



Farish A. Noor

# Data-Gathering in Colonial Southeast Asia 1800-1900

## Framing the Other

Amsterdam  
University  
Press

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Cover photo: Farish A. Noor, based on the author's collection, 2019

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Typesetting: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6372 441 8

e-ISBN 978 90 4854 445 5

DOI 10.5117/9789463724418

NUR 692

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*To my wife Amy,  
As always*

No one would have believed in the last years of the nineteenth century that this world was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own; that as men busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinised and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinise the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water.<sup>1</sup>

H.G. Wells,  
*The War of the Worlds*

<sup>1</sup> Wells, 1898: 1.

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# A Note on Spelling

A note on the spelling of words and names as they appear in this book:

I have retained the spelling of words and names as they appeared in the texts that I refer to in the following chapters, and in some cases there have been differences in the way some names were written by different authors. In the case of place-names, I have retained the original spelling as found in the texts I refer to in the first instance, but have otherwise used contemporary local spellings in subsequent references. Whatever discrepancies or inaccuracies in spelling found in the originals have been retained, and indicated as well.



# Introduction

## The Panopticon in the Indies: Data-Gathering and the Power of Knowing

Panopticon:

(pan-op-ti-con | \pə-'näp-ti-'kän, pa-'; *plural* panopticons)

Definition of *panopticon*:

1: an optical instrument combining the telescope and microscope

2: a circular prison built with cells arranged radially so that a guard at a central position can see all the prisoners

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary

The problem of control and reproduction of order was surveillance, but surveillance of a distinctively modern kind.<sup>1</sup>

David Lyon,

*Liquid Surveillance* (2010)

### I. Lost no longer: The House of Glass that is Postcolonial Southeast Asia

This is a book about books, and work on this book began as I was sailing in the Straits of Malacca, heading North-Northwest (bearing N30°W, by the compass) in the direction of the Gulf of Martaban, via the Andaman Sea, as a member of the Japanese Peace Boat team.

Though we were out at sea and the weather was clement, there was little by way of romance and adventure on offer. Thanks to the global positioning system that was installed in every cabin I knew precisely where we were. The GPS revealed our exact whereabouts and also provided us a stream of constantly updated information about our ship's bearing and speed, the weather for the day and the days to come, and the estimated time of our arrival (which, as it turned out, was correct down to the minute). My journey to Myanmar was an enjoyable—though predictable—one that was without any unforeseen surprises, save for the fact that I had packed some toothpaste but had forgotten to include a toothbrush. From beginning to end I was aware of the fact that the

<sup>1</sup> Lyon, 2020: 327.

journey I made took place in a Southeast Asia that has by now been thoroughly mapped and charted, and where it is virtually impossible to get lost.

It was also a journey that took place against a wider backdrop of debates about data and information, coming not long after the Cambridge Analytica data-mining scandal, and allegations that the data brokerage company had played a part in election campaigns in countries like India, Kenya, the United Kingdom and the United States. The Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal that followed in its wake revealed that the personal data of millions of social media users had been collected and used for political ends without their knowledge or consent, and commentators have seriously begun to question the role of social media platforms in the spread of fake news as well as fanning centrifugal tendencies in society.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile in China experts had raised the alarm over the manner in which the Chinese government was using the tools of social media and public surveillance to monitor the country's population of 1.4 billion people, and creating a social credit system (*shèhuì xìnyòng tǐxì*) which by 2020 is expected to bring together the combined data of all its citizens including their spending patterns, viewing habits, hobbies and fancies as well as their postings on the internet so as to be able to confer each and every citizen 'credit' based on their social and economic reputation, while also punishing those 'trust-breakers' (*shìxìnzhe*) who oppose the state or misbehave through penalties such as flight bans and excluding them from luxury hotels or prestige products. China's public surveillance technology has also been exported abroad, to countries like Venezuela whose government likewise wishes to monitor and document the lives of its citizens through tools such as the 'Fatherland Card' and the new enhanced national identity card.<sup>3</sup> Bentham's Panopticon seems to have merged with Orwell's Big Brother state, and as a result of this union we now live in a world rendered known and knowable as never before.

