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SUVANNABHUMI means “The Land of Gold” in Pali, which location implies Southeast Asia.
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Introduction to the Special Issue

Introduction to the Special Issue



Debating Southeast Asia



Victor T. King*

The papers in this special issue were presented at the 2019 ISEAS-BUFS International Conference organized by the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies at Busan University of Foreign Studies on 23-25 May 2019. The theme of the conference focused on “The Recognition and Construction of Southeast Asia as a Whole” and the eight papers in this current collection were drawn from three of the panels on the basis of the view that there was a degree of coherence and interconnection between them. The panels were “Methodological Quest: Creative Approaches to Southeast Asian Studies” (Henley, King, Curaming and Ferguson); “Centrality of Southeast Asia in Global Issues” (Khoo); and “Recognizing and Constructing Southeast Asian Cultural Identity – History” (Keck, Ooi and Iqbal). In their different ways the papers explored the issues arising from defining and constructing Southeast Asia as a region in the era of globalization, which addressed considerations of whether or not the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) might extend its membership to include such countries as Timor-Leste and Australia (and New Zealand), the contribution of Southeast Asian Studies as

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a “grounded”, multidisciplinary enterprise in understanding Southeast Asian cultures, histories and identities, and more general issues raised by area studies and its place in academic activity in such arenas of debate as climate change and environmental crises.

Some of the contributors took a more positive view of Southeast Asia as a reality or at least reaffirmed the importance of local knowledge and contextualization; some drew attention to the neglect of Southeast Asia in international or global history in spite of the region’s historical, cultural, political and economic importance; whilst others took a somewhat sceptical, questioning view of the “reality” of Southeast Asia.

Strong support for the “reality” of Southeast Asia was provided by David Henley in his examination of the perspectives and views of those who live in Southeast Asia, based on opinion poll material, organized primarily at NUS, Singapore, and the increasing role of ASEAN and other pan-Southeast Asian institutions in developing a consciousness of regional identity. He is expressing the views of those who live and work in Southeast Asia (though the surveys tend to focus on the educated segment of ASEAN, with the addition of data from a newspaper poll). Nevertheless, he has marshalled criticisms of an academic view of Southeast Asia, expressed in formidable terms in the work of Willem van Schendel, and then he counterposes van Schendel’s view against the perspectives expressed in “local voices”. Arguing against the skepticism of a significant number of Southeast Asianists about the “existence” of the region and those who argue for a fluid and ill-defined concept of the region, he proposes that increasing numbers of Southeast Asians accept it as a cultural, geographical and institutional “reality” and identify with it. He joins others in addressing the importance of ASEAN, since its foundation in 1967 and its subsequent expansion in the 1990s in promoting Southeast Asia as a defined region comprising ten nation-states and securing its recognition both within and beyond its now-defined ASEAN boundaries. Clearly, the relationship between ASEAN and a Southeast Asian cultural area that does not precisely coincide with a nation-state definition of Southeast Asia will continue to be debated, as will the status of the geographically, culturally and historically complex borderlands of

mainland Southeast Asia. But there is no doubt that ASEAN has served to give the region a “concreteness” which it would not otherwise have had.

The doubts about Southeast Asia as a region in its own right are raised by Stephen Keck and Ooi Keat Gin in their exploration of major studies in international, transnational or global history and their relative or absolute neglect of the importance of Southeast Asia in the interpretation of trajectories and developments in world history. Southeast Asia is largely “unseen”, “silent” and “unarticulated”, says Keck. The global historians are listed then criticized, or at least commented on: John Morris Roberts, Chris (C.A.) Bayly, Jurgen Osterhammel, Ian Robert Tyrrell, Sebastian Conrad, among others. The “autonomous voices” of Southeast Asia have not been sufficiently heard. Indeed, to counter this neglect or “silence” in historical narratives Stephen Keck draws attention to the important contributions of such writers as John Furnivall, Clifford Geertz, Benedict Anderson and James Scott in demonstrating that studies in the culture, history and politics of Southeast Asia have significance far beyond the boundaries of the region, just as there have been crucial historical events and social processes in the region which have resonance and importance in other parts of the world.

Ooi Keat Gin, on the other hand, draws attention to the fact that historians of Southeast Asia, with few exceptions, have not presented the region in a global context. He then takes us through a whole range of Southeast Asian contributions to world history as a “pivotal crossroads” and its interconnectedness with other regions of the world: cultural, economic, political. Both Keck and Ooi also consider global historical narratives as constructions to serve the particular objectives and interests of historians and they ponder what a global or international history might look like from a Southeast Asian perspective. Keck then presents ways in which the “visibility”, “audibility” or “augmentation” of Southeast Asia might be enhanced through such devices as “visual augmented reality” and “soft power” (tertiary education, tourism, heritage, shared histories) to those who live outside the region or have very little knowledge of it. Ooi, on the other hand, examines the reasons for this lack of locally-based attention to the region in international history, and he

points to motivations, inclinations and training within scholarly circles in the Southeast Asian academy as a possible explanation. Core-periphery relations, Southeast Asian parochialism and a failure to engage with an English-language-based international publication regime seem to provide plausible reasons for a Southeast Asian historical impasse in international terms. Ooi directs his attention to the Malaysian academy in this regard.

An interesting departure is to consider what Southeast Asia might look like if it was expanded. Henley's argument is that ASEAN gives a robustness, an identity, a "reality" to the Southeast Asian region, but, as Keck points out, there have been discussions about whether or not Australia (or even New Zealand) might join, and indicates discussions that have taken place in Australia about its regional identity; some senior Australian politicians and decision-makers see their future and identity as a Southeast one. The problem of their non-Asian identity, however, looms large. Not so with Timor-Leste. Khoo Ying Hooi explores the recent problematical history of East Timor and its desire to join ASEAN, formally expressed in March 2011. It clearly has a strong case, given that it shares a border with Indonesia, was once incorporated forcibly within Indonesia, and culturally and historically it is certainly part of Southeast Asia. However, as she indicates, there has been a certain reluctance within influential quarters within ASEAN to facilitate Timor-Leste's succession, and problems within Timor-Leste itself about its identity as a young country within which nation-building is still ongoing and in which the development of regional identity is still being worked out. Moreover, among some elite circles in Timor-Leste its continuing connections with a Portuguese-speaking, Lusophone world is still valued. The struggle to find an identity – national and regional – in a young, recently independent country is a fascinating study of the uncertainties and anxieties of building a nation, but, at the same time, having to confront the issue of its place in the world.

We also have reference in this special issue to the possibilities of Papua New Guinea joining ASEAN, though this now seems unlikely. Then there is the intriguing case of Sri Lanka, which is "outside the geographical area" of ASEAN but, in an important

sense, through Lord Louis Mountbatten's South East Asia Command, headquartered there during the Pacific War, and its historical and cultural connections with the Theravada Buddhist polities in mainland Southeast Asia, it has a claim to membership.

Then, from well-worn debates, we enter another that, if not equally well-worn, is becoming so. This comprises the reconfiguration or the reconceptualization of region and area studies. The concept of "Zomia" presented to us originally by Willem van Schendel and then developed into James Scott's thesis of a "retreat from the state" and "a zone of refuge", is here given an interesting turn by Iftekhar Iqbal. We must also remind ourselves of Jean Michaud's contemplations on the concept of the Southeast Asian massif. Rather than an emphasis on minority/upland-lowland/state relations, we might examine, with profit, the interconnections between the region of Zomia, which embraces part of Southeast Asia, but which goes beyond it into South and East Asia. The riverine connections which Iftekhar Iqbal has investigated seem to give a coherence to a region constructed by social scientists. It is perhaps as "real" as the "reality" of ASEAN and its relation to a definition of Southeast Asia, though based on a different set of criteria. He examines the intricate interconnections, the "water-world", between the Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Salween, Mekong and Yangtze rivers, as he says "spread out like a necklace around Yunnan". These are "ecologically contiguous areas". In an important sense, he re-energizes the debate between those who search for Southeast Asia and its place in the world, and those who go beyond, to the possibilities of "a greater Southeast Asia" in interaction with Timor-Leste, Australia (and New Zealand), and in Iftekhar Iqbal's paper, the "conversations" that have taken place and continue to take place "between parts of the Southeast Asian massif through to the expansive plain land and the vast coastal rim of the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea". Interestingly he deploys the concept of a "holon", and its reference to a network of relationships, in this case a network of rivers and the unities which it provides and which transcends the artificial boundaries of nation-states and regions.

Another contribution to the debate on Southeast Asia, which returns to an old theme in the construction of Southeast Asia and

the apparent genesis of Southeast Asian Studies, is that of American dominance in this enterprise and their role in giving shape and content to the region wedged between China and India. Instead King's paper explores critically and historically some of the popular academic views concerning the development of the study of Southeast Asia through the lens of the contributions of particular scholars and institutions. He questions American dominance, and proposes that much of what came to be Southeast Asian Studies was generated within the region itself and was not an external construct. He then suggests that the bipolar (and misleading) divisions between outsiders and insiders, local and foreign, Euro-American and Southeast Asian, in framing the debates about the study of the region, need to be rethought.

The scholars who created Southeast Asia had their roots in the 1920s and the 1930s in Southeast Asia, and the main players in this academic genesis were both insiders and outsiders working in higher education institutions and government departments in Southeast Asia, not in the USA. There was an earlier Austro-German (and Japanese) input as well. Moreover, some of the early scholars in the creation of Southeast Asia as a region gave fuel, energy and expertise to American efforts to create Southeast Asian Studies (O.W. Wolters, Benedict Anderson, Karl Pelzer, Harry Benda, Paul Mus, Robert (Baron) von Heine-Geldern, DGE Hall, Paul Wheatley, Jan Otto Marius Broek, John S. Furnivall). Claims that seek to establish the genesis of particular kinds of academic study are problematical when we accept that scholarly activity is global and is unconstrained by specific locations. King also proposes a qualification of Anthony Reid's "saucer model" in the conceptualization of Southeast Asia as a region. The conclusion in his trawl through the early literature on Southeast Asia is that the US provided an institutional basis for Southeast Asian Studies, but in an important intellectual sense they did not create it.

In an intriguing paper which contemplates the ways in which area studies specialists and historians might address environmental crises and climate change, generated by human activities, in what has come to be referred to as "the Anthropocene", Rommel Curaming argues for the continued relevance of area studies expertise in this

debate. He engages critically with Dipesh Chakrabarty's work on the Anthropocene, specifically Chakrabarty's position in regard to historical understandings of what some scholars argue might be a prelude to the "end of history" (indeed the end of humankind), in the disruption between our consciousness of the connections between past, present and future and in our inabilities (or unwillingness) to understand an uncertain future. In his exploration of the various "facets" of history, Curaming also addresses, with some skepticism, the perspectives which historians might adopt in the context of Chakrabarty's call for a non-human-centric history, and those which are expressed in post-humanist historical understandings. Against a conception of region and area studies which focuses on a collectivity of nation-states, Curaming proposes nevertheless, that, in coming to terms with such global phenomena as environmental change, the sensitivities, sensibilities and commitments which area specialists embrace (outside of politico-territorial definitions of region) are important in understanding local and regional contexts, variations and adaptations to environmental processes, as well as the indigenous knowledge which has been developed in pursuing livelihoods within different ecologies. In other words, "provincializing", recognizing and understanding the localization of human agency in the Anthropocene might be a way forward. We are invited to locate the local, and emplace it, in the global.

The final paper by Jane Ferguson takes us on a connected route to area studies, one which is truly global. She asks "Can area studies take to the air?" Area studies locates itself in places, as Curaming proposes in his paper; it is "emplaced", but with international air travel we enter a different world, just as rivers in Zomia take us beyond fixed places. Ferguson takes us on a journey, with the armoury of a regional expert, and ethnographer, a Thai specialist, who has worked in Thailand and speaks Thai, and who undertook research amongst airline customer service workers, and ground and cabin crews in Thailand and Myanmar. Let us forget Zomia for a moment and Southeast Asia and, follow Ferguson in examining the airline cabin as a field for ethnographic study, and a location for political and cultural processes. Using her knowledge of Southeast Asian cabin crews, she examines the 1990 hijack of Thai

Airways TG 305 from an emplaced cultural perspective. It is an extraordinary event, but one which is embedded in a cultural and historical matrix. These are not non-places; they are sites of socio-cultural encounters which, as Ferguson explains, are part of the political histories of Myanmar and Thailand and the culture of flight attendants. What is more, the actors are agents, particularly the cabin crew working out their own rationalizations and actions in relation to their position within Thai Airways and its corporate ethos (which is concerned to present an image of crew unity), and the wider world of Thai identity. It is further complicated by an engagement with Burmese politics and identity and the ways in which a Thai cabin crew attempt to address this crisis and its context.

What do we conclude from this excursion into a further debate on Southeast Asia? It is difficult to reconcile the approaches in some of the papers; this is the stuff of debate. There still seems to be a difference between those who do discern a Southeast Asian entity and identity and those who are still doubtful. But, in my view, the work of ASEAN in building a regional identity has contributed to a strengthening of the position that Southeast Asia is becoming “embodied”. As an anthropologist, I would still wish to retain a degree of flexibility in defining Southeast Asia, in that an ASEAN-based definition, though well-delimited in terms of nation-state boundaries with clear rules about membership and the criteria required to join, still excludes populations which I would consider culturally (linguistically) and historically to be “Southeast Asian”. It would also present difficulties in entering the terrain of global climatic change; the flow of people, goods and ideas along rivers; and our experiences of international air travel. There is also the view from a global or international history perspective that Southeast Asia has been of little account in these narratives, which again suggests in terms of regional identity and a voice in the world, that it is found wanting. This might help provide us with one of the reasons in explaining the sense of threat and crisis that Southeast Asianists experience.

The issue of the expansion of ASEAN is an interesting one. On what basis might Timor-Leste and then Australia (and even New

Zealand) be admitted? Is the main consideration in ASEAN to maintain a cultural integrity, and a spirit of Asianness (though different from South Asia and East Asia), and one which is in some way historically grounded. If that is the case then only Timor-Leste might eventually be given permission to join. Sri Lanka and Papua New Guinea are equally problematic.

We then have to continue to scrutinize and critically evaluate the continuing mantra that Southeast Asia is an external construction of the Western powers, particularly the USA during and immediately after the Second World War and that Southeast Asian Studies was primarily an American project. Moreover, the continuing and now tedious debate about the academic credentials of area studies and, in this case, Southeast Asian Studies needs to be put to rest, though I suspect that it will not go quietly. There is little more to say. Yet a grounded area studies perspective, as demonstrated in this special issue, can be sufficiently versatile to capture the need to “take to the air”, to help address and adapt to climate change, and to journey the interconnected rivers of the mainland, and not be necessarily emplaced within what is defined as Southeast Asia in ASEAN terms. Nevertheless, it must be accepted that ASEAN will continue to embody one definition of what Southeast Asia is and what it might become.

Whatever we have said here about debating Southeast Asia, undoubtedly the debate will continue. In a world in which, as academics, we publish or perish, contention and the “rivalries for intellectual capital” will intensify. This special issue is but a small part of these debates and rivalries.

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Articles



Southeast Asian Studies and the Reality of Southeast Asia



David Henley*

[*Abstract*]

Southeast Asianists have a perennial tendency to question the reality of the region in which they are specialized. Yet while scholars have doubted, Southeast Asians at large have become increasingly sure that Southeast Asia does exist, and increasingly inclined to identify with it. This article summarizes a range of evidence to that effect, from opinion poll research and from the history of ASEAN and other pan-Southeast Asian institutions, and uses it to construct a critique of the relativistic view that Southeast Asia is a fluid and ill-defined concept. Southeast Asians today tend to see Southeast Asia as a cultural as well as a geographical and institutional unit. The nature of the perceived cultural unity remains unclear, and further research is called for in this area. There are reasons to think, however, that it reflects real inheritances from a shared past, as well as shared aspirations for the future.

Keywords: Southeast Asian Studies, Southeast Asia, ASEAN, Region, Identity, Culture, Community, Institutions, Imagination, Zomia.

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I . Introduction

Southeast Asianists have spent a striking amount of time and effort “problematizing” Southeast Asia. Classic publications with tentative titles, like the much-used history textbook *In search of Southeast Asia* edited by David Joel Steinberg (1971, 1987), or Donald Emmerson’s meticulous definitional survey “‘Southeast Asia’: What’s in a name?” (1984), are testimony to this introspective tendency. So too, in a different way, is the present issue of *Suvannabhumi*, and the research project and conference in which it originated.

There are understandable reasons for this tendency to disciplinary self-doubt. In part it reflects a general hesitancy about categorization of peoples and cultures that has affected scholars of Asia and the “non-Western” world since the publication of Edward Said’s seminal work on Orientalism (1978). Area Studies, by its name and nature, is also rightly sensitive to the problems involved in mapping the complex and intangible geographies of human culture, and this predisposes its practitioners to hesitancy when it comes to defining their own academic territory.

Yet in the twenty-first century such soul-searching is actually less justified, as far as Southeast Asianists are concerned, than it ever was in the past, and risks causing them to lose touch with a reality in which their knowledge and perspectives are more relevant than ever. In what follows I would like to argue that Southeast Asia today can and does define itself, and that if academics want to understand the region’s identity, they should listen in the first place to the voices of its inhabitants, a great many of whom currently see Southeast Asia as a cultural as well as a political reality.

To avoid misunderstandings, a few disclaimers are in order at the outset. First, I am not trying to argue here that the existence of Southeast Asia is simply an objective geographical fact, independent of people’s perceptions of it. Neither am I arguing that its existence has always been perceived, or even that it is a particularly old concept. Although prefigured in, and to some extent influenced by, the writings of nineteenth-century European academics and sojourners in the region, an indigenous sense of unambiguously Southeast

Asian identity did not really begin to emerge until the 1960s. Toward the end of the twentieth century, nevertheless, Southeast Asia rapidly became both familiar and significant to very many of its inhabitants as a result of its institutionalization in the form of ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and many other organizations bearing the Southeast Asian label; its incorporation into educational curricula; and its representation in national and international communications media.

A large part of my article describes this process of regional identity formation and uses empirical evidence from attitude surveys to show that Southeast Asia is now firmly anchored in the consciousness of very large numbers of Southeast Asians, with geographical boundaries that are clearly defined and not in doubt. Toward the end of the piece, I also highlight the fact that most of those polled in the surveys believe that a degree of cultural unity exists among all Southeast Asian nations. This, I suggest, helps to explain why Southeast Asia has so quickly become such a popular and apparently self-explanatory concept. Like all self-identifying groups that are too large for all of their members to know each other personally, Southeast Asia, however strongly institutionalized, remains at some level an 'imagined community', to borrow Benedict Anderson's immortal phrase. But some communities are intrinsically easier to imagine than others. The shared cultural traits, rooted in shared history, which various scholars have identified as characteristically Southeast Asian did not *predestine* the region to emerge in our time as a political unit and a focus of subjective identity. Nevertheless, they are almost certainly part of the reason why it has done so.

II . Destructive fantasies: Zomia and the postmodern attack on Southeast Asian Studies

In its most aggravated form, the perennial academic "search for Southeast Asia" leads researchers to conclude that even in recent times there is simply no entity that is commonly, consistently, and persistently identified as Southeast Asia. Its location, extent, and

identity are up for grabs, its very existence in doubt. As the editors (all of them established Southeast Asia scholars) of a 2005 volume entitled *Locating Southeast Asia* put it in their introduction:

Efforts to define an entity to match the term "Southeast Asia" have been inconclusive, and the term persists as little more than a way to identify a certain portion of the earth's surface. [...]. Whether Southeast Asia will acquire greater coherence in the future, or become increasingly irrelevant, is a question that cannot be answered. [...] The value of "Southeast Asia" lies in the way it frames and juxtaposes people and events, but to be of any value it must be understood as a fluid concept, representing a variable collection of states, of terrains and ecological zones, and of peoples. It must be used with caution [...] (Kratoska, Raben and Schulte Nordholt 2005: 14-15)

Locating Southeast Asia is notable for including a uniquely influential critical reflection on Southeast Asia as a region, and on area studies in general: Willem van Schendel's "Geographies of knowledge, geographies of ignorance: jumping scale in Southeast Asia". In this contribution, originally presented as a paper at the 2001 Amsterdam workshop in which the volume had its origins, and also published elsewhere as a journal article (2002), Van Schendel begins by inviting his readers to sit down, in their mind's eye, at a food stall in a town where both Mon-Khmer and Tibeto-Burman languages are spoken, and where a "bamboo-shoot lunch" is on the menu. The town turns out to be Shillong, in northeastern India. "Is this Southeast Asia?", Van Schendel (2005: 275) then asks rhetorically. "If so, why? And does it matter?"

There follows an ambitious attempt to deconstruct, indeed demolish, Southeast Asia as a concept. The so-called Southeast Asian region, the author argues, lacks the "geographical obviousness of other areas". More importantly, the cultural commonalities that allegedly make it a human unit are at best "vague", and almost always shared with groups located outside its conventional borders.

Southeast Asianists [...] share [...] a concern to present Southeast Asia as a well-bounded geographical place with a certain internal

consistency and a *regional je ne sais quoi*, an essence that even area specialists find hard to put into words. As a result, the geographical boundaries of the region remain highly problematic: civilisations, languages and religions have never coincided with each other, nor with the contemporary political boundaries that most Southeast Asianists accept as the spatial limits to their quest for knowledge. (Van Schendel 2005: 277-278).

The only reason why such a weakly defined region became widely recognized as such, in this view, is that the “post-World War II academic division of the world” was shaped by the “geopolitics of the Cold War”, and by the legacy of colonial Orientalist scholarship.

To illustrate the supposed arbitrariness of the course of events which led Southeast Asia to become an “institutional space”, Van Schendel imagines a counterfactual region that did not become institutionalized in the same way: the subsequently (and somewhat ironically) well-known Zomia (from *zomi*, a term for “highlander” in a number of languages of Myanmar, India and Bangladesh), consisting of upland central and southeastern Asia. The reason why this “Region of No Concern” did not become recognized or institutionalized, Van Schendel (2005: 284-287) proposes, was not because it was objectively or intrinsically any less coherent than Southeast Asia, but rather because, unlike Southeast Asia, it “straddled the communist and capitalist spheres of influence” and encompassed only the peripheries, not their cores, of either historic civilizations or modern nation-states.

The subsequent popularization of Zomia in the academic world was due mainly to the fact that the term was picked up and expanded upon by veteran Southeast Asianist James C. Scott in his polemical book *The art of not being governed: an anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia* (2009). Citing Van Schendel's original 2001 conference paper, Scott borrowed Zomia as a convenient name for the “zone of refuge” which, according to his central argument in *The art of not being governed*, the mountain massif of mainland Southeast Asia had offered throughout history to non-state peoples fleeing from, or simply avoiding, the violence and taxation of lowland power centers (Scott 2009: 13-22, 340). Scott's book generated great interest in the scholarly community both within and

beyond Southeast Asian Studies, spawning a whole academic industry under the Zomian label. In 2010, for example, the *Journal of Global History* devoted a theme issue (5-2) entitled “Zomia and Beyond” to eight pieces debating Scott's ideas. Up to the present the term continues to be widely used, even giving rise to the derivative concept of a “maritime Zomia” (Hong 2016). In this way, one of the most influential contributions of Southeast Asian Studies to wider scholarly debate can ironically be said to have emerged as an accidental by-product of the persistent crisis of identity within the discipline.

That contribution, however, is a highly controversial one. Leaving aside the controversy generated by Scott's specific interpretation of Zomia as a historic zone of refuge and benevolent anarchy, Van Schendel's original formulation, in terms of the potential (but unrealized) equivalence of Zomia and Southeast Asia, and the implications of that equivalence, is itself open to obvious objections.

In the first place, Van Schendel's concrete criticisms of Southeast Asia as a concept mostly boil down to the observation that the region's cultural geography, however defined, does not correspond perfectly with its political borders. The importance of this point, however, should not be exaggerated. That the town of Shillong, for instance, appears culturally cognate with Southeast Asia is hardly surprising given that it lies less than 300 kilometers from the Indian-Burmese border. Southeast Asia as a whole, by comparison, extends over more than ten times that distance both from west to east and from north to south. Van Schendel's counterfactual argument regarding Zomia would be stronger if his alternative region had the effect of splitting up Southeast Asia - or South Asia, or East Asia, or any other “conventional” region - in a radical new way. But it does not: with respect to the existing Area Studies communities, Zomia does not amount to much more than a minor border dispute - and all academic disciplines, even the most rigorous, are subject to those.

In relation to Southeast Asia, Van Schendel (2005: 275) tries to suggest a more radical critique by declaring that Shillong, his epitome of a Southeast Asian place that defies Southeast Asian

borders, “may stand for towns as dispersed as Antananarivo, Trincomalee, Merauke and Kunming”. In the cases of Merauke, in Indonesian Papua, and Kunming, less than 300 kilometers from the China-Vietnam border in Yunnan, it is hard to disagree. But whether a Southeast Asian would really feel so much at home in Antananarivo, capital of Madagascar, or in the Sri Lankan Tamil town of Trincomalee, is actually a much more open question.

This brings us to the second and more profound weakness of Van Schendel's critique (and, by extension, many other critiques) of Southeast Asia as an object of academic enquiry: his insistence on treating it *only* as an object of academic enquiry, and his indifference to the opinions of the people who live there as to what it does and does not consist of. In “Jumping scale in Southeast Asia”, the region of that name is dismissed as a self-serving conspiracy of Western Orientalists, “colonial experts”, and Cold War strategists, an external category imposed on “distant places” that “needed to be better understood in the world centres of power” (Van Schendel 2005: 290). In a later, even more polemical essay entitled “Southeast Asia: an idea whose time is past?”, Van Schendel (2012: 500) does at last call for attention to changing indigenous geographies of identity.

