Myanmar in the 1990s included similar elements of cultural tourism in their plans and policies.

Thus, cultural heritage – especially religious heritage, ethnic traditions, and colonial architecture – became the main lens through which international tourists seeking a unique travelling experience in Southeast Asia were introduced to the region.

### *Celebrating Religious, Cultural and Architectural Heritage*

Religious belief has long motivated people to travel for pilgrimage to famous holy sites. Buddhist faith inspired the Lanna people in Northern Thailand, with Chiang Mai

as the center of the kingdom, to visit holy sites representing their zodiac year of birth. In this way, temples and pagodas in Northern Thailand were popular pilgrimage destinations. Similarly, people in Myanmar embarked on pilgrimages to temples and pagodas across the country, as well as other Buddhist countries. Apart from Buddhism, deep-rooted beliefs in and experiences of all other major religions have inspired visitors to the various religious heritage sites in Southeast Asia. Today, many of the region's religious monuments, especially temples, Buddhist sanctuaries, churches and mosques, are popular destinations for domestic and international tourists. The Emerald Buddha Temple in Bangkok; Borobudur in Yogyakarta; Angkor Wat in Siem Reap; Kek Lok Sri Temple in Penang; Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon; Sultan Mosque in Singapore, Cua Bac Church in Hanoi; and the Baroque Churches of the Philippines, are all examples of religion's reach in tourism.

Traditional culture and wisdom of ethnic groups and local communities in each Southeast Asian nation have also become tourist attractions locally and globally. Urban visitors are enchanted by the Batad Rice Terrace in Ifugao, Philippines; the Subak water irrigation system for paddy fields in Bali, Indonesia; Water Puppet performances in Vietnam; the Iban and Rungus long houses in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia; and the Peranakan mansions in Penang, Malaysia. Additionally, traditional festivals have become an opportunity for tourists to be a living part of local experiences and culture.



Kecak dance for tourists in Bali

Sirabus@Pixabay

Alongside religious heritage and ethnic traditions, colonial architectures are also important tourist attractions in Southeast Asia. They feature the uniqueness of cities or towns that had gone through architectural transformations during the colonial rule, thus delivering an old-world charm and significant historical value. This can still be found in the Spanish colonial architecture in Vigan, the Philippines; the French colonial buildings in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and in Luang Prabang, Laos; or the Queen Anne architectural style across former British colonial towns of Yangon in Myanmar, Singapore, and Penang in Malaysia.

#### *Drawbacks of Cultural Tourism in Southeast Asia*

As with all enterprising endeavours, there are consequences of success. Faulty tourism development can result in negative impacts to local cultural heritage and ethnic traditions, including the practice of traditional beliefs. For example, the Balinese dance, which has religious origins, is now commercialised as a tourist attraction. In Thailand, intensive tourism development for decades has effectively changed traditional crafts into tourist commodities. Tourism development and marketing promotion have also influenced traditional rituals into contemporary contests. The sand pagoda construction during the *Songkran* New Year festivities in Chiang Mai was originally to pray for good fortune. Today it is a contest where temple representatives compete over who can build larger sand pagodas and attract bigger donations. This is a classic case where consumerism has trumped original Buddhist beliefs. Chiang Mai is also famous for *Lanna* cuisine, symbolised by the traditional *Khuntoke* dinner served for special celebrations and occasions. A similar practice in Myanmar is called *Daunglan*. These traditional meals and serving styles are now staged as “authentic” dining experiences for tourists. The authenticity has been further compromised as traditional dishes have been increasingly adapted to satisfy foreign palates.

Experts have also listed other erosions or modifications of local culture and traditions to meet tourism targets. The transformation of the floating markets in Thailand, or the modification of cultural practices in Singapore, or the misuse of Angkor Wat, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, as one of the key locations for the Hollywood blockbuster movie ‘Lara Croft: Tomb Raider’ as well as cultural misappropriations in the movie. There are backlashes. As recent as 2017, researchers have listed clash between locals and tourists at mural art streets in George Town, a World Heritage Site in Penang, Malaysia. In the ancient city of Bagan in central Myanmar, which is dotted with over 2000 Buddhist temples, the food and entertainment needs of the increasing number of international tourists contrasts starkly with those of local pilgrims. Local communities and pilgrims alike are uneasy with the numerous pubs, pizzerias and hotel bars catering to foreign visitors but also compromising local cultural sensitivities.

#### *Future Challenges, Possible Solutions*

The ability with which Southeast Asian countries have drawn from their cultural resources to brand and market various tourist attractions, and pursue economic growth,

is an undeniable success story. The focus on cultural tourism has also fostered international understanding and appreciation of the region’s cultural heritage. However, there are problems and concerns. The dramatic increase in the number of tourists, noted by scholars tracking these trends, poses the biggest challenge to tourism in Southeast Asia. With big numbers of tourists coming in, their increasing demand for cultural experiences has been a key factor that drives more cultural heritage and ethnic traditions to become staged commodities for tourist consumption.

Another emerging concern is the reverse cultural flows from the homelands of foreign visitors to Southeast Asian destinations. The establishment of Hinoki Land theme park in Chiang Mai is an example of vintage Japanese culture as an “export”. Last year, a Channel NewsAsia (CNA) documentary on the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative also tells the story of how Thai businesses have modified their cultural products to be more Chinese-friendly. For example, at RAM 100 Complex – a Thai cultural theme park in Bangkok – fortune cats replace nagas and elephants to welcome visitors at the entrance while cabaret shows feature Chinese stories and Chinese costumes with images of Tiananmen Square and Mao Zedong at the background.

To continue to celebrate and share the uniqueness of Southeast Asian culture without further damage to or erosion of its rich centuries-old heritage, assessments of the on-the-ground impact on cultural heritage and traditions should be factored in future national tourism policies and plans. Education and awareness programmes that highlight respect for cultural heritage and traditions should also become a feature for both policy planners and tourism agencies.

