



Making Southeast Asia Visible: Restoring the Region to Global History



Stephen L. Keck*

[*Abstract*]

Students of global development are often introduced to Southeast Asia by reading many of the influential authors whose ideas were derived from their experiences in the region. John Furnivall, Clifford Geertz, Benedict Anderson and James Scott have made Southeast Asia relevant to comprehending developments far beyond the region. It might even be added that others come to the region because it has also been the home to many key historical events and seminal social developments. However, when many of the best-known writings (and textbooks) of global history are examined, treatment of Southeast Asia is often scarce and in the worst cases non-existent.

It is within this context that this paper will examine Southeast Asia's role in the interpretation of global history. The paper will consider the 'global history' as a historical production in order to depict the ways in which the construction of global narratives can be a reflection of the immediate needs of historians. Furthermore, the discussion will be historiographic, exhibiting the manner in which key

* Academic Director and Professor of History, Emirates Diplomatic Academy, Stephen keck@eda.ac.ae

global histories portrayed the significance of the region. Particular importance will be placed on the ways in which the region is used to present larger historical trajectories. Additionally, the paper will consider instances when Southeast Asia is either profoundly underrepresented in global narratives or misrepresented by global historians. Last, since the discussion will probe the nature of 'global history', it will also consider what the subject might look like from a Southeast Asian point of view.

The paper will end by exploring the ways in which the region's history might be augmented to become visible to those who live outside or have little knowledge about it. Visual augmented reality offers great potential in many areas of education, training and heritage preservation. To draw upon augmented reality as a basic metaphor for enquiry (and methodology) means asking a different kind of question: how can a region be "augmented" to become (at least in this case) more prominent. That is, how can the region's nations, histories and cultures become augmented so that they can become the center of historical global narratives in their own right. Or, to put this in more familiar terms, how can the "autonomous voices" associated with the region make themselves heard?

Keywords: Historiography, ASEAN, Southeast Asia, Soft Power, Australia, Global History

I . Introduction

"Southeast Asia has enjoyed remarkable economic progress in recent years. Viewed as a single entity, the region would rank as the seventh-largest economy in the world" (McKinsey 2014: 4). Students of Southeast Asia take the region's reality and importance for granted. Many teach or at the very least were trained in academic departments which specialized in the subject. Indigenous scholars understand themselves to be part of a larger region, which is now referred to as Southeast Asia. In addition, defining the boundaries of Southeast Asia has been a sustained issue, which will probably

never be fully resolved. Yet, it is clear that increasingly the boundaries are conceptualized in relation to ASEAN—in particular to the borders of its nations. External observers have complained that the reduction of Southeast Asia to the configurations of ASEAN is “intellectually distorting” (Cook 2018).

Those who study global history or modern history are familiar with the region because it has furnished both dramatic historical events and vivid pictures of first colonialism and then the successful revolt against it. Last, those who frame the world through the lens of geopolitics, recognize that the region’s geographical features ensure its relevance far away. More interesting, it is possible to learn about the region by reading authors whose works have proved to be seminal for the humanities and social sciences. The most obvious examples are Clifford Geertz, Benedict Anderson and James Scott—but they might be said to have been anticipated by John Furnivall and George Orwell.

Students of Southeast Asian history probably assume that its impact upon global history is both obvious and evident. After all, Southeast Asia is a region (however defined) that bridges India, China and Oceania and its mix of languages, peoples and religious experience alone attest to its broader significance. Equally, the region has witnessed some of the big events of modern history (imperialism, global conflicts, decolonization, modernization and uneven economic expansion) and therefore it is a place where key historical developments can be easily exhibited. Less obvious in the 21st century, Southeast Asia has also witnessed the contest of larger cultural forces, which have left their mark upon individual nations. Whether derived from China, India, the Middle East or the West, it has meant that Southeast Asia has been an area in which indigenous cultures have had to frequently adapt to external cultures and practices which were often dominant. If this is imagined in the 21st century, it might be said that Southeast Asia has been and remains a place where various types of soft power have waged sustained contests for hegemony. Last, the region offers an abundance of ancient and medieval ruins—Bagan, Angkor Wat, Borobudur being the most obvious and therefore in addition to modern history, there is ample reason for studying earlier periods of

history in Southeast Asia. Global history should draw together a rich cross-section of historical narratives to tell the broader human story, which should make Southeast Asia a natural object of interest. Yet, it seems clear that the region has yet to be represented adequately in the narratives which might be said to comprise “global history”. In fact, it might be argued that the region appears to be something of a footnote for larger historical trajectories.

As we will see, the rise of global history reflects both interest in reconceptualizing the study of history and the opportunities and pressures occasioned by globalization. Unfortunately, it is also the case that institutional support for Southeast Asian Studies has diminished in many areas of the world. This has been made manifest by the shrinking and, in some cases, closing of academic departments, which were once organized to examine the region. The study of global developments has built up significant scholarly momentum. While most global historians work in modern history, it also true that the work of figures such as Yuval Noah Harari and Ian Morris (neither of whom devoted much attention to Southeast Asia) have been retelling humanity’s story from a much longer perspective.

