Emergent Development Paths and Identities: The Cases of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand

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The dissertation project involves a study of the development process of four countries in Southeast Asia: Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. These four cases have been claimed to represent the success of an “Asian” model for development. Therefore, they present an excellent opportunity to study and compare the impact of ethnic stratification on development. Past research has focused on the role of the state in the development process. I argue that each case represents a different configuration of state-business-ethnic relations, and these configurations help explain the different economic and social outcomes of these four countries. Further, I argue that because of the region’s past experiences with colonialism, including its historical efforts to enter and remain in the global economy, development in Southeast Asia must be viewed as a reflexive process.

The concept of development refers to a dual process: (1) the creation of a national identity in a cultural and geo-political sense and, (2) the construction of a viable and healthy economy. These processes are separate but intersecting; issues of ethnic identity, national identity, and economic development overlap with each other in any contemporary discourse of Southeast Asia. Therefore, the development process in these four Southeast Asian countries is a result of a reflexive process; a process that includes interaction between institutions within each country, and more importantly, interaction across countries. The result of this framework is that the development path of each of the four countries becomes dependent on the others, and the nature of development is emergent and dynamic.