A strong motivation lies in obtaining the much-coveted designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Southeast Asia is home to 38 such sites, 24 of which are cultural sites, 13 are natural sites and one is mixed. The preparation work and awareness campaigns that go into efforts for designation as a World Heritage Site can lead to new policies and legislations that assign preservation responsibilities down to community or local levels. This can help to ensure that local communities in the heritage areas are not adversely and abruptly affected by the surge in tourist interest in their place of habitation. Maintaining local or national ownership of heritage management and local development is also equally important. Ultimately, the objective of cultural tourism would remain true to the motivation for which it was initiated several decades ago: to ensure that local communities and the people in each country gain the economic benefits of tourism activities in their country. 🏰

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# ASEAN Cultural Heritage

All ASEAN member states have ratified the UNESCO **Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage** which was concluded in 2003. <sup>1</sup>

As of 2018, there are **44** ASEAN Heritage Parks from the 10 ASEAN Member States. These are the educational and inspirational sites of high conservation importance, preserving a complete spectrum of representative ecosystems of the ASEAN region. <sup>4</sup>



Singapore's **hawker culture** has been nominated for inscription into UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. <sup>2</sup>

Over **40%** of the world's approximate **7,000** languages are at risk of disappearing.

In ASEAN, **490** languages are endangered, 269 of which are in Indonesia, 43 in Malaysia and Vietnam. <sup>5</sup>

Since 2010, a city from one ASEAN member state has been designated the **ASEAN City of Culture** for two successive years to help strengthen ASEAN identity through celebrating Southeast Asian arts and culture. <sup>6</sup>

2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
<b>Cebu City</b> Philippines		<b>Singapore</b>		<b>Hue</b> Vietnam		<b>Bandar Seri Begawan</b> Brunei Darussalam			<b>Yogyakarta</b> Indonesia	

The online portal **ASEAN Cultural Heritage Digital Archive** (ACHDA) was launched in 2018 to consolidate select digital archives of ASEAN's cultural heritage including artefacts, old documents and paintings. <sup>3</sup>

Out of 180 cities which currently make up the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, **6** are from ASEAN countries: <sup>1</sup>

- ① **Chiang Mai** (Thailand)  
A Creative City of Crafts and Folk Art
- ② **Phuket** (Thailand)  
A Creative City of Gastronomy
- ③ **Singapore**  
A Creative City of Design
- ④ **Bandung** (Indonesia)  
A Creative City of Design
- ⑤ **Pekalongan** (Indonesia)  
A Creative City of Crafts and Folk Art
- ⑥ **Baguio City** (Philippines)  
A Creative City of Crafts and Folk Art

UNESCO Asia-Pacific conferred the Award of New Design in Heritage Contexts on the **"Kaomai Estate 1955, Chiang Mai"** of Thailand, a hipster cafe built in the land of a former tobacco processing plant with two museums featuring the botanicals and over 50 animal species in the area. <sup>1</sup>



The **ASEAN Puppets Exchange** Programme (APEX) was initiated in 2014 to support ASEAN's goal to forge a common identity through shared cultural heritage. <sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO. <sup>2</sup> Singapore National Heritage Board, 2018. <sup>3</sup> ASEAN Secretariat, 2018. <sup>4</sup> ASEAN Secretariat, 2019. <sup>5</sup> ELP- Endangered Languages Project. <sup>6</sup> seasia.co. <sup>7</sup> ASEAN Foundation. <sup>8</sup> The Bangkok Post, UNESCO Bangkok. <sup>9</sup> Ramon Santos, 2013. Available on the website of the Philippines' National Commission for Culture and the Arts. <sup>10</sup> Southeast Asia: A Historical Encyclopedia, from Angkor Wat to East Timor, edited by Ooi Keat Gin, 2014. <sup>11</sup> Food Network. <sup>12</sup> ASEANFocus, 2018. <sup>13</sup> ASEANFocus, 2019. <sup>14</sup> Compiled from different sources.

Note: Images obtained from royalty-free open sources.

MYANMAR



Pyu Ancient Cities

LAOS



Town of Luang Prabang



Vat Phou and Associated Ancient Settlements



Khaen Music of the Lao people

VIETNAM



Citadel of the Ho Dynasty



Central Sector of the Imperial Citadel of Thang Long - Hanoi



Trang An Landscape Complex\*



My Son Sanctuary



Hoi An Ancient Town



Complex of Hue Monuments

THAILAND



Historic Town of Sukhothai and Associated Historic Towns



Historic City of Ayutthaya



Ban Chiang Archaeological Site



Khon, Masked Dance Drama

CAMBODIA



Angkor



Temple Zone of Sambor Prei Kuk



Temple of Preah Vihear



Tugging Rituals and Games



Royal Ballet of Cambodia



Sbek Thom, Khmer Shadow Theatre

PHILIPPINES



Historic City of Vigan



Baroque Churches of the Philippines



Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras



Tugging Rituals and Games



Darangen Epic of the Maranao People of Lake Lanao



Hudhud Chants of the Ifugao

MALAYSIA



Melaka and George Town Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca



Archaeological Heritage of the Lenggong Valley



Dondang Sayang



Mak Yong Theatre

SINGAPORE



Singapore Botanic Gardens

INDONESIA



Borobudur Temple Compounds



Prambanan Temple Compounds



Sangiran Early Man Site



Cultural Landscape of Bali Province: the Subak System as a Manifestation of the Tri Hita Karana Philosophy



Pinisi, Art of Boatbuilding in South Sulawesi



Three Genres of Traditional Dance in Bali



Indonesian Angklung



Indonesian Batik



Indonesian Kris



Wayang Puppet Theatre

ASEAN countries have **38** UNESCO World Heritage Sites in total, of which 24 are cultural sites and one is mixed site\*.<sup>1</sup>



UNESCO World Heritage Sites



UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity

UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding: <sup>1</sup>

**CAMBODIA**



Lkhon Khol Wat Svay Andet (masked dance)



Chapei Dang Veng (musical tradition)

**VIETNAM**



Ca Trù Singing (complex form of sung poetry)

**INDONESIA**



Noken Multifunctional Knotted or Woven Bag, Handcraft of the People of Papua



Saman Dance

**Phra Lak Phra Ram**

in Laos and

**Hikayat Seri Rama**

in Malaysia and southern Thailand adapted from the originally Indian epic Ramayana are oral traditions that have influenced local cultures, festivals and beliefs. <sup>8</sup>

Puppetry thrives in Southeast Asia in many forms and with variations in terms of platforms, stages and puppet materials: <sup>12</sup>



