



## **On the Influence of Historical Factors on ASEAN Integration**

Name: ZHANG Xin,  
Guangxi Minzu University  
Email: [xin132203@gmail.com](mailto:xin132203@gmail.com)

KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Cultural Identity; historic influence;ASEAN Identity; ASEAN community of destiny	With the development of globalization and regionalism, the integration of ASEAN develops rapidly. In this paper, the object of study is ASEAN identity, which mainly explores the origin, inheritance, enhancement and prospect of ASEAN identity from the perspective of historical theory.
ARTICLE HISTORY	Although the reality and future requires that ASEAN should become a community of destiny, its emotion derives from the past. The existence of object consciousness in Southeast Asia is closely related to people's subject cognition, and the cultural value of the historical consciousness reflected by the identity of the reality needs us to reflection and reorganization. Therefore, the cultural identity concept in the long historical period before the establishment of the ASEAN is an important aspect of the evolution of regional consciousness in Southeast Asia, especially the emergence of Southeast Asia countries and colonialist invasion enhance the complexity of the regional consciousness, the national identity, the suzerain identity and the sub-region consciousness interweave with each other, which has an important impact to the real identity.
Received: 09/24/2025	
Revised: 09/29/2025	
Accepted: 09/30/2025	

The integration of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a complex process, shaped by a multitude of historical factors. This section provides a detailed analysis of these factors and their impact on ASEAN integration.

### **I. Ambiguous Identity Consciousness in Early Southeast Asian History**

Tracing the origins of identity, Southeast Asian myths functioned to strengthen ethnic identity and a sense of belonging, with elements of identity embedded within



its primordial<sup>1</sup> historical consciousness. India primarily exerted ideological influence, while China impacted the region through geopolitics, together constituting distinctive regional characteristics in ancient Southeast Asia. Southeast Asians actively absorbed foreign cultures and localized them, selectively adapting external influences to suit their own needs and blending them with pre-existing beliefs. For instance, while Indian cosmological concepts and political organizations were adopted, the caste system was not. This capacity for localization formed the foundation of Southeast Asia's autonomous history and the source of sub-regional identities. A state system emerged in the pre-colonial period, creating a dialectical relationship between the state identity formed by early Southeast Asian states and sub-regional consciousness. Often, a sense of collective interest is manifested and strengthened under the threat of a common enemy. The arrival of Europeans in the 16th century began to imbue Southeast Asia with characteristics of a shared destiny. From the 19th century onwards, national identity intensified dramatically in both mainland and maritime Southeast Asian states, which recognized the real threat came from the West, not from within the region. This strengthening of national identity coincided with the awakening of a regional consciousness. After World War II, Southeast Asian history entered a new phase. The peoples of the region developed a new, comparative understanding of themselves, which significantly impacted Southeast Asian regional identity. Surveying Southeast Asian history prior to 1945, "Southeast Asian identity" was the result of the transmission and development of ideas and experiences. Although debates about the concept of "Southeast Asia" and its cultural homogeneity have persisted since the mid-20th century, the influence of historical consciousness on the value judgments inherent in the concept of Southeast Asian identity is undeniable. The evolution of identity concepts before 1945 was primarily a result of continuous processes of "othering" and "localization" under the influence of primordial historical consciousness, incorporating different propositions from various eras. The constructed nature of identity dictates that while present and future exigencies require ASEAN to become a community of shared destiny, the awareness and sentiment of this shared

---

destiny originate from the past. Given that cultural identity is characterized by transmissibility and experientiality, examining the origins and evolution of regional identity in Southeast Asia prior to ASEAN integration is essential.