We have to rethink space. But who are 'we'? The more important rethinking is going on, not among scholars, but among inhabitants of the regions confronting the wider world. Area thinking has become a significant resource in identity construction for some - to the extent that the 'area' in area studies has turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Yet after this promising start, Van Schendel immediately reverts to dismissing Southeast Asia as an externally imposed category, relevant at most to diasporic immigrant groups in Western countries.

For many others in the region, however, 'Southeast Asia' still means little or nothing. Furthermore, the claims of area studies have been received differently by inhabitants of the region and by people originating from it but living elsewhere. Who has adopted the self-identification of 'Southeast Asian', and why? It can be argued

that it is mainly, and increasingly, outside the area that the label has practical relevance. The idea of Southeast Asia is more influential beyond the region - on campuses and in boardrooms, foreign ministries and control rooms - than within it. Indonesians, Vietnamese and Burmese who live in the United States, Europe or Australia find themselves categorized as 'Southeast Asians' [...]. (Van Schendel 2012: 500).

Fifty years ago, such rhetoric might still have been credible. In the twenty-first century, it can no longer be taken seriously. Southeast Asia today is neither an academic abstraction nor a strategic project, but a concrete, everyday reality, institutionalized by every Southeast Asian state and directly experienced by millions of Southeast Asian people.

III. Southeast Asia in Southeast Asia: beyond deconstruction

The most obvious and important institutional basis for Southeast Asian regional identity today is ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) founded in 1967 and generally recognized as the most successful regional organization in the developing world. In all of its member countries ASEAN has a high and positive public profile, especially among educated young people. In 2014 and 2015, Eric Thompson, Chulanee Thianthai and Moe Thuzar organized a survey in which more than 4,600 undergraduate students at 22 universities across all ten ASEAN states were quizzed on their knowledge of, and attitudes to, ASEAN and the Southeast Asian region. Presented with the statement: "I feel I am a citizen of ASEAN", fully 82 per cent agreed, 36 per cent "strongly" so. An even higher proportion responded positively to the question of whether membership in ASEAN is beneficial to their country, and almost three-quarters also believed that their country's membership was beneficial to them personally.

	strongly agree (%)	some-what agree (%)	some-what disagree (%)	strongly disagree (%)	total agree (%)	total disagree (%)
I feel that I am a citizen of ASEAN	37.2	45.5	13.1	4.2	82.7	17.3
Membership in ASEAN is beneficial to my country	36.8	52.4	8.4	2.4	89.2	10.8
Membership in ASEAN is beneficial to me personally	22.0	52.3	19.1	6.6	74.3	25.7

Adapted from Thompson, Thianthai and Thuzar (2016: 38, 41, 43)

The same survey also revealed that good fundamental knowledge of the organization, and of the Southeast Asian region which it encompasses, is very widespread. When asked to list the member countries of ASEAN, for example, most respondents correctly named, without any prompts or clues other than an outline map, at least nine out of the actual ten.

Number of ASEAN member countries correctly named, average	9.1 / 10
ASEAN member countries correctly identified on map, average	6.7 / 10
ASEAN flag correct (choice of six)	81.5 %
Date of ASEAN foundation correct (choice of six, one per decade 1960-2000)	43.0 %

Adapted from Thompson, Thianthai and Thuzar (2016: 58)

Asked whether they favored integration and cooperation among the ASEAN countries in various fields, more than half answered “strongly agree” with respect to economic cooperation, educational exchanges, security cooperation, and sports competitions (Thompson, Thianthai and Thuzar 2016: 82).

These results closely mirror those of an earlier, somewhat less extensive survey carried out in 2007 among 2,170 students at ten universities, one in each ASEAN country, by two of the same authors (Thompson and Thianthai 2008). Both the 2007 and 2015 findings by Thompson and colleagues are also in line with the results of an unrelated poll conducted in 2005 by the Singapore newspaper *The Straits Times*, together with allied English-language

newspapers in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. In this survey over 1,000 English-speaking, urban respondents were polled in one-to-one interviews, via e-mail and telephone, with over 400 questioned in Singapore and about 100 in each of the other countries involved. Nearly half of those polled were of the opinion that the “pace of ASEAN integration” was too slow, and only 2.6 per cent found it too fast. The idea that ASEAN should have a single currency was backed by fully 45 per cent of respondents, with 38 per cent against. Most importantly in our context, when asked “Do people in ASEAN identify with one another?”, six out of ten (60.3 per cent) answered “yes” (Rekhi 2005).

A limitation of the three surveys just discussed is that they are all restricted to the most highly educated part of the Southeast Asian population. In this context a fourth piece of research on Southeast Asian views of Southeast Asia, conducted around the same period for a doctoral thesis on ASEAN's “security community project” by Christopher Roberts (2008), provides valuable confirmation that high levels of knowledge regarding regional cooperation are not limited to intellectual elites. A random sample of more than 800 people, distributed over all Southeast Asian countries except Myanmar, was quizzed on its knowledge of ASEAN and the region. This too was a highly urban sample: all interviews took place in capital cities, and over 90 per cent of the respondents came from a town of 20,000 or more people (Roberts 2011: 381). However, it was also explicitly and intentionally a *grassroots* poll, directed at ordinary people, conducted in vernacular languages by native speakers, and designed to complement a separate in-depth interview survey, by Roberts himself, of 100 members of Southeast Asia's political and academic elites (Roberts 2008: 40-42).

Asked how familiar they were with ASEAN as an organization, more than 50 per cent of those questioned as part of Roberts' grassroots survey reported that they knew it either “very well” or “reasonably well”; only 8 per cent had never heard of it.

	proportion of respondents (%)
I know it very well	7.5
I know it reasonably well	44.6
I know of it but don't really know what it does	38.4
I had never heard of it before this survey	8.3

Adapted from Roberts (2012: 171)

Another question in the grassroots survey was designed to investigate the ability of those polled “to differentiate between the Southeast Asian countries and the countries outside the region” (Roberts 2008: 361). Respondents were presented with a list of Asian and Australasian countries, and asked: “Which of the following countries form a part of your region?”. The result was that all ten ASEAN countries - Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar, and the Philippines - were identified as such far more often (in all cases by more than 40 per cent of respondents) than were any of the others on the list. The non-ASEAN country most frequently identified by respondents as belonging to their own region, China, was named by 25 per cent. None of the remaining countries listed - India, South Korea, North Korea, Pakistan, Australia, and New Zealand - was named by more than 10 per cent of those surveyed (Roberts 2008: 362; 2012: 170).

Of course, data from opinion polls and attitude surveys only tell us what participants say momentarily about a fragment of their views, and only in response to prepared questions from the researchers. The answers given are inevitably situational, the connection with everyday behavior often tenuous. Reported appreciation for the benefits of ASEAN, for instance, is no doubt partly formulaic, echoing public and official discourse. But for all that, the clarity and decidedness of the results just cited, and the impressive levels of geographical knowledge which they reveal, stand in striking contrast to the dismissive relativism of much of the academic literature. And while the urban and elite bias of the data cannot be denied, it should be remembered that the days when the vast majority of Southeast Asians were uneducated peasants are long past. One half of Southeast Asia's population now lives in urban areas, and only in Cambodia and Laos is the secondary school

enrolment rate below 50 per cent (ASEAN 2018: 7, 13).

IV. Demarcating ASEAN

The clarity with which individual Southeast Asians are able to define the geographical scope of Southeast Asia is matched by the clarity with which ASEAN as an institution does the same thing. Admittedly, neither the foundational ASEAN (Bangkok) Declaration of 1967 nor the more detailed ASEAN Charter of 2007 explicitly defines the “South-East Asian Region” (1967), or “recognised geographical region of Southeast Asia” (2007), within which they specify that member countries must be located. However, ASEAN documents of the 1990s relating to the accession of Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar (1997), and Cambodia (1999) refer explicitly to the Association expanding to encompass “all ten Southeast Asian countries” (Severino 2006: 42-43, 54-55). A protocol of 1998, ratified in the context of the opening up to non-member states of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation that had been an internal foundation of ASEAN since 1976, is likewise explicit as to what Southeast Asia as a region does and does not include.

States outside Southeast Asia may also accede to this Treaty with the consent of all the States in Southeast Asia, namely, Brunei Darussalam, the Kingdom of Cambodia, the Republic of Indonesia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, the Union of Myanmar, the Republic of the Philippines, the Republic of Singapore, the Kingdom of Thailand and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. (reproduced in Severino 2006: 400-401).

Consistently with this position, repeated ASEAN membership overtures from Papua New Guinea have been rejected on geographical grounds (Thuzar 2017), and the periodically mooted idea of Australian membership must be treated with scepticism for the same reason, among others (Dobel 2015). By contrast East Timor, still under Indonesian control in 1998 but independent since 2002, formally applied for membership in 2011 and will almost certainly be admitted, as ASEAN's eleventh and final member, once a number of economic and political issues surrounding its accession

are resolved.

Of course, ASEAN did not always encompass (almost) the whole of “academic” Southeast Asia as it does today. Myanmar and the Indochinese countries, as noted, became part of it only in the 1990s. At its birth in 1967, ASEAN consisted of just five non-communist, and anti-communist, states: Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. But it is striking that the unity of Southeast Asia as a whole was already accurately foreseen, and adopted as a long-term goal, by ASEAN at its foundation. In 2007 retired diplomat Sompong Sucharitkul, who assisted Thai foreign minister Thanat Khoman with the drafting of the Bangkok Declaration in 1967, was interviewed by journalist Kavi Chongkittavorn about the decisions and intentions of the ASEAN founders regarding the scope of the organization.

According to the 75-year-old law professor, [...] [t]he idea of including all 10 Southeast Asian countries was always in the minds of Asean's founders, even though at that time the region was literally divided into three different blocs: noncommunist Southeast Asia, communist Indochina and isolated Burma. "We knew in our hearts they would be part of Asean one day. That was why, towards the end of the Declaration, we invited all countries of Southeast Asia to [...] join", he reiterated. (Chongkittavorn 2007.)

As the new association was being organized, Indonesian foreign minister Adam Malik visited both Burma (Myanmar) and Cambodia in May 1967 in the hope of persuading their governments to be among the founding members. Concerned to preserve their non-aligned status (the Kingdom of Cambodia was then struggling to avoid involvement in the Vietnam conflict), and suspecting that ASEAN would essentially be a pro-Western grouping, both preferred at this stage to decline the invitation (Acharya 2012: 155-156; Severino 2006: 44-45). But a generation later they would quickly change their minds, and Vietnam and Laos with them, when the ending of the Cold War removed the great obstacles to regional unity formed by Myanmar's rigorous non-alignment, and Vietnam's Soviet alignment, in the mid-twentieth century superpower conflict. At that point ASEAN promptly expanded precisely up to, and not

beyond, the geographical limits envisaged by its founders.

The only country not belonging to “academic” Southeast Asia which has ever looked seriously likely to become an ASEAN member is Sri Lanka. Although not actively approached by the founders in 1967, the government of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) expressed spontaneous interest in the planned association immediately after it was mooted. According to Sucharitkul, Sri Lanka sent two ministerial-level representatives to the founding meeting at Bangsaen near Bangkok. Here however they were kept outside the doors of the meeting room after Singaporean foreign minister Rajaratnam (a Sri Lankan Tamil by birth) argued that Sri Lanka's unstable domestic situation would “not be good for a new organization”. Thailand, nevertheless, would allegedly have welcomed “the membership of an additional Buddhist country”, while Malaysia and the Philippines “did not have any objection” to Ceylon “because its location was not far from mainland Southeast Asia”. Sucharitkul's account does not mention Indonesia's position (Chongkittavorn 2007). In another version of events based on a Sri Lankan source, Sri Lanka was actually accepted as a founding member, but had to back out at the last-minute following pressure from the political Left at home (Severino 2006: 46).

The most detailed account, however, comes from the memoirs of later Singaporean president S.R. Nathan, who was an assistant to Rajaratnam at Bangsaen in 1967. According to Nathan, the idea of Sri Lankan membership was sprung on the five founding countries as an unexpected “last-minute hitch” when the leader of the Malaysian delegation, deputy prime minister Tun Abdul Razak, announced that his prime minister had already made a promise to the prime minister of Ceylon regarding Ceylon's admission to the group.

An undertaking had been made and he, Razak, could not retract it. [...] We were stunned. The geographical limits agreed and reflected in the Declaration did not extend to the west beyond Burma. Reluctantly, everybody decided to wait for the arrival of the application from Ceylon. Nothing happened. The clock was ticking and the Thais wanted the birth of the organization to take place within a certain auspicious time. Before that deadline the meeting

was called to order. Thanat Khoman then announced that the ministers had decided to call the organisation 'ASEAN' (Association of South East Asian Nations) and thanked Adam Malik for coming up with the name, which was accepted and acclaimed. Thus a new regional organisation was born (Nathan 2011: 350-351).

Nathan's account agrees with Severino's that it was domestic political opposition in Sri Lanka, not Singaporean opposition in Bangsaen, that kept Sri Lanka out in 1967. But it differs from both Severino's and Sucharitkul's in its portrayal of the geographical debate, which according to Nathan had already been resolved, in principle, in favor of a conventional modern definition of Southeast Asia when the Sri Lankan issue suddenly arose to complicate it.

Whatever ambiguity existed on that point in 1967, it was to disappear in subsequent years. In 1981 a renewed bid for membership from Sri Lanka, although once again sympathetically received by Thailand and the Philippines (no longer by Malaysia), was formally rejected by the ASEAN Standing Committee on the grounds that Sri Lanka lay "outside the geographical area" (Indorf 1987: 97). Another twenty years on and the Sri Lankan question was all but forgotten, with even ASEAN's founding fathers reportedly denying they had ever doubted where Southeast Asia's boundaries lay.

When I mentioned this episode to some personalities involved in ASEAN's founding, including Thanat Khoman, they dismissed it by pointing out that Sri Lanka is in South Asia and not in Southeast Asia, as if the idea of Sri Lankan membership had never been considered. (Severino 2006: 47.)

So much, then, for Southeast Asia being an "inconclusive" and "fluid" concept (Kratoska, Raben and Schulte Nordholt), with boundaries that "remain highly problematic" (Van Schendel). In the twenty-first century its boundaries, at least as far as Southeast Asians themselves are concerned, are in fact clear, fixed, and virtually undisputed.

V. Socializing Southeast Asia: communications and institutions

If Southeast Asia was really a “Cold War construct”, as Van Schendel (2005), Glassman (2005) and others allege, then we might expect it to have become less significant since the end of that conflict. But in fact, as Cynthia Chou and Vincent Houben already observed in 2006, the reverse is true.

From the Western perspective, the definition of Southeast Asia as a region has been problematic. [...] For those in Asia, however, the existence of a region called "Southeast Asia" has been becoming more and more self-evident. The end of the Cold War has created a multilateral world in which supra-national regions have acquired new strategic importance. With the rise of ASEAN, a new and stronger regional identity has emerged [...]. (Chou and Houben 2006: 10-11)

At the level of the individual ASEAN “citizen”, the immediate reasons why the existence of Southeast Asia has become “more and more self-evident” in the period after 1990 have to do above all with the prominence of ASEAN in the mass media, and in the classroom. Throughout Southeast Asia the media report extensively on ASEAN's summits, treaties, forums, slogans (“One ASEAN”, “Visit ASEAN”, “The ASEAN Way”, “One Vision, One Identity, One Community”), and projects (for example: ASEAN Charter, ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, ASEAN Economic Community). Meanwhile schoolteachers across the region incorporate material on ASEAN explicitly into their lessons, always using appropriate maps, and usually in the very idealistic way promoted by official publications such as the *ASEAN curriculum sourcebook*, subtitled “a teaching resource for primary and secondary schools to foster an outward-looking, stable, peaceful and prosperous Asean community” (ASEAN 2012).

In the survey of over 4,600 undergraduate students from all ASEAN countries carried out by Thompson, Thiantai and Thuzar in 2014/15, the top four reported sources of information on ASEAN were television, school, internet, and newspapers. School was the single most important source in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore, while television topped the list in Brunei, Cambodia,

Laos, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Books, radio, personal contacts, sports, and advertising were also significant.

Percentage of all respondents mentioning [X] as a source of information about ASEAN

X	%
television	72.2
school	71.1
internet	66.6
newspaper	60.0
books	56.5
radio	34.5
friends	34.3
advertising	31.5
sports	26.0
family	21.5
travel	19.3
movies	15.8
music	12.0
work experience	8.7

Adapted from Thompson, Thianthai and Thuzar (2016: 82)

The visibility and tangibility of ASEAN proper are complemented and enhanced by a host of related organizations that bear its name. An appendix to the ASEAN Charter of 2007 lists no fewer than 72 “entities associated with ASEAN”, ranging from the ASEAN Inter Parliamentary Assembly and the ASEAN Bankers Association to the ASEAN Chess Confederation and the ASEAN Kite Council (ASEAN 2007, Annex 2). One of the most familiar to the public at large is the ASEAN Football Federation (AFF), which organizes a popular biennial football competition between national teams from all ASEAN countries, plus East Timor. Although Australia has also been an AFF member since 2013 (the AFF is a subdivision of the Asian Football Confederation of which Australia is a part), it does not compete in the AFF international tournament, and there is considerable Southeast Asian resistance to the idea of it doing so in the future (Deurden 2019).

Not all of the high-profile regional institutions originate in, or are directly associated with, ASEAN. The largest regional sporting event in terms of cumulative participant numbers, the biennial Southeast Asian Games, has a separate lineage and an in some ways opposite evolution. This event originated in 1959, almost a decade before ASEAN, in the form of the Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games, with as participating countries Burma, Thailand, Malaya, Singapore, Laos, and Vietnam. Cambodia made its debut at the second SEAP Games in 1961. Like ASEAN, the Games were to expand - but in the opposite direction, from the mainland to the islands - to encompass the whole of (and again not more than) "academic" Southeast Asia, with Indonesia, Brunei and the Philippines joining in 1977, and East Timor too in 2003 (Creak 2017). There are many other explicitly Southeast Asian institutions that are not directly connected with ASEAN. They range from critical civil society groups like the Southeast Asian Press Alliance (Bangkok, since 1998) to commercial and media organizations like the music video channel MTV Southeast Asia (Singapore, since 1992).

Clearly, then, Southeast Asia today is far from being just a bureaucratic project. Still less is it an academic abstraction. Nevertheless, academia too has done its bit in the process of institutionalizing the region from the inside, with research institutes and university programs bearing the Southeast Asian label proliferating throughout ASEAN since the establishment of Singapore's iconic Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in 1968. Local academic publications dealing with Southeast Asia have multiplied correspondingly. Major long-running periodicals focusing explicitly on the region and published within the region today include: *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (Singapore, since 1960), *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* (Singapore, since 1968), *Southeast Asian Journal of Tropical Medicine and Public Health* (Bangkok, since 1970), *Contemporary Southeast Asia* (Singapore, since 1979), *Journal of Southeast Asian Economies* (Singapore, since 1984), *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* (Singapore, since 1986), and *Biotropia: The Southeast Asian Journal of Tropical Biology* (Bogor, Indonesia, since 1987).

VI. Imagining Southeast Asia

Like all communities too large for all of their members to know each other personally, Southeast Asia, however strongly institutionalized and however much reinforced in recent years by air travel, budget tourism, and educational exchanges, remains partly an “imagined community”. In this respect, however, it does not differ fundamentally from the individual nations that make it up. ASEAN regionalism has in fact been described as “a form of collective nationalism” (Vatikiotis 1999: 77). Its resemblance to Indonesian nationalism in particular is obvious, to the extent that Indonesia's national motto Unity in Diversity (*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*) is often also cited in relation to ASEAN. Like ASEAN, Indonesia encompasses a large and culturally diverse population which it has sought to unify on a pluralistic basis. Initially this involved a leap of imagination among a small elite, but ultimately it resulted in a widely perceived and endorsed common identity supported by multiple mutually reinforcing institutions.

As an imagined community, it is also worth noting, Indonesia is only a few decades older than Southeast Asia. Like most other Southeast Asian nations, Indonesia experienced its “national awakening”, an important part of which was the rise of a territorially demarcated identity, only in the first decade of the twentieth century. Its modern name, moreover, was not widely used until the 1920s. The first institutions to bear the Southeast Asian name, by comparison, appeared in the 1940s, beginning in 1943 with the Allied Forces South-East Asia Command (headquartered, interestingly, in Sri Lanka). At the close of the Second World War, the prospect of decolonization immediately ignited interest in regional cooperation among Southeast Asians themselves. In 1946, Burmese nationalist leader Aung San already looked forward to the creation of “something like the United States of Indo-China comprising French Indo-China, Thailand, Malaya, Indonesia and our country”, and in 1947 a short-lived “Southeast Asia League” was founded in Bangkok by left-wing nationalist groups from Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia (Reid 1999: 17-18). In 1961, Thailand, the Philippines and the then Federation of Malaya formed the

Association of Southeast Asia, a direct precursor to ASEAN (Pollard 1970).

The rapid postcolonial rise of impulses toward regional cooperation, even in the face of deep ideological differences, suggests that if at that stage Southeast Asia was still very much an imagined community, it was nevertheless a community that was somehow easy and attractive to imagine. It is interesting to note that for the architects of ASEAN, Europe, and the contemporary movement toward European unity, have been direct sources of inspiration. In the words of Thanat Khoman, who had studied in France:

It should be put on record that, for many of us and for me in particular, our model has been and still is, the European Community, not because I was trained there, but because it is the most suitable form for us living in this part of the world - in spite of our parallel economies which are quite different from the European ones. (Khoman 1992: xix)

Here, significantly, it is specifically the idea of Europe as a *community*, not Europe as a common market, that is identified as a model. And indeed, although trade policy has subsequently become an important area of ASEAN cooperation, the economies of the Southeast Asian countries, as Khoman rightly notes, show much less natural complementarity with each other than do those of Europe. Even today only about a quarter of Southeast Asia's international trade is conducted between countries within the region, compared with over 60 per cent in Europe (Chen and Intal 2017: 19).

Southeast Asia, of course, lacks Europe's rather coherent civilizational heritage, not to mention its time-honored geographical name. Nevertheless, the idea of Southeast Asia as a coherent region predates the birth of its modern label, at least in the eyes of outsiders. Western publications dealing with what was effectively the Southeast Asian region existed well before some German and Austrian scholars, less constrained in their thinking by colonial boundaries than their British, French, and Dutch counterparts, started using that explicit term in their writings at the end of the

nineteenth century (Reid 1999: 10-12). Examples of major books on Southeast Asia *avant la lettre* include J.H. Moor's *Notices of the Indian Archipelago and adjacent countries* (1837) and John Crawfurd's *Descriptive dictionary of the Indian islands and adjacent countries* (1856), both written by British authors based in Singapore. European cartographic representations of Southeast Asia as a whole have a longer history still. A notable early example is Jan Jansson's map of *Indiae Orientalis* (The East Indies), published in Amsterdam in 1630:



A rose, by any other name....

Source: National Library of Australia <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-232492036/view>

Of course, the fact that Westerners sometimes saw Southeast Asia as a geographical unit before they gave it its modern name does not mean that Southeast Asians themselves also perceived it as such. In this context, however, it is important to note that while *modern* Southeast Asians clearly do perceive their region as a unit, the unity which they ascribe to it is seldom a *historical* unity: that

is, they do not generally try to project it back into the distant past. As part of the in-depth opinion survey of 100 members of Southeast Asia's political and intellectual elite, carried out alongside his previously discussed mass survey, Roberts (2011: 368) asked his informants: "Do you believe that the notion of Southeast Asia is a centuries old phenomenon?". To this, 65 per cent answered "no", 13 per cent had no opinion, and only 22 per cent said "yes".

On the other hand, Southeast Asians mostly do believe that their region possesses a certain *cultural* unity. In the large international survey of ASEAN university students carried out by Thompson and his colleagues in 2014 and 2015, respondents were asked whether they agreed with the statement: "ASEAN countries are similar culturally". Fully 70 per cent were in agreement, albeit most of them mildly so, and only eight per cent responded with "strongly disagree". In Indonesia, agreement was as high as 81 per cent; only in Singapore was it less than 50 per cent (Thompson, Thianthai and Thuzar 2016: 46). Respondents were also clear that in their eyes, the ASEAN countries are much more similar to each other in cultural terms than they are in either economic or political terms.

"ASEAN countries are similar [X]" (percentage of all students' responses)

X	strongly agree	somewhat agree	somewhat disagree	strongly disagree	total agree	total disagree
culturally	10.5	59.5	21.5	8.5	70.0	30.0
economically	7.2	40.9	35.9	16.0	48.1	51.9
politically	7.2	32.4	41.6	18.7	38.7	60.3

Adapted from Thompson, Thianthai and Thuzar 2016: 46-48

For most external and academic observers, the most striking aspect of the cultural diversity of modern Southeast Asia is the division of the region into four more or less discrete domains of religious and (traditional) literary culture: Islamic in Indonesia and Malaysia, Catholic in the Philippines, Theravada Buddhist in Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, and Confucian in Vietnam. Perhaps the sharpest of the fault lines in this great cultural mosaic is the land border between Sinicized Vietnam and its

Buddhist (Indianized) Southeast Asian neighbors, marking what Hugh Toye (1968: xiv) memorably called “the yawning gulf that lies between the austere and self-contained civilisation of China and the tolerant earthiness of Hindu cultures”. Yet it is striking that in the Thompson survey the responses by Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian students on the question of ASEAN cultural similarity are if anything more, not less, in agreement with the proposition than are those of their counterparts elsewhere in the region.