**Indonesia**

shadow puppets (*wayang kulit*) are made of chiselled and carved tree bark



**Laos**

puppets are made of hard paper or cardboard



**Khmer**

shadow puppets are made of leather



**Thailand**

shadow puppets (*nang yai*) are made of buffalo hide



**Vietnam**

water puppetry (*múa rối nước*) use lacquered wooden puppets



Cambodia, the Philippines and Vietnam share the same

**“Tugging Rituals and Games”**

in the rice-farming communities to ensure abundant harvests, promote harmony and joy, and mark the start of a new agricultural cycle. <sup>1</sup>



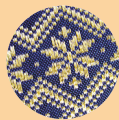
Both **Thailand's** masked dance (**Khon**) and **Cambodia's** masked dance (**Lkhon Khol Wat Svay Andet**) are listed as UNESCO intangible cultural heritage. <sup>1</sup>

ASEAN's treasure trove of handwoven fabrics: <sup>14</sup>



**Ikats silk**  
Cambodia and Thailand

Intricate silk with lustrous colours of beauty and the precision of its thread binding techniques



**Songket**  
Indonesia and Malaysia

Golden and silver brocaded silk/cotton



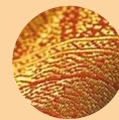
**Piña silk**  
Philippines

A soft and glossy fabric made of pineapple-based fibres



**Luntaya acheik**  
Myanmar

Intricate waves interwoven with bands of horizontal stripes, using a complex weaving process that requires many shuttles, each wound with a different colour of silk



**Jong sarat**  
Brunei

Brocade of silk and/or cotton interwoven with gold and silver threads



**To' tằm silk**  
Vietnam

Fine and delicate silk made from silkworm's cocoon





**Gongs** and **bamboo** are the main materials in Southeast Asian musical traditions. Gongs are valued for communicating to the spirit world while bamboo instruments are used for human communication in social and artistic lives.<sup>9</sup>

**Bamboo instruments** are the oldest instruments in Southeast Asia and available in many forms.<sup>10</sup>

<b>SOLO</b>	<b>sompoton</b> Malaysia	<b>khaen</b> Thailand	<b>khen</b> Vietnam	<b>ken</b> Cambodia	<b>khene</b> Laos	
<b>TUBE ZITHERS</b>	<b>krem</b> Malaysia	<b>kullitong</b> Philippines	<b>tueng-tueng</b> Thailand	<b>tol alao goang</b> Vietnam		
<b>ENSEMBLE</b>	<b>luntang</b> Philippines	<b>pattala</b> Myanmar	<b>ranat</b> Thailand	<b>lanat</b> Laos	<b>roneat</b> Cambodia	<b>angklung</b> Indonesia

**Rice** is a staple food and fundamental to the shared cultural and spiritual heritage in Southeast Asia. The beliefs on rice having a soul are common, such as:<sup>13</sup>

<b>Po Ino Nogar</b> Cambodia	<b>Dewi Sri</b> Indonesia	<b>Semangat Padi</b> Malaysia	<b>Kelah</b> Myanmar	<b>Mae Po Sop</b> Thailand	<b>Thần Lúa</b> Vietnam
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A few common foods in Southeast Asia:<sup>11</sup>



**BÁNH MỠ**

A take on the French casse-croûte (meaning “break crust,” or sandwich), it is made with a small baguette, split open lengthwise and filled with pickled carrots and daikon, fresh lettuce, cilantro, chili sauce and Vietnamese bologna, pâté and/or grilled lemongrass-flavored sliced pork.



**RICE NOODLE SOUPS**

Street food vendors’ classic rice noodle soups are popular in many parts of Southeast Asia, including pho (Vietnam), kway teow and hor fun (Malaysia, Singapore).



**CURRIES**

Coconut milk-based and ranging from mild to intensely hot and spicy, they often start with melting coconut butter and stir-frying a spice paste of lemongrass, kaffir lime leaves, garlic, turmeric and galangal with dry spices including coriander, cumin and fenugreek, followed by meat or vegetables.



**NƯỚC CHẤM**

A sweet lime and fish sauce dipping sauce with sliced, chopped or minced fresh garlic and chilies, this ubiquitous table condiment is enjoyed throughout Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.



**PEANUT SAUCE**

One of the most popular dipping sauces in Southeast Asia is made with dry roasted, unsalted peanuts, Hoisin sauce, fish sauce and coconut milk. Significant regional variations exist, for example the sauce can be enhanced with garlic, shallots, chilies and red curry paste.



**SATAY**

These grilled, skewered morsels of cubed or ground meat/seafood are flavored in an herb and spice paste combining fish sauce, palm sugar, lemongrass, garlic and dry spices including turmeric, cumin, coriander, and served with chili sauce, nước chấm or a peanut sauce.

Southeast Asian cooking methods are primarily:



stir-frying



deep-frying



grilling



steaming



boiling

The use of shrimp paste and fish sauce is found in the cooking of many Southeast Asian dishes.

Herbs and spices are integral to Southeast Asian cooking, with many of the most widely used being sourced from the tropical rainforest, including:



lemongrass



pandan leaves



galangal



wild ginger flower



cloves

# Southeast Asia's Cultural Heritage: Continuity, Change and Connections

Southeast Asia presents a unique combination of the many local cultures and traditions that link diverse communities across boundaries and borders. The region's cultural heritage is a multi-patterned weave of vibrant colours, a melting pot of delicious flavours and tastes, a medley of enchanting melodies and movements, and magnificent monuments in memory of past glories. ASEANFocus invites several 'ambassadors' for different aspects of Southeast Asia's cultures and traditions to share their thoughts on continuity and change in celebrating our heritage.

## Culinary Connections

Southeast Asian dishes and delicacies offer a multiple sensory experience. Cultural heritage radiates from each dish. Having adapted external ingredients and methods to enrich local culinary traditions through millennia, the melting-pot nature of Southeast Asian cuisine has helped it withstand the McDonaldisation of food. Three voices from the region's vibrant food scene contribute their thoughts on their efforts to keep alive the time-honoured dishes and tastes that have been part of Southeast Asians' food heritage.