Most important, the work of global history is relevant to those who work on regional history or area studies. Global history—particularly when it focuses upon transnational developments—enables local events to be better understood. In fact, the nexus between global history and regional or even national studies produces a much richer yield of analysis. Furthermore, while pre-modern global history may seem remote to those who work on recent or contemporary Southeast Asia, the scholarship of Harari and Morris is changing the big picture of humanity’s origins and early development. Connecting the dots between pre-modern (especially pre-medieval) Southeast Asian history and the trajectories plotted by students of the *longue durée* for human development should be an enticing project for future scholars.

In any event, this paper will then briefly explore the historiography of recent global history to argue that, despite an abundance of material, those who have written about transnational developments have underutilized Southeast Asia. The relative

neglect of the region raises questions about the ways in which it is made visible and audible to those outside. External scholars here refers to those who are not students of the region, but are willing and want to engage it. The argument here assumes that ASEAN is increasingly the way in which Southeast Asia is made visible and audible, but that in doing so much of the richness of the region is in effect lost in translation.

Consequently, the paper will also make the case that ASEAN and Southeast Asia might consider finding ways to develop a kind of regional soft power so that the richness of the region can be seen and heard. Furthermore, in reflecting upon the importance of telling a consistent Southeast Asian story, it will be worth considering how ASEAN and other opinion-makers might draw upon their own contributions to the global history to build an even more compelling identity for the region. An identity which might be manufactured through artificially intelligent (AI) means, but drawn from the region's peoples, common experiences and future trajectories could be powerful as it might be useful. This is not to endorse AI by itself, but to take the broader lesson from it, which is that knowledge is created and, as Harari reminds us, produced "imagined orders" which have proven to be the basis for mass cooperation (2011: 124). An artificially produced Southeast Asian "soft power" might be one way to capitalize on the reality of the region's languages, history, culture and natural beauty.

II . SEA in Global Historiography

Global history comes in many shapes and forms: in textbooks, documentaries, historical writing and historiography. The pursuit of global history had benefited from the broader economic trends associated with globalization, but, in fact, interest in telling the human story has antique roots. For our purposes, the subject refers to the attempts to understand global developments as definitive for historical study. While authors such as H.G. Wells and Arnold Toynbee attempted to trace the bigger patterns of world history, global history as a discipline is largely based upon the assumptions

of historians who began to write in the last decades of the 20th and first decades of the 21st century.

The historiography of global history emphasizes the importance of process and perspective. A provisional definition of “global history” is that it is a form of “historical analysis in which phenomena, events, and processes are placed in global contexts” (Conrad 2016: 5). At the same time, the practice of the subject reveals what have proven to be its priorities. As Sebastian Conrad has argued its core concerns are with “mobility and exchange, with processes which transcend borders and boundaries. It takes the interconnected world as its point of departure, and the circulation and exchange of things, peoples, ideas, and institutions are its key subjects” (2016: 5) Conrad might have added that global history is also a form of “historical production” in which the modes of analysis reflect the realities of an increasingly interconnected world. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot argued, the production of historical narratives creates “silences” in the representation of the past (1995: 26). Silences can take many forms, including the underrepresentation of themes, regions and significant narrations. The development of global narratives, then, brings with it the nearly inevitable challenge of adequately considering critical facets of the past. Global history is constructed deliberately across boundaries and done so in contrast to the more traditional national histories. Of course, these transnational subjects can be and are often more prized if they go beyond not only nations, but regions.

While the idea of world or global history is hardly new, the current practice tends to fall into three areas: (1) “history of everything”; (2) history of connections; (3) history which explores integration (Conrad 2016: 6). Each one of these approaches could obviously be relevant to understanding Southeast Asia. However, at least in the writings of influential global historians, Southeast Asia has hardly factored as part of the history of everything, but it serves as a place which illustrates key connections or the integration of experience.

The task of interpreting the 20th century will almost certainly be more challenging for historians than those who devoted massive

energies to the exploration of the 19th century. One early attempt—written against the background of the end of the Cold War and before 9/11—was *Twentieth Century: The History of the World, 1901 to 2000* by J.M. Roberts (1928-2003). Not only is the 20th century much more massive—in terms of people, events, wealth, information, living witnesses, etc.—but it is recent, making it harder perhaps to see in the rear-view mirror. Roberts’ early effort might now be read as a kind of primer for future historians who might attempt such a bold enterprise.

Roberts probably wrote with a largely Western audience in mind, which meant that his account of the 20th century was centered in European events. Given two world wars, the Cold War, the Great Depression and the wealth concentrated in North America and Europe, this might not be unsound, but it left him little time or energy to describe regional developments—particularly those in Southeast Asia. His treatment of the region might be said to be indicative of a Eurocentric approach to Southeast Asia: the region appears when it is directly related to Western power and politics. In other words, the region appears to make the West and its many struggles in the 20th century visible. For example, Roberts devoted a brief chapter to “Vietnam and After”, which begins with a heading entitled “The American Entanglement”. Roberts was more interested in tracing the conflict’s impact upon the status of American power and the fate of some of its involved presidents. His assessment betrays a questionable sense of proportion:

What had been achieved at the cost of immeasurable suffering, vast amounts of money and 57,000 American dead was a brief extension of the life of a shaky South Vietnam saddled with internal problems which made its survival improbable, while terrible further destruction had been inflicted on much of Indo-China. The last tended to be overlooked, as did the deaths of, possibly, as many as 3 million Indo-Chinese. Perhaps the abandonment of the illusion of American omnipotence somewhat offset the bill (Roberts 1999: 676).