The term "Southeast Asia" itself is an external label, a product of World War II, but this does not mean that a "regional concept" for the area only truly emerged in the 1940s. Prior to this, Southeast Asians already possessed some cognition of the features of this geographical area and politico-cultural entity, because identity is a historical product of societal continuous development. However, in stark contrast to the clear and tangible "European idea," the regional concept of "Southeast Asia" was ambiguous. Early Southeast Asian history refers to the period from prehistory to around 1500 CE (Reid, 2021). Southeast Asian identity and the traditions of its formation embody the cultural value of historical consciousness; primordial historical consciousness profoundly influenced the origins of the concept of Southeast Asian identity. Simultaneously, the transmission of ideas affected the characteristics of cultural homogeneity in ancient Southeast Asia and the emergence of early sub-regional identities. By summarizing and evaluating human social practices, primordial historical consciousness played a role in shaping behavioral norms and social order, influencing the formation of cultural identity and ethnic traditions. The formation and construction of a Southeast Asian regional identity were, in certain aspects, influenced by this primordial historical consciousness.

Southeast Asian creation myths often concern the origins of grains and animals. Distinctive grain-origin myths include the "flying grain" type in Vietnam and Cambodia, the "body transformation" type in Indonesia and the Philippines, and the "hero steals the grain" type in Indonesia (Reid, 2021). These rich grain myths provide significant information about the emergence and development of primitive agriculture in Southeast Asian countries, particularly illuminating the history of Southeast Asian rice culture.

History is the summation of human existence and its experiences. The Southeast Asian myths that narrate the origins of the cosmos represent an early understanding of

the primordial living environment, which serves as a prerequisite for discussing the origins of humankind and the course of human history. The primitive social environment exerted a significant influence on people's beliefs and customs. Guided by the idea that environmental changes shaped the origins of heaven, earth, and humanity, and through the gradual development of self-awareness, the ancestors of Southeast Asia profoundly influenced the subsequent formation and evolution of the region's identity and cultural characteristics. This worldview also shaped Southeast Asians' later attitudes toward socio-cultural transformation, leading to the "localization" process in which foreign cultures were continuously integrated with indigenous concepts (Sun, 2003).

Furthermore, Southeast Asian megalithic culture demonstrates a skillful combination of ancestor worship and nature worship. The stone circle discovered in Kelantan is a remnant of large-scale ancestral sacrifices. The megalithic culture most indicative of ancestor worship in Southeast Asia is found primarily in the Indonesian archipelago, where stone tables, seats, and platforms—sites for ancient rituals—all exemplify ancestor worship. Vietnamese scholar Nguyễn Văn Chính argues that scholars emphasize the role of ancestor worship and its evolution into a national cultural identity and philosophy to seek a cultural identity shared by the Vietnamese people. Primitive people preserved memories of all periods of their lives; these constantly re-emerging memories maintained their sense of ethnic identity through a continuous relationship. "There is no traditional form that does not legitimize itself through history." The instrumental nature of ethnic identity is evident; it "forms a consensual cultural identity through interaction, adopting socially transmitted cultural inheritance rather than biological instinct, continuously realizing the socialization of individual consciousness and the individualization of social consciousness." Identifying with ancestors manifests the ethnic identity function of primordial historical consciousness. The formation and development of ethnic identity, to some extent, hindered the formation of national and regional identities, yet simultaneously provided the potential for the later emergence of national identity.

## **II. The "Regional Concept" during the Colonial Period**

Most ASEAN countries share a history of colonization by European powers. This historical background has resulted in great cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity. Such diversity poses challenges to regional integration, yet it also provides opportunities for fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. Ample evidence suggests that early Southeast Asian states emerged along the trade routes between India and China. Trade provided these states with new resources—such as weapons and luxury goods—and introduced new concepts of political organization and legitimacy that rulers adopted to expand their authority and control (Zheng, 2011). Anthony Reid argues that trade not only created states but also forged regions. During the “Age of Commerce” (15th–17th centuries), commercial interactions connected major maritime cities in Southeast Asia, including Melaka, Johor, Pasai, Patani, Aceh, and Brunei. The expansion of regional trade reduced cultural barriers and accelerated the spread of the Malay language as a lingua franca of commerce (Reid, 2013).