Mr. Aun Koh, author of the popular food and travel blog "Chubby Hubby", went on a trek to uncover the "vanishing foods" in the region, and to pay homage to centuries-old culinary traditions and their guardians. Sharing that "far too many communities in our region have been losing important pieces of their culture through the loss of recipes", he muses on the variety of factors that have caused this loss of culinary heritage. In the case of one community in the Philippines, a natural disaster wiped out all the bakeries that once made *Dulce Prenda*, which had originated as a religious offering but became a favourite snack among the aristocracy. In other places, cultural shifts have phased out certain kinds of dishes, e.g. the Eurasian dish reflecting the original Straits fishing culture, *Curry Mohlyu*. Tastes have also evolved – younger audiences finding ingredients such as naturally foraged vegetables no longer appealing, especially when compared to more convenient fast foods. Furthermore, the lack of time has meant that many families have given up preparing elaborate and time-consuming dishes. Sadly, few countries in Asia have long histories of food writing, so many recipes – once loved – are now being lost as old people pass on together with their recipes. Mr. Koh hopes that more historians, chefs, and media will add to the work to keep historic recipes alive.

Dato' Ismail Ahmad, affectionately called Chef Ismail, is equally fervent about consistent efforts at awareness and education in passing on centuries-old culinary

traditions. For Dato' Ismail, this took place in the communal convivial atmosphere of a kampong kitchen. He is now seeking to recreate that learning and sharing experience via his signature *Restoran Rebung* in Kuala Lumpur where he offers a dazzling spread of Malaysian cuisine (and a tour of his herb garden) to interested visitors, thus providing a daily inspiration on his family's heirloom recipes and traditional-style cooking. Dato' Ismail strongly believes that food is central to culture and heritage. Heritage cuisine is thus food for both soul and body, as traditional recipes are based on fresh ingredients and unadulterated flavours.



Blending yesteryear culinary traditions and flavours of the present into our everyday food presents a continuous challenge and inspiration. Chef Marco Lim, who has pioneered Padang Peranakan cuisine's spread beyond Sumatra, finds this both easy and difficult. While many people in the region are familiar with and can easily recognise this signature cuisine from Padang in West Sumatra, Indonesia, the challenge lies in preserving its traditional cooking methods in contemporary situations. He ruefully recalls the difficulties faced in preserving the wood-fired slow-cooking method for the famed Beef Rendang dish in one of his restaurants located in a big shopping mall with strict kitchen conditions. It is not just flavours. Chef Marco is also “wooing” millennials’ interest in traditional cuisine, presenting his authentic Padang Peranakan cuisine with modern plating styles.

Can one country or culture claim a particular food heritage, or is there a common root from which variations branch out? There is no clear-cut answer. Chef Marco believes that there may be some common roots that spread across the Silk Road cultures. Padang Peranakan itself is a combination of the original Padang with Chinese cooking techniques and herbs. Thus, assimilations and hybridisations have occurred in the past and will continue to so in the future. Chef Ismail concurs. In his view, when people travel, food travels with them; and thus recipe, taste and culture spread across boundaries, although the distinct features of a traditional cuisine will retain its identity closest to its roots.

#### *Keeping the Fabric of Tradition Alive*

The myriad fabric patterns of Southeast Asia have the imprint of many influences from within and outside the region. The best illustration can be found in *batik* – the signature fabric made through wax-resist dyeing technique that is popular across all walks of life in Indonesia and the rest of the Malay archipelago. The whole region is also a veritable treasure trove of other stunning handwoven fabrics, including *Ikat* weaves (Cambodia, Thailand, and Indonesia), golden *songket* (Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia), Philippine *piña* and Myanmar *acheik*. Two leading ladies on the region’s fabric scene, Ibu Danarsih Hadipriyono, co-founder of Batik Danar Hadi in Indonesia, and Madam Patis Tesoro, considered the “doyenne of Philippine fashion”, share with us how their art and passion have blended old and new, bringing the heritage of centuries-old weaving traditions to contemporary consumers.

Ibu Danar built up the business from a small home workshop to the vibrant *batik* business spanning the Indonesian archipelago today. Ibu Danar’s daughter Diana now follows her mother’s example, adding insights from today’s generation to the centuries-old fabric. The challenge faced by Danar Hadi lies mostly in “translating” and “cultivating” past cultural heritage into something that is more “modern”, “contemporary” and “fashionable”. This applies to the expression of patterns and motives as well as the development of a more varied manufacturing process. For example, Danar Hadi has created the “Days” label with the dynamic young generation in mind. Continuing the heritage of *batik* into the future, in Diana’s view, will be determined by how the cultural and technological aspects are married.

Madam Patis Tesoro has used her fashion and design skills honed over decades to make *piña* more accessible to everyone, mixing and blending the transparent beauty of *piña* with other fabrics. When she started 30 years ago, it was a dying industry in terms of both craft and sourcing, as well as market access. Madam Patis hit on the idea of staging a contest, called *Miss Piña*, where she donated a gown for the fiesta, thus garnering the interest of the farmers, who then became *piña* stakeholders. She worked with an agricultural school in the area to organise the planting and harvest systems, and spearheaded the mixing of different threads with pineapple fibre to create pineapple silk. Later innovations of *piña* have combined pineapple and cotton for a greater variety of choice.



Making songket

Kars Alfrink@Flickr



Myanmar *acheik* fabric for women’s sarongs

Wikimedia



Patis Tesoro's embroiderer from Lumban Laguna working on a traditional pattern on piña seda

At Maculangan

Madam Patis views ASEAN as a region of siblings. Thus, one major adaptation to the production of *piña* was to produce it as fabric yardage, so people from ASEAN could buy and adapt it to their own ways and taste. She also started mixing ASEAN textiles together, making jackets and gowns using different weaves from all over the region, which has now become a lasting trend in the Philippines' local fashion industry. Thanks to her regional outlook, a fabric that is uniquely Filipino has been ASEAN-ised.

**Passing Down Performance Through Generations**

How do we preserve the traditional forms of entertainment that have beguiled and whiled away the hours of our earlier generations? Southeast Asia boasts a rich tapestry of cultural performances, drawing inspiration from both local lore and foreign epics, with religious and historical underpinnings. ASEAN countries today, however, face the challenge of preserving these cultural performances in the face of urbanisation, the rise of digital media, and the global attraction of MTV culture for younger generations. This section gets a glimpse of how artistes and citizens strive to continue traditional performing arts and fuse cultural heritage into contemporary currents.

The Shwe Man Thabin troupe in Myanmar has been a living link to the rich past of Myanmar's *zat* performances (referring to the Jatakas). Once the province of royalty in pre-modern times, the refined art performances spread to wider audiences after the loss of monarchy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since 1933, the Shwe Man *zat* troupe has gained international acclaim through the tireless efforts of its founder, U Tin Maung, who passed on the art to his five sons. The fourth son, U Win Maung, now focuses on promoting the art and tradition to wider audiences within and beyond Myanmar while his siblings and their children continue to present the Shwe Man Thabin performances.

