

AN 318/718 SOUTHEAST ASIA: TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Professor Robert Hefner
MW 10:10-11:45



Southeast Asia is familiar to many Americans through the experience of the Vietnam War and, more recently, the “war on terror.” The region’s cultures and history have a richness and importance, however, greater than this history of American involvement. Home to the “spice islands” for which European explorers set out in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Southeast Asia has long been a nexus in the economic trade and cultural exchange linking China, India, and the Middle East. Home to large populations of Buddhists and Christians and more Muslims than the entire Middle East, the region is often referred to as a civilizational “crossroads” shaped in dialogue with Asian, Middle Eastern, and Western cultures. Today Southeast Asia remains one of the most fascinating and complex of regions in the world. The status of women in this region has long been among the highest in the world. Its religious communities, including its Muslims and Buddhists, have long been recognized as among the world’s most innovative and reform-minded. Despite its ethnic, religious, and national diversity, it retains a unity that distinguishes it from its more famous neighbors to the west (India) and northeast (China, Korea, and Japan). Home to huge middle classes and some of the more rapidly industrializing capitalist economies in the world, Southeast Asian provides a powerful illustration of tradition and modernity in national development.

This course is intended to provide an in-depth introduction to the cultures, politics, religious traditions, and gender realities of Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Burma, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, East Timor, and the Philippines). We examine the region’s society and culture through the optic of political and cultural history, so as to understand the “critical junctures” and “integrative revolutions” that have shaped this region from earliest times to today. Our exploration addresses several critical questions -- the nature of the premodern state; the politics and culture of modern nation-states; contemporary developments in Southeast Asian Islam, Buddhism, Christianity; capitalism and the new Asian middle classes; the impact of modern development on families, sexualities, and gender relations; and the contemporary dynamics of democratization and civil society. Our effort to understand this rich, fascinating region sheds light not only on Southeast Asia but on the broader forces reshaping the entire late-modern world.

This class welcomes students from all schools and disciplinary backgrounds. No prior background in anthropology or Asian studies is required.