The arrival of Western colonizers subsequently led Southeast Asia toward a shared historical destiny (Yue, 2010). Confronted with common threats, a new sense of regional consciousness gradually emerged and intensified. The arrival of European colonial powers in the early 16th century marked the beginning of a new era for Southeast Asia. Amidst the ensuing chaos and foreign interventions, religion became a vital cohesive force, playing an irreplaceable role in Southeast Asian social life. From the late 18th century onward, the overall influence and penetration of the West deepened, drawing the region profoundly into the course of world history and triggering extensive socio-cultural transformations. Colonialism and anti-colonial struggles became the core driving forces shaping these transformations, significantly contributing to the strengthening of regional consciousness across Southeast Asia.

## **III. The Reshaping of Southeast Asian Identity in the Post-War Era**

Prior to ASEAN's establishment, World War II and the Cold War significantly reshaped conceptions of Southeast Asian identity. However, any optimism among

scholars regarding the potential for a regional order based on perceived cultural homogeneity was counterbalanced by the emergence of "nation-states" in the Southeast Asian political landscape, which prioritized safeguarding their own independence. Most scholars of International Relations contend that World War II constructed the concept of "Southeast Asia," arguing that its origins can be traced to two key features of the war (He & Guo, 2008).

Japan's colonial rule brought Southeast Asia under a unified administration for the first time. The impact of Japanese occupation on regional identity differed from that of the European colonial period. Japan adopted an encouraging attitude toward Southeast Asian nationalists; yet this unintended political stance inadvertently stimulated the growth of regional consciousness. Japanese rule disrupted the colonial divisions established by Western powers and enabled mutual recognition among nationalist leaders across Southeast Asian countries. Japan's occupation objectively led to a reconfiguration of the regional order in Southeast Asia, and the challenge to Japanese hegemony became a driving force behind the emergence of the concept of "Southeast Asia." After Japan's surrender, its influence extended over much of southern Indochina and large parts of Indonesia, with its headquarters relocated to Singapore. Except for Britain, the former colonial regimes in Southeast Asia relied entirely on the United States, and the Allied Command soon became the principal representative of security and political authority in the region.

From the early post-war period, although the political future of Southeast Asia remained uncertain, efforts to restore regional cultural cohesion had already begun. Japan's conquest of Southeast Asia and the emergence of entities like the Allied Command attracted international attention to the region, laying the groundwork for a regional geopolitical framework that had been absent during the colonial era. The Cold War prompted the further development of this framework, but the Southeast Asian regional order remained primarily influenced by external events and forces. Moreover, prior to the founding of ASEAN, initial attempts to foster a Southeast Asian regional identity through interstate cooperation proved unsuccessful.

#### **IV. Contemporary Driving Factors**

Firstly, territorial disputes and historical conflicts, such as the South China Sea issue and the Cambodia-Thailand border conflict, exist among ASEAN member states. While these frictions impede the integration process to some extent, they also compel member states to seek resolution through negotiation and cooperation, thereby paradoxically strengthening regional cohesion (Yang, 2007). Furthermore, major powers like China, the United States, Japan, and the European Union exert significant influence on ASEAN nations, maintaining close ties in trade, investment, and security. The policies and actions of these external powers considerably shape ASEAN's internal dynamics and integration trajectory.

Secondly, ASEAN countries collectively face the common challenges of improving living standards, promoting economic development, and maintaining regional stability. The recognition of these shared objectives fosters cooperation among members. ASEAN integration is not merely intergovernmental collaboration but also involves people-to-people exchanges and cooperation. Collaborative efforts in education, cultural exchange, tourism, and business activities contribute to building a regional identity and enhancing mutual understanding and trust among their populations.

Finally, advancements in information technology have facilitated more efficient communication and cooperation among ASEAN states. The rise of the digital economy, cross-border e-commerce, and digital services presents new opportunities for regional integration.