It has not been plain sailing, even though art critics in the West have lauded their performances as "a rare taste of Myanmar culture". U Win Maung's statement "we are fighting" summarises the kind of struggle that Myanmar's *zat* performances face for survival today. The popularity

and demand for the hours-long cultural extravaganza of song, dance, comedic talent and historical drama and operatic performances of a typical *zat thabin pwè* are now fading in the face of contemporary pop culture. Along with fading interest in the historical value and richness of the genre, cost issues of maintaining a large theatre troupe present a significant challenge. U Win Maung takes heart in the interest and recognition outside the country for Myanmar's cultural heritage, the continuing core support in Myanmar's heartland rural areas, and the support by the Ministry of Culture to sustain the tradition of *zat* performance. His passion is to continue working for a harmonious combination of modernity and heritage, such that successive generations of young Myanmarans can appreciate and value their cultural and historical traditions. For U Win Maung, to know history is to know oneself.

Southeast Asia is also home to diverse and unique forms of puppetry arts, and regionwide efforts have been undertaken to preserve and promote this shared heritage. In 2015-18, the ASEAN Puppetry Exchange offered a regional platform for mutual learning and sharing about puppetry arts. Mr. Terence Tan, founder and executive director of Artsolute, produced and coordinated this exchange. His main concern for the survival of puppetry arts centres on the lack of interest in human engagement and physical play, because of overwhelming digital interaction that affects interpersonal relations. He views puppet arts – as with most live performing arts – as being crucial for human development, since they teach human interaction, mindfulness, physical and mental cognition, among others. Mr. Tan observes, "Through puppetry, we learn of our relationships with the materials around us." The ASEAN Puppetry Exchange highlights the common strands among different art forms that have developed separately, such as water, string, and shadow puppets. It gave him further insights into how the artists' creativity can construct a storyline relatable to today's issues in ASEAN, such as environmentalism, working in cohesion with other cultures, and dealing with globalisation. For Mr. Tan, the unique quality of ASEAN puppetry performances lies in the integration of traditions with contemporary thought, as well as the combination of Southeast Asian art forms, something not often seen.



### “Managing” Cultural Heritage – More than Monuments

Heritage monuments in Southeast Asia are powerful proof of the region’s past splendours. They have defied the passage of time, standing high through the ebb and flow of dynasties, cultures and religions in the region. Prof. John Miksic, Dr. Elizabeth Moore, Dr. David Kyle Latinis, and Dr. Goh Geok Yian, who have shared their time and expertise at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute’s Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre (NSC), discuss the promotion, management and protection of these heritage sites from their different research viewpoints.

Prof. Miksic highlights that many ancient monuments were designed specifically to attract visitors from around the region as well as local worshippers. The location of ancient Cham temples, the Shwedagon in Myanmar, and Malay capitals such as Kedah, Palembang, Temasek, and Melaka, were on and around hills or mountains overlooking estuaries where temples and palaces could attract attention from seafarers and merchants. There were also various cross-country exchanges and learning between sites of Buddhism in Java, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Bagan.

As regards the dual challenge of celebrating the past and ensuring its protection, getting the younger generation’s interest and participation in heritage management is the next step. Prof. Miksic notes, “if young people are taught how to interpret these monuments, they often become inspired by the achievements of their ancestors, and enjoy helping to preserve them.” This has proven true in the efforts of the NSC Archaeological Field School which offers opportunities to students to conduct actual research at excavation sites in Cambodia and Singapore since 2013. In 2017, a four-member team of Asian students participating in the field school found and excavated three 800-year-old Buddha statues at the ancient Tonle Snguot hospital complex in the Angkor heritage site in Cambodia. In August-November 2018, Dr. Goh’s excavation at Fort Canning, Singapore also attracted a large number of students from primary, secondary and tertiary level.

For Dr. Moore, whose experience has been primarily in relation to Buddhist heritage, the management of cultural heritage is an emerging area of focus. This is where the internalisation of Buddhism into everyday life and the

resulting cultural attitudes and traditions – especially in the mainland Southeast Asian countries – at times find themselves at odds with international expectations and norms regarding heritage protection. Thus, there are complex interactions of accommodation and resistance regarding the preservation and maintenance (or management) of heritage monuments. Attitudes towards heritage preservation and management differ from village-level to academics and cultural heritage staff.

Balancing management and protection of cultural heritage becomes even more pronounced in situations of conflict or post-conflict recovery. Sharing his perspective grounded in extensive archaeological research in conflict zones in Southeast Asia (including Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge), Dr. Latinis notes that there are now more policies protecting monuments from destruction, desecration and looting during war and conflict, such as strict prohibitions to target monuments and archaeological sites during military operations as well as training and awareness programmes for military personnel. However, he acknowledges that aerial bombing campaigns and insurgencies still present significant challenges, and providing security zones for monuments during conflict is not a priority. To reduce these risks, Dr. Latinis believes that incentivising protective measures can be a good start, including involving civilian populations and building on cultural beliefs and traditions. In Cambodia, for example, emphasising the wrath of *neak ta* (ancestral spirits with abilities to help people when placated, or cause serious problems including death when disrespected) may help reduce damage since this is a very powerful cultural belief, even among insurgents.

Through their expertise and insights, the different experts and practitioners have given us a glimpse of the region’s diversity which informs and inspires different approaches to protect and celebrate heritage. Amidst challenging changes, there is a continuity of interest to preserve and keep this heritage as a legacy. This legacy should not divide, but instead provide a welcoming space to build communities, a sense of belonging and a shared identity in a constantly changing global environment. ■



Ceremony for blessings, protection and removal of Dvarapala Statue at Tonle Snguot, Cambodia

# The Chao Phraya: Where the Waters Are Awash with Life

**Anuthida Saelaow Qian** explores how much Bangkok has changed, yet still stays the same through her journey along the Chao Phraya.

The shrill shriek of a boatswain's whistle pierces the thick air. Colourful long-tail boats and ferries dart across the choppy waters, shuttling office workers, schoolchildren, vendors, monks, and tourists from pier to pier and zipping past tugboats dragging bulky cargo-laden barges. Some distance away, wooden stilt houses and stately places of worship dot the riverbanks, lending a touch of old-world charm as Bangkok's glittering skyscrapers loom in the background. As in centuries before, life in Thailand is intertwined with and anchored by the Chao Phraya: a cultural, spiritual, social, and economic lifeline of the country and its people.

