

THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN HISTORY

John Bastin and the Study of Southeast Asian History

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ON DECEMBER 14, 1959 PROFESSOR JOHN BASTIN, OF THE DEPARTMENT of History, University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, delivered his inaugural lecture under the title "The Study of Southeast Asian History." This lecture touches upon several aspects of Southeast Asian history. It has the merit of raising certain theoretical issues the urgency of which is beyond doubt considering the fact that interest in theory, in the field of Southeast Asian history, is not sufficiently encouraging. Bastin's lecture serves hence as a good starting point for a discussion on some of the important issues raised. I have selected it for a critical appraisal in the hope that this will lead to a further extension of the theoretical field.

The issues dealt by Bastin belong to different theoretical categories. He deplores the attempt to construe a propagandistic history wherein the role of Western elements is played down and the significance of Asian factors is exaggerated beyond proportion. This aspect of Bastin's lecture has been critically appraised by Singhal.¹ Bastin is accused of generalizing the propagandistic tendency of Asian historians, without the correct foundation for this generalization. In this respect Singhal is certainly right. Bastin has also complained of what he feels as the tendency to regard the colonizing Westerners as morally bad while the colonized Asian are suggested to be morally good and innocent.

Leaving the problem of ascertaining the truth of his accusation aside, let us start with our theme. Bastin has put forward certain difficulties blocking the path of what he conceives to be an interpretation of Southeast Asian history from a Southeast Asian point of view as an alternative to a Europe-centric history. He poses the following problem: The fact that Western historians of Southeast Asia have been culturally conditioned by their Western background affects their attempt to understand and develop a Southeast Asian-centric history. He says, "If European historians, and for that matter Asian historians (for it must be remembered that the majority of these historians are trained in Western historical methods)

¹ D. P. Singhal, "Some comments on The Western element in modern Southeast Asian history," *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. 1, no. 2 (Sept. 1960).

bring to their study of Southeast Asian history the concepts and categories and periodizations of Western historiography, and interpret Southeast Asian history in the light of these concepts and categories, then they can hardly succeed in producing the new sort of history for which there is apparently so great a need. The type of Asian and Southeast Asian history which is being written to-day, even by Asian historians themselves, is history in the Western tradition; for the kind of history with which we are all familiar is indissolubly tied to the whole Western cultural base. No amount of emotional criticism of this historiography will alter that state of affairs. If a different sort of Southeast Asian history is ever to be written, then what is required is a revolutionary reappraisal of existing historical methods and techniques, and of existing historical concepts and periodization. But that particular task, which is so often talked about, is fraught with so many difficulties and hazards that it remains unattempted.”²

According to Bastin, instead of attempting the revolutionary reappraisal of the writing of history, in the sense indicated by the above passage, a neat deception has been perpetrated by a number of historians who convince themselves and their audience, that by paying exclusive attention on the evils of Western colonialism, they accomplished an interpretation of Asian history from an Asian point of view, and escaped thereby from the Europe-centric approach. He says of them, “They have, of course, deluded themselves, and those who have listened to them, for their particular brand of interpretation bears as much resemblance to history proper, as the comments in a *Pravda* editorial on Wall Street bear to the reality of an American business life.”³

Another problem refers to the nature of the source materials for Southeast Asian history, the bulk of which are in Western languages, and in the case of Malacca and Indonesia in English and Dutch. Bastin perceives some consequences flowing from this. Though they offer the possibility to extract an extraordinary amount of information on Southeast Asian manners and customs, yet these sources are comprehensible only within a Western historical framework. “They tend, in fact, to establish the pattern of the historical narrative before it is even written.”⁴ After citing an instance from a Dutch work (H. J. de Graff, *De regering van Sultan Agung*) Bastin draws the following inference: “The fact, there-

² John Bastin, *The Study of Modern Southeast Asian History* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya, 1959). An abbreviated version of this study has been published under the title *Western Element in Modern Southeast Asian History*.