The “silences” here are actually loud: not a word about the brilliant Vietnamese leadership which enabled it to defeat the US and nor a word about a new unified nation. Vietnam was visible

only as a place to underscore US misdeeds. Roberts' treatment of Indonesia, sparse as it is, also cannot successfully divorce global political considerations from the analysis of local or regional events. Hence, Sukarno had been enjoying American support because it "reflected the belief that strong, prosperous national states were the best bulwarks against communism" (Roberts 1999: 502). He adds that the "history of Far Eastern Asia in the last forty years can indeed be read so as to support this view" (Roberts 1999: 502). Roberts was not as indifferent to the developments in China, India and Japan as he seemed to be regarding Southeast Asia.

One final point, Roberts wrote when ideas about the "end of history" were quite popular. His reply is worth citing:

As the century closes, there is once again debate about what Europe may be, could be, should be, is; clearly the continent may not obviously influence the rest of the world in a future where so much power gravitated to Washington and Beijing. But whether it will do so or not is not the business of historians. They need not speculate about the future but should try to clarify the past.... the miseries of shattered Yugoslavia alone surely should persuade us how much history can still clutter up our present (Roberts 1999:848).

Addressing the "end of history" was easy but being able to "clarify the past" revealed Roberts' naivety: the prospect that Indochina, Indonesia or Southeast Asia or other parts of the world had any kind of past or produced history or developed their own historiography appears to have been beyond possible. The idea that the past might be the place where battles for ownership would develop or the notion that the very making of historical productions would be called into question appear beyond the ostensible subject matter of history. Above all, the importance and potential of Southeast Asia and other regions were not visible to this distinguished historian.

A more formidable attempt focuses on the 19th century: C.A. Bayly's *The Birth of the Modern World 1780-1914* helped set the stage for a new generation of historians to explore global interconnectedness. In fact, Bayly argued that anyone working in the history of the last two centuries had to be a global historian because

it no longer made sense to write histories of particular nation-states –and he might almost as easily have added regions (2004: 2).

In *The Birth of the Modern World* Bayly tells a global story which emphasizes the interconnections of key developments. Bayly explains that his book

Reveals the interconnectedness and interdependence of political and social changes across the world well before the supposed onset of the contemporary phase of “globalization” after 1945. On the one hand, the reverberations of critical world events, such as the European revolutions of 1789 or 1848, spread outwards and merged with convulsions arising within other world societies. On the other hand, events outside the emerging European and American “core” of the industrial world economy, as the mid-century rebellions in China and India, impacted back on that core, molding its ideologies and shaping new social and political conflicts. As world events became more interconnected and interdependent, so forms of human action adjusted to each other and come to resemble each other across the world. The book...traces the rise of global uniformities in the state, religion, political ideologies, and economic life as they developed through the nineteenth century. This growth of uniformity was visible not only in great institutions such as churches, royal courts, or systems of justice. It was also apparent in “bodily practices”; the ways in which people dressed, spoke, ate, and managed relations within families (2004: 1).

Bayly adds that these uniformities produced a dialectical reaction because they could heighten the sense of “difference, and even antagonism, between people in different societies, and especially between their elites” (2004: 1). This meant that in practice local and global forces “cannibalized” one another. Bayly sums up this process by observing “Broad forces of global change strengthened the appearance of difference between human communities. But those differences were increasingly expressed in similar ways” (2004: 2).

To put this in useful terms, if Bayly is correct, many of the developments which defined the 19th century in Southeast Asia need to be understood as parts of broader patterns of global transformation. More important, it means that it is probably not possible to understand the history of the region, without contextualizing it by

connecting Southeast Asia with larger global trajectories. To cite a few examples, global developments regarding kingship and the state could be found in Vietnam as elsewhere (Bayly 2004: 113); alternatively, the rise of new cities with unique hybridities could be gleaned from Singapore, Batavia and Manila; again, the “empire of religions” – Bayly’s words for the expansion and standardization of religious practices in the 19th century, could be found in Burma; finally, the diffusion of indigenous cultures – with its implicit critique of colonialism might be readily found in Vietnam and Burma. None of these developments were Southeast Asian, but rather they were global and could readily be found in the region. To look at this a bit differently, Bayly’s global history made it possible to speak about the agency of many actors in various parts of the world. Modernization, the rise of the state, colonialism and other key forces may have originated or picked up momentum in the West, but they were soon adopted and strengthened by local actors. Southeast Asia, then, contributed to the birth of modernity and while Bayly did not draw as much from it as he did China, India and Japan, it would be clear that the region and its people were both visible and audible in that they did contribute to these larger global developments.

Last, but most recent, Jurgen Osterhammel’s *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (2014) will almost certainly be remembered as one of the achievements of 21st century global historical study. This 1000-plus-page volume made the case for the 19th century as a decisive period in the transformation of global civilizations. Osterhammel’s arguments are beyond the immediate scope of the discussion, but it is worth noting that his method for studying change in the 19th century was not particularly favorable to regional or area studies. Rather than probe the visibility of regions, Osterhammel, worried about making the 19th century visible and audible. He was impressed that many of the modes for the preservation of memory were developed in the 19th century. Osterhammel could point to the invention or development of libraries, museums, exhibitions, photography and news production; these modes of knowledge might be said to have made an unprecedented ability to describe both past and present – and reflect critically upon both. While Osterhammel acknowledged that most,

but not all of these developments, took place in the West many were soon imitated elsewhere. Osterhammel concluded that

The nineteenth century can be thought of today as global because that is how it thought of itself. The universality of libraries, exhibitions, and encyclopedias signaled a new phase in the development of knowledge society in Europe. The most important theoretical currents of the time—positivism, historicism, evolutionism—shared a cumulative and critical conception of knowledge that went together with the idea of its public significance. Knowledge was supposed to be educative *and* useful. The new media made it possible to unite the traditional *and* the new. In no other civilization had the culture of scholarship developed in such a direction (2014:17).

