**Truth vs. Illusion in Southeast Asia**

**Blood and Silk: Power and Conflict in Modern Southeast Asia**

By Michael Vatikiotis


Reviewed by David Plott

THE COUNTRIES of Southeast Asia have been masters of national branding, tapping with alacrity into the rich reservoir of impressions that sustain images of this vast and culturally rich region as exotic but welcoming, economically dynamic, and bent far forward in a march to modernity, pulling along in their wake the marvels of their diverse history.

Amazing Thailand; Land of Smiles (Thailand); Malaysia, Truly Asia; Wonderful Indonesia; A Kingdom of Unexpected Treasures (Brunei); Simply Beautiful (Laos); It’s More Fun in the Philippines; YourSingapore; and Timeless Charm (Vietnam). To be sure, these are tourism slogans. But these acts of national branding have their roots in a narrative of Southeast Asia that countries in the region have consciously crafted in their decades-long campaign to attract foreign investment, tourism, trade relations and political acceptance. That narrative has been central to how governments in the region have presented themselves to the outside world.

Blood and Silk, the title of this magisterial account of modern Southeast Asia by Michael Vatikiotis, is a damning counterpoint to that narrative. It is in the soup of these slogans.

In the interest of full disclosure, I have known Vatikiotis for almost 20 years. We first met in May 1998 when we both flew to Jakarta and worked out of the same office in the Antara news agency’s building as journalists to cover the fall of the longtime Indonesian dictator Suharto. We later worked together from 2000 at the Far Eastern Economic Review in Hong Kong as managing editors, and served separate stints as editors.

We were very close personally in those five years at FEER, and what struck me most about him were his remarkably deep and wide connections to Southeast Asia’s elite, his passion for such networking rituals as diplomatic lunches, dinners and other functions, and his tendency to see developments through the lens of highly placed sources. To be sure, he sometimes spent time as a journalist with ordinary people, but that was never the wellspring of his deep understanding. He was a chronicler of the elite and enjoyed rubbing shoulders with them, something fellow journalists commented on privately behind his back.

When FEER was shuttered by its owner, Dow Jones, in 2004 after 58 years as the most respected magazine on Asia, Vatikiotis joined the Geneva-based Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue as its representative in Asia, based in Singapore. The CHD provides, among other things, private diplomatic services to resolve conflicts. It was the perfect fit for Vatikiotis, with his extensive connections to the powerful and his extensive knowledge of the region.

Vatikiotis that I knew as a journalist was a man fully immersed in the field, a man that was the CHD’s building as journalists to cover the fall of the longtime Indonesian dictator Suharto. We later

his deep historical knowledge of the region. I mention this background because it explains why Blood and Silk is such a powerful and authoritative work on Southeast Asia. Divided broadly into two main parts, the book first examines in great detail the complex systems of power, patronage and corruption that characterize in different ways virtually every country in the region. Vatikiotis demonstrates convincingly how this deeply rooted culture has proven impervious to change, even as the region has made some efforts to move toward democracy and more accountable forms of governance. He also provides a deep historical perspective on the religious and cultural roots of Southeast Asia’s conception of political power. The second part of the book focuses on the region’s many centers of ethnic, religious and territorial conflict — such as the deep south in Thailand, where Muslims struggle with a dominantly Buddhist government; Rakhine State in Myanmar, where the Muslim Rohingya minority are currently being driven out of the country in an orgy of violence; and southern Mindanao in the Philippines. In all of these centers of conflict, and others, Vatikiotis in his work as a private diplomat with the CHD has played a role in trying to resolve the conflicts.

This is where things get personal. The Vatikiotis that I knew as a journalist was a man filled with optimism and a belief that the right connections could yield the right results. Perhaps that’s because the powerful — even in places like Southeast Asia — speak to the media to feed that illusion. But when Vatikiotis climbed the fence to become a mediator in conflicts between the powerful and the powerless, the naked realities revealed themselves. “I started engaging my long-standing political contacts from inside the fence and was confronted by the grim realities — and paradoxical limitations — of un constrained power,” he says.

In this respect, Blood and Silk is a deeply personal expression of anguish and disappointment at the failure of Southeast Asia to live up to its vaunted self-branding as a land of promise. But in the end, the value of this book may be the challenge that Vatikiotis throws down to the leaders of the region and their people to renew — and fulfill — that promise.

David Plott is Managing Editor of Global Asia.