³ J. Bastin, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

fore, that often the richest sources for the study of modern Southeast Asian history tend to be Western sources leads, inevitably, to the imposition of a Western structural framework on that history.”⁵

Hence a Western historian who attempts to write a Southeast Asian history from the Southeast Asian point of view, according to Bastin, cannot escape certain severe limitations. His own Western background for another reason will condition him from successfully interpreting Asian history from an Asian point of view. The “strangely different, and frequently confusing,” Southeast Asian world is, to Bastin, a region which the mind of a Western historian cannot comprehend from within.⁶

Bastin’s position may be summarized in the following: He is sceptical of the attempt to write successfully Southeast Asian history on a new basis, differing from previous ones. The arguments he provides are the following: The Western historian, Bastin claims, will be prevented from understanding Southeast Asian history from the Southeast Asian point of view because he is conditioned by his Western background. He will not be able to allow his mind to be “dissolved in the strangely different, and frequently confusing, Southeast Asian world.” As to the Asian historian, the Western source materials and the Western method of historical writing will become his main obstacles. Western historiography and the nature of the source materials will condition the structure of the finished product from the very beginning. These arguments, one meant to apply to the Western historian, the other to the Asian historian, made Bastin conclude that the prospect of writing Southeast Asian history from the Southeast Asian point of view is indeed bleak. He doubts whether it will succeed.⁷ So far Bastin’s view.

My first point of criticism is that Bastin has complicated rather than clarified the problem of writing Southeast Asian history from the Southeast Asian point of view. In his lecture he discusses two subjects as though they were one. He discusses the writings of certain historians who belittle the role of the Westerners in Southeast Asian history and those historians who write propagandistic history. He also discusses the theoretical side of writing Southeast Asian history from the Southeast Asian point of view. The written histories produced by the historians criticized by Bastin, as such, are not relevant to the problem of the prospect and possibility of writing Southeast Asian history from the Southeast Asian point

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9. This, at least, is how I understand the phrase he uses, one which is certainly liable to befog the issues. “How, one may equally ask, can the Western historian allow his mind to be dissolved in the strangely different, and frequently confusing Southeast Asian world?” What is this dissolution of mind? Bastin borrows the term from Geyl.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

of view. It is one problem to assess their works, it is another problem to inquire on the possibility of Southeast Asian history from its own viewpoint. My criticism here is not that Bastin is unaware of the factor of relevance noted above, but that he discusses them together without any systematic division.

The second point of criticism I should like to raise is the fact that Bastin has not taken the trouble to clarify certain concepts he uses which are crucial to the success of his argumentation. I have in mind the term "allow his mind to be dissolved in the strangely different, and frequently confusing Southeast Asian world." What is meant by "dissolved"? I suspect it is what Collingwood calls "emphatic understanding," or what Windelband, Dilthey, Rickert, Weber and other German sociologists and historians call *verstehen*. The great debate on this problem took place in Germany in the course of the decades preceding the second world war. The discussion on this problem is still going on with the participation of historians, philosophers and sociologists from Great Britain, France, America and the Scandinavian countries. To put it roughly and briefly, *verstehen* means understanding the historical event in the manner of the participants, transposing oneself to the period under study, trying to grasp its moving forces, looking at the event from within, not as a distant and external observer. It is the phenomenological approach to the understanding of history. Had Bastin used an existing and recognizable term in the field of theoretical history, we would feel that the blame is ours for not understanding him. In such a case he could assume that we know the term, as it is expected that no time should be wasted on the preliminary clarification of elementary concepts. As it is, Bastin has preferred to use a term which is probably understood only by himself. Hence my demand that he clarifies the term "dissolved" in the context he had in mind, is perfectly justified.

