

TWELVE PARAGRAPHS ABOUT SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Southeast Asia has a real grip on me. From the very first time I went there, it was a fulfilment of my childhood fantasies of the way travel should be.

Anthony Bourdain



Saint Francis Xavier, the Apostle of Asia (Parish "Phanxicô Xavie"), in Hue (Vietnam)

1

Around four and a half million square kilometres make up this immense Asian subcontinent, located south of China, east of the Indian subcontinent and northwest of Australia, often regarded as mainland of Oceania. To the north of Southeast Asia, we see the Bay of Bengal; to the east, the islands of Oceania and the Pacific Ocean; to the south, Australia and the Indian Ocean. Situated at the southern tip of the Eurasian Plate, Southeast Asia shares borders with four other geological plates, namely the Indian, Philippine, Pacific and Australian plates. This is why Southeast Asia is seismically unstable and frequently volcanically active.



Temple of Literature (Hanoi, Vietnam)

2

Southeast Asia is made up of the following countries: Brunei, Cambodia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, East Timor and Vietnam – always remembering that some of the islands of Indonesia belong, geologically speaking, to Oceania.



Hue, the spiritual, intellectual and cultural heart of Vietnam

3

Today's political borders of Southeast Asia owe little or nothing to cultural and historical coherence. For example, it is not easy to properly identify the Hindu influence, which is acknowledged to be majoritarian: "... in Cambodia and Java, Hindu presence is evident in art, religious practices and customs in general; in Vietnam and the Philippines, Hinduism is much more subtle than it is noticeable at first glance. It is true that the Philippines retain some traces of Indian culture; but this does not allow us to talk about an Indo-Filipino stratum on Malay civilization, as some scholars do." (João Vicente Ganzarolli de Oliveira. *História & geografia da arte*, Rio Bonito, Benedictus, 2024).



Singapore Changi Airport

4

The poster announces the presence of a place of prayer, apparently ecumenical, in Singapore, theoretically a secular state.



Singapore Changi Airport

5

Most Singaporeans profess Buddhism, and Christianity is second most preferred in their country.



Singapore Changi Airport

6

So why is there no images of Buddha and of Jesus Christ in the prayer hall? The room is nothing more nothing less than a mosque, where the only welcome visitors are Muslims!



Hue's citadel, former imperial capital of Vietnam during the Nguyễn dynasty

7

Following a cultural rule, Southeast Asian art has religion as its central theme: “The trade routes were the same as those followed by the missionaries. In the case of theatre, the religious origins are evident: they are found in ancient shamanic rites; even today, theatrical performances are associated with magic, healing and the action of spirits. Following the eastern tradition, Southeast Asian theatre almost always combines dance, music, movement and recited text. In many languages of the subcontinent, there are no specific words to designate purely spoken drama.” (João Vicente Ganzarolli de Oliveira. *História & geografia da arte*).



Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (Phnom Penh, Cambodia)

8

Under Pol Pot's regime, which was in force between 1975 and 1979, no less than 1.5 million Cambodians (i.e, around 25% of the Cambodian population) were murdered to implement the "best possible world" raved about by Karl Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao Tse Tung, Fidel Castro, Pol Pot himself and many others.



Phnom Penh

9

Although still under the tyranny of the hammer and the sickle, Cambodia has admitted the return of the monarchy – a unique fact in the *orbis communisticus*.



Inside the Library of the Royal University of Fine Arts, in Phnom Penh

10

With the restoration of the monarchy came a spark of hope for freedom and prosperity for the Cambodians.



Phnom Penh

11

The influence of Western culture is felt in many areas of life in Southeast Asia; note the door decorated in the neoplastic style of the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian.



Laotian Art

12

Sculpted in the 18th century, this Buddha from Laos evokes the predominance of Indian culture in Southeast Asia; Buddhism and Hinduism are present, in one way or another, in every part of the subcontinent. We know that “Much of Southeast Asia is part of the Pacific Ring of Fire, marked by frequent earthquakes and tsunamis, as well as by intense volcanic activity. With its epicentre in Sumatra, the famous earthquake of December 2004 reached nine on the Richter

scale and shook the entire planet; it triggered gigantic waves and caused the death of 230,000 people. In addition to five Southeastern Asian countries (Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Burma and Singapore), Sri Lanka, India and much of the East African coast were also affected. It is possible that this same dangerous nature has contributed to the emergence of a positive fatalism, as seen in the Philippines, for example. Aware that this life is fleeting and that it can end at any moment, Filipinos have developed a taste for life, as if they wanted to enjoy their smallest portions to the fullest. This is what they express in the motto *bahala na*: 'let it be what has to be'." (João Vicente Ganzarolli de Oliveira. *História & geografia da arte*).