Though some of us may be appalled by the extent to which our lives have come under scrutiny by states and corporations that remain unseen, the point that I wish to put forth in this book is that this drive towards gathering more and more information about society is neither new nor unique in

2 See, for instance: Alex Shephard, 'Facebook Betrayed America', in: *The New Republic*, 15 November 2018; and Evan Osnos, 'Facebook and the Age of Manipulation', in: *The New Yorker*, 15 November 2018.

3 Angus Berwick, 'How ZTE helps Venezuela create China-style Social Control', in *Reuters Investigates*, 14 November 2018.

Southeast Asia. It can be dated back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the region came under Western colonial rule, and when the process of colony-building was dependent upon the gathering of information.

As stated earlier, *this is a book about books*, and in this work I shall present a close and critical reading of the works on Southeast Asia that were written by the men who were part of the colonizing effort and also at the forefront of the kind of colonial data-collecting that would provide the vital information and intelligence upon which the colonies were later developed. Among the works that I shall be looking at closely are Thomas Stamford Raffles' *The History of Java* (1817) – and in particular I shall be focusing on his *Regulations Passed by the Hon. Lieutenant-Governor in Council For the More Effectual Administration of Justice in the Provincial Courts of Java* and the *Revenue Instructions of 1814*; John Crawfurd's *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Court of Ava* (1829); Hugh Low's *Sarawak; Its Inhabitants and Productions* (1848); Spenser Buckingham St. John's *Life in the Forests of the Far East* (1862); Dominick Daniel Daly's *Surveys and Explorations in the Native States of the Malayan Peninsula, 1875-1882* (1882) and Hugh Clifford's *A Journey Through the Malay States of Trengganu and Kelantan* (1897).

What all these writings have in common is the fact that they were written about a region that would later come to be known as Southeast Asia. As I have argued earlier (Noor, 2016.a) the discursive invention of Southeast Asia during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a process that was guided by the logic of racialized colonial-capitalism, and where in the course of 'discovering' that part of the world it was also discursively constructed by the men who wrote about it. Along the way Southeast Asia and its peoples were written about in a manner that imbued them with essential traits, and it was from this process of discursive construction that stereotypical understandings of the native Other later emerged – which found expression in tropes such as the myth of the lazy native (Alatas, 1977), the uncivilized headhunter or the violent Asiatic pirate.

Before moving on to the books themselves, there are several points that I wish to highlight in this introduction.

The first is that the books that were written by men like Raffles, Crawfurd, Low, St. John, Daly and Clifford were complex works indeed. These were among the first works on Southeast Asia that were written and published when the domain of Southeast Asian area studies had yet to emerge, and in many ways they were the forerunners to the works that would be written in the following century. But as I have argued elsewhere (Noor, 2016.a) these works were primarily written as *reports* or accounts of places that were then

seen as having strategic-economic value to the Western governments and militarized companies that were seeking a foothold in the region; and they were written by men who were themselves servants of those governments and companies. Though the word 'history' makes an appearance in some of their titles – as in Raffles' *History of Java* and Crawford's *History of the East Indian Archipelago* – their own concerns were in the immediate here-and-now. These company-men and colonial functionaries had not ventured all the way to Southeast Asia for a history lesson, and nor should their works be read as such. But if these works were not histories in the truest sense of the word, then what were they? The answer lies in looking at them in the context where they were written, and asking what and who they were written for, which leads me to the second point that I wish to raise.