Apart from the term "dissolved" he has also used other vague terms like "the pattern of the historical narrative," and "imposition of a Western structural framework." Again, these two terms are probably understood only by Bastin himself. We do not question his right to use any term he likes but we do insist that it should not be ambiguous and a little trouble should be taken to clarify it. Should this not be done the term would then be a great obstacle in communication between those interested in the issue.

To the above difficulty is added yet another one which, to my mind, is more serious than the previous ones since it delivers us to the greatest of complications. Most of the historiographical terms are used by Bastin in the undifferentiated sense. In his conception of history Bastin lays the

emphasis on interpretation. Once or twice he uses the word explanation. The full import of the distinction between explanation and interpretation has not been brought to bear on the theoretical side of Bastin's lecture. To interpret Southeast Asian history, as it is with any history, is not the same as explaining it. To put it in a nutshell, interpretation deals with the assignment of meaning or significance to an event relative to the historian's criteria, whereas explanation deals with the imputation of causes and conditions which are not supposed to be relative to the observer, that is, to his philosophy or system of values. Because this distinction is not fully observed by Bastin, he is caught in a barely perceptible confusion. He argues on two different things and gives the impression that they are the same. Suppose we take his statement that the Western historian cannot escape his Western background as true, it applies at most to Southeast Asian history in the realm of interpretation. But this need not be the case in the realm of explanation. Personally, I believe it possible in both realms for non-Asian historians to write the history of Southeast Asia, and this belief can find support in the recent development of historiography and the social sciences. There is no reason why a Western historian, thoroughly familiar with Southeast Asia, fully equipped with the knowledge of its peoples and languages, understanding their psychology and mentality, should not be able to write Southeast Asian history from the Southeast Asian viewpoint, given the necessary conditions. But Bastin says his Western background makes it impossible for him to do so, or at least, unlikely to succeed. As a statement of fact, that Western historians in the past have not been able to write Southeast Asian history from the Southeast Asian point of view, I may not deny it. But if this statement is presented as an insoluble problem, I do reject it. The reasons are many for rejecting it. The social sciences (or studies for those who disagree to consider them as sciences), by which term is meant here sociology, anthropology, history, social psychology, have thrown up a body of knowledge which has made it possible for a sub-discipline like the sociology of knowledge to develop. It is precisely here that the problems of viewpoints, historical objectivity, emphatic understanding, the influence of the age on the choice of perspectives, value judgments, historical and sociological laws, causation, identification of events, etc., have received the attention they deserve with astonishing results. The theory as well as the practice of writing on a subject outside one's own culture have been established beyond doubt. I can cite numerous works as illustrations, in the field of history, sociology and anthropology. Montgomery Watt's works are good examples.⁸ In the field of anthropology, Ruth Benedict's

⁸ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford, 1953) and *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford, 1956).

work can be mentioned.⁹ In the field of sociology I can cite Robert Bellah's work.¹⁰ In Indonesian study, the works of Wertheim and Schrieke contain numerous portrayals of events as seen by the Indonesian peoples from within, though Schrieke has failed to present the spread of Islam from the Islamic Indonesian point of view. The theoretical and practical possibility is beyond doubt. If Bastin feels that such an ideal cannot be achieved only because of insufficiency of data, his argument can be accepted, though it may later be no more valid with the discovery of more data. But Bastin does not present it in this way. He insists that the Western historian is doomed to fail in his task by virtue of his being a Westerner. It is a relativistic argument which takes away objectivity in the writing of history for it implies that there are no objective standards of historiography which can be applied by everyone beyond the most elementary level like checking the reliability of data and not perpetrating "a neat deception."