Osterhammel noted that it would be educated elites in places such as Japan and China which would promote the transfer of these scholarly practices in the last decades of the 19th century. He concluded that the 19th century was “an age of well-nurtured memory” (Osterhammel 2014: 17). Consequently this “is one of the reasons why it retains a strong presence in today’s world” and most important, perhaps, the “collecting and exhibiting institutions that it created continue to prosper, without being tied to the goals set at the time when they were founded” (Osterhammel 2014: 17).

Osterhammel’s attempt to make sense of the 19th century—with its roots in the age’s patterns of thought—did not find much of a role for Southeast Asia. Instead, he drew upon developments located within nations and cities to exhibit much larger global trends. For example, his discussion of Southeast Asian monarchies in the 19th century pointed to their diversity, persistence, but equally to the ways in which they were behind many other historical trajectories. Osterhammel notes that the monarchy was strengthened in Malaya during the 19th century, but in the transition to nationhood “there was no centralized Malayan monarchy but only a set of nine thrones” where they co-existed. He concludes that monarchies survived because the colonial state relied upon them to deliver indirect rule (Osterhammel 2014: 582). More generally, Osterhammel was not interested in finding out what the persistence of monarchy might itself say about Southeast Asia or larger political

questions, but rather understood their survival in relation to colonialism or as being possibly predictive for post-colonial situations. Hence, the “monarchy itself was above all criticism, but the individual who sat on the throne was obliged to prove his worth. These multiple tasks and expectations confronting the monarchy meant that its abolition by the colonial revolution created deep fissures in the social web of meaning” (Osterhammel 2014: 583).

The experience of colonial rule was so powerful that transitions were “especially difficult where a monarchical link to the symbolic repertoires of the past was totally lacking, and where, after the end of the colonial state, only the military or a communist party remained as a vehicle of national centralization” (Osterhammel 2014: 583). By this point Osterhammel was speaking not only of monarchies in Southeast Asia, but in other parts of Asia and Africa.

In a similar vein, Osterhammel’s discussion of Chinese emigration – a major, possibly decisive development in the history of Southeast Asia – was part of a global ‘mobilities’. The stress was not so much upon the fate of immigrant communities in Siam and Malaya, but in their representation of experience of migration as a global trend. There is much to learn here (especially with reference to the Gold Rushes and Chinese migrations to the US and Australia), but again Southeast Asia appears to be unimportant in itself. Equally, Southeast Asia was the home to Chinese emigrants who fled the Taiping Rebellion, but the broader discussion of their subsequent impact on places within the region was not explored. Nonetheless, he did observe that Southeast Asia was the one place “Chinese emigrants settled in large numbers” (Osterhammel 2014: 163).

Osterhammel’s agenda meant making the 19th century both visible and audible. To do that, he emphasized common themes, panoramas and experiences in order to tell a broad and deep story about the ways in which life in many parts of the world changed in the 19th century. Consequently, very important and interesting regional developments were subordinated by the need to portray what amounted to transregional developments in global development. That is, the historiographical priority was to utilize

research results to build a global story—even if it ensured that the particularity of regional and national realities become obscured.

The works of Roberts, Bayly and Osterhammel are all well-known to students of global history. At a minimum, they are suggestive for ways in which Southeast Asia is represented by global historians. We have seen that the region was essentially invisible and inaudible in the hands of Roberts; Bayly and Osterhammel made it visible and somewhat audible, but in service to the deeper need to communicate a story about the 19th century. In other words, Southeast Asia mattered when it could make a particular—even if incredibly well-researched—view of the 19th century appear to be most real. In the case of Bayly, the region’s people are given much greater agency to chart their destiny, even if they are unwittingly following a script which is also playing out in other parts of the world. Yet, in all of these works the richness of the region appears to be largely as unseen as it is “silent” and essentially unarticulated, if not actually undiscovered.

III. ASEAN: Making Features of Southeast Asia Visible

Some historians may have missed it, but Southeast Asia is in fact quite visible to those outside the region. It might be argued (possibly by exploring the history of commercial aviation—particularly the routes which connected Australia to Eurasia) that Southeast Asia has long been visible to ANZAC countries as a bridge into Asia. The Australia-ASEAN Special Summit, held in Sydney in March 2018, reflected this interest. Prior to the Special Summit, at least one key ASEAN leader-- Indonesian President Joko Widodo endorsed the possibility that Australia might become a member of ASEAN. (Huong 28) In ‘Australia as an ASEAN Community Partner’ Graeme Dobell addressed the possibility of Australia either becoming a member of ASEAN or having some other kind of significant connection (bringing New Zealand) with it (Dobell 2018). Dobell cites the ideas mooted by Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating, who in 2012 explained that the appeal of joining ASEAN lay in Southeast Asia:

