

PREFACE

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Southeast Asia is at the crossroads of East Asia and South Asia. It is a fascinating field of study that attracted much scholarly attention in the second half of the 20th century. The region's diversity in ethnicity, religions, social and cultural traditions, economy, and politics, and its past history of European and American colonial domination offers fertile ground for Western academics. Consequently, and it came as no surprise, most of the primary scholarly works of Southeast Asia in various disciplines were the results of research findings from Western scholars. It is only in the past two or three decades that indigenous scholars, largely trained in Western institutes and universities, have begun to research and write about their homeland.

Nicholas Tarling stands amongst the many great scholars of Southeast Asia. Author of more than thirty books (and several forthcoming), he is one of the most, perhaps even the most I dare venture, prolific historians of Southeast Asia. He made an excellent and illustrious career out of uncovering, analyzing and evaluating what his English forefathers did in the region as traders, White Rajahs, empire-builders, administrators. If he had been born several decades earlier, it was not unlikely that students of history might have read of a historical personage of 'Governor Nicholas Tarling of British Burma' or 'of British North Borneo.' But providence decided otherwise.

When Emeritus Professor Nicholas Tarling decided to have a fun-filled birthday for his 75th year, the New Zealand Asia Institute (NZAI) sent out invitations to several scholars for an international conference in Auckland. What a conference and what a birthday.

It was a great honour when I received an invitation to the aforesaid conference. Thereafter a greater honour followed when NZAI invited me to be the editor of a festschrift drawn from the papers delivered at the

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conference. As past editors and current ones will testify, editing a volume of papers from a host of scholars is a pretty ‘entertaining’ as well as ‘enriching’ undertaking and experience.

Publishing a book is a drawn out affair with occasional hiccups along the way. The review process takes a pretty long time, not to mention the inquiries and feedback from contributors. A blessing comes in the form of the wonderful tool of the ‘email,’ if not several more months would be necessary to allow for communication across many continents. Happily all came to pass in the publication of *Themes for Thought on Southeast Asia: A Festschrift to Emeritus Professor Nicholas Tarling on the Occasion of His 75th Birthday*.

Themes for Thought on Southeast Asia, as the title implies, covers a host of themes not only from History, which is Tarling’s preoccupation, but also from other disciplines such as anthropology, management, industrial administration and others. This volume is intended to showcase the various themes being currently pursued by scholars and to encourage further exploration along similar lines or related detours. Most of the contributors are specialists and their respective essays reflect their on-going work. Besides their respective backgrounds and publications, each contributor recounts his/her relationship with Tarling with several anecdotal first-time encounters with him. These recollections provide personal insightful perspectives of Tarling’s interrelationships with others, the impact of both his personality and his work on students, colleagues, and contemporaries.

Themes for Thought on Southeast Asia appeals to those interested in Southeast Asia. A festschrift dedicated to Tarling undoubtedly attracts his legions of students, those who specialize in Southeast Asia, fellow Southeast Asianists, historians and other scholars. Informed general readers will find the essays stimulating and thought-provoking.

As with all scholarly undertakings, several individuals working in concert towards a singular objective contributed to the fruition of this present volume. I take this opportunity to record my indebtedness to the many quarters that made the publication of this festschrift a reality. I am grateful to the New Zealand Asia Institute for its kind invitation to be a participant of its international conference themed ‘Southeast Asia: Past, Present and Future’ in honour of Emeritus Professor Nicholas Tarling, Auckland, 1-3 February 2006, and of its invitation to me to edit this present festschrift. In particular I wish to extend my gratefulness to Professor Barry Gustafson, then director of NZAI. His successor at NZAI, Professor Yongjin Zhang, has been singularly helpful in making this publication a reality. I applaud the assistance rendered by Dr Xin Chen in facilitating various aspects of the work particularly in liaising with the many contributors. Thanks to Professor Henry Johnson, editor of *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* for his support and cooperation. He and his editorial team at NZJAS deserve an accolade of appreciation for bringing out the festschrift as a special issue. I am grateful to

Professor Wang Gungwu, former director of the East Asia Institute, National University of Singapore, for his keynote address and Professor Anthony Reid, former director of the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, for penning the Foreword. Special appreciation is due to all contributors for their patience, lightheartedness, professionalism, and cooperation that made my task a fun undertaking.