In order to bring home more effectively the truth of the criticism against Bastin, it would be appropriate here to define the area of discourse. Modern historians and social scientists made the distinction between history, philosophy of history, and historiography. The concepts of history and philosophy of history have often been ambiguously used, for each of them contains two different meanings. History is supposed to mean (a) the actual concrete events, the subject matter of the historian's interest and (b) the finished product of the historian's labor, the narration or analysis of events. Philosophy of history is supposed to mean (a) the reconstruction of the past with a view of showing the general pattern of human development based on the belief in universal laws and purpose guiding human history. Examples of this are the Marxian, Toynbeeian and Spenglerian conceptions of history as worked out in their writings. (b) The other meaning attached to the term is the conception of how to arrive at the most rationally defensible presuppositions in the writings of history which no historian can avoid. Philosophy of history in this sense deals with the choice of foci in the reconstruction of events, the conception of the value and function of history, problems of objectivity in human thinking which intrude on the historian's mind, etc.¹¹ Taken in this sense no historian can avoid having a philosophy of history of some sort. "There are some elements of an historical philosophy

⁹ Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1947).

¹⁰ R. N. Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1957).

¹¹ On the difference between the two meanings of the term, together with other significant problems around them, see Raymond Aron, "Philosophy of History," *Chambers Encyclopedia*, Vol. X (London, 1950).

in every historical work, but they remain implicit and inarticulate, tending to be in practice merely working hypotheses or topics of inquiry."¹²

Historiography, on the whole, deals with the theory and methodology of the writing of history, covering such interests as the internal and external criticisms of historical documents and other data, theories and problems of analysis or synthesis, imputation of causes, problems of data-finding, etc. In reality the divisions we have made are not always easy to maintain. At certain points they intersect. The easiest to maintain is between the two types of philosophy. Between certain aspects, the second type of philosophy and certain aspects of historiography, the boundary line is rather hazy. It is like the water of a river mixing with the sea, when it enters the ocean.

My intention here, as indicated earlier, is to define the area of discourse and locate Bastin's whereabouts in the area. It is not my purpose to discuss the three terms at great length. Bastin, at the beginning of his lecture, notes the variety of historical comprehensions, understandings and interpretations of history offered by historians. History, he says, cannot be produced (I would say reconstructed) in a definitive form. Human history is too vast to be encompassed within the context of a single interpretation. History is a phenomenon in constant flux. Every age interprets the past by its own standards. The present is no exception.¹³ So far we may agree with Bastin when he states those views which, in the light of modern historiography, may be regarded as truisms. No doubt it is sometimes necessary to restate truisms depending on the purpose. In the context of his lecture these truisms are stated in the interest of a covertly upheld relativistic standpoint. They are his philosophical presuppositions. Modern historiography and the philosophy of history, in the sense of methodological inquiry, consider those truisms as problems confronting the historian when he embarks on his inquiry. They are to him a challenge and the initial relativistic position induced by them is meant to be overcome and transcended for otherwise, the writing of history is liable to be debased to sentimentality or neat deceptions, if not vulgar distortion. It appears that Bastin does not realize the consequences of his covertly upheld relativism. His whole attitude towards the problem is one of defeatism. We know that different peoples in different times, through the mouthpiece of some historians, interpret themselves and their past in different manners. The proper problem to pose, and this is a

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 149. In the realm of the philosophy of history, in the methodological sense, further subdivision has been accomplished. For the present purpose it is not necessary to refer to it.