From now on we have to concentrate on where we can be effective and where we can make the greatest difference. I believe that is fundamentally in South East Asia. South East Asia occupies the fulcrum between South West Asia and North East Asia; the fortunes of the Indian Ocean and the sub-continent vis-à-vis those of continental Asia, China and the western Pacific. In a geopolitical sense, this region is a place of amity, a zone of peace and cooperation, perched between the two most populous neighbourhoods on earth: broadly, Pakistan and India and their ocean, and China and Japan and their ocean. Northern Australia is adjacent to the fulcrum point. It is completely natural therefore, that Australia be engaged there; certainly, with Indonesia but preferably, with the wider ASEAN. This grouping represents the security architecture of South East Asia, the one with which we can have real dialogue and add substance. In the longer run we should be a member of it—formalising the many trade, commercial and political interests we already share. This is the natural place for Australia to belong; indeed, the one to which we should attribute primacy. The utility of such a foreign policy would be to distil the essence of our primary national interests, such that the naturalness of it gave it a self-reinforcing consistency (Dobell 2018: 25).

This discussion generated by the prospect of Australia joining ASEAN is a good reminder that the visibility of regions depends upon many often unrelated factors, but reflects the need to organize knowledge, often prior to reshaping politics and commerce. This possibility nearly bears the stamp of “eternal return” as it has been mooted since the 1970s and this subject might be worthy of a paper in its own right. However, the rise of a new multipolar order renews the need for Australia to rethink its security arrangements.

For our purposes here, it is instructive to highlight a few features of this debate, which has drawn responses from many of the region’s leaders. From the Australian side, the appeal of ASEAN has involved security considerations, but it is largely economic: since the region’s nations represent a significant percentage of Australia’s trade, it would make sense for it to become a member.

Malcolm Cook pointed out that ASEAN was actually an intergovernmental institution of a region made up of 10 diverse countries: he noted that “South East Asian states have not created

a custom union through ASEAN, nor have South East Asian states surrendered sovereign rights to negotiate trade agreements to the ASEAN Secretariat” (Cook 2018: 1). This objection hardly captures the full range of domestic challenges which Australia probably faces if it attempts to join ASEAN. Many of these obstacles might come from within Australia because it might not want to be part of an Asian bloc. Again, it is useful to cite Dobell’s article where he quoted Kishore Mahubani regarding the transformation which Australia would have to make:

In the long run, Australia will also have no choice but to seek membership in ASEAN. Right now, any such option is unthinkable in the minds of the Australian elite. Yet this is precisely the kind of ‘unthinkable’ option that Australia has to consider as it enters the most challenging geopolitical environment of its history. In thinking of the unthinkable, Australian leaders should also ask themselves a simple question: why is Australian membership of ASEAN unthinkable? In due course, the honest answer will come out. The main disconnect between ASEAN and Australia is in the cultural dimension. ASEAN is Asian in culture and spirit. Australia is Western in culture and spirit. The main reason why Australia will be uncomfortable as a member of ASEAN is that it will have to learn how to behave as an Asian rather than as a Western nation. In thinking about this discomfort, Australians should bear in mind a new reality for Australia. Australia will have to change course in the Asian century. It will only have painful options. There will be no painless options. The big question that Australia will have to ponder as it looks ahead at its future in the 21st century is a simple one: will it be more painful for Australia to join ASEAN (and thereby accept both its constraints and its valuable geopolitical buffer) or will it be more painful for Australia to remain beached alone as the sole Western country (with New Zealand) in a resurgent Asia of 3.5 billion people (2018: 8)

Postcolonial burdens aside, the heart of the difference is mindset—a differentiation framed by ethnicity, culture and religion. Even though there is an argument based upon geography and trade, a number of Asian thinkers have insisted that Australia first identifies itself as an Asian nation. This argument precludes the possibility of anything of wider synthesis between the ANZAC

nations (which have significant numbers of Asian citizens and immigrants) and ASEAN. However, Mahubani is hardly alone in this view; Lloyd Alexander M. Adducul notes:

The admission of a country that is not considered part of ASEAN's recognized zone demands a radical shift in mindset. Populated by Europeans by accident of history, Australia ought to dispel uncertainties in identifying itself with Asia in general, and Southeast Asia in particular. An Asian consciousness among Australians must emerge prior to ASEAN membership (2018: 2).

It is not enough for Australia to have political and economic ties to ASEAN, it must rather be Asian, especially Southeast Asian. Dobell cited Rodolfo Severino who had famously articulated the probable basis for an automatic ASEAN rejection: "ASEAN will say, 'You're not Southeast Asian.' And that's all the criterion is, to be a member of ASEAN. You must belong to a region called Southeast Asia, which was invented by Lord Mountbatten [during WW2] by the way—South East Asian Command—but that's neither here nor there. The fact is that the region exists now, conceptually, which is the most important thing" (2018: 19). Yet, as Huong Le Thu pointed out that Southeast Asia has many strengths, but ASEAN is essentially "an intra-governmental institution that has a diplomatic function." (2018: 29) In fact, Huong Le Thu added that Southeast Asia had been "overlooked for a long time" (2018: 30) but even though ASEAN was an important regional organization it was actually quite "fragile" (2018: 30). She criticized the Australians for overestimating ASEAN and not understanding that it had not evolved into a more mature entity. (2018: 30) Huong Le Thu's criticism reminds us that even though ASEAN might become important as part of a larger security architecture, it should not be conflated with Southeast Asia.