The Chao Phraya wends southwards from its origin in Nakhon Sawan, where the Ping, Wang, Yom, and Nan rivers converge, coursing past several provinces before meandering through the heart of Bangkok and emptying into the Gulf of Thailand. It stretches for 372 kilometres, playing the roles of nurturer, protector, provider, and transportation artery all at once for the surrounding communities, wildlife, and crops. It is apt, then, that the Chao Phraya is also referred to as *Mae Nam* or *Menam* ("mother water").

During the Ayutthaya period (1350-1767), a small trading post at the mouth of the Chao Phraya favoured for its fertile plains formed the early nucleus of Bangkok. It would eventually become the site of the sprawling Thai capital, first in Thonburi on the river's west bank, then Rattanakosin on the east bank. Nestled between the

river and canals that served as moats, the artificial island of Rattanakosin was heavily fortified against attacks. Over time, the system of canals, or *khlongs*, was extended for trade, transport, drainage, and irrigation, spanning hundreds of kilometres. The riverine way of life on these watery streets earned Bangkok the moniker of "Venice of the East" in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Such is the charm of the river that spurred the works of eminent writers such as Joseph Conrad and Somerset Maugham. Contemplating the Chao Phraya during his stay at the Oriental Hotel (now Mandarin Oriental) in Bangkok, Maugham in his travel memoir *The Gentleman in the Parlour* described in rich and vivid detail the "broad and handsome" Menam with so much life happening around the riverfront and along its *khlongs*.

Today, the city's reach has broadened far beyond the Chao Phraya's river banks. Though many of the original canals have been filled in to pave the way for development, the existing waterways still serve as highways for the locals and offer visitors a novel way to explore Bangkok by hopping on one of the many ferries, river taxis, long-tail boats, or canal boats plying the waters. All around the river, many shopping districts, malls, and markets serve up an assortment of clothing, accessories, trinkets, food, and more to the avid shopper or foodie. Glitzy malls like the recently opened Iconsiam heave with luxury brands, while street vendors wreathed in smoke grill skewered meat and hawk their wares along the chaotic lanes of Chinatown slightly upstream. Meanwhile, bursts of kaleidoscopic blooms and sweet floral scents greet visitors to Pak Khlong

A panoramic view of the Chao Phraya





Georgeje Pauwels@Flickr

Talat, the go-to market for fresh flowers and produce. On a balmy afternoon, one may even opt to paddle through one of the ever-popular floating markets scattered in nearby provinces to catch a unique glimpse into yesteryear when early trade thrived on the very same waterways.

As one cruises along the Chao Phraya, a breathtaking host of attractions comes into view. With all its architectural intricacies and splendour, the magnificent Grand Palace is perhaps the most popular site for tourists, and for good reason. Originally constructed from wood, the Grand Palace's structures were eventually replaced with bricks recovered from the ruins of Ayutthaya and shipped south via the Chao Phraya. A stroll around the palace grounds yields some awe-inspiring views of gilded *chedis*, European-influenced decor, ornate sculptures, and manicured gardens.

Within the Palace's expansive compound is Wat Phra Kaew, or the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, which is regarded as the most famous Buddhist temple in Thailand. Home to the highly revered statue of Buddha carved from a single block of semi-precious green stone, the temple features glimmering mosaics and elaborate Thai murals. Other striking riverside landmarks just a stone's throw away include Wat Pho (Temple of the Reclining Buddha), famous for its 46-metre-long reclining Buddha covered in gold leaf, and Wat Arun (Temple of Dawn), named after Aruna, the Hindu god personifying dawn. Situated only a river crossing apart, these ancient temples are particularly stunning at sunrise and sunset, so much so that it stirred a "thrill of emotion" in Maugham when he wrote: *"It makes you laugh with delight to think anything so fantastic could exist on this sombre earth. They [the temples] are gorgeous; they glitter with gold and whitewash, yet are not garish; against the vivid sky, in the dazzling sunlight, they hold their own, defying the brilliance of nature."*

Many Thai festivals centre around the Chao Phraya, the most well-known being *Songkran* in mid-April to usher in the



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John Shedrick@Flickr

Thai New Year. Jovial revellers take to the streets wielding buckets and water guns, splashing water to wash away bad luck and herald a fresh start for the coming year. From cultural performances to carnival activities, many of the *Songkran* festivities in Bangkok unfold along the Chao Phraya.

Later in the year, the river also stars in *Loy Krathong*, where Thais and tourists alike gather under the full moon on the twelfth month of the Thai lunar calendar to pay respect to *Phra Mae Khongkha*, the Goddess of Water. As hinted through its name, roughly translated as “floating a basket”, the festival sees the waterways illuminated by *krathongs* (floating offerings usually made of banana tree trunks and decorated with flowers, candles, and joss sticks) set adrift by people hoping to send their ill fortunes away with a prayer on this night.

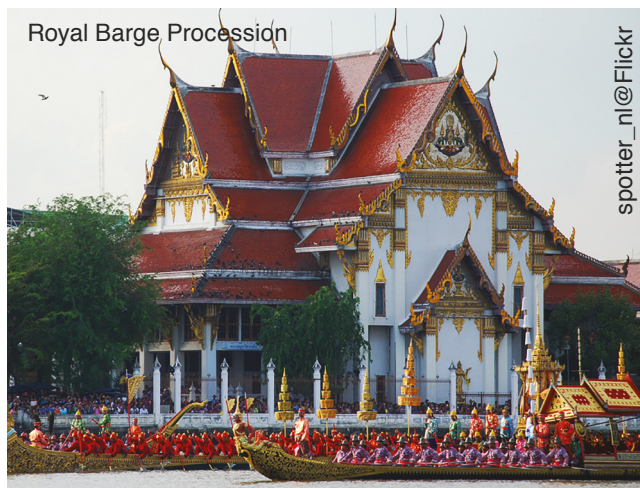
Rounding off the list of celebrations is the Royal Barge Procession, a spectacle of expertly crafted and exquisitely decorated vessels on the Chao Phraya exclusively on special and auspicious occasions. These extraordinarily ornate barges have long been used to ferry royalty, monastic robes, and other sacred objects, earning the river its nickname “the River of Kings.” The Royal Barge Procession will likely make a rare, mesmerising appearance on the river later this year, as one of the highlights that celebrate the coronation of His Majesty King Maha Vajiralongkorn.