¹³ John Bastin, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

crucial one, is how to interpret the past, and to ask what is the most truthful and worthy interpretation in the light of present requirements. Bastin completely avoids this issue which is the central problem in the study of any history. The problem is not upheld by Bastin because it was eliminated before it was born. The reconstruction of Southeast Asian history, other than that from a Western point of view or historical framework, is one improbable of solution according to Bastin. Once again it is not with the suggestion that we are concerned but with the arguments and the elimination of the problem. His main argument with reference to Western historians is that they cannot free themselves from the influence of their background. As apparent from his lecture, he did not discuss his theme on the basis of the division currently employed by modern historians. He did, however, separate and reject the philosophy of history in the sense of global pattern of development, our first type. But for the rest, the concepts of written history, philosophy of history of the methodological type, and historiography, are not differentiated. The philosophy of history is fused with historiography as revealed by the fact that Bastin made use of the philosophical element as the main argument against Asian historian, though he presented it as an element of historiography. His remark that the "kind of history with which we are all familiar is indissolubly tied to the whole Western cultural base" is not a historiographical but a philosophical judgment. Apparently he did not apply the distinction between historiography as a technique and methodology in the writing of history as well as the philosophical and cultural elements in the historian's mind which intrudes upon his work. As a technique and methodology, historiography can be transferred from one culture to another like a plant which can be moved from one pot to another. But here Bastin says that you cannot remove the plant without the pot. The analogy with architecture is perhaps closer. The modern science of building construction originates in the West. The Japanese took it over and construct buildings based on Japanese styles. We have here three different things, the science of building, the process of construction, and the architectural style of the finished product. Bastin claims that the science of building is indissolubly tied to the locality and architectural background of its origin, the Western world.

Bastin has also been inconsistent in his views. The inconsistency flows from those aspects of his lecture against which criticisms have been delivered. When it comes to Southeast Asian adopting modern historiography, he reminds them that it is indissolubly tied to the Western cultural base. Yet Bastin shows a sign of amazement to learn that the Marxist materialist philosophy of history, with its emphasis on social and economic

analysis has exerted such little influence in the scholarly writing of Southeast Asian history, despite the fact that Marxism has made such a tremendous impact on Asia. Why, we may ask, should Bastin raise this point? How can the materialist philosophy of history be utilized by Asian historians since it is indissolubly tied to the Western cultural base? If it is possible to transfer the Marxian philosophy to Asian life, why not also modern historiography? Probably, Bastin refers to the non-Asian Marxists in Asia. Again there is ambiguity. Does he mean the Asian Marxist or the Western Marxist? ¹⁴

In his lecture he criticizes those historians who delivered moral judgment on their subject, in the present context—Western colonialism. The passing of moral judgment, he claims, is none of the historian's business.¹⁵ But, on the preceding page, he paraded the atrocities and acts of cruelty of Asian despots to show that it is not only the Western imperial powers who committed such acts. He says, "Where in the whole period of Western contact with Malaya be matched those frightful atrocities which the Thais inflicted on the Malays when they invaded Kedah in 1821?" This is certainly a case of passing moral judgment. Apparently, he did so to correct the exaggerated emphasis on Western atrocities. This attempt to correct, requires that Bastin also passes moral judgment but then, why state as a principle that historians have no business to pass a moral judgment? As it is, with the other aspects of the problem of Southeast Asian historiography, Bastin did not allow the full impact of modern historiography and philosophy of history in the methodological sense to bear upon the discussion on moral judgment or value judgment. The Amsterdam historian Jan Romein and the sociologist Wertheim, whom Bastin characterizes as belonging to the sentimentalist school,¹⁶ delivered their value judgment on a methodical and reasoned conclusion on premises developed from all the areas of discourse pertinent to historiography. Romein had devoted a great deal of attention to theoretical history. From Bastin's lecture one gets the impression as though Romein and Wertheim indulged in what has been classified as vulgar value judgment. Their value judgment is based on their philosophy of history. It is this philosophy of history which Bastin should criticize, if he disagrees with passing moral judgment. A mere statement that it is not the business of historians to pass moral judgment, will not satisfy those who have arrived at the standpoint to do so after a methodical investigation on the subject.

Nowhere in his paper did Bastin ever disclose his standpoint on the nature of history, whether it is a science or not. In my opinion, history

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

is a science, like sociology or economics. This implies that history can be studied, based on our understanding of its laws, or regularities. Bastin denies the existence of patterns of historical development and laws of human behavior.¹⁷ It is clear that he refers to global historical laws in the Marxian, Toynbeeian and Spenglerian sense. However, in another sense, there are laws of human behavior in history. This recognition will have as its consequences the acceptance of the possibility of isolating historiography from its Western cultural base, for science, as science, is subject to diffusion and transplantation from one cultural area to another. No doubt there is a difference between the writing of history as a science and the natural sciences like physics. To avoid a tedious digression at this juncture I shall not elaborate on the proofs for the scientific credentials of history and its difference with physics and biology. For those interested there are enough references on this subject.