The second point is that the here-and-now wherein these books were written and published was the era of 19<sup>th</sup> century racialized colonial-capitalism. And it is worth reminding ourselves of the fact that the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time when long-held opinions and prejudices towards other cultures and societies found expression through a gamut of scientific and pseudo-scientific theories of racial difference that helped to rationalize and justify a range of aggressive military-economic-security policies, from slavery to colonialism. Undoubtedly all societies have had ways of viewing difference and alterity, and all societies have had their own ways of seeing, framing and locating the Other. And as Goffman (1974) has argued, such framing can be normative and also natural, and we are often unaware of the frame itself while looking at the object that has been framed and presented to us. The manner in which the urban landscape of the colonial cities of 19<sup>th</sup> century Southeast Asia was a racialized and colour-coded one was not entirely new, or unique to the experience of Western colonial rule: Long before the coming of Western imperialism to the region the polities of Southeast Asia – from Banten to Ayutthaya – had already employed the practice of keeping different communities apart, differentiating them on the basis of cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic differences. But what makes the 19<sup>th</sup> century different was the huge military-technological gap that had grown between East and West, which afforded Westerners leverage in their dealings with non-Westerners (Darwin, 2008); and which in time made it easier for the Western powers to not only defeat their non-Western adversaries and competitors, but also acquire their lands and control their peoples. Belief in, and reliance upon, science and the scientific method can also be seen in the works that we shall be looking at later. The works that I shall be looking at were works written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that bear the hallmarks of the industrial and scientific revolutions as well as the rational,



calculating and deliberative mindset of the men who penned them. In many significant ways their writing was very different from the works on Asia that were written in the preceding centuries. By way of comparison, a glance at the earlier writings on the Far East by 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century travellers like Antonio Pigafetta, Poggio Bracciolini and Ludovico de Varthema would show that they were less inclined to police the boundary between fact and fiction, and had allowed their imaginations to wander further than their feet.<sup>4</sup>

The men whose works I shall be looking at *did* wander all over Southeast Asia, but they did so with a clear sense of purpose. In the process of coming to control the lands and peoples of Southeast Asia, knowledge was a vital factor and the acquisition of data assumed greater importance as part of the colonial enterprise. The kind of modern colonial-capitalism that developed in 19<sup>th</sup> century Southeast Asia then was one that aimed to not only defeat native belligerents but to also gain access to their lands, open up the interior, and project military power as far and fast as possible. All of this could only be made possible if the colonial power had knowledge of the territories and communities that were coming under their control. To that end the authors we will be looking at – Raffles, Crawfurd, Low, St. John, Daly and Clifford – were also keen data-collectors. The development of colonial data-collecting strategies has been the focus of the writings of Dirks (1988, 2001), Richards (1993), Cohn (1996) and Bayly (1983, 1996). In their works we see how the conquest and eventual colonisation of India was a long process that relied heavily upon the modalities of knowledge-building that was a collaborative enterprise between the colonizers and the colonized. In this work I would like to shift the focus in two ways: By looking at the modalities of colonial data-gathering in Southeast Asia, and to highlight the manner in which such modes of data-collecting contributed to the framing of the Southeast Asian Other (both colonized and free) as the *constitutive Other* to Western identity.

This leads me to the third point that I wish to make, which is that the acquisition of data and information was hardly ever a haphazard endeavour. In the following chapters I hope to show how in all the cases we will be looking at, the role of the author as data-collector and data-organizer was paramount. Be it in the case of Raffles' proposal to create an island-wide surveillance-policing apparatus for the entire population of Java; or

4 See: Varthema, Ludovico de. *Itinerario de Ludovico de Varthema Bolognese*, 1963; Bracciolini, Poggio. *India Recognita: The Indies Rediscovered, In which are included the Travels of Nicolo de Conti, 1492, 1963*, and Pigafetta, Antonio. *Megellan's Voyage: A Narrative Account of the First Navigation*, 1975.

Crawfurd's careful selection of testimonies and eye witness accounts in his report on the state of the Kingdom of Burma; or Clifford's selective emphasis on the geographical vulnerabilities of the Malay kingdoms which he paired with his own critique of Malay political culture – these authors were not only writing detailed accounts of the lands and peoples they had encountered, but were organizing the data they accumulated in a manner that would lead the reader to the conclusion they had in mind. They possessed agency and they knew what they were doing, and data was thus not simply collected, but *curated* in a sophisticated and intelligent manner so as to frame Southeast Asia – and Southeast Asians – as objects of knowledge that could be utilized or even weaponized in some instances. In the writing of these books and the collection of the data that went into them agendas were at work and ends were being met, which is, as Goffman (1974) has noted, what framing is all about. Data-collecting in colonial Southeast Asia was never an innocent process, but one that was informed and guided by grander plans for domination.