“ASEAN countries are similar culturally” - percentage of responses from sampled students

	strongly agree	somewhat agree	somewhat disagree	strongly disagree	total agree	total disagree
Hanoi	18.4	55.5	16.1	10.1	73.9	26.2
Ho Chi Minh City	15.5	67.1	14.1	3.3	82.6	17.4
Phnom Penh	12.9	64.2	16.3	6.7	77.1	23.0
Vientiane	10.0	65.0	23.2	1.8	75.0	25.0
SE Asia average	10.5	59.5	21.5	8.5	70.0	30.0

Sampled universities: Vietnam National University, Hanoi; Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City; Royal University of Phnom Penh; National University of Laos

Adapted from Thompson, Thianthai and Thuzar 2016: 46

Reid (1999) has argued that while the core areas of Southeast Asia - Malaysia, Singapore, western Indonesia, and Thailand - have endorsed the regional idea in a positive way as a result of their long history of largely peaceful maritime interaction and commerce, peripheral areas like Vietnam have endorsed it largely as a negative decision *not* to become “appendages of their larger and more threatening neighbours” - in Vietnam's case, China (Reid 1999: 7). Vietnamese testimonies, however, indicate that there was more to Vietnam's long-awaited embrace of ASEAN in 1995 than the need to “balance” the country against China after the collapse of its former ally, the Soviet Union. According to scholar-diplomat Luu Doan Huynh, joining ASEAN also signified “a return of Vietnam to its place of origin”, in “ethnic” as well as geographical terms, in the context of a national “crisis of identity”.

Vietnam is located in Southeast Asia and its ethnic origins are similar to those of many other regional countries. [...]. After the end of the Cold War, [...] Vietnam was both free and without allies, with a deep sense of freedom coupled with something like 'a crisis of identity'. It was at that moment that ASEAN offered its hand of friendship, [...] replacing old alliances with a new one, where there is real mutual respect of independence and sovereignty [...]. Further, the new alliance is a Southeast Asian one, which would signify a return of Vietnam to its place of origin. (Luu Doan Huynh 2004: 23, 30)

Given what appears to most *outsiders* to be Southeast Asia's great cultural diversity, the fact that *insiders* tend to perceive an underlying ethnic or cultural unity is highly interesting. It almost certainly helps to explain why an overarching Southeast Asian community has apparently been so easy for Southeast Asians to imagine, even in times of political division, why the borders of that community have been so consensually established, and why the endeavor to translate it from the realm of imagination into lived reality has been so enthusiastically pursued.

VII. In search (again) of Southeast Asia

In what ways, exactly, do Southeast Asian perceive each other as culturally similar? Thompson's survey, unfortunately, did not include questions on that topic, empirical research on which would surely be very useful. The idea is a rather enigmatic one, and seems to be downright unfamiliar to many academic writers on international relations in the region. One well-known book on ASEAN, arguing that the organization has been successful precisely because it is premised on an assumption of Southeast Asian *disunity*, opens by quoting a "popular ASEAN saying" according to which the ASEAN states "have only three things in common: karaoke, durian, and golf" (Ba 2009: 1). The irony here is the greater in that only one of these three things, durian, is Southeast Asian in origin.

Where the idea of ASEAN as a cultural unit appears in existing literature, it is usually in relation to a supposedly shared value of

pluralism, or tolerance of diversity. Diversity itself, in other words, is portrayed as the basis for cultural unity, both within and between the ASEAN nations. This indeed is the official ASEAN line, and there is some truth in it. Certainly the “unity in diversity” formulation helps to explain why Indonesians, with their heritage of multicultural nationalism, tend to recognize themselves in ASEAN's pluralistic ideals, which they are consequently inclined to see as part of a regionally shared culture.

Yet in conversation many Southeast Asians, particularly those who have themselves travelled around the region and interacted with members of its other nationalities, also struggle to articulate a deeper, earthier sense of commonality. Sometimes they link this with features of Southeast Asia's physical environment. As José T. Almonte, a former Philippine presidential advisor, put it to Michael Vatikiotis in 1995:

You have to understand the moorings of Southeast Asia. Lifeways were shaped by the same environment. The physical environment shapes a kind of behaviour that is homogeneous [...]. (Vatikiotis 1999: 81.)

Here Almonte echoes academic geographers of Southeast Asia like Charles Fisher (1964), and anthropologists like Robbins Burling (1965) and Ben Wallace (1971), who saw rice cultivation, tropical climate, and abundant water as central to Southeast Asia's “personality” (Fisher 1964: 3-10). Across the region, these writers argued, characteristic patterns of climate, topography, and agriculture have shaped traditional dress, architecture, daily habits and rhythms, and of course food and cookery, in parallel ways.

More recently, historian Anthony Reid has likewise noted the significance of environmental factors in making Southeast Asia a region that is still coherent at its cultural “grassroots”, even if the globalizing influences of the last millennium, and particularly of the precolonial “Age of Commerce” (1400-1650), have divided it at the level of court culture and scriptural religion.

The common environment was responsible for a diet derived overwhelmingly from rice, fish, and various palms. [...] Wood, palm,

and bamboo were the favoured building materials, seemingly inexhaustibly provided by the surrounding forest. By preference Southeast Asians lived in houses elevated on poles [...]. Much of the characteristic architecture, domestic pattern, and even sociopolitical structure [...] derived from the ease of building and rebuilding such elevated wood-and-thatch houses. (A. Reid 1988-93, Vol. I: 5.)

Yet as Reid also observes, not all of the common Southeast Asian cultural practices can be explained purely in environmental terms. Exceptions include the well-known pattern of relatively egalitarian gender relations that is found in all Southeast Asian countries, and which differentiates them quite sharply from the patriarchal societies of neighboring India and China. Shared musical traditions, featuring bronze gongs, likewise point to a common heritage which is not the result of environmental factors alone. The same is true of the traditional house designs of Southeast Asia, which, although their characteristic raised floor platforms have clear functionality in an environment of heavy rain and flooding, are also similar in too many other details to be accounted for solely by climate. One of the first academic writers to make this point was Vietnamese scholar Nguyen Van Huyen, a pioneer of Southeast Asian studies whose 1933 Paris doctoral dissertation is entitled *Introduction a l'étude de l'habitation sur pilotis dans l'Asie du sud-est*. In it, Nguyen documents an array of common features which he concludes can only be explained by "a certain influence emanating from one and the same civilization" (1933: 191).

Recent research in historical linguistics has confirmed that the various cultural similarities across the region are not coincidental, but reflect common origins. That almost all the languages of island Southeast Asia descend from a single common ancestor, "Proto-Austronesian", has long been understood. Mainland Southeast Asia, however, contains three major language groups - Tai-Kadai, Austroasiatic, and Sino-Tibetan - which until recently were usually held to be unrelated. Then in 1999, study of a previously undocumented Tai-Kadai language with very conservative features, spoken by a small population on the Chinese side of the China-Vietnam border, proved what some scholars had long suspected: that the mainland Tai-Kadai and insular Austronesian

groups, which today are geographically separated, either share a common ancestor, or were in intensive contact with each other at a very early point in their history, before the ancestral Austronesians left Taiwan to colonize the Philippines and Indonesia (Sagart 2004: 432-3). Evidence for similar high-level connections involving the other two mainland language families, although not yet conclusive, is also mounting (L.A. Reid 2005; Sagart 2005).

In addition, David Gil (2015) has identified 17 language features which he argues define a single 'Mekong-Mamberambo linguistic area' encompassing both the whole of mainland Southeast Asia, and all of island Southeast Asia except for the Philippines. In this case, Gil proposes, the features in question are not inherited from the ancestors of today's four big Southeast Asian language families, but rather acquired from a common 'substrate' of now extinct languages, the speakers of which occupied almost all of Southeast Asia *before* the region was colonized by speakers of languages belonging to the modern families. Recent archaeogenetic research seems to reinforce this picture by indicating unexpectedly close genetic similarity between the populations of - for instance - Indonesia and Thailand (Lipson *et al.* 2014).

The common prehistoric origins revealed by clues like these may seem remote from the present day and its concerns, and the similarities in rural 'lifeways' shaped by climate and agriculture are themselves increasingly remote from the experience of today's young urban Southeast Asians, raised in an age of globalization and air conditioning. Nevertheless, there are ways in which legacies of the past probably continue to inspire Southeast Asians, albeit largely at an unconscious level, to identify more with each other than with other groups. Likely areas for investigation here, I would suggest, include: (1) physical appearance (skin color, facial and body features); (2) food preferences and traditions; (3) social conventions and politeness forms; (4) body language and gesture. On this last point, it is interesting to note that two of Gil's 17 'Mekong-Mamberambo' features are nonverbal: the "passing geture" (stooping with the right arm extended when passing a seated person), and the use of repeated dental clicks to indicate amazement (not, as in the English-speaking countries, disapproval). It is probably also

significant that almost every Southeast Asian country, prosperous or poor, in peace or war, has at some point been described as a “land of smiles”.

VIII. Concluding remarks

I have argued that while Southeast Asia may be in some sense an “imagined community”, it is nevertheless one that is today very widely imagined among its inhabitants. Some communities, moreover, are easier to imagine than others, and by the standards of international regions, Southeast Asia has proven a strikingly popular and consensual idea. It was envisaged indigenously, with its present extent and boundaries, as soon as its constituent nation-states - each of them a more or less novel imagined community in its own right (Henley 2013) - began to achieve independence after the Second World War. Its most important institutional manifestation, ASEAN, was founded immediately after the process of decolonization was completed in the 1960s, and expanded swiftly to encompass the whole of “academic” Southeast Asia - no more, and no less - as soon as this became politically feasible in the 1990s. Today it is part of the everyday experience of millions of Southeast Asians, who know what it consists of, identify with it, and endorse an ideal of regional cooperation within it. Although they recognize its historical novelty and the persistent political and economic contrasts between its member states, most of them believe that Southeast Asia possesses a degree of *cultural unity*. This helps to explain why it has so quickly become such a popular and apparently self-explanatory concept.

It is true that in political terms, a shadow has been cast over Southeast Asia in recent years by China's pursuit of expansive territorial claims in the South China Sea. This has effectively split ASEAN for some purposes between those member states which oppose China's claims, and others which - whether because they are not themselves claimants, or for reasons connected with their economic and financial relations with China - do not (O'Neill 2018). Constrained by its insistence that it can take no collective position

or action on which there is not unanimous consensus among its members, ASEAN has repeatedly proved unable to form a united Southeast Asian front for bilateral, rather than multilateral, negotiations with its powerful northern neighbor.

To some extent, commentators who talk of ASEAN's "South China Sea ulcer" (Davies 2016) and lament its weakness in the face of "China's 'divide and rule' attitude in Southeast Asia" (Thim 2016) are actually being unfair: ASEAN was and is designed to promote internal security and commerce, not as an alliance against external aggression. As this article goes to press, there are in any case signs that perhaps Southeast Asia has at last found its collective voice on the South China Sea issue after all (Gomez 2020). A more important point to note in our context, however, is that the very language used in such critical commentary – "Southeast Asia's developing divide" (Cook 2014), "Southeast Asia refuses again to stand up to Beijing" (Daiss 2016) - continues to reaffirm the reality of Southeast Asia as a region, which may be united or divided, but either way does not cease to exist.

For scholars of any discipline to deny that reality now is a poor idea, not just because it threatens the interests of those involved in Southeast Asian Studies, but because it is misleading, unproductive, and likely to fuel the widespread belief that academics are given to irrelevant sophistry. Since Southeast Asia is now an indigenous project, and one moreover that involves genuine idealism, foreign academics who take a denialist position also risk appearing condescending and dismissive of local views. And indeed, however good their intentions, Western scholars today who insist on stressing that Southeast Asia is a Western construct are rather like those ex-colonial Dutchmen who, years after Indonesian independence, continued to reiterate that Indonesia was an arbitrary and artificial creation of Dutch colonialism. That is: not wholly mistaken, but blind to indigenous insights, ideals, and endeavors, as well as radically overtaken by events.

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Making Southeast Asia Visible: Restoring the Region to Global History



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[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

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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—itself 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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Southeast Asia in International History: Justification and Exploration



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[*Abstract*]

Despite its centrality at a pivotal crossroads of both land and sea of East-West trade, communications and travel, the region now known as Southeast Asia provides very few scholarly works situating or featuring it in an international context. Because of this paucity, there is immense scope for exploration. But prior to further explorations, justification is needed to establish that Southeast Asia, as a region, is a subject of interest, relevance, and significance in a global context. Southeast Asia was home to several empires whose reach transcended the region and beyond. Southeast Asia in, and as part of international history as an area of study is therefore justifiable. Moreover, other factors come into play, viz. geography, resources, migration, diffusion of ideas and beliefs from without and accommodation from within, shared experience of imperialism and colonialism, decolonization, and the Cold War, and the collective fate under the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), that further bolster its rationalization as a component of international history. Explorations, on the other hand, examine issues and

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obstacles that contribute to the paucity of works on Southeast Asia in international history. Furthermore, in contextualizing Southeast Asia in international history, there might appear challenges that need to be identified, confronted, and resolved.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, international history, global economy, area studies, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

I . Preamble

What is presently recognized as the region of Southeast Asia has been overlooked as a legitimate component of international or global history with few scholarly works adopting a global view of its importance. To date, a mere seven volumes - five historical works, viz. Lockard (2009), Lieberman (2003, 2009), Ang (2018) and Chew (2018), and two volumes in international relations (IR), Acharya (2012) and Dayley (2016) – have presented the region in an international context. This paper will establish a justifiable case in citing a host of compelling factors in support of Southeast Asia's inclusion in international history. The second part on explorations focuses on issues and hindrances that contribute to the paucity of works on Southeast Asia in international history. Moreover, in attempting to contextualize the region as an international history component, it might foster challenges that need to be ascertained and addressed.

II . Definitions and clarifications

Almost three decades-old, international history (this more inclusive term is preferred over transnational history) is an approach in analysis and interpretation in the discipline of history addressing in what way developments within a country or region have been shaped, influenced, and changed by developments from without, particularly from trends, growths, expansion in the “outside” world. For instance, taking a modern nation-state like Thailand, how has

Thai history been impacted by developments from other neighboring nation-states such as Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Likewise, the history of Southeast Asia has been shaped by developments from outside, from East Asia, South Asia, and West Asia. The progenitor of international or transnational history was the Australian historian Ian Robert Tyrrell (b. 1947). Prominent works that promoted international/transnational history are Tyrrell's *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective since 1789* (2015), and an edited volume by Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake, *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective* (2006)

Southeast Asia as a region was borne from the wartime Allied demarcation of areas of military operations, namely the South East Asia Command (SEAC), a British theater of operations during the Pacific War (1941-1945). Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten was the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia (1943-1946), headquartered in Kandy, Ceylon (Sri Lanka). SEAC's land force operational domain initially comprised India, Burma, Ceylon, Malaya, northern Sumatra, Siam (Thailand), and from August 1945, also the Dutch East Indies and the southern part of French Indochina. The US sphere of military operations, designated South West Pacific Area Command (SWPA), came under US Army General Douglas MacArthur (1942-1945), who commanded the Philippines, Borneo, Dutch East Indies (Java and eastwards), East Timor, Papua and New Guinea, Australia, Guinea, and the Solomon Islands. In the post-war period, the contemporary term "Southeast Asia" came to denote the mainland nation-states of Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and archipelagic territories of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, Brunei, North Borneo (Sabah, from 1963), Indonesia, East Timor, and the Philippines. The Federation of Malaysia, created in 1963, comprised Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, and North Borneo. Singapore seceded from the Federation in 1965 becoming an independent republic. Between 1769 and 1974, East Timor was under Portuguese colonial rule. Following civil war in 1975-1976, Indonesia annexed East Timor as its 27th province in mid-1976. Elections were held in 2001, and in 2002, when East Timor or Timor-Leste attained independence.

III. Justification

Does Southeast Asia as a region warrant a space in international history? This had first to be justified. Grounds for rationalizing the region's qualification include: geography, resources, emigration and immigrants, diffusion of ideas and beliefs, imperialism and colonialism, and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Each factor in concert with others, contributed in legitimizing Southeast Asia as a region worthy to be featured in international history.

3.1. Geography

A glance at a map of Asia with parts of Europe and Africa on the peripheries reveals the centrality of Southeast Asia vis-à-vis the other continents. Specifically, within the Asian continent, Southeast Asia is juxtaposed between East Asia and South Asia, almost equidistant to both. Once one reached the sub-continent of India, either landward or seaward, one's access to West Asia, thence the Mediterranean and to Europe are inevitable. Again, from perusing the aforesaid map, Southeast Asia's positioning between East Asia and South Asia is located between East-West maritime routes. Either commencing from the Sea of Japan or the East China Sea, a vessel proceeds southward and westward through the South China Sea entering Southeast Asian waters. The journey continues through the Straits of Malacca into the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. In crossing the latter, the vessel anchors on the eastern coast of the Indian sub-continent. Continuing seaward and westward, through the Palk Straits into the Arabian Sea, and northward along the western periphery of India towards West Asia approaching the Arabian Peninsula, either via the Gulf of Oman thence the Persian Gulf, or further westward, through the Red Sea. With the opening of the Suez Canal (from 1869), the latter sea route proved more prudent rather than having to make the overland journey through present-day Iraq and Syria to reach the Mediterranean.

The ancient overland network of trade routes, the so-called Silk Road (c. 114 BCE-1450s CE) that connected Chang'an (modern Xi'an) at its eastern end to Byzantium (Constantinople; present-day

Istanbul) at its western point (Liu Xinru 2010; Frankopan 2016). Paralleling this terrestrial passageway was a seaborne route, the Maritime Silk Route (200 BCE-1400s CE) that, in fact, predated the former (Liu Yingsheng 2018). There were three major navigational passages of the Maritime Silk Route, namely the East Route, from China to Korea and Japan; the South Route, from China to Southeast Asia; and, the West Route, from China to South Asia, Arabia and East African coastal territories. The West Route, that connected to Arabia via the Red Sea, embarked overland to Egypt to proceed to the Mediterranean. Undoubtedly the West Route was joined to the South Route, hence Southeast Asia to the Mediterranean.

Participants of the terrestrial Silk Road, mainly Chinese, Parthians, and Romans profited lucratively until the advent of Islam in the seventh century that brought in “new players”, namely the Arabs. The seafaring Arabs brought into prominence the Maritime Silk Route (Kauz 2010). The advantage of the latter over the former was due to the capacity for greater volume of goods conveyed, but more importantly, the sea passages were comparatively safer than the land routes that were often plagued by brigands and warlords. Nonetheless, sea passages too had their shortcomings, from adverse weather conditions, dangerous waterways to piracy. Skilled and experienced seamanship was thus mandatory in undertaking voyages on the Maritime Silk Route.

Southeast Asia played a pivotal role in the ancient Maritime Silk Route. Not only were trade goods conveyed and exchanged, but there was also the migration of ideas, sociocultural practices, and peoples. Southeast Asia was directly involved in the lucrative spice trade from Roman times and flourished during the fourteenth to sixteenth century CE. Spices were needed in the flavouring, colouring and preserving of foods (Czarra 2009). The most common spices as well as commanding a high price were pepper, cinnamon, cumin, nutmeg, ginger, and cloves. The Moluccas, famed as the “Spice Islands”, in present-day Eastern Indonesia, produced most of the spices, likewise the northern part of Sumatra, noted for its pepper. Ginger, however, native to mainland China, was brought to the Southeast Asian spice emporium for conveyance to Europe. As

a result of the trade in spices, Southeast Asia acted as the *entrepôt*, on the one hand, East Asian herbs and pepper, South Asian cinnamon turmeric, and on the other hand, through West Asia to the markets in Europe. Similarly, the luxury China trade of silk, tea, and porcelain (chinaware) also traversed Southeast Asia before making its westward journey to Europe (Greenberg 1951). Southeast Asia's strategic geographical location between East and West, and on the ancient trade routes gave it an essential place in international history.

3.2. Resources

In addition to its role as a go-between in East-West trade and commerce, Southeast Asia is endowed with valuable mineral and plant resources. Spices were the major produce in high demand in Western markets. Paralleling such plant produce, the Malay Peninsula was referred to as the *Golden Khersonese*, the Golden Peninsula, by Greek and Roman geographers in classical antiquity (Ptolemy 2000). Much earlier, the Indian epic, *Ramayana*, had made references to *Suvarnabhumi*, a Land of Gold, and *Suvarnadvipa*, referring to a Golden Island or Peninsula (Kulke 1986). Possibilities as to these references are either the Malayan Peninsula, or the island of Sumatra, or both, as the two territories were known to have gold deposits.

In south-west Borneo, present-day Indonesian Kalimantan, Hakka gold-miners had been working the gold fields since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Jackson 1970). In the mid-nineteenth century, due to internecine clashes, several of these Hakka miners crossed over to Upper Sarawak, where in and around Bau, gold-mining was undertaken. The cyanidation process of gold extraction was applied to the mines in Bau at the turn of the twentieth century with lucrative outcomes (Ooi 1997: 135-136, 158-159).

Meanwhile, the islands of Bangka and Belitung, off south-east Sumatra, had long been a producer of tin ore. As early as the thirteenth century, Hakka miners were known to have worked the tin fields there. However, it was during the seventeenth century that

the tin industry begun to flourish when local rulers recruited Chinese immigrant mine-workers (Heidhues 1992).

In the mid-nineteenth century, after the fashion of Bangka-Belitung, native rulers, Malay chieftains in Perak sought Chinese labor for the alluvial tin fields of the Kinta Valley, likewise the Klang Valley in Selangor, and Sungai Ujong. Sungai Ujong was one of the larger states of Negeri Sembilan (lit. ‘Nine States’) (Ooi 2018: 316). Collectively the tin output from the west coast peninsula Malay states of Perak, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan by the early twentieth century accounted for more than half the world’s tin production (Drabble n.d.).

The chance discovery of the Telega Tila oil well in northern Sumatra led to the establishment of Royal Dutch Shell in 1890. Oil exploitation commenced in Tarakan in north-east Kalimantan in 1899 (Poley 2000: 121-132). The Miri field in Sarawak was opened in 1910, and Seria, in neighboring Brunei, in 1929 (Ooi 1997: 136-143; Vienne 2015: 120). By the close of the nineteenth century, Southeast Asia was connected to the world’s energy markets.

Coffee (Java), tobacco (North Borneo/Sabah), sugar cane and manila hemp (Philippines), pepper (Sumatra, Sarawak), and timber (Siam/Thailand, North Borneo/Sabah) were important agricultural resources of Southeast Asia traded as commodities in the international marketplace (Brema 2015; John and Jackson 1973: 88-106; Aguilar 1998; Owen 1984; Ooi 1997: 175-176, 180-181; Wattanaikorn 2018; Ibbotson 2014; Shaffer 2014: 139-198). Moreover, the region was a major rice exporter to the world market. Successful and sustainable rice cultivation was undertaken in the Lower Irrawaddy (Burma/Myanmar), Central Plains (Siam, Thailand), Mekong Delta and Red River Delta (Vietnam) (Brown 2005; Johnston 1981: 107-126; Coq, Dufumier, and Trébuil 2001). Rice, being the staple food of the peoples of Southeast Asia, was, and still is, grown throughout the region (Piper 1984).

Besides spices, the other profit-making agricultural product was natural rubber. The problematic coffee industry in the west coast peninsula Malay states led to the switch to rubber, and the first rubber boom of 1909-1910 sealed the success of this “miracle

crop" (Drabble 1973). Thanks to Detroit's automobile industry, the high demand for rubber increased its prices dramatically. Malaya, particularly the west coast Malay states (Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, and Johor), became the world's largest exporter of natural rubber during the first half of the twentieth century (Drabble 1991; Voon 1976). Indonesia, southern Thailand, and Vietnam too were, and still are, major suppliers to the world natural rubber market.

Southeast Asia's plant and mineral resources which contributed to the world market demonstrated the close interconnection of the region with other parts of the world, notably East Asia, South Asia, West Asia, Europe, and North America. Linkages between other regions were the inevitable consequence of the networks of international trade and commerce.

3.3. Emigration and immigrants

Besides the transportation of goods and products, the migration of peoples from within and without Southeast Asia were equally significant. Southeast Asia's population is not entirely indigenous for many residents had migrated from other territories, some in recent years while others since centuries past.

The Bamar, the present-day ethnic majority of Myanmar, originated from Yunnan in south-west China. Their emigration to the Irrawaddy valley occurred in the seventh century (Yi 2015: 3-4). On the other hand, Tai-speaking peoples of modern Thailand's Central Plains emigrated from Guangxi in southeast China in the first millennium CE, fanning out across mainland Southeast Asia (Evans 2002: 2). Others, however, suggested a later date of this south-westward migration of Tai-speaking peoples between the eighth and tenth centuries (Pittayaporn 2014: 47-64). Similarly, the Lạc Việt, derived from a conglomeration of Yue tribes from Guangxi, which settled in the fertile Red River Delta and subsequently came to be the ancestors of modern-day Vietnamese. The Lạc Việt were known to have established Văn Lang, a kingdom that occupied today's northern Vietnam, in the third century BCE (Taylor 1983: 303-311). The Bronze Age Đông Sơn culture of mainland Southeast Asia featuring elaborate bronze drums was associated with the Lạc

Việt (Hoang 2007: 12-13).

Ethnic Malays are indigenous to eastern Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula, coastal Borneo, and island Southeast Asia, comprising the modern nation-states of Indonesia, southern Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and southern Philippines. Islam, *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language), and sociocultural practices and traditions conventional in the Malacca sultanate of the fifteenth century are distinct attributes of *Malayness*. The *Melayu asli* (aboriginal or native Malays) or *Melayu purba* (ancient Malays), were of Austronesian stock believed to have migrated on a piecemeal basis to the Malay Archipelago between 2500 and 1500 BCE.