It is true that it is more difficult to give an impersonal and impartial account of the decline of Rome than the earthquake that devastated Pompeii. Given the data for both events, the historian in his reconstruction of the downfall of Rome, would have to take into account the human factors, the interplay of emotions and sentiments among the people under study, their political and economic systems, their cultural and religious values, etc., all of which may or may not be congenial to his philosophical conceptions of those factors. Bias and prejudices may consciously or unconsciously color his account of the event. In the case of his account of the earthquake, should he be a geologist, the intrusion of his philosophical biases would be reduced to the minimum or even eliminated.

Then there is the difference of the subject of analysis. Historical causality, because of its basically human element, is interwoven with such factors as chance, individuality, and non-repeatability. If we convert the term chance into indeterminacy, we find that even in the natural sciences we have those three categories of indeterminacy, individuality and non-repeatability, though not to the same degree as in history. Just as the Indonesian revolution is an event which possesses its own individuality and distinctness, not subject to a complete understanding of all its possible causes, non-repeatable in its entirety, so is the earthquake of Krakatau. An absolute demarcation between geology and history in terms of its essential nature, is impossible to maintain because both contain certain common elements and both can be subsumed under one general heading, science. Both include general laws and patterns of regularity. It is these general laws and regularities which partly constitute the warp and woof of history. No doubt the sciences dealing with these regularities and gen-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

eral laws, like sociology, are not strictly speaking, the science of history, but which historian has ever dispensed with those sciences of human behavior like sociology and psychology, in his historical synthesis? It is usually the neglect of sociology and psychology which has led some to propound that there are no general laws of human behavior. Because of this they succeeded to slice off a substantial portion from the science of history, the very essential part which gives history its scientific quality.

The complexity of the causal nexus in history has contributed to the fact that some historians are hesitant to recognize it as a science. But if we bear in mind also the prevalence of general laws in history, the recognition of history as a science will not appear as an insoluble problem.¹⁸ It is not necessary for us to enumerate at length those general laws. A few is sufficient. Let us start with Acton's famous dictum, power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Then we have one formulated by Mosca. Whether it is in a democracy or dictatorship, men are always governed by a minority.¹⁹ As a recent author puts it, "It is beyond question that certain uniformities and regularities may be observed in historical phenomena, there is no difficulty in designating these as 'laws' in the broad sense which this usage requires."²⁰

The scientific nature of historiography as a discipline makes it untenable to maintain that it is indissolubly tied to a particular ethno-cultural base, as indicated by Bastin. As noted earlier, historiography, as a scientific technique, like any other, can be utilized by any people given the preparatory background. That being the case, we are still left with the problem whether the Southeast Asian historian can rewrite Southeast Asian history from its own point of view. According to Bastin, the prospect is bleak. Since the richest sources for the study of Southeast Asian history, as noted earlier, according to Bastin, tend to be Western sources, it leads inevitably to "the imposition of a Western structural framework on that history." Whatever Bastin has in mind expressed by that vague phrase, one thing is certain, that a Southeast Asian point of view can still be inferred from those Western sources. Before we proceed further, let us define what is meant by "Southeast Asian point of view." Neither Bastin nor other writers before him has ever defined what is meant by the term.

¹⁸ For the relationship between sociology and history and other related sciences, see Henri Berr and Lucien Febvre, "Historiography," *Encyclopedia Social Sciences*, edited by E. R. A. Seligman, Vol. VII (New York: Macmillan Co., 1951).

¹⁹ For further interest in general laws in history, see C. G. Hempel, "The function of general laws in history," in P. Gardiner (ed.), *Theories of History* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1962).