As the Western empires expanded further to the East, penetration was accompanied by further entanglement. The linking together of the respective imperial economies meant that the regulation and policing of the colonies would also contribute to the policing of the imperial metropole as well – to the extent that in Britain new laws would be introduced to police the importation of goods from the East Indies, and would go as far as restricting the number of handkerchiefs a British subject may carry on his or her person during the day<sup>5</sup> – while the colonies provided the laboratories where newfangled experiments on social policing and surveillance could be carried out in earnest. But the need to gather data was also accompanied by the growing concern that such data had to be managed. This was a problem that predated the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and long before the introduction of the modern gunboat, the rifled musket and the rocket that tipped the balance of war against the native communities of Southeast Asia there was already the worry that one day all this information would become unmanageable. (In May 1786 the Marques de Sonora dispatched an urgent directive to Spanish Philippines – and all of the other colonies of Spain as well – where he ordered the officials in Manila to cut down on the excessive paperwork and duplicate copies of

5 See: Parliament of England, *An Act for Imposing an Excise Duty on Silk Handkerchiefs fold by the Eaft India Company for Home Confumtion*, 28 July 1814; Parliament of England, *An Act to reduce the duty on Rum and Rum shrub, the Produce of, and imported from, Certain British possessions in the East Indies into the United Kingdom*, 6 April 1841.

their reports that were being sent to the imperial capital, for there was simply too much of it.<sup>6</sup>) As we shall see later what began as an ambitious project of data-collecting and knowledge-building would eventually turn into an unwieldy enterprise that nevertheless failed to stem the tide of anti-colonial nationalism.

This book, however, is not an account of that later anti-colonial struggle and how the Western empires in the East collapsed one after another by the end of the Second World War: my aim, as stated at the outset of this introduction, was to write *a book about books*, and to look at how the works of men like Raffles, Crawfurd and their contemporaries were not merely accounts of Southeast Asian society, or histories of Southeast Asian nations, but also exercises in data-collecting and object-framing – following the arguments that have been formulated by the likes of Cohn (1996), Bayly (1996), Goffman (1974) and McCombs (2004). The aim here is to show how knowledge-building and social policing were interconnected in the works that were written by these men, and how their epistemic claims to knowledge of the Southeast Asian Other were made through their own active participation in the data-gathering process.

This book is therefore not a history of Southeast Asia *per se*, or even a history of colonialism in Southeast Asia, but is really a book about the books written on Southeast Asia, and how those books were in fact some of the earliest attempts to build a comprehensive database about the region while also framing its peoples as things that could be seen and understood from the perspective of the Occidental gaze. If there is one point that I wish to communicate in the chapters that follow, it is that the framing of the native Other that was the outcome of data-collecting during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a practice that was intimately linked to the workings of racialized colonial-capitalism, and that Empire was not only built through the force of arms but also upon a bedrock of information that would be used to frame and re-present those who would come under colonial rule. If we are to persist in our thinking that works such as Raffles' *History of Java* (1817) or John Crawfurd's *Journal of an Embassy to the Court of Ava* (1829) or Hugh Low's *Sarawak; Its Inhabitants and Productions* (1848) or Hugh Clifford's *A Journey Through the Malay States of Trengganu and Kelantan* (1897) are works that deserve to be considered as pioneering works in the domain of Southeast Asian studies, then we ought to see them for what they are as well: databases upon which the mighty edifice of Empire was later built.

6 The Marques de Sonora, Directive to the Spanish colonial administration of the Philippines and all the colonial offices of the Spanish Empire, dated 29 May 1786. (Author's collection.)

Here I would like to pause for a moment, to give thanks to friends and fellow-travellers who have accompanied me on this journey back to Southeast Asia's complex past. My thanks go to Saskia Gieling and Jaap Wagenaar of Amsterdam University Press who were supportive of this prolonged effort that has spanned three books, all of which were about other books, and which has brought me one step closer to realizing my Tolkienesque dream of coming up with a trilogy in my lifetime. It is thanks to them that over the past decade I have found myself back in my original domain which happens to be colonial Southeast Asia, and for that I shall be forever grateful.