Theories of the origins of ethnic Malays, at best tentative and contested, are divided into two schools of thought, the Taiwan theory (1997) and the “Southeast Asian origin” model (1998). The out-of-Taiwan theory posited that Proto-Malays left Taiwan to migrate southward to the Philippines, Borneo, Eastern Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea (Bellwood 1997). The Taiwan theory is based on linguistic evidence drawn from the Austronesian language family. The “Southeast Asian origin” model, on the other hand, contended an “opposite flow”: inhabitants of Sundaland (comprising present-day Malay Peninsula, Borneo, Java, Sumatra and all the islands in between) during the last Ice Age (110,000 to 12,000 years ago) lived on a vast land mass created when sea levels decreased some 30-40 meters. The population migrated northwards to the (present-day Southeast Asian) mainland consequent of the rise in sea level (Oppenheimer 1998; Oppenheimer 2006: 65-73; Piper et al. 2017; Donohue and Denham 2014). The current Sunda continental shelf is evidence of this “Southeast Asian origin” thesis.

During the first century CE, there was a phenomenon referred to as *Indianization*, a phrase coined by French archaeologist, George Coedès, who contended in *Histoire ancienne des états hindouisés d'Extrême-Orient* (*The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* [1968]), that the spread of sociocultural elements – ideas and concepts (kingship), language (Sanskrit), beliefs (Hinduism and Buddhism) – from the Indian sub-continent influenced and impacted on the peoples of Southeast Asia.

It could be argued that Indian traders and merchants then, in their pursuit of gold and spices, established economic contacts with the lands of Southeast Asia through the Maritime Silk Route. *Suvarnabhumi* and *Suvarnadvipa* were Sanskrit terms for Golden Island or Golden Peninsula. On the heels of the traders were Brahmin priests, on their own initiative or invited by local elites, seeking vocations in the region. The native upper classes of mainland and island Southeast Asia adopted the sophisticated sociocultural practices of the Brahmins including the idea of kingship, viz. *Devarāja* (god-king), *Chakravartin* (ideal universal ruler), from the Sanskrit language, religious traditions and beliefs, and from Hinduism in particular. Today, the Indonesian island of Bali has continued to embrace Hinduism (Stuart-Fox 2002).

Buddhist monks from India, like their Brahmin counterparts, too ventured into Southeast Asia. While the Brahmins and Hinduism took root in mainland Southeast Asia in the initial stages, Buddhism then was far more influential in the archipelago. But Buddhism proved sustainable in the long run evident from its legacy in modern Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and to a certain extent, Vietnam.

The Hindu-Buddhist transformation was exhibited in the example of Angkor Wat, originally a Hindu temple dedicated to Vishnu by the Khmer king Suryavarman II (1113-1145/1150) in the early twelfth century as his state temple and eventual mausoleum. In fact, he broke convention, from the traditional honoring of Siva to Vishnu. But towards the end of the century, Angkor Wat was transformed into a Buddhist temple (Richter 2009).

Srivijaya (650–1377 CE), a Malay Buddhist thalassocracy in the south-east of Sumatra at its zenith in the eighth century CE, oversaw a maritime empire that comprised Sumatra, the Isthmus of Kra, the Malay Peninsula, and the greater part of West and Central Java (Munoz 2006: 171). Borobudur, a ninth-century Mahayana Buddhist temple in Central Java, Indonesia, reputedly the largest Buddhist temple in the world, is testimony to the Buddhist impact on the Javanese (Gifford 2011).

Since then, Indians have been in Southeast Asia with enclaves

in the port-cities of the region. Archaeological evidence from *Lembah Bujang* (Bujang Valley) pointed to the existence of a Hindu-Buddhist kingdom in present-day Kedah in the north-west of the Malay Peninsula (Mohd Supian Sabtu 2002). Tamil traders had sojourned there and brought back trade goods for exchange at the capital of the Tamil Chola dynasty (300s BCE–1279 CE). *Kedah Kuno* (Old Kedah) was referred to variously as: *Kadaram*, *Kataha-Nagara*, *Anda-Kataha*, *Kataha-Dvipa*, and *Kataha*. In the fifteenth century Malay-Muslim Malacca sultanate, the Indian mercantile community was so large that it required the appointment of a *Kapitan Keling* (Indian Captain) to ensure harmony within the community and to deal with petty offences. Likewise, *kapitans* were appointed for the other trading communities. This form of indirect rule was prudent and cost-effective (honorary appointment without remuneration) (Ooi 2004: II: 711).

During the colonial period, convicts from British India were transported to other British colonies such as Fort Blair in the Andaman Islands and Penang. In George Town, Indian convicts were seconded to the Public Works Department (PWD) to erect and repair public buildings, churches, and roads (Ooi 2019: 11-12). Towards the last quarter of the nineteenth century, not only were Indian *sepoy*s (Hindu and Muslim) stationed in British Malaya, but also Indian wage laborers were conscripted to lay rail sleepers, followed by road construction (Soh 1973). Indian traders, artisans, and professionals too emigrated to urban centers in Southeast Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Enclaves of Indians in contemporary Yangon (Rangoon), Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Manila testify to past emigrations.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Tamils from South India migrated in their thousands to the rubber belt of British colonial Malaya. As foreign indentured labor, the Tamils met the labor shortage and contributed to the development and success of the Malayan rubber industry, the world's largest pre-war exporter of natural rubber (Drabble 1991).

The peninsular tin industry of the 1840s in pre-colonial British

Malaya bore witness to the influx of Chinese miners and laborers from the southern provinces of China (Jackson 1961). When the tin-rich west coast peninsular Malay states of Perak, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan became British protected states from 1874, greater Chinese investment from the neighboring British crown colonies of the Straits Settlements further spurred the tin industry that in turn enticed more Chinese immigrants (Wong 1964; Yip 1969). While the mining industry (tin and gold) drew in proletarian Chinese from peasant stock, trade and commerce in the Straits Settlements brought in the Chinese mercantile class (Yen 1986; Tai 2013). The latter too were spread across Southeast Asia's port-cities and urban centers where their activities can be discerned today in the many Chinatowns in the region: Yaowarat (Bangkok), Tayoke Tan (Yangon), Binondo (Manila), Cholon (Ho Chi Minh City), Petaling Street (Kuala Lumpur), Glodok-Mangga Dua (Jakarta). More apparent in the Chinese diaspora are the Chinese-majority cities and towns in Malaysia, viz. George Town (Penang), Ipoh (Perak), Kuching and Sibu (Sarawak), and Singapore.

Emigration was a consequence of "push" and "pull" factors. The arrival of large waves of Chinese immigrants to Southeast Asia, in particular the west coast peninsular Malay states during the second half of the nineteenth century owed much to unpalatable conditions in the Chinese mainland. Internal strife and rebellions coupled with external threats from European and Japanese imperialist powers created political instability, economic dislocation, and social chaos (Spence 2012: 137-245; Keay 2009: 446-479). Aggravating human-made troubles were natural calamities: floods, droughts and earthquakes resulting in widespread famine, outbreaks of disease, loss of properties, and high death tolls. Poverty and the vagaries of the weather were "push" factors in the Indian sub-continent especially in South India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Sandhu 1969: 31-74). Southeast Asia provided attractive "pull" factors, notably trade and commerce, the mining sector, commercial agriculture all of which required investment, enterprise, and immigrant labor.

From the seventeenth-eighteenth century and earlier, there were small-scale piecemeal migrations of peoples within mainland

and island Southeast Asia. Enclaves of Javanese and Bugis, for instance, in peninsular Malaysia, are testimony to such movements. Similarly, Karen communities in present-day north-west Thailand, Dayaks (Ibans) in west-central Sarawak, or Minangkabaus in Negeri Sembilan (West Malaysia) are a consequence of past migrations from within the region.

Emigration and immigrants from within and without Southeast Asia point to the interrelatedness of the region with neighboring territories, notably the Indian sub-continent, and mainland China. Southeast Asia's innate attributes of acceptance welcomed sojourners and immigrants. Sojourners too appreciated the congenial environment of their host country and decided to establish their homes with local spouses. Co-habitation and miscegenation generated hybrid communities such as the *peranakan* and unique Eurasian communities in present-day Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia (Dhorausangam 2006; Suryadinata 1997; Chia 1983; Khoo 1996; Daus 1989; Walker 2009).

3.4. Diffusion of ideas and beliefs that accommodated local input

Southeast Asia had long witnessed the inflow of trade goods and peoples as well as ideas and beliefs. Buddhism was adopted in Thailand as early as the reign of Ashoka (268-232 BCE). The flourishing of the religion occurred when it was designated as the officially-sanctioned religion during the Sukhothai kingdom of the thirteenth century (Rooney 2008). The kind of Buddhism adopted was of the Theravada school after the Sinhalese tradition. However, Theravada Buddhism in Thailand had been integrated with local folk animism and the eclectic religious practices of the sizeable resident Chinese community. Contemporaneous with Buddhism was Hinduism, both being transplanted in what is referred to as the Indianization process. But as the Thai example has shown, Hinduism too was subject to acculturation to indigenous animistic beliefs and practices. Most of mainland Southeast Asia, with the notable exception of Vietnam, was greatly influenced by Hindu-Buddhist traditions. As pointed out, Angkor Wat, initially Hindu, was transformed to a Buddhist monument. The Angkor or Khmer Empire (802-1431 CE) in about 900 CE covered the greater

part of the modern nation-states of Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. Jayavarman II (802-835 CE), the founder, was proclaimed *Devarāja* (god-king), and declared *Chakravartin*. Thus, Indian concepts of statecraft and kingship derived from Hinduism were embraced by the Khmer rulers.

Meanwhile, Vietnam, during the ascendancy of the neighboring Khmer empire, was drawn into the Chinese world order, dominated by Tang China (618-907 CE). Chinese colonialism dates back to the annexation of Vietnam by Han China (202 BCE-220 CE). Overall Imperial China's domination stretched over a millennium, between 111 BCE to 939 CE (Kiernan 2017: 61-100). The Vietnamese reclaimed their independence when they triumphed at the celebrated battle of Bạch Đằng in 939 CE. Nonetheless, as part of Imperial China, there was the concerted attempt to transform Vietnamese peoples into Chinese citizens, a process termed Sinicization. Although a political tool – in becoming Chinese, Vietnamese identity and nationalism would be discarded – Sinicization focused on sociocultural transformation, notably customs, traditions, attire, hairstyles, language, and mannerisms. To a certain extent, the Vietnamese were already admiring their dominant neighbor; hence adopting Chinese ways and styles was not unduly problematic. Advanced Chinese expertise in architectural and building technologies contributed to the infrastructural development of Vietnam, and in turn, economic progress. Imperial China's model of statecraft (absolute monarchy) and the mandarin system of civil administration (scholar-bureaucrats) were adopted in Vietnam which subsequently emerged as the "Little Dragon". But the "Little Dragon" did not fully *kow-tow*.

The Vietnamese revolted at earlier stages but they later supported Sinicization and adopted most of Chinese culture. *The Vietnamese chose what to adapt to and what to reject*. For example, they saw that the Chinese military system would be of great benefit to them, so they adopted it. However, the Vietnamese women greatly rejected and revolted against the patriarchal system of leadership. The women rejected the culture that forced them to be submissive to men, and refrain from leadership and trading activities. On the other hand, China largely benefitted from Vietnamese rice. The rice later

became the staple food of China (World Atlas n.d., emphasis added).

Like others in Southeast Asia, the Vietnamese retained their ethnic and cultural identity despite Sinicization. And although they used the Chinese script for official purposes, Vietnamese mandarins retained their mother tongue in interactions within the domestic domain. Like the Chinese, the Vietnamese were pragmatic, tolerant, and embraced eclecticism. Folk beliefs accommodated Confucian ritual, ancestor worship, the Chinese Daoist pantheon of deities were honored, and given equal reverence alongside native animistic spirits.

Similarly, the diffusion of Islam across island Southeast Asia from the thirteenth century displayed adaptability and accommodation by local communities. Islam which established a strong foothold on the northern coast of Java during the early decades of the fifteenth century, adjusted to local situations and tolerated animistic practices. Hence, the dichotomous nature of adherents of Islam in Java between the *santri*, the orthodox practitioners, and the *abangan*, who observe a more syncretic version of Islam incorporating indigenous folk beliefs called *adat* (customary rituals, practices and tradition) and *kebatinan* (Javanese folk religion) (Geertz 1976). The latter, also called *kepercayaan*, is a syncretic amalgamation of Javanese animism, Buddhism, Hindu, and Sufi beliefs and practices. Undoubtedly some aspects of *abangan* practices were regarded as *syirik* (*shirk*), a sinful partiality to polytheism. Nonetheless, the Javanese, as with others in Southeast Asia, exercised a high degree of tolerance.

Christianity too in the Philippines where Catholicism was established as the predominant faith among the indigenous inhabitants underwent transformation and adaptation to local folk beliefs and practices (Andaya 2016: 233-249). The pre-Hispanic animistic beliefs comprised a host of deities, spirits, creatures believed to oversee and/or guard, protect streams, fields, trees, mountains, forests, and even houses and other buildings (Pelmoka 1996). Moreover, Chinese residents in the Philippines have been culturally influential in impacting on Catholicism with their “world of beliefs”, viz. Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. Like their

Javanese counterparts, Filipinos too were tolerant and accepting of hybridization.

Overall, there was a high degree of syncretization of ideas and beliefs. World religions from without upon entering Southeast Asia were subject to local influences and enrichment that facilitated native acceptance and consumption. An ambience of co-existence and mutual beneficence abounds throughout the region.

3.5. Imperialism and colonialism

Imperialism and colonialism from within and from without are elements that contributed to Southeast Asia as a region warranting a place in international history. Undoubtedly imperialism and colonialism moulded, influenced, and transformed the region. As indicated, the Khmer empire held sway over the greater part of Indochina for more than six centuries. Borne from this domination, modern Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos shared numerous sociocultural practices, customs and traditions, language, and Theravada Buddhism. Nevertheless, there are distinct characteristics of these shared elements derived from indigenous influence and adaptation. Lao Buddhism, as a case in point, presents a distinctive version of Theravada Buddhism founded upon the basis of Lao culture where animist beliefs and reverence to ancestral spirits remained strong and influential.

In archipelagic Southeast Asia, imperialism and colonialism from within were exemplified by Malay-Buddhist Srivijaya, Javanese-Hindu Majapahit (1293-c. 1500), and Malay-Muslim Malacca (c. 1400-1511). Malacca, for instance, at the apex of its power, dominated central Sumatra, the Straits of Malacca, and the central-southern Malay Peninsula (Villiers 2004: II 868-871). But Malacca's influence via its maritime trade expanded further to Borneo, Java, the Moluccas, and beyond. Its trade networks facilitated Islamic proselytization when missionaries travelled with traders and merchants. Owing to the rice trade, and relations between Malacca and Java, the northern coastal Javanese polities were transformed into Islamic sultanates, notably Bantam, Demak, Ceribon, Tuban, and Gersik (Graaf and Pigeaud 1976).

Between the Catholic Iberian powers, Spain made the greatest impact as an imperial and colonial power in the region, specifically, in the Philippines. The Spanish brought Roman Catholicism to the Philippines which flourished during more than three-centuries of colonial domination (1565-1898). US colonialism in the Philippines (1898-1946), on the other hand, brought Protestantism. Both Spanish and American colonialism had a profound religious impact on the Philippines.

The Philippines proudly boasts to be the *only Christian nation in Asia*. More than 86 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 6 percent belong to various nationalized Christian cults, and another 2 percent belong to well over 100 Protestant denominations (Miller n.d., emphasis added).

Besides the religious legacy, Western imperialism and colonialism exerted a strong and deep influence on the peoples of Southeast Asia. The introduction of Western-style formal education delivered in Western languages (English, Dutch, French) produced several generations with knowledge of Western philosophy, history, politics, economics, science and technology. The growth, nurturing, and flourishing of nationalism across the region, to a great extent owed much to Western education.

Infrastructure developments in transport and communications by the Western colonial regimes primarily to expedite economic exploitation and serve military purposes brought modern amenities to Southeast Asia.

In guerrilla struggles for independence, rail track and rolling stock became prime targets for sabotage. In such ways, railways insinuated themselves into the *mentalité* of Southeast Asian nationalism (Dick and Rimmer 2003: 66).

In fact, the railways, roads, telecommunications, the mass media (newspapers, magazines, periodicals) all facilitated greater proximity thereby allowing local nationalists to be in touch, to discuss, to plan, and to plot against their colonial masters.

Admittedly, Western imperialism and colonialism with their

legalistic approach to governance and borders, created the modern nation-states of present-day Southeast Asia. To a large extent, modern Thailand was a consequence of Anglo-French competition and strategy; to avoid friction in sharing a common border, Thailand remained an independent, sovereign kingdom, a buffer between the two imperialist powers (Baker and Phongpaichit 2014: 46-79; Tuck 1995). Again, the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of London (1824), ensured that spheres of influence were clearly demarcated between Britain and the Netherlands by a border drawn along the Straits of Malacca, the northern portion being assigned to the British, the southern part, to the Dutch. As a result, Malaysia and Indonesia followed a different colonial pathway, the former within the British sphere, and the latter, the Dutch realm.

Imperial Japan was the first and only colonial power which managed to establish a regime and administration, albeit a military-type, over the entire region except Thailand (Satoshi 2019). In a sense, Imperial Japan regarded Southeast Asia as a region. The concept appeared to have impacted on the Anglo-American military planners that designated the SEAC as a theater of military operations. In other words, Southeast Asia as a region was borne of wartime military exigency and expediency.

3.6. Decolonization and the Cold War (1947-1990) scenario

Post-war developments in Southeast Asia witnessed two overlapping phenomena, mainly the decolonization process and the Cold War (1947-1990). As each colonized state struggled to unshackle itself from the metropolitan power, to the right stood the US, champion of the so-called free world and Western democracies, and to the left, the USSR, leader of the socialist states, both extending “welcoming hands” to enter or join their respective camps. The Washington-Moscow “conflict”, labelled the Cold War, due to the fact that both sides did not come face-to-face in armed clashes, but simply clashed ideologically: democracy against communism, and free market competition against a centralized, planned economy. Each protagonist sought support from other countries, especially the newly-independent nation-states that were grappling with their new reality, unclear, and unsure of the future, at the crossroads, considering whether the

Western-type liberal democracy model of governance would be appropriate, or whether the communist form of centralized authoritarian government should be followed. The “race” to recruit adherents to their respective camps was underway in earnest in Southeast Asia.

From 1949, an additional Cold War protagonist emerged, the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Between 1949 and 1960, the Moscow-Beijing axis stood firm against Washington and its close allies (UK, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, also Canada, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand). Fundamental ideological differences, however, led to the Sino-Soviet split in 1960. Thereafter, Beijing pursued its own agenda, and courted its own supporters and allies.

Following the tense situation on the Korean peninsula and following the conclusion of an uneasy armistice on 27 July 1953, the global focus turned to Southeast Asia, when unexpectedly following a four-month siege, French forces surrendered to the Việt Minh at Điện Biên Phủ on 7 May 1954. Undoubtedly the French capitulation was seen as an escalation of the Cold War, a triumph for the communist bloc.

In the First Indochina War (1946-1954), while the Western democracies led by the US lent support to France, struggling to reinstate its colonial rule over Indochina but faced with resistance from the Việt Minh. Both Moscow and Beijing in their respective ways contributed to the Việt Minh’s cause for independence. France’s defeat at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954 and its withdrawal, witnessed the increased involvement of the US in the Vietnam imbroglio (Fall 1966; Logevall 1999).

US President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-1961), in referring to communism in Indochina, espoused the domino theory on 7 April 1954 at a news conference prior to the 1954 Geneva Conference (26 April-20 July 1954). Eisenhower’s “falling domino” principle envisaged that, if a single country in a region embraced communism, then its neighbors would follow in a domino effect (Leeson and Dean 2009: 533–551). The 1954 Geneva Conference ended the First Indochina War but left an uneasy situation whereby Vietnam was divided at the 17th parallel until 1956 between a more

populous North under the Việt Minh, and the South under a democratic regime. The year 1956, as sanctioned by all parties, witnessed democratic elections supervised by an international authority. Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969) and the Việt Minh would undoubtedly have attained an electoral triumph due to greater support and the bigger electoral roll of the North. Taking heed of Eisenhower's forewarning of "falling domino", the US "blocked" the scheduled 1956 election, and instead increased the number of military advisers to the Ngô Đình Diệm (1955-1963) regime of South Vietnam. The Second Indochina War (1955-1975), popularly rendered as the Vietnam War, saw the increasing involvement of the US that subsequently led to the commitment of ground troops from mid-1965 in support of the non-communist South Vietnam regime (Logevall 1999: 333-374).

In the Cold War scenario, whilst South Vietnam was supported by the US and the Western democracies, North Vietnam was militarily sustained by the USSR and PRC. Such a scenario had a precedent in the Korean War (1950-1953) whereby communist North Korea received Moscow-Beijing support including the commitment of ground combat forces, the so-called Chinese People's Volunteer Army (PVA) from October 1950. South Korea, on the other hand, received a UN international force (16 nations) headed by US Army General Douglas MacArthur (June 1950-April 1951) (Hastings 1987; Cumings 2010).

Besides the conflict in Indochina, Southeast Asia witnessed an alignment of the main Cold War protagonists (US, USSR, and PRC) in insurgencies in territories in the region. Shortly after the cessation of armed military hostilities of the Pacific War British Malaya saw the declaration of an "Emergency" on 16 June 1948, when the colonial administration, and the government of independent Malaya (from 1957), waged a 12-year war with the guerrilla army of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) (Tonder 2017). The UK was undoubtedly a close ally of the US, and it was no surprise that the latter rendered material support to an almost fiscally devastated post-war London in its Malayan anti-communist conflict.

Paralleling the Malayan Emergency, was the Hukbalahap

Rebellion (1942-1954), a leftist-led peasant rebellion by members of the former *Hukbalahap* or *Hukbo ng Bayan Laban sa Hapon* (People's Army against the Japanese) soldiers against the Philippine central government (Greenberg 1987; Corpus 1989). Whether it was misinformation or the truth, the Manila correspondent of the respected *New York Times* 1949 allegedly claimed that Soviet submarines were supplying weaponry, ammunition and supplies to the Huks (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 Apr 1949). Ex-colonial power and close ally, the US, undoubtedly assisted the Philippines in its fight against any leftist threat, and the Huk insurgency was no exception.

When the concept of “Malaysia” was first mooted in 1961, whereby the newly-independent Federation of Malaya together with the British crown colonies of Singapore, Sarawak, and North Borneo, and the British protectorate of the Sultanate of Brunei would form a wider federation, initial responses within the component states ranged from enthusiasm (Singapore), bafflement and uncertainty (Sarawak and North Borneo) to cautious reservations (Brunei) (Ooi 2020: 200-236). Likewise, neighboring countries too, namely Indonesia and the Philippines, *did not openly object initially*. But as the scheduled deadline of September 1963 approached, attitudes started to change. The most conspicuous response came from Jakarta with its accusation that Malaysia was nothing more than a neo-colonial plan to extend Britain’s influence in the region after decolonizing its colonial territories (Poulgrain 1998). Indonesian President Sukarno threatened to launch *Konfrontasi* (confrontation) in opposition to this wider federation, and his less than subtle phrase, ‘*Ganyang Malaysia*’ (lit. “to chew”, obliterate or smash Malaysia), further aggravated the hitherto tense situation. Meanwhile, Philippine President Diosdado Macapagal (1961-1965) objected to North Borneo’s incorporation in the proposed wider federation claiming it as its possession owing to the fact that it was once part of the Sultanate of Sulu, therefore a part of the republic (Noble 1977).

Mandarins at the British Foreign Office (FO) and Colonial Office (CO) in London were uneasy over Sukarno who seemed to be increasingly leaning to the left, apparently closer to *Partai Komunis*

Indonesia (PKI, Indonesian Communist Party). In fact, Sukarno was struggling for his own survival in balancing two opposing but influential forces, the PKI on the left, and the *Tentara Nasional Indonesia* (TNI, Indonesia National Armed Forces), particularly the Army, on the right (Huges 2002; Daves 2013; Mortimer 2006). *Konfrontasi*, a low-intensity war characterized by occasional cross-border incursions, was a distraction in order to turn public attention away from the deteriorating domestic economic situation, and also, to “please” the Army who could justify demand for a more generous budget.

Nonetheless, Sukarno’s allegation of Malaysia as a neo-colonial plan of the British was proven to be concise and precise. Whitehall was undoubtedly concerned with developments in the on-going protracted Indochina conflict. The Sino-Soviet split had implications for Southeast Asia. Following the soured relations, Beijing could act unilaterally without having to seek Moscow’s sanction. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had actively supported communist parties in the region including the MCP, PKI, and the Việt Cộng in South Vietnam, as well as the communist regime of North Vietnam (Belogurova 2019; Simon 1969; Olsen 2006). In such a scenario, in order to ensure that none of its former colonial possessions fell into the socialist camp, Malaysia, comprising the Malay Peninsula (West Malaysia), and northern Borneo (Sarawak and Sabah), were regarded as a barrier to communism.

Developments such as those which unfolded in Indochina, the prelude to Malaysia and the Indonesian and Philippine objections, and the involvement, directly or indirectly, of the major Cold War players in post-war Southeast Asia, made the region an indispensable chapter in international history’s “Table of Contents” relating to “Decolonization” and “the Cold War era”. Global phenomena, decolonization and the Cold War dominated the second half of the twentieth century.