²⁰ G. J. Garraghan, *A Guide to Historical Method* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1957), p. 148.

Neither has it been exhaustively discussed whether there was, in the past, such a point of view. As this is a debatable question, I would for the purpose of the present paper restrict it to the Malayan point of view as represented by the Sultanate of Malacca in the 15th century, for such a point of view did exist.²¹ Suppose we only use the Western sources, we can still, despite the limitation imposed by them, learn something of the Malaccan point of view. We may be able to read between the lines what the Sultan of Malacca and those involved in the event thought of themselves and their surrounding neighbors. What were the events which they considered important? What were the interests which they defended? How did they tackle the problems they perceived? How did they view the Portuguese intrusion? What ideals and historical forces moved them? It is when we reconstruct their history with reference to such problems that it can truly be claimed that we are writing their history from their own point of view. A mere allocation of greater space in our history books on the Sultanate as such need not mean that we have succeeded in presenting its point of view, unless those questions have formed the foci of our interest. Whether the sources are Western or local, does not necessarily prejudge the case in favor of this or that point of view. I shall illustrate this with one instance. During the early part of the fifteenth century, we can see from the historical records, both Western and Chinese, that the political power which impressed the Sultanate of Malacca most was China and not Portugal. From the activities of the Muslim admiral Cheng Ho, we can understand the extent of Chinese supremacy in the area.²² It is not difficult to see that the Sultanate of Malacca was anxious of gaining the protective friendship of China. Hence, from its point of view, China was the number one power to reckon with. Then, there was its rivalry with other states and conflict with turbulent elements. When the Portuguese first came to Malacca under Diogo Lopez de Sequiera, in 1509 A.D., Sultan Mahmud of Malacca was by no means overcome by fear and subservience. On the contrary, the Sultanate expressed a defiant spirit which eventually led to the siege and conquest of Malacca by d'Al-

²¹ I have especially selected an earlier period than the 18th or subsequent centuries as the scarcity of data is allegedly greater. However, if we take a much later period, nothing serves as a better instance where the Malayan point of view is so well presented on the basis of the British sources than Swettenham's account of the policy pursued by the Sultan of Kedah concerning the occupation of Penang by Francis Light on 11 August 1786. See Sir Frank Swettenham, *British Malaya* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1955).

²² For further account, see F. J. Moorehead, *A History of Malaya and Her Neighbours* (London: Longmans and Greene, 1957), Vol. I, pp. 119-123. Also R. J. Wilkinson, "The Malacca Sultanate," *Journal Royal Asiatic Society Malayan Branch*, Vol. XIII, pt. 2 (1935).

buquerque in July 1511 A.D.²³ The point I wish to stress is that it is from the Western sources that we can know what the point of view of the Malacca Sultanate was regarding its foreign policy, its attitude towards the powers of the time. Hence, Bastin's pessimism of reconstructing Southeast Asian history from the Southeast Asian point of view, is unfounded even if we take into account that the bulk of the available source materials to-day are Western sources.

Apparently, Bastin completely ignores the fact that in the writing of history, the questions we raise and the problems we pose are at times more important than the available sources. These problems and questions suggested at the beginning of an investigation eventually direct the process of historical reconstruction and subsequently determine the emerging pattern of the historical narrative. As long as interest in the Southeast Asian point of view is suppressed—either by pessimism or a wrong conception of the task—the guiding problems and questions that will finally reveal the Southeast Asian point of view, will remain buried under the dust of historical documents.

²³ It took d'Albuquerque three weeks, eventually leading to his attack on Malacca, to ask Sultan Mahmud to release the Portuguese captives left by Sequeira in the hands of the Sultan, two years earlier. See R. J. Wilkinson, "The Fall of Malacca," *Journal Royal Asiatic Society Malayan Branch*, Vol. XIII, pt. 2 (1953).

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