The passage of time has seen the Chao Phraya and its surroundings undergo plenty of changes. As the city’s skyline continues to expand, many efforts have been made to preserve, restore, and develop the riverscape. For instance, riverside districts such as Bang Rak and Khlong San have been revived and rebranded into Bangkok’s Creative District. Ayutthaya’s old urban template, including its canals, was uncovered since the ancient city was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1991. Drawing on the words of Yossapol Boonsom, landscape architect and co-founder of the non-profit organisation Friends of the River, “the Chao Phraya is a precious gem. If we polish it and look after it, it will be worth a fortune.”

As sunlight glints off towering spires and steel high-rises at the same time while humble congee stalls rub shoulders with trendy restaurants along the riverside, the Chao Phraya connects Bangkok’s glorious past with the thriving metropolis that it is today, melding tradition with modernity in a seamless way. It is a microcosm of Bangkok that juggles between calm and chaotic, serene and secular, old and new. The river is thus forever present in the soul of Bangkokians, as beautifully reflected by Naowarat Pongpaiboon, a famous contemporary Thai poet:

*“Chao Phraya is the definition of love.  
It is in the glorious kingdom that we dream of.  
It symbolises the spiritual heart.  
That flows into every place where there is you...”*

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# A Coffee Tour Around Southeast Asia

Hayley Winchcombe captures a glimpse of life and history of the region through their love for coffee.

In Flores, an island of Indonesia 200 miles to the east of Bali, coffee pickers squeeze the bright outer skin of *Yellow Caturra* coffee cherries, passing them through a hand-cranked depulper to expose the sticky mucilage beneath. Along with other specialty Arabica varieties such as *Juria*, *Lini S795*, and *Red Caturra*, these distinctively coloured coffee cherries have to be painstakingly harvested and processed before their beans, infused with fruity and floral qualities, are brewed into steaming cups of coffee that are served across the region and beyond.

A bean primarily grown within thirty degrees north and south of the equator, coffee has been entwined in the history and culture of Southeast Asia for over 200 years, dating back to colonial times. Think of coffee's origins and the tropical lands of Brazil, Colombia, and Ethiopia probably come to mind. However, a little known fact is some of the world's coffee exporting giants can be found right here in Southeast Asia, where favourable geographic and climatic conditions have made coffee production a lucrative industry. Around 1.65 million tonnes of coffee is produced in Vietnam every year, making it the second largest exporter of coffee globally, while Indonesia trails slightly behind in fourth place with more than one million hectares of its land dedicated to coffee plantations. In Laos, where some of the finest coffee is produced in the Southern provinces, coffee crop is the country's largest agricultural export. Favourable production conditions and a steadily growing coffee culture have stimulated a burgeoning market for coffee in Southeast Asia, with niche players like Thailand and the Philippines also joining the fray.

Beyond its commercial value, coffee has become an essential part of local identities and cultures across



A traditional *kopitiam* breakfast of *kopi* and *kaya* toast

Panganiban@Flickr

Southeast Asian cities and towns. Coffee is the staple rhythm of everyday routines, the oil that fuels the daily grind of work tasks, appointments, dramas and deadlines. Amidst the cacophony of modern life in Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia, traditional *kopitiams* (*kopi* means “coffee” in Malay, and *tiam* means “shop” in Hokkien) remain an ode to the good old days, dishing up strong brews at low prices through tried-and-tested brewing methods: Beans are roasted with sugar and margarine before their grounds are strained through a cloth sock, lending a smooth, almost buttery texture to the signature cup. Besides the loquacious Southeast Asian taxi drivers, *kopitiams* are the best place to get a sense of local politics and “updates” on the neighbourhood developments. These friendly neighbourhood joints are diverse social spaces serving anyone and everyone. For long-time customers bantering with the shop-owners, retirees enjoying their morning *kopi-o* (black coffee), groups of friends gathering to watch football, and multi-generation families tucking into their breakfast, the *kopitiam* is synonymous with daily life.



A coffee farmer drying coffee cherries in Sulawesi, Indonesia

World Agroforestry Centre-  
Yusuf Ahmad@Flickr

Adding to the coffee-scape of Southeast Asian cities are indie cafés offering in-house roasted coffee that boasts a specialty flavour and artisanal quality to the most discerning coffee connoisseurs. Rubbing shoulders with local *kopitiams* as well as global chain brands like *Starbucks*, these indie coffee roasters are rising in both number and popularity, signifying the success of “the third wave coffee movement” that is carving out a name for itself amidst the expansion of coffee culture in Southeast Asia.

Coffee shops in the region have also become the buzzing workplace of digital nomads, entrepreneurs and freelancers, a symbol of productivity, mobility and agility. The modern predilection for quality coffee is found not only in the roasted beans but also in fancy interiors and the availability of free WiFi. In the age of social media, coffee has gone beyond a loveable pick-me-up to a cultural conquest: a marker of class, modernity and cultural sophistication. Young people experience this phenomenon intensely, swarming in droves to the most aesthetic and Instagramable coffee locations to snap pictures on their smart phones and share them instantly on social media platforms.

The spectrum of tasting notes and flavour profiles belonging to Southeast Asian specialty coffees, ranging from dense and smoky to crisp and fruity, hinge on the variety of plant, altitude, amount of rainfall or sunshine, and chemistry of the soil. Besides species and environmental differences, the region has also given birth to innovative and famous methods of roasting, brewing and preparation, guaranteeing a pleasant surprise wherever one ventures to drain a cup of their favourite bean.