3.7. Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

The ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) agreed in Bangkok on 8 August 1967 established the Association of Southeast Asian

Nations (ASEAN); it abstained from using such words as “communist” or “communism” or “leftist”, its formation as “an Association for Regional Cooperation” was aimed specifically as a bulwark against the further expansion of communism in the region (The ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) Bangkok, 8 August 1967). By 1967, Washington had committed close to half a million ground combat troops in the Vietnam War, and there was no significant sign that victory was at hand. The initial five signatories of the ASEAN Declaration had encountered the threat of communism in one way or another, and by 1967, each had justification for participation, viz.

Indonesia had emerged in the post-Sukarno era called *Orde Baru* (New Order) under President Suharto. The Sukarno regime appeared to be falling into the grips of the PKI until arrested by the anti-communist purge of mass killings in 1965 that was orchestrated by the Army.

Malaysia had triumphed over the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) but was confronted by the Sarawak Communist Insurgency (1962-1990).

The Philippines that had faced a leftist-led uprising, the Huk Rebellion, was ever cautious of a revival of armed communism. Manila’s fear was not unfounded, for in 1969, the Maoist New People’s Army (NPA, *Bagong Hukbong Bayan*), the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), was established in March, and thereafter launched a guerrilla war in accordance with the strategic line of protracted people’s war (Corpus 1989).

Singapore had its close brushes with the wily *Barisan Sosialis* (Socialist Front), undoubtedly a front political party of the communists that had covertly infiltrated labour and student movements. Barely two years after joining Malaysia Singapore was expelled from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965 owing to insurmountable ethnic issues, hence as a newly-independent small republic, it felt vulnerable.

Thailand faced a communist insurgency (1967-1983), a guerrilla war between the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and the Thai government at Bangkok. The CPT was supported by neighbouring

communist organizations including Cambodia's Khmer Rouge (until 1978), Lao's Pathet Lao, and Malaysia's MCP. North Vietnam, later (from 1976) Vietnam, PRC (1971-1978), North Korea, and Soviet Union were also known supporters of the CPT.

Forward-looking ASEAN in disregarding “-isms” and past histories, expanded its membership to include Brunei (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos (1997), Myanmar (1997), and lastly, Cambodia (1999) (Weatherbee 2019: 95-118). For better or worse, ASEAN's pragmatic outlook, in embracing inclusiveness, and in widening its membership, further strengthened itself as a regional bloc in regard to other counterparts such as the European Union (EU), North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA).

Although ASEAN does not wholly represent Southeast Asia, its importance in world affairs justifies both – ASEAN and Southeast Asia – to be an integral part of international history. Through ASEAN, Southeast Asia as a region is enhanced, and its importance amplified.

IV. Exploration

Having established and justified Southeast Asia as a region worthy to be a component of international history, it is prudent to ponder on the paucity of publications on Southeast Asia in this field. Such a phenomenon necessitates further inquiries as to issues, problems, and obstacles that have hitherto hindered the output of more scholarly publications on the region. Identifying, and subsequently addressing the issues, problems and barriers is the first step in moving forward the agenda of Southeast Asia in international history.

4.1. Core-periphery

Southeast Asia as a region had long paid a subordinate role to China in the east, and the Indian sub-continent in the west. Southeast Asia appeared on the *periphery* of both East Asia and

South Asia, a side show to the main developments in the *core* areas. In this connection, Southeast Asian historiography too had played a secondary or subordinate role to the two Asian historical “movers and shakers” – India and China. Likewise, from the sixteenth century, with the advent of Western powers – Spain and Portugal, thereafter Britain and the Netherlands, France, and the US – Southeast Asian historiography was again marginalized as if being written from the deck of galleons, carracks or East Indiamen. The seminal work of John Smail (1961), argued for Southeast Asia to be regarded in its own right as a region, and not as an appendage of others. Although the call was made in the early 1960s, Southeast Asian history managed to emerge as “an Autonomous History” only from the 1980s and 1990s.

Beginning from the 1970s, universities within Southeast Asia gradually produced publications in the vernacular. This point is based on personal insights and observations drawn from more than three decades of involvement as an academic staff member affiliated with a public university in Malaysia as well as holding several visiting fellowships in various institutions throughout East and Southeast Asia. Owing to pecuniary issues, only a handful of academic staff benefitted from postgraduate studies abroad. Moreover, not all those who possessed foreign, mainly Western degree qualifications, published works in English, the academic *lingua franca*. The growth and expansion of the tertiary educational sector across Southeast Asia became increasingly apparent from the late 1980s and the 1990s when improved economic performance offered the much-needed capital for investment in new universities and colleges. But this growth and expansion was a double-edged sword. As more and more local universities were available, there was a cost-effective trend to have home-trained scholars rather than spending huge amounts on tertiary training abroad. But, on the other hand, as the majority of local universities in the region taught in the vernacular, rather than utilizing English, with the exception of the Philippines, Brunei, and Singapore, unsurprisingly, scholarly publications in English remained low. Regardless of the language medium, the quality of universities across the region, with notable exceptions, were at best less than average. Universities in Singapore,

such as the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University, were exceptions to the regional norm. Kuala Lumpur's Universiti Malaya too, in the past decade, had proven its mettle as one of the top-tier institutions globally.

Consequently, the works produced and published might not meet the highest standards in the international scholarly arena. The down-side of non-English publications moreover is their limited dissemination, localized within the confines of national boundaries, (as there is unlikely to be any market) for Khmer books in Myanmar, or *Bahasa Indonesia* volumes in Vietnam.

Publishing nationally in the vernacular undoubtedly makes the work of local historians in Southeast Asia even more peripheral and divorced from the international scholarly community. At the same time, any attempt at utilizing publications to contribute to Southeast Asia in international history requires the fluency in the various languages throughout the region in order to tap into these works.

4.2. Parochialism

Furthermore, not only were locally trained historians not publishing in internationally (acclaimed) journals, or with major (established) publishing houses, largely due to the formidable English language barrier, but local academics have a tendency to be inward-looking. The latter mind-set typically characterized a domestic-trained historian with a tendency to focus on local subject matter, and ethnic-bound topics and themes pertinent to his or her community, tapping into local source materials. Publications tended to be in local journals and publishers that utilized the vernacular for the local market. Such trends appear to be the norm in the region rather than the exception, as I have observed personally for more than three decades.

The parochialism of locally-trained historians is accentuated by the research grant structure. More often the rule than the exception, the bulk of local academics including historians rely on university-based funding and national government largesse for research and conference attendance. Understandably, public universities that receive annual financial support from the government follow

national priorities and concerns. Government-funded research obviously focus on the national agenda. All the aforesaid are justifiable, and no quarrel could be made from such goals. Historians and other scholars who relied on local funding for their research therefore, have little latitude, but to pursue nationally prioritized agendas.

Private tertiary institutions (colleges, university colleges, universities) on the other hand, have relegated research activity of their academic staff as a marginal activity; the primary focus is in graduating students. Private universities throughout the region are profit-making organizations. Higher education, not unlike other service sectors, is profit-driven. Altruistic intentions might appear in an institution's motto or vision statement, but the "bottom-line" has to be the handsome annual dividends that are delivered.

As a result, few historians in public universities dare take the gamble to work on non-national designated topics or themes lest they be marginalized for government grants. Although international grants are undoubtedly available, they are highly competitive. Moreover, owing to the paucity of publications in English, not many historians received international grants. In other words, as far as historians in Malaysian public universities are concerned, they have focused on research in topics and themes that qualify access to university-based funding and national government grants, and in turn, have published their research findings in the vernacular. Subsequently, these individuals will be rewarded with more grants as well as elevation in their academic career.

Furthermore, if one is to work on cross-country themes, for instance, a Malaysian historian undertaking comparative historical study of the Malay and Thai monarchical institutions, there is no escaping the reality that the historian needs to master both court Malay and classical Thai to enable the examining of source materials accessible at the respective royal repositories. Mastering a single language for academic work is already a challenging endeavor; fluency in two or three languages might prove insurmountable. Consequently, there is a paucity of trans-national studies in the region.

To overcome the language barrier, cross-border collaboration between a Malaysian and Thai historian might be the panacea. Again, there is little scholarly cross-border joint-research projects. ASEAN notwithstanding, collaborative scholarly research among academics from the various member countries are few and far between. Despite the proximity, there are few collaborative works on Malaysia and Singapore, or Myanmar and Thailand, or Indonesia and the Philippines largely due to a parochial outlook. Furthermore, historians, owing to the nature of the discipline, are solo scholars, and collaborative research and publications tend to be the exception rather than the norm.

4.3. Challenges

We have thus far explored two apparent obstacles to the paucity of publications on Southeast Asia in international history, namely the core-periphery issue, and parochialism of historians of the region. The justifications indicated in the first part of this paper might address the core-periphery issue in demonstrating and justifying that Southeast Asia as a region is significant as a component in international history.

Whether it is the core-periphery approach or through the Big Picture and Small Picture lenses, a complementary balance between them (core and periphery, and Big Picture and Small Picture) should be pursued. For instance, it is difficult to fully understand international trade patterns (core or Big Picture) without taking into account regional trade networks (periphery or Small Picture). Equally challenging is to fathom the Second World War (1939-1945) (core or Big Picture) without comprehending the Pacific War (1941-1945) (periphery or Small Picture).

If one is to reverse the viewpoint in putting the periphery ahead of the core, likewise the Small Picture preceding the Big Picture, would one's understanding and grasp of the entirety be improved, equal, or less apparent? Due to their complementarity, a reversal of viewpoint, in fact, does not affect one's overall understanding. It all depends on one's interest or priority, to see the parts first, or to view the whole, and thereafter, the individual parts.

The challenge, therefore, remains with the parochialism and inward-looking attitude of historians in Southeast Asia. Unless they go beyond their national borders and conduct regional historical studies, and from there proceed to a wider and broader scope, namely international history, then Southeast Asia could indeed establish its place and significance vis-à-vis other parts of the “outside” world.

The parochial mind-set, however, is more difficult to resolve. Interestingly, a way out of this predicament in changing the attitude of local historians in Southeast Asia might lie in the world-ranking league tables of institutions of higher learning. For better or worse, many universities in the region, regardless of whether they are public or private, have bought into the various annually-published ranking tables for higher education that emphasize publications with two conspicuous criteria, publishing in English, and in Scopus-listed journals. Scopus is reputedly the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature in both the science and arts disciplines (Elsevier 2019). The pressure then to “publish or perish” in English, is placed upon academic staff, from Yangon to Hanoi, Jakarta to Manila.

The vicious cycle begins, thus. Increasing pressure on historians (and other academics) is exerted by university administrators, who in turn are pressured by the government minister in charge of education, who in turn is answerable to the cabinet, which in turn is answerable to Parliament, and the electorate, the taxpayers and the stakeholders. Parliamentarians demand that budgetary allocation for higher education should be reflected in qualitative improvements, and the yardstick is the widely publicized annual world university ranking league tables, viz. The Times Higher Education World University Rankings, and QS World University Rankings. Like football league tables, any layperson could easily comprehend the rankings, for example, “top 10 in the world”, or “top 50 in Asia”.

Undoubtedly, academics and university administrators tend to temper the poor performance with excuses, the most common appears to be in criticizing the criteria used, highlighting shortcomings of

such surveys, and any other explanation short of acknowledging their own inadequacies. But if the world rankings exerted positive changes and improvements, the scenario will be encouragingly positive in this manner, namely in addressing the parochial mindset.

Therefore, as a result of the annual world university rankings, more historical works will be published in Scopus-listed journals thereby ensuring a degree of acceptable quality. The ready availability of these published works will, to some extent, facilitate research and works of Southeast Asia in international history. Undeniably, mastery of the various languages in the region remain the key in undertaking intra-regional studies, and comparative work. Alternatively, joint collaboration among historians of the region might serve as a viable solution in integrating Southeast Asia in the corpus of international history.

V. Concluding remarks

International history explicitly demonstrates the interrelatedness between the parts and the whole. Simply expressed, adhering to logic and rationality, if Southeast Asia is a part of the whole world, the region's place is arguably confirmed in international history. Southeast Asia as a region is justifiable as an integral part of international history as this paper has shown. However, there remain obstacles and barriers – core-periphery and parochialism – that need to be addressed and overcome. As has been argued, a complementary balance would resolve the core-periphery outlook. The annual published world university rankings might work against the bastion of parochialism and the inward-looking attitude of local historians. Pressure to ascend the league tables might break down the parochial barrier. Time might be a factor in changing mindsets, but possibilities abound for more positive outcomes in the foreseeable future to see more work of Southeast Asia in international history emerging.

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Regional Identity and Belonging: Timor-Leste and ASEAN



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[*Abstract*]

Emerging from Portuguese colonialism and Indonesian occupation to become one of the newest states, Timor-Leste is an interesting example of modern nation-building. Geographically, Timor-Leste is located in the area covered by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In such context, Timor-Leste has a strong claim to belonging to Southeast Asia. Timor-Leste nevertheless has not yet been admitted formally as a member despite its application for membership in March 2011. This paper locates Timor-Leste in a broader context of their construction of regional identity and as part of Southeast Asia. Drawing upon the constructivist approach, this paper suggests that the complexity of Timor-Leste's regional affiliation with ASEAN is made more challenging with its quest to assert itself as a nation-in-the-making.

Keywords: regional identity, national identity, ASEAN, Southeast Asia, Timor-Leste

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I . Introduction

Following a bloody independence struggle from the Portuguese until 1975, Timor-Leste, a small state with close to 1.3 million population restored its independence in 2002 after 24 years of Indonesian occupation with the United Nations-assisted referendum in 1999. Emerging from Portuguese colonialism and Indonesian occupation to become one of the newest states in this era of globalization, Timor-Leste provides a particularly interesting example of modern nation-building. With the multiple belongings of Timor-Leste between Southeast Asia, the Pacific and the Lusophone connexion, this paper focuses on the construction of Timor-Leste's regional identity in relation to Southeast Asia, and tries to understand the interactions between the local population and the influence from Southeast Asia based on the identity, interests, culture and relationship that the member states may have with one another. In this framework of work drawing upon the constructivist approach, this paper locates Timor-Leste in a broader context of their construction of a regional identity within Southeast Asia and its application for membership of ASEAN.

As a former province of Indonesia, Timor-Leste is geographically located within ASEAN. In such a context, Timor-Leste has a strong legitimate claim to belonging to the Southeast Asia region. Timor-Leste has not been admitted as a member despite its formal application for membership in 2011. Prior to the ASEAN Charter that was adopted at the 13th ASEAN Summit in November 2007, there is no specific requirement to become a member in ASEAN. In the ASEAN Charter, it stipulates that ASEAN membership is conditional, based on four factors. They are geographical location, recognition by other states, agreement to be bound by the ASEAN Charter, and ability and willingness to carry out the obligations of membership.

Based on two views, namely spatial and temporal, Sahin (2014: 4-5) argues that Timor-Leste's insecure national identity is a factor that determines the political leadership's foreign policy moves in the post-independence period. The construction of spatial boundaries refers to Timor-Leste's political and cultural distinction from its

neighbors, while the temporal dynamic is linked to a broader lens where it encompasses its transition from a colony to an independent state as well as its transformation from a “fragile” state to a more stable one. This paper draws upon the constructivist approach of Wendt (1992) and the conceptualization of the actors’ construction of identities as an outcome that is constituted by particular interactive processes rather than it being a one-way relationship. It looks into the state action preferences in the broader context of the quest of decision-makers to position their small state in the emerging global order (Weldes 1996) in order to secure national identity.

For constructivists, states can have multiple identities that are socially constructed through interaction with other actors. Identities are an indication of an actor’s understanding of who they are, which in turn signals their interests. Interests and actions are important in indicating which identity a state chooses. The constructivist approach attempts to set the backstage for the development of the consciousness of a state through mutual interactions with the emphasis on the significance of different actors, and on the creation of mutual concepts and interests for understanding the identities, interests, institutions, and perceptions of a state.

In the context of Timor-Leste, its identity as a small state implies a set of interests that are different from a large state. It is arguably more focused on its survival, whereas the large state is usually more concerned with gaining political and economic influence. This paper is based on the author’s interactions with the East Timorese from different backgrounds ranging from government, academics to civil society, as well as drawing on secondary sources. It is divided into three main sections: The first examines Timor-Leste’s politics and its national identity; the second addresses Timor-Leste’s relationship with ASEAN; the third section explores the regional identity of Timor-Leste.

II . Politics and national identity in Timor-Leste

Timor-Leste is the newest state in the Southeast Asian region as it

only achieved its restoration of independence in 2002. It was first colonized by the Portuguese in 1701. Timor-Leste began to develop its political parties to call for independence following the “Carnation Revolution” in Portugal in 1974 that finally brought an end to the regime. Later, it was caught in a short yet bloody war between the two largest parties, the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (FRETILIN) and the Timorese Democratic Union (UDT). Political crisis then took place and in December 1975, just nine days after Timor-Leste declared independence from the Portuguese, Indonesia launched an invasion and the forced integration of the province into Indonesia in 1976.

Resistance to Indonesia’s invasion lasted for 24 years and it led to the deaths of a total of 180,000 of the East Timorese population (Leach and Kingsbury 2012). This means, approximately a third of the population died from various forms of abuse such as execution, starvation, or disease. More than three-quarters of the population of Timor-Leste were displaced and more than 70 per cent of its buildings and infrastructure destroyed. Later, in January 1999, in a referendum conducted by the UN Mission in East Timor (UNAMET), the East Timorese had the opportunity to decide their own fate whether to remain within Indonesia or to become autonomous and achieve full independence. The East Timorese voted overwhelmingly for independence on 30 August 1999 as the result revealed that 78.9% opted to be separated from Indonesia. Violence and destruction however accompanied the lead up to the referendum, and continued after the ballot result. The process of rebuilding Timor-Leste as an independent state then was put under the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET).

Its Constitution is based on the Portuguese model, with a directly elected president as the head of state, a parliament with legislative authority, and a prime minister as head of the executive government and a cabinet. The parliamentary representatives are elected under a party-list proportional representation system to serve for the duration of five-years (Leach and Kingsbury 2012). As the youngest country in Southeast Asia, Timor-Leste is also one of the poorest in the region. Emerging from the decades of conflict, food security was low with poverty continuing to be widespread. All

these pose challenges in Timor-Leste's institutional frameworks. However, it has managed to live up its democratic ideals despite the political challenges since its restoration of independence. For instance, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) ranks Timor-Leste at the top of the most democratic countries in the Southeast Asia region in the latest Democracy Index 2018. The oil and gas sector continues to be the main resource, yet the challenge is to find ways to manage political disagreement and to address it in the most effective way to support sustainable development (World Bank March 2018).

Despite being in the highest rank in the EIU's Democracy Index 2018, Timor-Leste has been facing some political challenges in recent years. The March 20 presidential election and the July 22 parliamentary election in 2017 were the first elections successfully held without assistance from the international community since the UN mission departed in 2012. The 2017 elections were considered as significant milestones as they were held in a peaceful manner with no major incidents reported (Khoo 2018). Difficulties kicked in after the elections when the political parties could not achieve consensus in forming the government. The VII constitutional government composed of two political parties, the FRETILIN and the *Partido Democratico* (PD) with a total of 30-seats out of the 65-seat house was formed. The earlier agreement between FRETILIN, PD and *Kmanek Haburas Unidade Nasional Timor Oan* (KHUNTO) fell apart when the youth party withdrew from the coalition at the last minute. This then strengthened the opposition parties; the National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT) led by former revolutionary leader Xanana Gusmao, and the People's Liberation Party (PLP), led by former president Taur Matan Ruak. With the addition of KHUNTO, they formed the opposition coalition, "parliamentary majority alliance" or AMP.

While this minority government hoped to maintain stability and ensure peace with political inclusion, the FRETILIN-led minority government could not sustain itself as it was having difficulty in passing policy programs or budget bills. For months since the 2017 elections, political uncertainty marked disturbances

at the expense of the interests of the people. Finally, in January 2018, President Francisco Guterres, famously known as Lú-Olo, from the FRETILIN dissolved the parliament and announced the early election on 12 May 2018. The coalition of opposition parties with Xanana Gusmao at its head emerged with a majority of seats in the parliament and the two parties of the outgoing minority government; FRETILIN and PD accepted the outcome and pledged to serve as a strong parliamentary opposition. Such a situation highlights the fragility and insecurity facing the government, as argued by the constructivists on the importance of state survival for a small state like Timor-Leste.

Over time with the bloody independence struggle as its background, East Timorese national identity has evolved since Portuguese colonialism from a conventional anti-colonialist narrative, to one contesting Indonesia's forced invasion with the elements of local differences (Tønnesson and Antlöv 1996: 30). The resistance as portrayed by the East Timorese is described by Chatterjee (1993) as a form of an inner 'spiritual domain' of identity that was 'always sovereign' despite the political dominance of the colonial power. Although Timor-Leste shares much in common with other post-colonial narratives that aim to unite its populations under a similar colonial history and territory, it is important to note that there are several distinct features of East Timorese nationalism. This is mainly due to the experience of the subsequent invasion by Indonesia that is distinctive compared to other post-colonial states.

This provides Timor-Leste with a more complex and distinct narrative of the differential impacts of "colonialism" from the Portuguese period and then Indonesia's forced occupation. It is particularly significant when it has also led to a distinctive feature of East Timorese national identity with two generations of nationalists with different linguistic and cultural characteristics in that the people have been exposed to different forms of government. Two generations witnessed the country's long struggle for independence. The first is the "Generation of '99", also known as the *Geração Foun*, who were born during the period of the Indonesian occupation, some of whom emerged as national leaders in the 1980s and 1990s. They are distinct from the "Generation of

‘75” who are Portuguese-speaking older leaders and mostly dominate the government. The two generations find themselves in disagreement over certain matters including national identity. But the reconciliation of both generations’ nationalist experience is crucial for the transmission of cultural values and for the country’s social cohesion as a whole (Khoo 2017b) as different visions of national identity are brought to a compromise (Shamsul 1996: 346). This remains a central part of the story of East Timorese nationalism (Leach 2019: 295).

Among the common problems facing post-colonial states is the challenge to establish a durable balance between the national government and the various forces that might threaten state sovereignty, especially in ethnically diverse societies (Leach 2019: 297). This is a distinctive feature of East Timorese nationalism in which ritual leadership continues to be a sustaining force in East Timorese identity. This has also been raised by Hicks (2012: 26) who argues that for rural Timorese communities, they are more inclined to identify themselves as residents of those local communities than as citizens of the state. The challenge then lies in finding ways to integrate the existence of these two political cultures that draws on the strengths of both sources of political identity. Hicks (2012: 34) quoted a Timorese who reminds us that “the process of nation-state formation led by a few elites from the East Timorese diaspora and the UN relied heavily on elements of foreign cultures and values and undermined the cultural identity of the East Timorese”.

The 2015 celebration of the “500-year” arrival of Catholicism in the attempt as the “affirmation of Timorese identity” (RDTL 2015) suggested dimensions of the same narrative in contemporary East Timorese nationalism. For instance, Catholicism, the role of the church, and Portugal, is depicted as outsiders whose arrival marks the beginning of a new political society that played a role in shaping national identity. But this has been met with some domestic critics as a contradictory, or inadequately “post-colonial” discourse (Leach 2019: 296). At the beginning of the rise of the PLP, led by Taur Matan Ruak in late 2015, the PLP provided strong criticisms against the government’s development policy, the rampant clientelism and corruption, and also its efforts in building a national consensus.

They argued that there is a need for a renewed emphasis on teaching Indonesian and English in schools alongside Tetun and Portuguese (Cleary 2016), which are the two official languages of Timor-Leste. This brings into more discourse as the contestation of Timor-Leste's national identity continued. More recently, the government has also attempted to shift the focus of the nationalist narrative from the national identity of resistance to one, which emphasizes the concern for national development, but it has thus far not been successful (Leach 2019: 283).

Examining this from a constructivist perspective, states are considered as active stakeholders in the construction of their own national interests through processes of interpretation and representation as they do not simply act on the basis of a predetermined environment (Weldes 1996). The distribution of power as Wendt (1992) argues has considerable influence in the states' calculation of its future direction, but the way it does so depends on "intersubjective understandings" that shape their conceptions of the state and other actors (Wendt 1992: 398). Having said that, it is rather the interactive processes among states that create meaning or define situations that eventually determine their interests (Wendt 1992). As such, foreign policy choices that a state decides to make on certain issues can be best understood as "interpretive processes" that are shaped by interests, which in turn "depend on a particular construction of self-identity in relation to the conceived identity of others" (Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein 1996: 60).

III. Timor-Leste and its relationship with ASEAN

ASEAN is considered the premier regional association in the region (Frost, 2008). ASEAN's founding declaration in Bangkok in 1967 called upon its member states to "... ensure their stability and security from external interference in any form or manifestation in order to preserve their national identities in accordance with the ideals and aspirations of their peoples". It is regarded as an important factor for stability in Southeast Asia through various

reasons; among them are its cooperative activities, its policies of constant active dialogues with not only the Asia Pacific countries but also other major key players in the world. Moreover, ASEAN's promotion of wider cooperation forums in East Asia and the Asia Pacific is also a significant role. Significantly, ASEAN is often regarded as constituting a diplomatic, security, and economic and cultural community (Ganesan 1994).