Thanks are also due to Peter Carey, Rachel Harrison and Martin van Bruinessen whose support and encouragement have meant so much to me. Peter's work in and on Indonesia – not least of which was the vitally important recovery of forgotten histories related to the Java War and the period of British occupation of the island – has long been a source of inspiration to me, and a reminder that the historian's task is that of recovery, however painful the memory recovered might be. Peter's tenacity in reminding society of the value of lost histories and the importance of re-membering the broken body of the past is something that I admire and value as much as his friendship. Rachel Harrison's work in the domains of literature and culture were, and remain, reminders to me of the importance of the public domain and how meaning and history can be found there as well, and has shaped my own view towards the power of language and narratives in relation to power and politics. While Martin van Bruinessen's commitment to fieldwork and his enduring love for Indonesia was one of the reasons why I chose to abandon the comfort and consolations of philosophy and return to the region that I focus upon today. Along with the work of Syed Hussein Alatas – that literally opened up new worlds for me during my undergraduate days four decades ago – Peter, Rachel and Martin have been the academic constants in my life, and to them I owe infinitely more than words can possibly convey.

Thanks are also due to my colleagues at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies and the School of History, COHASS, NTU, where I have been based for more than a decade now. My thanks go to Joseph Liow, Dean of the School of Humanities; Ralf Emmers, Dean of RSIS; as well as my colleagues Joel Ng, Alan Chong, Ang Cheng Guan, Irm Haleem, Ahmed Hashim, Michael Stanley-Baker and Els van Dongen with whom I have had many a long discussion about the legacy of Empire and the workings of colonial and neocolonial power past and present.

In Europe I would like to acknowledge the support of my dear friends and colleagues, without whose help I would not have been able to pursue my research over the past few years. My thanks go to Christele Dedebant, Eric

Germain, Violaine Donadello Szapary, Remi Marilleau, Romain Bertrand, Wim Manuhutu, Marije Plomp, Willemijn Lamp, Chris Keulemans, Dominik Muller, Pablo Butcher and the late Henry Brownrigg. In Japan I would like to thank my friend Haruko Satoh in particular, with whom I have had the enormous pleasure of working with at OSIPP, Osaka University. Not to be forgotten are my academic friends in Osaka, Kyoto and Tokyo who have hosted me on many occasions. My gratitude goes to Kazufumi Nagatsu, Koji Sato, Mitsuhiro Inada, Carmina Yu Untalan and the staff and students of the Osaka School of International Public Policy too.

I would also like to express my gratitude to my colleagues and students who I have had the pleasure to work with in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, who have been supportive of my own labours over the years. My thanks go to Nicholas Chan, Danial Yusof, Zaharom Nain, Haris Zalkapli, Stephen Murphy, Naomi Wang, Akanksha Mehta, Oleg Korovin, Natallia Khanijo, Iulia Lumina, Rohit Muthiah, Maria Ronald, Alex Bookbinder, Carli Teteris, Ram Ganesh Kamatham, Vincent Mack, Izhar Abdul Rahman, Salihin Subhan, Sean Galloway, Annie Yong, Randy Wirasta Nadyatama, Benny Beskara, Netusha Naidu, Adri Wanto, Anais Prudent and Chris Hale in particular, who was instrumental in helping me translate much of my work into documentary format.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my wife Amy, who has probably endured the most. Over the past six and a half years I have dedicated myself to writing three books in succession, and in the course of this journey I vowed never to shave until all three works were done. It was Amy – along with my mother – who had to live with the ‘U-boat commander-pirate captain’ look that I adopted as my public mien for all these years, and perhaps in the future such an ordeal may even be regarded as a form of human rights abuse. To that charge I plead guilty, and to her I can only tender my abiding love as compensation.

*Farish A. Noor*

*Singapore, June 2019*