#### **V. Conclusion**

By examining the origins and evolution of the concept of regional identity in Southeast Asia, with a focus on identity consciousness in its early history and the development of regional awareness through colonial intrusion, this paper concludes as follows:

The intellectual orientation of Southeast Asia's ancestors, rooted in contemplating cosmic and human origins in response to environmental changes, influenced the region's cultural traits during the formative stage of its ambiguous cultural identity. The cultural values within their primordial historical consciousness formed the substrate for vague ethnic identities and unique cultural traditions. Subsequently, the formation of Southeast Asian state systems and the development of sub-regional consciousness interacted mutually. Following the emergence of early states, historical consciousness gradually became rationalized and nationalized, while clan-based identity transformed into state-based identity. The establishment of centralized systems further elevated the prominence of national identity (Chen, 2010). Enhanced interstate exchanges and shifts in the world order led to the emergence of a sub-regional consciousness around the Strait of Malacca circa 1500. Colonial invasion precipitated significant social transformations in Southeast Asia. A sense of crisis strengthened both national and regional identities. Suzerain identity, national identity, and regional awareness became intertwined. In the post-World War II era, Southeast Asian nations required a regional culture that could internalize a confident "self-identity," aiming to strengthen national identity and thereby diminish the affinity some populations felt towards former colonial powers. At this juncture, although the region's future development demanded a stronger regional identity, the shaping, characteristics, and sentiments of a Southeast Asian identity are historically derived. This ensures that the evolution of the regional identity concept remains grounded in the foundation of nation-state identity.

Historical factors exert multifaceted influences on ASEAN integration, presenting both challenges and opportunities. ASEAN member states must seek a path of common development based on respect for their respective histories and cultural diversity to achieve closer regional integration.

**Conflict of interest:** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.



## References

- Chen, B. (2010). The role of cultural identity construction in the process of EU integration and its enlightenment for ASEAN. *Dongnanya Zongheng*, (9).
- Han, Z. (2010). On national identity, ethnic identity, and cultural identity: An analysis and reflection based on the philosophy of history. *Beijing Normal University Journal (Social Sciences Edition)*, (1).
- He, Q., & Guo, Q. (2008). The ASEAN Charter: A milestone in ASEAN integration. *Dongnanya Zongheng*, (7).
- Hong, D. V., & Minh, C. H. (2025). The growth effects of financial integration in the ASEAN countries. *International Journal of Emerging Markets*, 20(3), 1351–1370.
- Jin, X. (2013). The dilemma of loyalty transfer in ASEAN integration: An examination from the perspective of identity politics. *Pacific Journal*, (6).
- Pu, X. (2025). Research on the ASEAN Way and ASEAN integration. *Academic Journal of Management and Social Sciences*, 11(2), 155–158.
- Sun, H. (2003). Collective identity and international politics: A cultural perspective. *Modern International Relations*, (1).
- Yang, Y. (2007). Regionalism and the crisis of national identity in the modernization process. *Lanzhou University Journal (Social Sciences Edition)*, (3).
- Yue, R. (2010). Sovereign identity and regional identity in Southeast Asia and their roots. *Zhejiang Normal University Journal*, (5).
- Zheng, X. (2011). A historical examination of interregionalism in Southeast Asia. *Nanyang Wenti Yanjiu*, (2).
- Pu, X. (2025). Research on the ASEAN Way and ASEAN Integration. *Academic Journal of Management and Social Sciences*, 11(2), 155–158.
- Hong, D. V., & Minh, C. H. (2025). The growth effects of financial integration in the ASEAN countries. *International Journal of Emerging Markets*, 20(3), 1351–1370.
- Reid, A. (2021). *A history of Southeast Asia: Critical crossroads* (S. Wanzhen & Z. Zhang, Trans.). Shanghai People's Publishing House. (Original work published in English).
- Reid, A. (2013). *A brief history of Southeast Asia* (S. Laichen, L. Tana, & W. Xiaoan, Trans.). The Commercial Press.

**Author Bio:** Zhang Xin (2000–), female, holds a Master's degree in Political Science from Guangxi Minzu University. Her research interests lie in international relations and ASEAN studies.