Geographically, Southeast Asia consists of eleven countries that reach from the south of China and to the east and southeast of India. It has basically two main regions. First is considered as the continental Southeast Asia, which includes Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Singapore and peninsular Malaysia. Second is the archipelagic Southeast Asia, which includes East Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste. This region has long been influenced by external sources because of its rich natural resources and strategic location. ASEAN that was formed in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand brought a new level of regional cooperation to the extent of protecting the region so as not to be controlled by external global forces. Brunei Darussalam joined the regional body later in 1984. Traditionally, ASEAN's cooperation approach emphasized mutual respect for national sovereignty, avoiding direct confrontation, agreement through consensus and most importantly, all decisions are made at a pace with which all the member states feel comfortable.

Since the late 1990s, ASEAN has made substantial efforts to maintain its profile and prominence. After the end of the Cambodian conflict and the end of the Cold War, ASEAN's membership was expanded to also include Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999. With that, ASEAN in the late 1990s was able to represent Southeast Asia in a more holistic way. But on the other side of the coin, the membership expansion poses some challenges. ASEAN's diversity is now becoming wider and therefore poses further challenges in terms of economic integration. While most new members are agreeable to ASEAN's principles and norms, some member states, for instance Myanmar's autocratic regime has tainted the image of

ASEAN's cohesion and its international image overall.

ASEAN has pursued cooperation in three ways. First, in 2003, it committed its members to develop an ASEAN Community. The ASEAN Community involves three key pillars. They are the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). Second, as to what was stipulated since its establishment, ASEAN continues to actively engage the major powers in political and economic dialogue to enhance the overall security and prosperity in the region. With that, ASEAN member states agreed to place special emphasis on the "big three" Asia Pacific powers, namely the United States, China and Japan. Third, ASEAN is sponsoring wider regional cooperation by playing a leading role in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to build confidence and enhance dialogue on security issues, the ASEAN Plus Three grouping with China, Japan and South Korea and the East Asian Summit (Frost 2008).

In comparison to the 1967 Declaration of Bangkok, the ASEAN Charter is a rule-based document that specifically provides provisions in matters that were not found in the Declaration. One of which is the matter of membership admission. It is stated in Article 6(2) of the ASEAN Charter that admission shall be based on the following criteria: location in the recognized geographical region of Southeast Asia; recognition by all ASEAN member states; agreement to be bound and to abide by the Charter; and ability and willingness to carry out the obligations of membership. The puzzle that needs to be solved is when will Timor-Leste be formally accepted as the regional bloc's 11th member. As the newest country in Southeast Asia, its place in the region is often overlooked. Timor-Leste is vulnerable not only as a small and relatively young state but also the fact that it suffered an Indonesian occupation that destroyed its economy and infrastructure prior to the restoration of independence in May 2002. It therefore faces various post-conflict challenges, including having its voice heard in regional and international forums.

Timor-Leste expressed its desire to be part of ASEAN immediately

after the restoration of independence in 2002. In July 2005, it became a member of the ARF and it signed the ASEAN Treaty on Amity and Cooperation in 2007. As outlined in its Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030, Timor-Leste's aspiration to join ASEAN is based on geographical location, the wishes of the country's leaders and people, and its cultural affinity with its neighbors. Timor-Leste officially applied for ASEAN membership in March 2011 during Indonesia's chairmanship after a number of years with ASEAN observer status. An ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group (ACCWG) was then set up and tasked to assess Timor-Leste's readiness to be part of the regional grouping, and the implications for ASEAN if it did join.

The exclusion of Timor-Leste is in stark contrast to the time-consuming admission of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam in the late 1990s (Astriana, Arif and Fadhillah 2016). This is because in the past, prior to the introduction of the ASEAN Charter, there were no specific requirements for admission. With its domestic challenges, some questioned Timor-Leste's aspiration for ASEAN membership, as well as the benefits and costs of joining. For Timor-Leste, ASEAN membership is hoped to provide access to an established forum where important issues such as security, economic development and integration, and socio-cultural matters can be pursued.

In 2018, Timor Leste's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation (MFAC), through the Directorate-General for ASEAN Affairs and with support from the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) technical assistance team, held consultation meetings with various government institutions to discuss a technical work plan for ASEAN accession. The meetings gave rise to the Timor-Leste ASEAN Mobilization Program (TLAMP) document that set forth Timor-Leste's commitment and timeline for policy, economic and legal reforms in order to become a full member in the broad range of ASEAN cooperation. Around the same time, a technical working group composed of representatives from key government agencies was also established to address a number of Critical Elements for Accession (CEA), with a structured work plan to achieve these within a short time-frame. The CEA process has identified a key number of ASEAN

agreements in economic, political-security and socio-cultural matters that can be implemented swiftly to demonstrate Timor-Leste's capacity and commitment to join ASEAN.

In a more recent development, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Dionisio Babo Soares launched the TLAMP on 4 March 2019, to mark the 8th anniversary of Timor-Leste formally expressing its interest in becoming a member of ASEAN. Held in Dili, the launching ceremony brought together various Timorese government officials, eminent persons, technical directors, representatives of academia, civil society, and the private sector and ambassadors and representatives from countries and international agencies, including some of the ASEAN ambassadors. The launch of TLAMP, which came after the Council of Minister's approval of a Government Resolution on Timor-Leste's Accession to ASEAN, reiterated Timor-Leste's commitment to join the regional organization.

As emphasized in the speech delivered by the Foreign Affairs Minister, "ASEAN membership is our national interest, foreign policy priority and strategic decision to take part in regional economic integration, to diversify our economy and contribute to the stability in this region". Some of the preparatory steps have included nation-wide programs for ASEAN awareness, the establishment of the ASEAN National Secretariat and focal points, capacity-building through training and dialogue to ensure the readiness of institutions, the establishment and strengthening of Timor-Leste's embassies in all ASEAN countries, and participation in regional meetings, which include co-chairing and hosting the ARF.

IV. Complexity in constructing regional identity

In an attempt to explore Timor-Leste in a broader context of their search for regional identity and belonging in Southeast Asia by using the constructivist approach, I argue that the complexity of Timor-Leste's regional affiliation with ASEAN is made more challenging with its quest to assert itself as a nation in the making. This section is written mainly based on interactions that I had with local respondents from various backgrounds ranging from the

government to civil society groups including academics.

Regional identity refers either to the supposed distinctive natural and cultural qualities of a region, and the identification of people with such a region or both aspects at the same time (Paasi 2012). From the constructivist approach, regions can be understood as “social constructs” and a form of expression that showcases the power relations but it is not often clear what such arguments mean in practice (Paasi 2010). In such contexts, regions are considered as results and expressions of social relations that may have their origin in complex institutional interactions located both within the region itself and outside (Paasi 2011: 10).

The definition of regional identity is used in diverging ways in different social and geographical contexts. The basic division is between approaches that regard regional identities as “really existing” and stable, and those that understand them as social constructs or narratives and expressions of societal power that are developed for specific purposes. From the latter viewpoint, the key question is not whether regional identities exist but what it means to talk about such identities (Paasi 2012). Both the rise of regional identities and their current power are related to the globalization of culture, economics and consciousness. It has been suggested that people’s awareness of the processes of globalization and their insecurity in the face of them generate a search for new points of social orientation in a world that is increasingly mobile (Paasi 2012).

Until today since the restoration of independence in 2002, Timor-Leste continues to face difficult issues of post-conflict justice and reconciliation. Internationally, as a small state, the relationship between Timor-Leste and China has also been the focus of discussion as China’s “soft power” and global resource diplomacy grows. Issues also arise on how Timor-Leste balances its two major neighbors, Australia and Indonesia, as well as its involvement with the global Lusophone community. Timor-Leste is especially prominently known as an active player in the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) and G7Plus. These are some of the critical issues that continue to inform and inflame the politics of Timor-Leste (Leach and Kingsbury 2012).

Having endured internal strife that has scarred the nation-building process in 2006 and 2008, the political uncertainty since the 2017 elections signifies that several unresolved issues are still looming. Despite the political uncertainty, Timor-Leste continues to be assertive on a range of topics with potential implications for the country's foreign policy agenda. Nevertheless, the internal situation poses questions and doubts in regards to the direction this small state seeks to pursue (Seabra 2012: 145). As one of the newest players in the international arena and a small state, Timor-Leste had to formulate a foreign policy that not only guarantees its worldwide recognition but also to establish the country as a credible actor in the regional setting by not neglecting its nearest neighbors. As an oil-rich country, it provides Timor-Leste not only with opportunities but also challenges, especially given the various choices that the small state has to make concerning where to allocate them.

By opting to balance key international donors which mostly are either historically and culturally related or politically engaged, and at the same time, investing in a secure and stable regional scenario, a careful diversification of the country's foreign policy goals was required, despite the various constraints that could impede those goals. Despite the establishment of the Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation (CAVR) with the aim of investigating human rights violations during the Indonesian occupation, the human rights violations perpetrated by the Indonesian military remain a thorny issue between Indonesia and Timor-Leste until today. However, Timor-Leste recognizes that it remains necessary to establish a working bilateral relationship with Indonesia not only as former ruler but also its neighbor. This is done based on the reason that it is essential to recognize the importance of state survival, therefore, normalizing ties with Indonesia is unavoidable (Seabra 2012: 146).

For all intents and purposes, the Timor-Leste government acknowledges that it is crucial to forge close relations with Southeast Asia in order to better secure its longer-term diplomatic relations and realizing the potential for opening new relations with vibrant economies, as well as for contributing to a regional stability.

Nonetheless, this particular goal has so far been much delay, as Timor-Leste has been limited to observer status in ASEAN. Among the reasons for this are structural constraints in the accession process and to some member states' doubts about Timor-Leste's ability to meet the organization's requirements.

On the other hand, given Australia's contribution to the later stages of the independence process through both its leadership of the International Force East Timor (INTERFET) and its bilateral aid program, Australia has come to regard Timor-Leste as a country situated within its sphere of influence. Bilateral relationships between the two countries, however, have occasionally caused some tensions, one particularly difficult issue concerns the exploration of the vast natural resource reserves lying beneath the Timor Sea (Seabra 2012: 147-148). As for its status as a former colony of Portugal, the former colonial power retains a historical and continuing bond with Timor-Leste. Since the Indonesian invasion in 1975, and especially leading towards the 1990s, Portugal has been supportive towards the independence of Timor-Leste and it played an active role in securing the referendum leading to independence (Seabra 2012: 149).

Section 8 of the Constitution sets out the principles for Timor-Leste's foreign policy. It states the importance of the right of the people to self-determination and independence, the protection of human rights and the mutual respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and equality among states as guiding principles. The aims of Timor-Leste's external policies are to establish relations of friendship and cooperation with all other peoples, aiming at settling conflicts peacefully, general disarmament, establishing a system of collective security and creating a new international economic order to ensure international peace and justice. The same section of the Constitution also mentions the importance of maintaining privileged relations with Portuguese-speaking countries and of special ties of friendship and cooperation with neighboring countries of the region.

Timor-Leste's Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030 in the section on Foreign Affairs stipulates that "As a small nation in a highly strategic geographic location, Timor-Leste's security will

depend upon forging strong relationships with our neighbours and friends, making a positive contribution to a stable and peaceful region, and participating in global peacekeeping missions and cooperative international forums and initiatives". Having an outward-looking policy, it believes that a collaborative approach to foreign policy will encourage people to take pride in the development of Timor-Leste, attract international investors and generate greater opportunities for economic advancement. In the plan, it has highlighted that apart from the CPLP in which Timor-Leste is active, another key regional organization is ASEAN. It states, "Timor-Leste's aspiration to join ASEAN is based on our geographical location, the wishes of our leaders and people, and our cultural affinity with our Asian neighbours. The plan has set the target to be a key member in ASEAN by 2020". As mentioned in the earlier section, the MFAC, through the Directorate-General for ASEAN Affairs and with support from the ADB technical assistance team kicked off the TLAMP document that set forth Timor-Leste's commitment and timeline for policy, economic and legal reforms to become a full member in the broad range of ASEAN cooperation.

From the interaction that I have had with various respondents, it reveals that there are some agreement in which Timor-Leste is connected to Southeast Asia, and that it plays an important role in defining its regional identity despite its difficult journey to independence. In the meantime, the foreign policy approach of the Timor-Leste government is also a distinctive feature in defining its regional identity especially its active role in the CPLP and the G7Plus. For many respondents, it is logical that Timor-Leste be considered as part of ASEAN. Nevertheless, Timor-Leste is considered as Asian but also Pacific because of its ethno-linguistic and oral history connections. As elaborated by one respondent, it has always claimed itself to be geographically part of Southeast Asia; indeed, it shares the same island with West Timor, which is part of Indonesia. In this regard, one can assume that Timor-Leste has a closer proximity to the Southeast Asia region than to other regions.

Moreover, the annexation and occupation of Timor-Leste by Indonesia for 24 years has tied Timor-Leste historically with the Southeast Asia region, although in an undesired way. It resulted in

an expanded cultural interaction between the people of Timor-Leste and the Malay-Indonesian world. Great numbers of Timorese are able to communicate in the Indonesian language, which enables them to communicate with people from other Southeast Asian countries, such as Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei. Timor-Leste is seen as part the ASEAN community as there are commonalties and cultural ties with other ASEAN members, especially with Indonesia as its closest neighbor and also as a former Indonesian-occupied country. Nevertheless, many respondents do not dismiss the close connection between Timor-Leste and Portugal.

During the years of the liberation struggle, Timor-Leste was more Pacific than Southeast Asian. However, since the restoration of independence in 2002, Timor-Leste's identity is seen to be part of Southeast Asia. However, to some extent, Timor-Leste's foreign policy tends to be more inclined to the European region in some instances such as its active role in CPLP. The question of regional identity is complicated in than it is "socially constructed" as argued in the constructivist framework. A respondent as I quote said "Timor never see itself [as] part of any regional identity except for the CPL P... ASEAN countries were not really supportive of our struggle, only Vanuatu in the Pacific who was very close to us. Perhaps the closest we can get is that we do have families living in West Timor, since before the formal separation by the Dutch and the Portuguese and recently in 1999".

There exist generationally different views in term of Timor-Leste's regional identity. As informed by a respondent, on the one hand, the East Timorese have fought so hard to be different from Indonesia, on the other hand, they have come to embrace being closer to the Portuguese. Having said this, the Timorese are still defining themselves in term of regional identity. As part of the constant struggle to be free and independent, the Timorese had to reject much of what Indonesia was trying to inculcate in them. Yet, there are thousands of young Timorese voluntarily taking Portuguese citizenship to go to the United Kingdom for economic opportunity. Nevertheless, the respondent believes that from the perspective of religions, values and norms, particularly the historical past, these will keep many Timorese from truly embracing being Asian. As

regional identity formulation also links closely with how a country shapes its foreign policy, the same respondent also added that Timor-Leste's foreign policy is driven by the concern about being stuck between two giants: Indonesia and Australia. Nevertheless, the strength of Timor-Leste lies in its ability to straddle continents and alliances.

The respondents are however divided in their views when it comes to the question about admission of Timor-Leste to ASEAN. Some have stated that Timor-Leste might not be ready for the time being due to the internal political and economic challenges, although in general, there are more supportive voices for Timor-Leste to be admitted to ASEAN at some time in the future. Timor-Leste is undoubtedly unique when it comes to its regional identity. Therefore, in determining the direction of its foreign policy, it is trying to diversify its neighborly reach while awaiting the consecration of its primary regional objective. While the association of regional identity with Southeast Asia is relatively strong as shown through the history and socio-cultural norms and values that they share, this is also not to dismiss the close links between Timor-Leste and other regional organizations such as the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) and Pacific Island Forum apart from the CPLP. The significance of Timor-Leste's ASEAN bid goes beyond economic benefits to the realm of security-building and identity formation. Functioning as a boundary-setting practice, it not only signifies the country's position in the regional and global order but also helps secure the young state's identity by distinguishing its political and cultural difference from its two powerful neighbors as an independent, Portuguese-speaking Southeast Asian nation.

V. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have attempted to demonstrate the connections between Timor-Leste's search for identity and its leaders' foreign policy preferences in the post-independence period. Using a constructivist theoretical framework and relevant empirical material derived from the interactions with local respondents, I sought to

clarify what is on their “slate” during their external interactions in the context of the development of regional identity in Southeast Asia. After all, the specific foreign policy decisions that the state leaders take as part of their efforts to shape and consolidate the political and cultural character of their state and its place in the emerging global order do not occur in an ideational vacuum, nor are they simply shaped by a set of supposedly objective rules and behaviours conditioned by the strategic environment in which they are operating. Understood as such, it becomes clear that the choices made by Timorese policy-makers in relation to membership of the Southeast Asian region as the strategic orientation of the fledgling state was neither the “only choice” available nor merely a matter of material considerations. Instead, they view ASEAN membership as providing an important opportunity to establish and secure the boundaries of state identity, which is essential not only for their state survival but also as an opportunity for common benefits in areas such as politics, economy, security and socio-cultural cooperation.

This discourse is closely related to the country’s transitional experience from a former colony and then internationally supervised by the UN to a more stable country. All these experiences have been embedded in a process of identity construction that is underpinned by the understandings and meanings that Timorese officials have attributed to the emerging global order (Sahin 2014). The challenge is how Timor-Leste can balance its foreign policy direction to garner more regional attention to its own interests in the long run in asserting itself as a truly independent country. Ultimately, the relatively complicated relationships between Timor-Leste and some of its major foreign partners are common problems for every small state, this is especially so when it is still struggling to advance its development. The need for greater freedom to establish an independent policy is inherent in any state’s growth, and, since Timor-Leste is a young nation, it is only natural that some hard choices and decisions have to be taken in the name of state survival and development.

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From Zomia to Holon: Rivers and Transregional Flows in Mainland Southeastern Asia, 1840-1950



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[Abstract]

How might historians secure for the river a larger berth in the recent macro-historical turn? This question cannot find a greater niche than in the emerging critique of the existing spatial configuration of regionalism in mainland Southeastern Asia. The Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Salween, Mekong and Yangtze rivers spread out like a necklace around Yunnan and cut across parts of the territories that are known as South, Southeast and East Asia. Each of these rivers has a different topography and fluvial itinerary, giving rise to different political, economic and cultural trajectories. Yet these rivers together form a connected “water-world”. These rivers engendered conversations between multi-agentive mobility and large-scale place-making and were at the heart of inter-Asian engagements and integration until the formal end of the European empires. Being both a subject and a sponsor of transregional crossings, the paper argues, these rivers point to the need for a new historical approach that registers the connections between parts of the Southeast Asian massif through to the expansive plain land and the

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vast coastal rim of the Bay of Bengal and the China Seas. A connection that could be framed through the concept of Holon.

Keywords: Zomia, Holon, rivers, transregional flows, “water-world”, mainland Southeast Asia

I . Introduction

The early thoughts on “Holon” are traced to Aristotle who proposed the concept of wholeness as a representation of integration. “Form consists from the matter of the form”, declared Aristotle and suggested that “Nature is styled the substance of things that exists by Nature”. Within this early conception of Holon, a phenomenal duality ran deep as Aristotle metaphorically referred to it as an organic relationship between, for example, letter and syllable; bipeds and men; liquids and water; *Illiad* and its verses; a house and its stones (2007: 94-95, 121). This duality comprised integration, which saw one part of the dual core of the holarchy holding on to the other, usually a larger or general one (*the genus*). By the time of Galen, Holon came to be viewed as a “total mixture” (*krasis di’ holōn*), (Singer 2016), which surpassed the Aristotelian propensity to asymmetrical duality. The modern conceptualization of Holon continues to move beyond the “dualistic way of thinking in terms of ‘parts’ and ‘wholes’” and to reconcile the atomic and holistic approaches, as suggested by Arthur Koestler, the architect of holarchy in late modern times (1967, 1970, 1978). A more recent illustration of holarchy would look like this: An organic whole (holarchy) is comprised of molecules, cells, tissues and organs— the organism is fully operational only with the collaborative functioning of all these organic units, but each of these units also exists on its own, functioning autonomously (Funch 1995).

Since Koestler, the idea of Holon has flourished in numerous lines of thoughts, ranging from “bricks to bable” and in a range of disciplines including sociology, ethnography, biology, linguistics, geography, industrial management and so on. In the wake of the debates initiated by Koestler, Dov Nir was among early scholars

dealing with the question of regionalism from a holonic perspective. Grounded on the systems approach in geography, Nir considers the “place” as a Holon, because it is simultaneously the “summit of a certain system and a component of a larger spatial system”. Following this approach, Nir stressed that the “region” is “an entity, a unique individuum, but, being a component of a larger system, it is also a part of the space; *it is both place and space*” (1987: 195). Although Nir makes a useful contribution to the idea of linking Holon with regionalism, there are still debates on the processes in which a place becomes a functional part of a region. If for Henri Lefebvre the creative human labor is crucial in the construction of place, for Bruno Latour, such convergence is possible through a network of relationships existing in nature, including both human and non-human (Lefebvre 1991; Latour 2005).

Latour is particularly important here. All fluvial nodal points together may form a network that more closely fits what he terms ‘actant’ in the context of his Actor-Network Theory. Fluid riverscapes or apparently inaccessible mountain zones bordering the river valleys propelled human actors to capitalize on the trade routes that crossed their habitats. To imperial gazes, many of them appeared as marauders and disruptive but, in most cases, they were part of the flows, who would claim a stake and ownership of the economic activities that evolved within the network shaped by the river system and to which they were connected. Rivers thus, even in their most inaccessible zones, acted as a powerful actant. Yet if the actor-network theory expands the idea of collaborative existence of human and nature, it leaves room for the discussion of spatial specificities that are shaped by long-term historical practices within a particular ecological regime. This paper suggests that Latour could be better appreciated by looking at the larger process of imperial history and human mobility within nature’s network—multifaceted collective that I would call “holon”.

Partly responding to the question about the relationships between space and region, this paper stems from an interest in exploring Southeast Asia as a region from the vantage point of the concept of Holon. In its long-term history, Southeast Asia was at the cultural crossroads of India and China; during colonial times it was

under the grip of different imperial economic structures; in the post-WW II period, the region came to be perceived as a strategic “unit”, particularly in the American academia (Vandenbosch 1946). In the current environment of geo-economic integration within the framework of ASEAN, there are clearly sub-regional and extra-regional outreaches. Southeast Asia is thus a complicated candidate for a holonic perspective. Despite these limits in the spatial conceptualization of the region, there are ecologically contiguous areas that may be fruitfully engaged from a holonic perspective. In this paper, I would argue that a Holonic perspective of mainland Southeast Asia and adjacent regions could be best explicated by locating the role of the rivers that flow through these regions.

In the holonic projection, rivers are perceived both as a geological and a temporal body. As Marko Pogacnik suggested that from the geomantic point of view, “the river is running inside a rounded membrane that resembles a tube” (2007). In this tube flows geological and biological agents of sand, silt, mud, fish, leaked oils or gold dusts; on the surface there are steamers, boats, teaks, rainwater, fluvial waves and currents; also water that drops on the river body as rain and those that drain through the mountains, each forming an enormous organic flow. Each river in this context becomes a holarchy, a “total mixture” or an “ecosystem metabolism”. (Cabello et al 2015). In its temporal sense, the river becomes the site of political power-play, gun-boat diplomacy, trade and commerce, agrarian production choices, irrigation, navigability, ethnic conflicts and coexistence, mobility as well as immobility and a wide range of livelihood options—a combination of temporal flows that may be termed as “societal metabolism”.

Recently, there have been attempts to bridge the gaps between societal and ecosystem metabolism (ibid.). These attempts call for reconciliation not only between natural and human activities around the river, but also for reconciliation between multiple river landscapes. In other words, interests are growing on how geological and social metabolism evolved along and across the basins from its source to the sink. This is particularly important in the context of recent historical and anthropological debates on Southeast Asian highlands. Of all major contributions in the field of Tibetan-

Himalayan highlands, known by various names including “Zomia”, most references to rivers were furnished in James Scott’s seminal work *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009). Scott’s Zomia is an antidote to the nationalist projection of space and landscape that emerged from the German and French tradition of geography. Scott, along with Schendel(2002) and Michaud(2013), have been instrumental in promoting the Southeast Asian massif as a spatial category that embraces the “transregional” in the place of the regional and national— suggesting that the Tibetan-Himalayan highlands developed an autonomous autarky that avoided the political and economic dominance of the centralizing states in the valleys. In the broader conceptual parameter that informs Scott’s valley-upland dichotomy, however, only part of the river is intelligible, as Scott notes: “‘Easy’ water ‘joins’, whereas ‘hard’ hills, swamps, and mountains ‘divide’” (2009: 45).

This paper builds on the concept of the “social metabolism” of the river in its broader sense and through this it reads the Zomian conception of spatial autonomy around the Southeast Asian massif. In particular, it seeks to examine the connections of rivers that dilutes topographical difference and interrogates spatial dichotomies. It argues that a new understanding of regionalism depends on avoiding consigning human intent and action to a morphologically delimited vision of the highlands and valleys. A more profitable line of enquiry would be to take a closer look at the unity of the river that connects all forms of landscapes allowing it to cross regional boundaries.

In the recent past—as much as in the pre-modern period—the Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Salween, Mekong and Yangtze, among other Tibetan-Himalayan rivers, enabled multiple and layered mobilities. These were facilitated by the river as the route of large-scale trade and transport, as well as a site of micro-scale livelihood options. The river was also as much a site of navigability as of directionality both upstream and downstream. It was a site of occasional contestations and conflicts, but also of a referral, a signifier, a meeting place and a crossroads of pathos and pathways. In a narrower spatial context, ethnic groups forged relationships with riverine neighbours to access the ecological resources available

to them. On a broader scale, rivers in both their inland mountainous terrains and deltaic ends saw connectivity through long-distance trade. Do these dual processes of river-induced mobility imply a pattern of holonic connectivity across north-eastern South Asia, northern mainland Southeast Asia and Southwestern China? This paper deals with these queries with a focus on the Brahmaputra, the Irrawaddy and the Yangtze river systems.