Vietnam might have inherited coffee from the French, but the locals have put their own spin on the beloved beverage with variations incorporating yoghurt, fruit, cheese, and even eggs. *Cà phê trứng* (Vietnamese egg coffee) combines espresso, egg yolk and condensed milk whipped into a thick froth that overflows from the indulgent cup. This unusual concoction was created to address the shortage of milk in the 1940s and has since amassed an international following for its likeness to “liquid tiramisu”. Along with classic Vietnamese coffee brewed with the *phin* (a single-serving drip filter), such unconventional blends can be found in both concept cafés that have sprouted across the country, as well as no-frills coffee houses which have withstood the test of time. As the *drink du jour* in Vietnam, coffee is enjoyed in all forms by all walks of life, from

Egg whisk and *phin* to prepare Vietnamese egg coffee



Migle Seikyte@Flickr

## Ways of Ordering Kopi

### KOPI TYPE



#### Kopi

[Malay: “Coffee”]  
Coffee with condensed milk



#### Kopi-O

[Malay: “Coffee”; Hokkien: “Black”]  
Coffee with sugar



#### Kopi-C

[Malay: “Coffee”;  
Hainanese: “Fresh”]  
Coffee with evaporated  
milk and sugar



#### Kopi Peng

[Malay: “Coffee”; Hokkien: “Ice”]  
Iced coffee with  
condensed milk

### STRENGTH

- ☪ ☪ ☪ **Di Lo** [Hokkien: “Pour all the way”] Extra strong
- ☪ ☪ **Gao** [Hokkien: “Thick”] Strong
- ☪ **Po** [Hokkien: “Thin”] Mild

### SWEETNESS

- ☪ **Kosong** [Malay: “Zero; Empty”] No sugar
- ☪ ☪ **Siew Dai** [Foochow: “Less sweet”] Less sweet
- ☪ ☪ ☪ **Gah Dai** [Foochow: “More sweet”] Sweeter

### EXAMPLES

- Kopi-O Kosong Peng** Iced black coffee without sugar
- Kopi Siew Dai** Coffee with less sugar
- Kopi-C Gao** Strong coffee with evaporated milk and sugar

students and young adults working on laptops while savouring *sinh tố cà phê* (coffee and fruit smoothies) to seniors perched on low wooden stools sipping classic *cà phê sữa đá* (iced milk coffee).

In Malaysia, the signature brew not to be missed out by coffee hoppers is Ipoh White Coffee. The famed drink has made Ipoh, the idyllic capital of the state of Perak, one of the top three coffee spots in Asia by travel guide book, *Lonely Planet*. A mix of Arabica, Robusta and Liberica, the coffee beans are roasted with palm oil margarine that gives the roast a lighter colour, hence the nickname “white coffee”. It is served with condensed milk instead of sugar, giving a thick, creamy texture, a hint of charcoal aroma, and a full-bodied buttery flavour. While sipping the delightful White Coffee cup, one is also reminded of Ipoh’s history as a tin-mining hub during the British colonial era in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The White Coffee was then the creation of a Hainanese coffee roasting master who, through his innovative roasting and brewing techniques, toned down the bitterness of the coffee drink to suit the palate of Chinese migrants working in Ipoh’s tin mines.

In Indonesia, where humidity and rainfall make it necessary to dry, process, and sell off coffee quickly to avoid rot, a wet-hull method unique to the country called “*giling*

*basah*” is practised. The process, which involves removing the outer skin of coffee cherries and leaving them to sit in their mucilage for one day, results in a rich, syrupy brew. Since its introduction by the Dutch in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, coffee has flourished across the archipelago. Lintong and Mandheling, some of the most famous organic coffees in the world, yield a full-bodied, sweet, and earthy taste, while the Toraja region in Sulawesi produces a smoother, cleaner blend with hints of spices. While each coffee blend has its own uniqueness, none has a story like *kopi luwak*. The distinctive taste of this blend stems from the beans’ journey through the civet cat’s digestive system and were subsequently excreted. You may thumb your nose at drinking “cat poo,” but at the going price of US\$100-600 a pound, the civet cat’s waste is nothing to scoff at.

Across Southeast Asia, governments are taking increasing measures to promote their coffee industries. For instance, the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism supports an annual International Coffee Festival in Banda Aceh which showcases traditional methods of cultivation, roasting, brewing, and serving coffee. Local producers vie in a fiercely contested Coffee Competition to be named the best coffee in Aceh. Alongside these measures, support for coffee collectives - groups of producers - has been growing. Collectives share agricultural tips, work together to promote their region’s name, coordinate sales, and allow small-holder producers to access certification programmes such as Fairtrade, helping them to remain competitive amid evolving consumer preferences.

Even in smaller coffee-producing countries such as Myanmar, the quantity and quality of specialty coffee production has risen with the diligence of farmers trained through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Value Chains for Rural Development project as well as Coffee Quality Institute training programmes. At the third annual Myanmar Coffee Association Coffee Quality Competition in 2017, top coffee samples reached nearly 90 points on the 100-point Specialty Coffee Association quality scale, presenting a promising trajectory for coffee production in the country.

Along with its emergence as a significant cash crop of most ASEAN member countries, coffee has indelibly shaped life and identities in the region. Coffee shops across Southeast Asian cities and towns offer more than just a taste of unique flavours and aromas produced through distinct methods of production and brewing; they also provide a sense of belonging and community: Youngsters gather together around piping hot specialty coffee blends at cool and funky concept cafés while uncles, aunties and grandparents chit-chat over their morning *kopi-o* amidst the clamour of nearby hawker centres. With rich coffee offerings steeped in local history and culture, the region is the perfect choice for any traveller wishing to embark on a journey of tantalising coffee experience. ☕

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Mural of an old man drinking Old Town White Coffee painted by Ernest Zacharevic in Ipoh, Malaysia

Khamboopha@123rf



Cong Ca Phe - a popular communist-themed coffee shop in Vietnam

Cong Ca Phe



Women sit at a table in a kopitiam in George Town, Penang, Malaysia

Елена Ермакова@123rf



Luwak coffee beans

Studio Sana Lou@Flickr

# Sumatran Orangutan

*Pongo abelii*

Numbers remaining in the wild:  
14,613

Found in Sumatra, Indonesia

The Sumatran Orangutan is one of three orangutan species belonging to the great ape family. It is primarily arboreal, spending most of its life in the trees of tropical rainforests in Sumatra Island, Indonesia. Sumatran Orangutans sport distinctive reddish-brown fur, stand between 1.2 and 1.5 metres tall, and can weigh up to 90 kilograms. Habitat loss and degradation pose a serious threat to the species, with large forest areas cleared for oil palm plantations and other agricultural activities. Sumatran Orangutans are also highly vulnerable to poaching for sale in the illegal pet trade. The dramatic decline in its population has seen the Sumatran Orangutan listed on the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), and the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Red List of Critically Endangered Species.

(Source: WWF, IUCN)