IV. ASEAN Makes Connectivity a Priority

Having seen where Southeast Asia is less visible than it should be and subsequently observed how it looks to another country and region, it remains almost logically necessary to apprehend how it is understood by ASEAN itself. Even though ASEAN should not be

confused with Southeast Asia, but it is clear that it has the potential to both improve the quality of life in the region and enhance its impact upon global affairs. Therefore, a brief examination of how ASEAN policy makers see the future of the region can be recognized by investigating some of their policy objectives.

To that end, it is worthwhile to examine the (Master Plan for ASEAN Connectivity) MPAC 2010 which was adopted by the 17th ASEAN Summit in Hanoi in 2010. This document contains a number of key aspirations explicitly for ASEAN and implicitly for Southeast Asia. Most important, ASEAN leadership aims to build a more integrated organization and region, while reducing income and developmental gaps between its members. After all, the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity “will promote economic growth, narrow development gaps, ASEAN integration and Community building process, enhance competitiveness of ASEAN, promote deeper social and cultural understanding as well as greater people mobility and connect its Member States within the region and with the rest of the world” (2011: ii).

The broader vision—itsself worthy of “branding”—aimed for “One Vision, One Identity, One Community” envisions a more humane region, with a clear ASEAN-stamped identity, forming a real community. Not surprisingly, most of the key initiatives are for regional integration. This document was followed (and updated) by MPAC 2025 which was the product of a summit in Vientiane in 2016 (which followed the 27th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur in 2015) and noted that substantial progress had been made since MPAC 2010. However, the MPAC 2025 observed that the vision articulated in 2010 had yet not been realized. Its authors explained that the region could expect not only growth, but other challenges:

a doubling of the number of ASEAN households that are part of the “consuming class” over the next 15 years; the challenge of improving productivity to sustain economic progress as growth in the size of the workforce starts to slow; the movement of 90 million more people to cities within ASEAN by 2030; the need for infrastructure spending to more than double from the historical levels; the challenge of equipping the world’s third-largest labour force with the skills needed to support growth and inclusiveness; the emergence of

disruptive technologies; the opportunity to transform natural resource efficiency in the region; and the imperative to understanding the implications for ASEAN as the world shifts towards a multipolar global power structure (2016: 8).

The authors envisioned a region which would grow, but would be threatened not only by “disruptive technologies”, but by an aging work force. To this end, MPAC 2025 articulated a number of key strategic objectives: Sustainable Infrastructure, Digital Innovation, Seamless Logistics, Regulatory Excellence and People Mobility. ASEAN’s population might be mobilized by a number of different strategies, including facilitating travel throughout the region and building blue chip qualification frameworks for important and essential occupations, and advancing opportunities for greater university cooperation (2016: 10). These initiatives prioritized intra-ASEAN enterprises which found echoes in the aspirations to develop sustainable ASEAN cities. As a result, this objective highlighted the importance of developing models which were already extant in Southeast Asia:

This initiative aims to scale up the sharing of smart urbanisation models across cities in ASEAN Member States. While there are many useful international case studies addressing sustainability concerns associated with urbanisation, the most useful insights for ASEAN are likely to come from within the region itself. There are many examples of smart urbanisation from across ASEAN, including George Town’s heritage-protection strategy, Medan’s efforts to reduce dependency on cars and investing in making the city more pedestrian-friendly, and Da Nang’s efforts to strengthen institutional capacity and manage corruption. Despite the efforts of institutions like Singapore’s Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC), the IMT-GT Green Cities initiative, and the ASEAN-German Technical Cooperation Programme on Cities, Environment and Transport, there are still limited networks for sharing such lessons on sustainable urbanisation models and a lack of robust data to assess performance (MPAC 2025 2016: 48).

Not all of the objectives were shaped by internal priorities. The realization of these objectives would be impacted by a number of anticipated developments, some of which will be external to the

region. The shifting of the geopolitics outside the region could be important, but the commercial and digital activity would probably have an even greater impact. Citing its proximity to China, Japan and India the authors argued that “ASEAN is well positioned to benefit from all types of global flows with more than half of the world’s ‘consuming class’ living around the region by 2025” (MPAC 2016: 31). Ultimately MPAC 2025 reflected both frustration with the inability to complete earlier policy objectives, while articulating massive ambitions for the development of ASEAN countries.

For our purposes, the document offers some insight into how Southeast Asia looks from the point of view of contemporary policy-makers. If the region was underrated by global historians, but attractive for geo-strategic purposes to those who might remake Australian foreign policy, it appears uneven and not yet adequately integrated to many of ASEAN’s policy makers. Many of the initiatives—digital innovation sustainability, seamless logistics and improved regulatory frameworks--all mooted in MPAC 2025 might well resonate with Australia’s leadership. The region made visible by ASEAN policy-planning followed from the political and economic language of contemporary politics, which by itself betrayed little ethnic or religious identification. Yet, the Australians and many in ASEAN worried, probably rightly, that the possible integration of the region and its larger neighbor would be impossible. To know Southeast Asia through the eyes of the planners is to see the region in relatively neutral terms; of course, both global historians and Australian leaders might add that what is missing (because it is assumed) is the articulation of an Asian identity.