II . Brahmaputra-Irrawaddy Network

In the late nineteenth century, a European observer compared the mountain ranges that extended from the Tibetan-Himalayan highlands to mainland Southeast Asia and adjacent regions as the fingers of a human hand and the rivers that flowed through these fingers as parts of a radial system (McMahon 1873-74: 463-467). While these rivers, flowing between the Brahmaputra to the Yangtze, joined the seas in disparate locations from the Bay of Bengal to the East China sea, they flowed quite close to each other between north-east India, Tibet and Yunnan. For example, the Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) was so close to the tributaries of the Irrawaddy that for most of the nineteenth century European explorers debated whether the Tsangpo was actually the main source of the Irrawaddy river (Anderson 1869-70: 346-356). While the two rivers had different origins and reached two different destinations, both remained within the watery grid created by a range of smaller rivers and their tributaries and branches.

The Chindwin river, a 520-mile major tributary of the Irrawaddy, was the main artery for the connectivity between the valley of the Brahmaputra and the Irrawaddy. There was a distance of only a few miles between the starting point of the Chindwin river above Hukong Valley and the Dihing, a major tributary to the Brahmaputra. Further down in northern Manipur, the Tuzu river, a tributary of the Chindwin, flowed less than ten miles from the Dhanshiri river, a tributary of the Brahmaputra. Further south, the Manipur river, with a basin of about 700 square miles, was connected with the Chindwin river via its

tributary, Myittha. All the feeders of the Manipur river, including Imphal, Iril, Khuga and Tuitha, were, in their turn, close to some tributaries of the lower Brahmaputra/Meghna, including the Barak river (Ludden 2019: 23-37).

Within these land-river networks, at least three major highways emerged between India and Burma. One route extended from the Sylhet and Kachar districts across the Manipur territories to the Chindwin river and then the Irrawaddy river in the northern region of Ava. Another route extended from the Brahmaputra valley in southern Assam into Manipur. A third network of routes went through Arakan province (Yalak, Aeng, and Tongo) to the towns of Shembegwen, Membu, and Prome on the banks of the Irrawaddy river (Pemberton 1838: 392)

The Manipur river collected a considerable flow from other Indian rivers and carried products from Bengal and other north-eastern regions before entering Myanmar. Manipur was known for its trade in salt, silk, wax, ivory, cotton, and ponies, and attracted Burmese and Chinese merchants from Yunnan. The Maharajah of Manipur made remarkable profits out of tea, which he bought in the trading village of Thaungdut on the bank of the Chindwin river in Hkamti district in Sagaing and sold in Cachar. Significant amounts of rice were carried along the traditional route via the Chindwin river which connected the Irrawaddy and Brahmaputra feeders. In short, what is today mapped as the borderlines of South and Southeast Asia were spread out in an elastic and interlocking network of rivers in this region.

III. Brahmaputra-Yangtze Network

The proximity of the Himalayan-Tibetan rivers led to the idea of maintaining communications between Bengal and China by means of rivers, instead of through the Straits of Malacca, particularly because of the shifting patterns of the monsoons (Huttmann 1844: 123). Soon the logic of a volatile sea for advancing riverine communication was replaced by the hope of

the communicational potential of the rivers themselves. In the late 1860s, Arthur Cotton proposed to connect the “heart” of China with that of India by means of inter-valley connections between the Brahmaputra and the Yangtze, which were only 250 miles within their nearest navigable points. Cotton proposed this connection between Sadiya in Assam on the Lohit river (a feeder of the Brahmaputra), and on the Yangtze (Jinsha) near Lijiang in northwest Yunnan. This connectivity was to run across three other major rivers, including the Irrawaddy, Salween and Mekong (Cotton 1867).

Cotton’s idea of connecting India and China through the Brahmaputra and Yangtze was partly a reflection of nineteenth-century confidence about conquering nature and partly an outgrowth of his own “river-linking” projects in the valleys of south and north India. But those engineering projects were unlikely to be applicable in these upland regions where the elevation from the Sadiya to Lijiang extended from about 500 feet to 7900 feet with deep valleys between them. Not surprisingly, during the century prior to decolonization, neither the inter-linking of rivers nor through construction of railways were India and China connected across this region. Topographical and financial conditions were of course prohibitive, but the principal factors that prevented a project of the inter-linking of the Brahmaputra and Yangtze was the British annexation of northern Burma in the 1880s. Following this the attempts to connect India and China via the Brahmaputra and Yangtze gravitated to the Irrawaddy and Yangtze network. But the abandonment of imperial ambition to connect these river valleys hardly made any difference to the historical continuity of communications across Tibet, Assam and Yunnan which were largely dependent on a wide and efficient mule-horse-pony network.

IV. Irrawaddy-Yangtze Network

As the Brahmaputra and Irrawaddy were considered a means to access China, so the Yangtze became part of remarkable efforts to reach out to India, Tibet and Burma. The Yangtze and the city of Shanghai were important for two reasons as far as the connectivity between India and China was concerned. First, by the 1860s the British were increasingly feeling uncomfortable about the greater presence of other imperial powers in Shanghai. So, there emerged the strategy of pursuing a pre-emptive entry to the Yangtze valley from what became known as the “Irrawaddy Corridor”. In this connection Edward Sladen, the British political agent in Mandalay during the reign of the last Burmese King, was concerned that the Americans would soon take control of the east coast trade of China, particularly after the opening of the ship canal across Panama to connect the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. Because of these issues, which Sladen referred to as the “contingency of US predominance”, and in the context of the decline of the opium trade along with the Canton system, he suggested that Britain should attempt to find a western doorway to China. He felt that a route to China through Burma would be of the “highest importance” (Iqbal 2014). Second, Shanghai itself became a starting point for efforts from different imperial powers to gain access to the upper Yangtze region, especially Yunnan, bordering Burma. Thus, by the late nineteenth century, while the British sought to reach the upper Yangtze through Yunnan, other powers based in Shanghai began to establish a presence on the upper Yangtze around Sichuan and Yunnan, making the river a remarkably international water space in the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The trade and commerce that then took place between the Irrawaddy and Yangtze systems looked very promising. The Irrawaddy grew in importance not just because it was a highway to the sea for products from the hinterland, but also because it worked in the opposite directions too as a connection to the Yangtze system. By the 1870s upper Burma under the Burmese king was heavily dependent on rice imports from British Burma in the coastal region; these imports increased from 26,655 tons in 1872/3 to 71,444

tons in 1877/8. The price of rice rose by more than a third between 1855 and 1875 (Webster 1998: 211). After the annexation of upper Burma in 1885, the entire 1000-miles of the Irrawaddy came under direct imperial sway resulting in a seamless mobility that went beyond Burma borders: through a combination of land and water routes connecting the river valleys of the Salween, Mekong and Yangtze across Yunnan.

In the eight years between 1890-91 and 1897-98, exports and imports to and from Western China more than doubled, from Rs. (Indian Rupees) 16,218,400 to Rs. 39,579,400. If the Northern and Southern Shan states are included, the total trade in the same period increased almost four-fold, from Rs. 55,426,300 to Rs. 193,587,300. The import of products into Burma from Western China for the same period increased three-fold, from Rs. 5,343,500 to Rs. 14,785,300. Products included raw silk, hides, opium, orpiment, hides and horns, fibrous products as well as miscellaneous items including gold and silver, brass gongs and pots, iron cauldrons, straw hats, paper, hams, musk, fur coats, walnuts, china root, and coptis root, among many other commodities. Most of the products that moved from the westernmost navigable part of the Yangtze to the Irrawaddy transited through Yunnan and there were five routes for that purpose: Hankow to Yunnan-Fu; Chungking to Yunnan-Fu via Kueiyang-Fu; Chungking via Luchow to Yunnan-Fu; Sui-Fu (Hsuchou-Fu) to Yunnan-Fu; Chungking via Chenghtu-Fu to Tali-Fu. Eventually most of the products found their way to different parts of the Irrawaddy, mostly via Bhamo.

V. Symbiosis of Human and Animal Energy: Connecting Rivers, Valleys and Mountains

While the holonic appreciation of the links between the Brahmaputra, Yangtze and Irrawaddy could be examined from the flow of people and products across them, one needs to acknowledge the rugged and difficult routes that had to be negotiated between the upper reaches of these rivers. There are untapped primary materials that suggest that where physical connections between

rivers were not possible due to topographical difficulty or unnavigability, connectivity across the valleys flourished through a symbiosis of efforts, skills and energy, of both humans and animals.

The animals that kept connections alive across and between the rivers in Yunnan, the Shan States and regions east of the Irrawaddy valley included mules, ponies and to a lesser extent oxen (predominantly in the Shan States). Despite their smaller size (their height averaging about 46 inches) and being saddle-galled, an early twentieth-century report noted the quality of the Yunnan mules: endurance, sure-footedness, docility, intelligence and training to follow the instructions of the Mafus (muleteer). They were also inclined to swim in the rivers readily, and temperamentally suited to use swinging suspension bridges or ferry boats even if these were about the height of their shoulders. A mule, despite its small size, could carry more than 200 lbs on its back. Clarence-Smith (2015: 32-45) offers details of the importance of mules, along with horses and donkeys, for the transport system within the particular landscape of the region and the flourishing of the culture of reproduction of the same.

By the turn of the twentieth century, a rough estimate found the number of mules in Yunnan to be at least 40,000, most of which were bred in the upper Yangtze region. After the annexation of upper Burma and the consequent control over the entire length of the Irrawaddy the British administration felt the need to have the service of the mules to continue the commercial relations with south-west China across the Irrawaddy, Salween, Mekong and Yangtze. In addition to the attempts to procure as many Yunnan mules as possible, the British administration started negotiating the importation of mules from other parts of the world. In 1904, 1,200 mules arrived in Calcutta from Argentina for employment on the Burma side of these inter-river valley routes. With mules, ponies and oxen, the difficulties of the intermittent and rugged landscape and unnavigability of river networks were considerably overcome. Some recent scholarship, including those by Ma Jianxiong and Ma Cunzhao (2014), provide interesting accounts of the use of mules that took place within an intricate social organization of networks of

the muleteers. There is indeed a case for a Braudel beyond the Mediterranean Sea, a Braudel of the river-mountain network in which the pack mules loomed large. As Leonard (1982) quipped, Braudel “is brilliant, however, in demonstrating how most history is written on the backs of most people, maybe with hollow-bladed scissors, to cut us down to size so that great men will have somewhere to sit or stand. His perspective, heroically, is that of the pack animal.”

VI. Conclusion

Recent works on deltaic ecology and agrarian relations have shed useful light on social and economic life at the river’s end, while being shy of the fuller length of the river and its macro-spatial connectivity (van Schendel 1991; Biggs 2010; Iqbal 2010). Similar caveats apply to a range of studies on Asian highlands, which consider mountainous regions as a site of deliberate distance from the valleys for political and economic reasons. A holonic approach could take us beyond such insularity of area studies in Asia. The Zomian dichotomy between highland and valley seems to have been continually contested by the urge to reach out to navigable river spaces. An attempt to recover the rivers of these regions as a unified “social metabolism” requires looking at a river’s entire fluvial body, from its mountainous upper parts to its plains through to the ocean rims and, more importantly, to its outreach to the networks of neighbouring rivers.

It is curious how Southeast Asian Studies has recently shaped two significant trends along two broader spatial contours. Historians have made powerful contributions to the maritime connections and economic trends, often taking a long-term perspective (Chaudhuri 1985; Bose 2009; Amrith 2013). Anthropologists on the other hand have provided an equally impressive contribution to our understanding of the highland Southeast Asian massif, as already referred to in this paper. These important historical and anthropological studies point to the need to explore further how ethnic families and spatially larger economic flows operated within nature’s network

spanning the oceanic rims, valleys and upland areas.

Rivers are not hollow liquid space. Once the unity of the river from its origin to its length into the sea is fully appreciated, the multiple temporalities surrounding it must become intelligible. This paper has focused on the way rivers facilitated a connected world of human mobility and connections around trade and commerce during the colonial period. River was central to mainland Southeast Asia's engagement in historical conversations and connectivity with parts of western China and north-eastern South Asia. More research might lead to a deeper understanding of the Holon that the Southeast Asian rivers comprise and represent.

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Who Made Southeast Asia? Personages, Programs and Problems in the Pursuit of a Region*



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[*Abstract*]

This paper explores critically and historically some of the popular academic views concerning the development of the study of Southeast Asia through the lens of the contributions of particular scholars and institutions. Within the broad field of Southeast Asian Studies the focus is on the disciplines of geography, history and ethnology.

There are certain views concerning the development of scholarship on Southeast Asia which continue to surface and have acquired, or are in the process of acquiring “mythical” status. Among the most enduring is the claim that the region is a post-Second World War construction primarily arising from Western politico-strategic and economic preoccupations. More specifically, it is said that Southeast Asian Studies for a considerable period of time has been subject to the American domination of this field of scholarship, located in programs of study in such institutions

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as Cornell, Yale and California, Berkeley, and, within those institutions, focused on particular scholars who have exerted considerable influence on the directions which research has taken.

Another is that, based on the model or template of Southeast Asian Studies (and other area studies projects) developed primarily in the USA, it has distinctive characteristics as a scholarly enterprise in that it is multidisciplinary, requires command of the vernacular, and assigns special importance to what has been termed 'groundedness' and historical, geographical and cultural contextualization; in other words, a Southeast Asian Studies approach as distinct from disciplinary-based studies addresses local concerns, interests, perspectives and priorities through in-depth, on-the-ground, engaged scholarship. Finally, views have emerged that argue that a truly Southeast Asian Studies project can only be achieved if it is based on a set of locally-generated concepts, methods and approaches to replace Western ethnocentrism and intellectual hegemony.

Keywords: Southeast Asian Studies, Personages, Programs, Western constructs, local approaches

I . Introduction

This paper is prompted by a joint project with Professor Ooi Keat Gin (also in the special issue) on "pioneers and critical thinkers" in Southeast Asian Studies and my earlier speculations about the construction of British scholarship in and on Southeast Asia (King 2013; Park and King 2013). It has provided the occasion to examine in more detail the careers and contributions of a range of scholars and to rethink some of our cherished beliefs and commitments. In this regard there have been certain persistent and powerful myths which have grown up around the attempts to define Southeast Asia as a region, explore the origins of this regional concept and develop appropriate concepts, methods and perspectives to study it. It has been argued very widely in the academy that (1) Southeast Asia is an externally-generated concept primarily derived from post-war

American (and Western) strategic, geo-political and economic interests; (2) the multidisciplinary field of Southeast Asian Studies (and area studies more generally) has distinctive attributes which serve to define it separately from discipline-based scholarly endeavors; (3) the study of the region should move from Western ethnocentrism to alternative, more locally-based forms of conceptualization, understanding and analysis. Given that Southeast Asia possesses no overarching and agreed upon characteristics (social, cultural, historical, political, economic) which serve to define it as a region in its own right, nor that it can be easily demarcated using nation-state boundaries, then the attention of those who decided to devote themselves to the study of Southeast Asia or a part of it has been unduly preoccupied with attempts to construct a region by using a range of criteria, some imaginative and some mundane, and none of which command general agreement.

The problems of regional definition are amply demonstrated in one of the most well-known attempts to provide Southeast Asia with an identity of its own. Based on his indepth experience in Southeast Asia, specifically in what was then the British-administered Malay States, and subsequently his exploration of the early history of Southeast Asia in his academic sojourns in London and Ithaca, Oliver Wolters discerned a distinctive “cultural matrix” (1999; Reynolds 2008). Not all the constituents of Wolters’ Southeast Asia possessed these cultural elements, but in serial and polythetic fashion they demonstrated a cultural-regional coherence (and see Needham, 1975). I shall return to Wolters in due course.

What I intend to do in this paper is rearrange categories of local/non-local (foreign), insider/outsider, indigenous/exogenous, and Southeast Asian/Euro-American. These dichotomies require qualification and elaboration. I want to reverse them. So, the foreign becomes local, the outsider becomes insider, the exogenous becomes indigenous and the Euro-American (and others) becomes Southeast Asian, in certain cases and circumstances. I therefore, for example, and in this exercise, place some European scholars of Southeast Asia in contexts in which some researchers might think they should not be placed.

II . An American-dominated enterprise?

The popular and widely accepted view is that “The term Southeast Asia has been in use since World War II”, and “[it] has been coined to designate the area of operation (the South East Asia Command, SEAC) for Anglo-American forces in the Pacific Theater of World War II from 1941 to 1945” (Wikipedia 2019a). In addition, Milton Osborne, though searching for a locally-generated concept of Southeast Asia, says that the “general tendency” to think about the area as a region “came with the Second World War when, as a result of military circumstances, the concept of a Southeast Asian region began to take hold” (2016: 4). Russell Fifield supports him: “In the course of the Second World War Southeast Asia was increasingly perceived in terms of a region with military, political, and other common denominators” (1964: 188-194). Emphasizing the external construction of the region, Ariel Heryanto, in championing Southeast Asian scholarship, refers to Southeast Asia’s “exogenous character” (2002: 3). Donald Emmerson depicted it as “an externally defined region” (1984: 18), and Craig Reynolds has referred to the region as “a contrived entity” (1995: 437). Commentaries in this vein come from both researchers based outside the region and from those within, and, in the latter case, Amitav Acharya proposes that “The problematic nature of the concept of Southeast Asia is not the least due to its ‘non-indigenous’ origins as a convenient shorthand for Western academic institutions and as a geopolitical framework for Western powers in the form of the war-time Allied Southeast Asian [sic] Command” (1999: 55).

Similarly Paul Kratoska, Remco Raben and Henk Schulte Nordholt (2005a) accept the view that Southeast Asia emerged as a regional concept primarily as a result of external involvement and interest (from the USA, Europe and Japan) so that these foreign powers could “deal collectively with a set of territories and peoples that felt no particular identification with one another” (2005b 11). The editors conclude that attempts to define Southeast Asia have been “inconclusive”; the term Southeast Asia continues to be used “as little more than a way to identify a certain portion of the earth’s surface” and that the question of whether or not the concept of

Southeast Asia as a defined region “will acquire greater coherence in the future, or become increasingly irrelevant,....cannot be answered” (ibid., 14).

Returning to the construction of Southeast Asia as a post-war American artefact it should be noted that there were few signs before the 1940s that the USA had arrived at the realization of Southeast Asia as a region (see Reid 1999). Their preoccupation, as with the Spanish before them, was with their colonial possessions, the Philippines, and its connections across the Pacific Ocean to the Americas. In addition, the fact that it was predominantly a Europeanized and Christianized colony, and that there was no substantial evidence of Indianized or Sinicized state formations in the islands, set the Philippines apart historically and culturally from the French, Dutch and British dependencies and independent Siam to the west and south (but see Zialcita 2007). The American tendency to “look East” distracted them from the conceptualization of other neighboring countries as sharing cultural and other features with the Philippines. It is therefore understandable that D.G.E. Hall, in the first edition (1955) of his monumental history of the region excluded the Philippines, both for the reasons given above and for the fact that, during the Pacific War, the islands were included within the Pacific Ocean theater of war under American command, and excluded from the British-centered South East Asia Command based in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Hall, in rethinking Southeast Asia, included the Philippines in his 1964 edition, and subsequent editions (1968, 1981).

III. Local/non-local; indigenous/foreign

Many of our difficulties in exercises of definition, delimitation and conceptualization turn on another persistent theme which is the use of dualistic frames of reference: local/non-local; indigenous/exogenous; internal/external; insider/outsider; Southeast Asian/Euro-American. These distinctions are far from helpful in deciding on the origins of Southeast Asia and its conceptualization, and we should be aware of essentializing “the indigenous” or “the local”, just as we have

retreated from positions that tend to stereotype and essentialize Euro-American ethnocentrism and hegemony (Park and King 2013). In his “saucer model” of Southeast Asian identity, Reid pursues “an indigenous origin of the Southeast Asian idea” (1999: 8). But in this exercise he includes some expatriate scholars living and working in Southeast Asia. For him “indigenous” has a wide meaning.

The problem in differentiating the indigenous from the foreign, which in turn morphs into internal and external, and insider and outsider distinctions is that academic activities do not operate in this way. Scholars populate a globalized environment of information generation and exchange. Significant numbers of indigenous scholars (and in the Southeast Asian case I would include in this category of “indigenous”, migrant Asian populations which have settled in Southeast Asia, prominent among them being Chinese, those from the Indian sub-continent, Arabs and others from the Middle East, and Eurasians and other mixed ethnicities) have been trained overseas, especially in the USA and other Western countries (in this category I would include Australia and New Zealand). Many travel abroad frequently and work in higher education institutions or have settled in the West; indigenous scholars also work closely with fellow researchers from the West and elsewhere in collaborative research programs and publish together and engage in collaborative enterprises. Many Western scholars working on Southeast Asia have lived and undertaken research on a long-term basis in the region, are fluent in one or more local languages; some have married locally, converted to local religions and embraced local cultures. In addition, given the various expatriate retirement schemes in such countries as Malaysia and Thailand, senior Western academics who have contributed to the study of Southeast Asia, and are still actively engaged in research and publication, have more recently decided to spend long periods of time in the region. Some Western scholars have also adopted vigorously local research agendas and priorities (see, for example, Thompson 2012, 2013), as increasingly did such historians as D.G.E. Hall and O.W. Wolters; whilst many indigenous scholars continue to work with social science paradigms formulated in the West (Evers and Gerke 2003; Ravi, Rutten and Goh 2004). Having said this I acknowledge that, though in several cases

boundaries are blurred, there are scholars whom we can more clearly categorize as indigenous and exogenous, or internal and external or local and non-local(foreign).

IV. Non-colonial external observers

Pursuing this theme, we might then ask what are the circumstances in which an academic or at least someone who is pursuing scholarly activities, might come to realize that, whatever their immediate research interests, ethnicity and location, they have to deal with the parameters of a wider region? Emmerson (1984: 5-6) and Reid (1999: 10), in what are among the most significant contributions to our changing perspectives on Southeast Asia, have drawn attention to the importance of early Austro-German researchers in the construction of Southeast Asia as a region and that as outsiders in the European colonial dominance of Southeast Asia they were not bound by more narrowly colonialist preoccupations; in other words they were not focused as the British were on Burma, the Malay States, the Straits Settlements, and British Borneo (but see below), or as the French on Indochina (again see below), or the Spanish and then the Americans on the Philippines and the Dutch on the East Indies. They tended towards a wider vision of region.

4.1. Robert (Baron) von Heine-Geldern (1885-1968)

The outstanding personage in this context was Robert von Heine-Geldern. He was an Austrian ethnologist, prehistorian and archaeologist who studied at the University of Vienna under Father Wilhelm Schmidt and, having visited India and Burma, wrote a thesis on *Die Bergstämme des nordöstlichen Birma* (The Mountain Tribes of Northeastern Burma) (1914); it is noteworthy that he focused on Burma in his early work (Kaneko 1970) and that a regional Southeast Asian perspective was also, in part, derived from this mainland sub-region (see below). Von Heine-Geldern was responsible, among others, for the early use of the term "Southeast Asia" (*Südostasien*) (1923); subsequently, as a prehistorian and archaeologist, he also developed interests in other areas of Southeast

Asia to the south of the mainland (1942, 1946). Bridging the mainland-island divide was an important prerequisite in “discovering” Southeast Asia. He had a formative influence on the development of Southeast Asian Studies in the USA from 1938 to 1950 (Wikipedia 2018a). Reid also refers to other early German contributions to the concept of Southeast Asia as a region and to the use of the term by A.B. Meyer and W. Foy (1897) and F. Heger (1902) (Reid 1999:10); and then later by Karl J. Pelzer (1935), who, like von Heine-Geldern, was subsequently to make a major contribution to the development of Southeast Asian Studies in the USA (1935).

Japan, like Austria-Germany, as a expanding industrialized power, also developed an early concept of Southeast Asia during the first two decades of the twentieth century, although there were no notable individual scholars who stand out in this process of construction. The conceptualization of Southeast Asia (or *Tōnan Ajiya*) as the south or the southern ocean (*nanpo*, *nanyo*) was part of the emerging Japanese strategy of southern expansion (*nanshi-ron*) (Park and King 2013: 11; Hajime 1997).

V. Local European and indigenous observers

In my view, it is problematical to assert that Southeast Asia is an externally-generated concept deriving primarily from post-war Western, especially American geo-political and economic interests when we turn our attention to scholarly development in institutions of higher education in the region. Again Reid has indicated that when he was engaged in writing a paper on trends and future directions in Southeast Asian Studies outside Southeast Asia and tracing “the lineage of outside models”, including that of Cornell University (1994), he began to think more deeply about the origins of the study of the region and what Southeast Asian Studies at universities like Cornell entailed. In the 1990s, in his own pathway to the discovery of Southeast Asia he says “I had no contact with Cornell or any Southeast Asia program up to the point when I began to consider myself a Southeast Asianist” (1999: 9). Rather he pointed

to the importance of the University of Malaya, where he worked from 1965 to 1970, in the construction of Southeast Asia (the University of Malaya was founded in Singapore in 1949 with the merger of the King Edward VII College of Medicine [founded 1905] and Raffles College [founded 1928]) and then extended [with a semi-autonomous division] to Kuala Lumpur in 1959, and then, in the course of time, to the creation of two separate universities). Reid refers to many of the academic staff there (mainly British and Commonwealth expatriates, especially in the fields of geography and history, and particularly Australians and New Zealanders) who contributed to this process, among them, he lists: E.H.G. Dobby, Charles A. Fisher, T. (Terry) G. McGee, Robert Ho, James C. Jackson, Michael Leifer, Harold Crouch, David Brown, C.D. (Jeremy) Cowan, John Bastin, Jan Pluvier, Leonard and Barbara Andaya, Wang Gungwu, David K. Bassett, Shaharil Talib, Hans-Dieter Evers, Anne Booth and John H. Drabble (1999: 9).