However, the attempt to build the world’s largest trading area is not dependent on the confluence of ethnic identities or related postcolonial issues. At least Australia will almost certainly be connected to ASEAN when the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) comes into existence in 2020. Even though India exited this proposed trading bloc, it will remain immense because it will connect ASEAN, China, South Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. If RCEP comes anywhere close to achieving its expectations, then, Southeast Asia will be much better positioned to attract not only significant economic development, but to become

more visible to the world beyond Asia and the Pacific rim.

V. Towards a Southeast Asian Exceptionalism: Making the Region Visible and Audible

The prospect of Australia (and New Zealand) become members or partners with ASEAN and the organization's integrative aspirations raises a number of issues and ultimately opportunities for Southeast Asian leaders. Clearly the region is visible—but it is increasingly so through ASEAN's organization, governance and aspirations. As we have seen, the Australian example actually illustrates that the region is not well-known or understood by many external actors. That said, the rise of China and to a lesser extent India (both heralding the arrival of a new multipolar world—much of it connected to the Asia Pacific or 'Indo-Pacific') makes an idea which was once unacceptable now at least possible to consider for policy makers in both Australia and Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, Asian identity or Western identity remains the barrier (probably for both sides) for this relationship to significantly deepen. Explaining why it is easy for Southeast Asian leaders to reject this possibility points to limitations of ASEAN as the only identity marker of the region and leads to the more fundamental issue: what should make Southeast Asia visible and audible. At the same time, we have also seen that ASEAN's policy makers have sought to promote the integration of Southeast Asia, but these priorities are to be realized with modalities to improve social interactions, enhanced infrastructures and greater cooperative frameworks.

However, the opportunity exists to further the goals of integration by creating Southeast Asian Soft Power (SEASP). Creating soft power is normally a goal associated with nation-states (and their foreign policies), but it will be important for regional blocks as well. The rise of new global powers may well mean that regional associations will rely increasingly on a wide range of tools to fight for their key interests. One of these tools will almost certainly be soft power, even if it remains difficult to quantify both its reality and impact upon particular events.

In fact, Southeast Asia has been portrayed, not without reason, as a place where various soft powers compete for influence. In fact, there is already an abundance of academic literature devoted to charting the fate of Chinese, Indian, Korean and Japanese soft power in the region (Lum, et. al. 2008). These realities nearly mimic accounts of the competition between colonial empires in the 19th and 20th centuries. For that matter, the status of the European Union’s soft power capacity in Southeast Asia has been studied as well (Jones 2009-2010). The impact of the Korean Wave (*hallyu*) on Southeast Asia has seemingly yet to be studied adequately, even if Joseph Nye has observed “South Korea has a compelling story to tell...its soft power is not prisoner to the geographical limitations that have constrained its hard power throughout its history” (2009:1). Most telling, in its survey of Southeast Asia 2019, the ASEAN Studies Centre explored “three aspects of soft power – tertiary education, tourism and foreign language” in order to determine the extent to which external powers had the most influence in Southeast Asia (2019: 1). Unwittingly, perhaps, the impression might be congruent with Eurocentric global history, where Southeast Asians are hardly deemed capable of agency. More important, the possibility that Southeast Asia might itself have and develop soft power has hardly seemed to be considered.

SEASP could be important because it might give the region’s leaders the capacity to tell their own story. This narrative, which would build upon national histories, would serve to make Southeast Asia visible to the outside world. Additionally, it could well become a platform for the region’s autonomous voices to be heard. Creating and sustaining soft power is more difficult than it might appear, but it could have a significant pay off for ASEAN and the people who live in Southeast Asia. As we have seen, ASEAN’s priorities are not storytelling, but instead raising the standard of living for the region and creating structures and policies which might foster regional integration. These realities will not change in the near future, but it is not too early to consider the ways in which ASEAN or other regional actors might tell Southeast Asia’s story. After all, developing an effective narrative for the region would in itself contribute to integration—ideally, it would be a force multiplier. To that end, it

makes sense to call attention to a number of assets which help a nation—and probably a diverse region—transmit its self-image and identity to the outside world.

To begin with, Southeast Asia already has considerable soft power resources. The region is rich in natural beauty and its leaders long ago found ways to deliberately deploy “orientalist” motifs to increase tourism. In other words, Southeast Asia has ample “exoticism” to draw upon. The region also has a good track record of preserving its heritage sites and makes it easy for people from outside to connect to its cultures and history with relative ease. Southeast Asia is diverse, but it has common historical experiences—some of which are among the most poignant in the 20th century. The experience of colonialism, Japanese occupation, the fight for independence and the development of new nations can be positively underscored with the region’s very success—especially after the end of “the cycle of violence” in the late 1970s.

Yuval Noah Harari recognized that nations try their best to conceal their “imagined character”. (2011: 407). He added that most nations “argue that they are a natural and eternal entity, created in some primordial epoch by mixing the soil of the motherland with the blood of the people” (Harari 2011: 407). Regions normally do not have such luxuries: they are almost by definition much more diverse and therefore require possibly greater imaginative power to appear natural and, therefore, inevitable and unchallengeable.

For Southeast Asia shared experiences can be the basis not only for developing a mutual outlook and sympathies, but offer natural departure points for finding meaning from memory. To some extent, nations in the region have done this with the preservation of heritage, the construction of museums and the development of curricula which emphasize country history. Yet, it is possible to imagine what these efforts might look like if either ASEAN or even some of the region’s nations invested in building a major museum (with outlets in each ASEAN nation), archives and libraries dedicated to collecting artifacts, information, memories about Southeast Asia. Regarding this broadly, museums have anchored the organization of knowledge and it is possible to

imagine that a well-funded institution might become a credible voice which speaks with reference to Southeast Asia's natural and cultural heritage. The outreach opportunities within the region would be very useful, but a Southeast Asia museum would add significant value by additionally helping the region to engage with other transnational narratives. If we remember that the nation-state—at least in its current form-- itself is a relatively recent invention and it grew rapidly in the 19th century because it benefited from similar projects. As we have seen, Osterhammel argued that the construction of such institutions was not only a key foundational asset for national development, but they helped to define the very culture of the 19th century.

For our immediate purposes, a strong Southeast Asian focused museum would also bring the capacity to enhance the region's leaders to tell its story because it would almost certainly strengthen Southeast Asia's common identity. After all, Benedict Anderson reminded us a generation ago that one of the important things about the museum is the imagination which produced it: "For museums, and museumizing imagination, are both profoundly political....The present proliferation of museums around Southeast Asia suggests a general process of political inheriting at work" (1983: 178) Anderson was referring to the construction of museums which focused on the region's relatively new nations. The same observation, however, might now apply to the region itself: a museum focused on Southeast Asia would attest to cultural inheritance, which might underscore the richness of the Southeast Asian story.

Making a major museum (and related institutions) a priority would make it likely that Southeast Asia would find the resources to develop Visual Augmented Reality (VAR) products which would make the region's story distinctive and vivid. VAR has the potential to make an absolute difference in areas such as education, heritage and natural preservation. VAR could also be a natural tool for museum outreach. It might, as such, help to realize the "Connectivity" that ASEAN's leaders seem to crave so badly. A well-connected region with an even stronger sense of common identity (and possibly purpose) would be much better posed to draw upon its

resources to define and develop SEASP. After all, the struggle for cultural supremacies—inherent in any honest discussion of soft power—is an old story for Southeast Asia. Obviously, this narrative predates both the arrival of universal religions and colonialism, but it probably makes sense to add that in more recent times it has been about “autonomous voices” and finding a place for Southeast Asians in Southeast Asian Studies (Heryanto 2002). Developing SEASP might go a long way to address these concerns, especially with the rise of national powers which will have no trouble fighting for soft power supremacy.

With that, it might also be possible to imagine a way to construct for the region and its people a narrative which would ensure those who would study global developments reflect critically upon what has been learned in Southeast Asia. That is, attention might be given to “Southeast Asian Exceptionalism” which would be a broad narrative that would underscore the resilience and adaptability of the region’s people. It would inevitably draw from the rich, if at times very troubled history of Southeast Asia, but in so doing, exhibit the rich encounters with those who have lived in the region and have experienced the stormier currents of global history. For instance, the development of ASEAN—a necessity for newly independent Southeast Asian nations—can be understood as part of a much older and broader story about the way the region’s peoples have adapted to external challenges. Last, to claim that Southeast Asia has an “exceptional” narrative is not to deny the historical realities aptly identified by Bayly, Osterhammel and others. But it would be to say that the development of Southeast Asia as a region and hybrid civilization remains a unique human achievement. Restoring Southeast Asia to global history should require that its role is not only to make external transnational narratives visible, but to capture the expedient features of the region’s adaptable peoples and make them a fundamental component of the much larger human story.

VI. Conclusion

The definition of regions is usually, possibly inevitably, a product of time, space and human needs. It will come as no surprise here that Southeast Asia and ASEAN are fundamentally different, but it might be added that finding ways to explore the former has become complicated by the existence and development of the latter. This paper has also hinted at the fact that regional definition is not stable over time: just as Australia could redefine Southeast Asia, so too, the rise of China and India may well put pressure on both ASEAN and the integrity of the region.

More specifically, the argument here began with the observation that SEA has largely been written out of much of global history. The historiography of the subject reveals that the region's contributions to global history have been under-utilized. *Suwannabhumi* has generated conversation and scholarship about the region and this paper has attempted to find ways to think about Southeast Asia in ways which depart from ASEAN, but could well contribute to its larger goals.

This discussion has, in effect, used global history as a kind of index with which to measure or at least try to get a hint about external perceptions of Southeast Asia. Obviously, it is limited by both scope and selection, but it seems clear to this author that its central assumptions are derived from representative sources. Accordingly, Southeast Asia has yet to be adequately connected to the larger discussions of human history. This may well say as much about the historians as it does the history of the region, but it suggests nonetheless, that a great deal is to be done to make the region visible and audible or to put it into a historian's nomenclature, to write it back into history. The plea for a Southeast Asian narrative—one which might highlight the region's unique characteristics—will actually require engagement with other historiographies and producers of history. After all, even when historians explore the past, they do their work in the present. Historians are probably affected more by immediate concerns than they might like to admit. For Southeast Asia to become visible with its autonomous voices becoming audible in history, probably means

providing them with better chances to be heard and understood. The development of SEASP for the region could amplify its significance for historians who are studying global developments. This paper did not begin with a soft power agenda, but in recognizing the ways in which the region remains under-represented in global historiography, it became clear that at a minimum--paying attention to this concept might help to reposition the significance and ultimately the attractiveness of scholarship about Southeast Asia.

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