Several of these scholars who returned from posts in Southeast Asia and who formed the first and second generation of Southeast Asianists in the UK, for example, were my mentors (particularly Bassett, Jackson and Fisher; I also attended lectures and seminars given by Leifer, Wang Gungwu, Cowan, and Ho). Singapore and Kuala Lumpur also became early training grounds for Malay(si)an and Singaporean scholars (Malay, Chinese and Indian) before the American programs in Southeast Asian Studies got under way in earnest. The nurturing of scholarly talent at the University of Malaya did not stop with Reid's list, taking it through to the 1970s; other expatriates included Donald Fryer, Paul Wheatley, W.D. McTaggart, William Roff, J.A.M. Caldwell, R.D. Hill, C.M. Turnbull, Anthony Short, Heather Sutherland, and Rudolph de Koninck, and, Anthony Reid himself, among many others. But what is of greater significance was the emergence of local/indigenous scholarship within the University of Malaya from the 1950s, and aside from Wang Gungwu and Shaharil Talib, we should note Syed Hussein Alatas, Kernial Singh Sandhu, Jeya Kathirithamby-Wells, Chandran Jeshurun, Lam Tim Fook, Jatswan Singh Sidhu, Zainal Abidin Wahid, Zahara Hj Mahmud, Cheng Siok Hwa, Khoo Kay Kim, Hamzah Sendut, Shamsul Bahrin, Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, Lee Boon Thong, Ooi

Jin Bee and Voon Phin Keong (Lee 2008; NUS, Department of Geography 2019; University of Malaya, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences 2019). The fulcrum of the development of teaching and research on Southeast at the University of Malaya comprised the Departments of History and Geography which also introduced two internationally important journals to the academic world in the 1950s and 1960s: *Journal of Southeast Asian History* (1960-1969) which was renamed *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* from 1970, and the *Malayan Journal of Tropical Geography* launched in 1953 which then gave rise to the *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* (1980) and the *Malaysian Journal of Tropical Geography* (1987). It is perhaps significant that Cornell, one of the most prominent world centers of Southeast Asian Studies, launched in its early years, not a regional journal, but a nation-state-based one, *Indonesia*.

E. (Ernest) G. (George) H. (Henry) Dobby was a pivotal figure in the early development of Southeast Asian geography at Raffles College and the University of Malaya (1950, 1961). Before the establishment of the University of Malaya in Singapore he held the Chair of Geography at Raffles College from 1947 and was appointed as Head of Department in 1946; he joined the College in 1939 (NUS, Department of Geography 2019). After 1949 Dobby appointed to the department, among others, Donald Fryer, who wrote a major book on the geography of development in Southeast Asia (1970), and Paul Wheatley (see below) (1961).

Nevertheless, Reid does point to the early contribution of American scholars, not so much in the fields of history, prehistory, ethnology and geography, but, perhaps predictably in political science and international relations. He refers to the work of Kenneth P. Landon, Bruno Lasker, Cora du Bois, Virginia Thompson, E.H. Jacoby and Lennox Mills, and particularly publications that were produced by the New York-based Institute of Pacific Relations (1999: 9-10, 14-15).

In a little known publication, Ralph Smith also pointed to some features of early post-war British scholarship on Southeast Asia and made some comparisons with American studies of the region (Smith 1986; and see King 2013). In this connection it is

important to note that not only is it problematical to define precisely what constitutes British scholarship on Southeast Asia in that it was not confined to the UK. Scholarship is seldom restricted by national boundaries, but in the particular case of British academic engagement with Southeast Asia, in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, we have to take into account the contribution of expatriate researchers and teachers, a considerable number of whom were not British, in centers of higher education in the colonies and dependencies. The same principle can be applied broadly to early French and Dutch research on the region.

Reid emphasizes the importance of one location for the recognition of a wider region, at a major meeting and exchange point in Southeast Asia, the Straits of Malacca, which defines what he refers to as its “low centre”. Here the “communications hub” of Singapore and the presence of Chinese who were themselves interconnected across the Southeast Asian region and who looked out to the territories bordering the South China Sea and northwards through the Straits to southern Thailand and Burma, encouraged the development of a regional perspective (Purcell 1951). In this connection Grant Evans also suggests that Southeast Asia was a region contrived by China as its “watery internet” ; for the Chinese it was a single stretch of ocean to the south, a field of communication, contact and exchange (2002), and Reid points to the Nanyang Xuehui (South Seas Society) founded in Singapore in 1940 as the first locally-based Chinese scholarly organization which focused on the Southeast Asian region (1999: 11). Reid then goes back even further, as did Emmerson (1984: 5-6) to discover the seeds of this regionalism in early British scholarship in Singapore exemplified in the work of John Crawfurd (1971 [1856]), J.H. Moor (1968 [1837]) and J.R. Logan (1847-1862); Russell Jones provides further details of their achievements and those of the seafaring George Windsor Earl (1973; Earl 1837). Earl’s designation of much of what is now Southeast Asia as the “Eastern Seas” still survived in various circles some 100 years later (Parkinson 1937; and see below). We should also note the important contribution which expatriate scholars at the University of Hong Kong, formally established in 1911, made to the study of Southeast Asia, among

them Brian Harrison, Professor of History in Hong Kong, and formerly Senior Lecturer at the University of Malaya (1955).

Reid contrasts the positive perspectives of the region which emanated from the “low centre” of Singapore and then Kuala Lumpur with “a high periphery”, characterized by “the negative turning away of the ‘outer’ centres of Southeast Asia from their neighbours beyond Southeast Asia – China for Vietnam, India for Burma, the Americas for the Philippines” (1999: 14). I agree broadly with this view, but there were important differences between these three sets of peripheral territories. The British were the only colonial power in Southeast Asia which had possessions stretching from mainland to island Southeast Asia, including Burma, and this gave a particular slant to their regional perspective.

An important pre-war training ground for British academics and scholar-administrators was the University of Rangoon, founded in 1920 based on a merger between University College (formerly Rangoon College) and Judson College (Selth 2010; and see Cowan 1963, 1981).

5.1. John Sydenham Furnivall (1878-1960) and others

It is noticeable in the work of the British Burma-based scholars, notably Hall (see below) and Furnivall, that they developed a positive and expansive view of Southeast Asia, in spite of their conclusion that Burma should not be seen as a mere extension of British India. Indeed, Hall, after his appointment to the Chair of History at the University of Rangoon in 1921, reorganized the history syllabus to focus on Asia, and in 1922 succeeded in recruiting Gordon H. Luce to the Chair in “Far Eastern History” (Reid 1999: 15), though John Luce and A.B. Griswold refer to Gordon Luce’s appointment as “a new Chair in Southeast Asian Studies” (1980: 115; Wikipedia 2018b); Luce’s career is often referred to in terms of his contribution to both scholarship on Burma and Southeast Asia. This was a more positive embrace of Southeast Asia rather than simply a rejection of India, and before the founding of the University of Malaya. After all it was Furnivall who was among the first to write general books using the term “Southeast Asia”, and interestingly

published two volumes with the New York-based Institute of Pacific Relations (1940, 1943) before writing his major work *Colonial Policy and Practice* (1948; Wikipedia 2018c). He was also developing a “modern perspective” on the region, engaging with political economy and sociology, which pre-dated the American post-war social science approach.

Hall and Furnivall taught at the University of Rangoon in the 1920s and 1930s. Arguably it was there that British academics began to discover “the modern Southeast Asia” in scholarly terms (though see Emmerson on the emergence of the realization of Southeast Asia in a wide range of 1920s and 1930s writings [1984: 6-7]). Following the Pacific War and the independence of Burma in 1948 an interesting shift in the locus of British scholarship occurred. The British no longer had a base in Burma and the University of Rangoon, but they continued to have a presence in Singapore and Malaya and also Hong Kong during the 1950s and 1960s when we witnessed the making and consolidation of Southeast Asia as an internationally defined region for scholarly enquiry.

5.2. French scholarship

In the case of Vietnam the expansive approach of Hall and Furnivall is not replicated. Prominent French scholars focused on Indochina (including Bernard Philippe Groslier, Charles Robequain, and Pierre Gourou), the major exception being George Coedès and to some extent Paul Mus who looked to the south and the Indonesian islands, especially Java, for comparisons with mainland Southeast Asian “Indianized states”. This widened the horizons of French scholarship, but only in a partial way with its focus on early states and the legacy of Indian culture in Southeast Asia, and the emphasis on classical studies (1944, 1948, 1968). Indeed, Coedès’ *The Making of Southeast Asia*, despite its ambitious title confined itself to the Indochinese states (1966). Interestingly Reid also refers to the work of a Vietnamese scholar, Nguyen Van Huyen, as an early indigenous champion of the concept of Southeast Asia (1934), but this local scholar came to this realization not in his homeland but outside the region, at a distance in Paris (see Reid 1999: 11, 19).

5.3. The Philippines

Finally, in the “high periphery” Reid turns to the Philippines. He struggles to find a contribution to the development of a concept of region, and manages only to refer to José Rizal’s identification of himself as a “Malay” (1999: 16-17). He presents no substantial evidence of American scholarship emanating from the Philippines which was adopting a regional perspective, though there were leading American scholars who were developing research agendas on the Philippines, including H. Otley Beyer. Therefore, in its commitment to a Southeast Asian region there are variations in Reid’s “high periphery”, from a more decisive and positive contribution from Burma, to a partial one from Indochina, to a negligible one from the Philippines.

5.4. Local and Non-local

Overall this excursion into early scholarship serves to lay bare the extraordinary difficulty in distinguishing between the categories of local and non-local (foreign), or indigenous and exogenous scholarship, exemplified in the close academic relationships forged between expatriate teachers and local students within Southeast Asia. In Syed Hussein Alatas’s terms this might illustrate another example of Western academic hegemony and the imposition of models and priorities on local scholarly endeavor (see, for example, 1974). But I venture to suggest that this environment of scholarly engagement in the context of decolonization created a generation of local scholars, many of whom surpassed their mentors: Wang Gungwu, among others, is an obvious case in point. And in terms of the local/foreign divide, where would we place someone like Gordon Luce (1889-1979) who first went to Burma in 1912 as a lecturer in English at the Government College, Rangoon, married Ma Tee Tee in 1915, spoke fluent Burmese, and apart from a sojourn in India during the Pacific War stayed in Burma until 1964 (Wikipedia 2018b)? Or similarly John Furnivall who was appointed to the Indian Civil Service (ICS) in 1901, arrived in Burma in 1902, married Margaret Ma Nyunt in 1906, spoke fluent Burmese, founded the Burma Research Society in 1906 which established its journal in 1910, retired from the ICS in 1923, taught at the University of

Rangoon in the 1920s, founded the Burma Book Club in 1924 and the Burma Education Extension Association in 1928, retired to the UK and the Netherlands from 1931, returned to Burma in 1948, and served in U Nu's Administration in the 1950s, was awarded an honorary D.Litt by the University of Rangoon in 1957, expelled from Burma by General Ne Win's government in 1960, and died in the UK in 1960 as he was about to take up a post again at the University of Rangoon (Wikipedia 2018c)?

VI. An American construction?

Reflecting on the development of Southeast Asian Studies in the West in the late 1960s, in my case in the UK as an undergraduate student, I cannot fail to be impressed by the achievements of American scholars in their multidisciplinary programs at Yale, Cornell and California. Indeed the UK, through its Hayter Committee in the early 1960s, established multidisciplinary Southeast Asian Studies centers based on the American model (King 1990; and see Song 2013). The programs on Southeast Asia which the USA introduced at Yale (1947), Cornell (1950), and California (1960), undoubtedly led the way in the study of Southeast Asia in the West (Van Neil 1964). The American model focused on postgraduate studies, Southeast Asian language training, grounded primary research, the support of substantial library resources, and the bringing together, in a multidisciplinary environment, of Southeast Asian specialists who continued to be located in their disciplinary fields of study. For me, it was in this important sense that the USA constructed Southeast Asian Studies in the post-war period. But who were the scholars who contributed to the programs? Here we find a rather different picture because there was a significant infusion of expertise from Europe and the Commonwealth, and this makes sense in relation to the limited "grounded" experience that American scholars had in the region up to the 1940s and 1950s. If one of the main rationales of Southeast Asian Studies was on-the-ground research supported by a knowledge of local languages, then, other than twentieth-century Philipines, American scholars did not have the opportunities to

develop this expertise, though they acquired it rapidly from the 1950s. And even when they acquired it, they kept to a disciplinary-based, nation-state-focused conception of Southeast Asia.

6.1. Yale University

Let us look at Yale University, which was the first major American program in Southeast Asian Studies to be established in 1947 (Council on Southeast Asia Studies, 2019). There were several prominent American scholars who were appointed; in the pre-war period most notably Raymond Kennedy and John Embree, both of whom came to untimely ends in 1950 (Kennedy ambushed in Java, and Embree in an automobile accident), and also the linguist, William Cornyn. Then came Harold Conklin and Isidore Dyen in the 1950s, among others. But importantly the main driving forces were recruited from Europe.

6.1.1. Karl J. Pelzer (1909-1980)

Pelzer, a German émigré to the USA who took up American citizenship, was born in Oberpleis in 1909; he taught at Yale for 30 years, from 1947 until 1977, and was appointed Professor of Geography there. He also served for many years as the Director of Yale's Southeast Asia Studies program (Council on Southeast Asia Studies 2019). As in other German scholarship Pelzer was familiar with the term "Southeast Asia" and used it in his doctoral research in the 1930s at the University of Bonn, which examined plantation labor migration in Southeast Asia, and the problems of land use and the migration of pioneer settlers (1935). On his arrival in the USA, he held teaching positions at the University of California, Berkeley, which was to establish a Southeast Asia Studies program in 1960, and Johns Hopkins. As a geographer he had a mature perspective on Southeast Asia as a region. His most well-known and widely quoted book is *Pioneer Settlement in the Asiatic Tropics* (1945). Prior to that he had written a general book on *Population and Land Utilization* (1941) which did not have a significant impact on the formulation of a Southeast Asian region but was a precursor to his later work. His wide-ranging interests in Southeast Asia also resulted

in research and publications on Indonesia, the then Malaya and the Philippines. Significantly he was inspired by the work of the American cultural geographer, Carl O. Sauer (see below).

6.1.2. Paul Mus (1902-1969)

Born in Bourges in 1902, Mus was a French scholar of Vietnam, who was appointed to a visiting lectureship at Yale in 1950 and then to a Professorship there in Southeast Asian Civilizations in 1951 (Chandler 2009; Council on Southeast Asia Studies 2019; Wikipedia 2018d). He had long practical experience living, working, studying, and teaching in Vietnam and serving in the French military and administration. He arrived in Hanoi in 1907 and enjoyed his education there. After higher education at the University of Paris from 1919, he then secured a post at l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient from 1927 as a young researcher and for a time Director, then, in the late 1940s as a Professor in his early 40s at the Collège de France in Paris, and finally as a senior academic at Yale, continuing to visit the Indochinese countries to undertake research. His most distinguished work was produced on Vietnam and published in French, particularly his trenchant criticisms of colonialism and American imperialism (Goscha 2012).

His early reputation was based on his knowledge of Cham, an island Austronesian language, and his study of the kingdom of Champa in Vietnam which then led, in the footsteps of his mentor, George Coedès, who was Director of the French School in Hanoi from 1929 to 1946, to comparative work on the Indian-based cultures of Southeast Asia, which he published in a series in the *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, and then brought together as a book (1935).

6.1.3. Harry (Heinz) J. (Jindrich) Benda (1919-1971)

Benda came from a Czechoslovakian Jewish family which sought refuge first in Java and then after the Japanese Occupation moved to the USA. Heinz (Harry) Benda eventually arrived in Yale in 1959 after completing his PhD at Cornell; the Cornell-Yale connection is important. John Richard Wharton Smail also undertook his doctoral

studies at Cornell and then moved to Yale. Benda took responsibility for the successful Yale Southeast Asia Monograph series in 1960, and was appointed as a Professor of History in 1966 until his untimely death in his early 50s in 1971 (Council on Southeast Asia Studies 2019; McVey 1972; Sartono 1972; Wertheim 1972). Both Benda and John Smail marked a major turning point in the study of Southeast Asian history, though not “indigenous” or “local” they argued for an “autonomous” history of Southeast Asia, from the inside. I would venture to add that senior scholars like Hall and Furnivall had already embarked on this locally-embedded route which Benda and Smail then took, but they gave it reasoned and evidenced support and a new impetus, free from any “colonial baggage”. Hall, in particular, could never really shake off the criticisms of his Anglocentrism (Sarkisyanz 1972). But, interestingly Benda and Smail chose to propose a new, autonomous way forward, not in an American-based journal, but in *the Journal of Southeast Asian History*, launched not in the USA but in the colonial heartland and origin of Southeast Asian Studies, the University of Malaya in Singapore (Smail 1961; Sears 1993; Benda 1962a, 1962b). In those days the luminaries like Benda did not publish in quantity (there was no need to), but what they published was crucial in the development of scholarship on Southeast Asia.

6.1.4. Charles A. Fisher (1916-1982)

I hesitate to include Fisher in this narrative on Yale but he has to be there. He was another major figure in British Southeast Asian Studies who enjoyed American connections (Farmer 1984; Fisher 1979). Fisher was a visiting lecturer at Yale in 1953-1954. After finishing his degree at St Catherine’s College, Cambridge in 1935, he joined the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in 1964 on the creation of a new Department of Geography there, having held posts in Leicester, Aberystwyth, Oxford and Sheffield. In that year he was appointed as Professor of Geography with reference to Asia in the University of London. In the introduction to his major study of Southeast Asian geography he says “I certainly regard South-east Asia as a major part of the world, possessing a sufficient measure of overall unity to justify its being viewed first as a single entity”

(1964: v). Moreover his military experience in Southeast Asia with the Survey Service of the Royal Engineers and in the Japanese POW camp at Changi in Singapore and then on the Burma-Siam Railway in Thailand, where he endured enormous privation and hardship, helped him, he says, learn “in some degree to look at South-east Asia from within rather than, as I had hitherto done, from without” (ibid.:vii). Was he local or foreign, an insider or an outsider? I met him just before he retired from SOAS in 1982; his more than three years as a POW (1942-1945) had obviously affected him deeply. But though he had come to terms with this traumatic period in his life and managed to exorcize this life-crisis as a young man in the writing of his book *Three Times a Guest* (1979), I recollect that he was moved to tears one evening over dinner with me in 1982 when he recounted stories of some of his comrades who had died in Thailand.

Fisher firmly presents the view that it was the encounter with the Japanese that brought the Western colonial powers to the realization of the region as an entity in its own right (1964:3; and see Fisher 1979). Having said this, as others have done before and since, he set out to demonstrate in compelling fashion, that this military-strategic-geo-political dimension merely served to give belated recognition to “a distinctive region” in geographical, demographic, historical, cultural, racial, and mental-psychological terms (ibid.:7). Although I have been tempted to relegate Fisher’s book to a rather old-fashioned tradition of regional geography, Michael Parnwell has argued for his recognition as “one of the greatest Southeast Asian geographers” and particularly that “he engaged with, and informed, the issues of the day”. Above all it was his dedication to the study of an area from “a solid disciplinary foundation” which marked him out as a scholar of international standing (1996: 108, 122). In an obituary B.H. Farmer also tells us that “Charles Fisher’s work amply demonstrates that he had the pen of a ready writer perhaps more so than any other geographer of his generation. He deplored opacity and jargon” (1984: 252).

6.2. Cornell University

Similarly, in the Southeast Asia program at Cornell, established in

1950, the infusion of European scholars was vitally important to its development. It is particularly significant that the doyen of Southeast Asian Studies at Cornell, Lauriston Sharp, who was the Director of the Southeast Asia program from 1950 to 1960, and Goldwin Smith Professor of Anthropology and Asian Studies, studied ethnology under Robert von Heine-Geldern in Vienna in 1931 (Wikipedia 2019b). Sharp's main focus was on Thailand; he directed a research team working in Bang Chan, a Siamese rice village on the then margins of Bangkok (now fully absorbed into an urban agglomeration), a Cornell Thailand Project which he established in 1947. His contribution in publications to the conceptualization of Southeast Asia as a region was modest (see, for example, 1962), but his contribution to the establishment of Southeast Asian Studies as an internationally recognized and institutionalized arena of academic endeavor was substantial. Sharp's scholarly contribution to the field of Southeast Asian Studies through studies of Thailand is perhaps not surprising in that American scholarship tended to focus on Southeast Asia as a collection of nation-states rather than as a region.

In 1951 George McTurnan Kahin was appointed to a post in Cornell and in 1959 to a Professorship. He founded the Cornell Modern Indonesia Project which he presided over until his retirement in 1988 (Wikipedia 2018e). Indonesian studies was further strengthened with the appointment of John Echols in 1952. Then the program was expanded to the Philippines with the arrival of Frank Golay in 1953 (History, Cornell University, 2018). But it was done so on the basis of a nation-state framework.

Smith says of post-war Southeast Asian Studies in the USA that

Language was combined with specialisation in one or other discipline, on the assumption that a group of scholars working on a single country would then be able to share one another's expertise. The countries which received most emphasis, at Cornell and in the United States as a whole, were Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines (1986: 16).

6.2.1. Oliver Wolters (1915-2000)

Cornell relied on immigrant scholars who had lived and worked in the region to boost the “grounded” Southeast Asian dimension of their work. One of the most prominent among them being Oliver Wolters who “By the 1970s... was unarguably the most influential historian of early Southeast Asia writing in the English-speaking world” (Reynolds 2008: 1). He had enjoyed a somewhat unconventional academic career (O’Connor 2001: 1-7; Reynolds 2008: 1-38). He did not complete his PhD in London until he was in his late 40s. After taking a degree in History at Lincoln College, Oxford, where among his fellow students he met Heinz W. Arndt, who was to become a leading figure in the study of the Indonesian economy at the Australian National University, his early career was as an officer in the Malayan Civil Service (MCS: from 1937 to 1957) where he learned both Chinese and Malay. There he met a number of distinguished scholar-administrators, including Victor Purcell, another locally embedded individual who, like Wolters, developed a regional perspective in his engagement with the Chinese (1951). Wolters was also interned in 1942-1944 in a Japanese POW camp in Singapore (first at Changi where he shared a cell with Carl Gibson-Hill [later to become the Director of the Raffles Museum], and then at the Sime Road Golf Course). Subsequently he resumed his MCS career until 1957 and served the colonial administration during the intense conflicts engendered by the Malayan Emergency.

On his departure from the MCS he arrived at the School of Oriental and African Studies under the supervision of D.G.E. Hall, and was awarded his doctorate in 1962 (Wolters 1962) which he then developed into two major publications (1967, 1970). Rather than a career in London, which was tempting, he went to Cornell in 1964 and stayed there until his death in 2000, where he was promoted to the Goldwin Smith Professorship of Southeast Asian History. Wolters’ record of doctoral supervision at Cornell included many students who came to occupy distinguished positions in Southeast Asian History: Milton Osborne, Craig Reynolds, Merle C. Ricklefs, Anthony Milner, Barbara Watson Andaya, Leonard Andaya, Reynaldo Ileto, Taufik Abdullah, Charnvit Kasetsiri, and Shiraishi Takashi (Ileto 2003; Reynolds 2008).

The influences on his work were wide-ranging. During his early studies in London, Wolters visited George Coedès in Paris and Gordon Luce in Burma; he began to develop a regional perspective. In an important sense Wolters brought a concept of “region” to Cornell, based on his long years of working and living in Southeast Asia, his command of early history and his familiarity with Chinese records on the region; Reynolds says Cornell needed Wolters “because [at that time] in the United States Southeast Asian studies was always a younger and weaker sibling of the studies of Japan, China and South Asia” (2008: 22).

In this respect Wolters followed in the footsteps of his mentor, D.G.E. Hall who had focused, in his early research, on Burma, but had then become exposed to wider regional perspectives in the writings of the Dutch on the East Indies and French research on Indochina. Wolters followed this regional pathway; after focusing on the Malay-Indonesian world, and particularly examining Chinese sources in early Southeast Asian history, he moved to research on Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam.

But what was Wolters’s legacy? The ideas that he presented have stood the test of time: “*mandala*”, “man of prowess”, “localization”, “cultural matrix”. These are enduring and provocative concepts in our study of the region, though they continue to be the subject of critical engagement.

6.2.2. D.G.E. Hall (1891-1979)

D.G.E. Hall also had significant connections with Cornell and it was through his influence and recommendation that Wolters secured an appointment there. The presence of both Hall and Wolters added an important regional perspective to the work of Cornell, preoccupied, as it was, with Southeast Asia as a collectivity of nation-states. Both Hall and Wolters, and before them Furnivall, bridged the mainland-island divide (King 2013; Wikipedia 2017). Hall began his university life in colonial Burma when he was appointed to the Chair of History at the University of Rangoon in 1920; he took up his position in 1921. He returned to his homeland in 1934 to become Headmaster at Caterham School in Surrey until 1949.

During the 1930s he had already expanded his interests in British relations with “Further India” into Dutch trade and commerce and more general European commercial relations with Burma. Not only did he have a reading knowledge of Dutch but also French and German which provided him with a working basis for a history of the whole of Southeast Asia (Cowan 1981:152-153). After the war and the expansion of government funding in area studies he was appointed to the Chair of South East Asian History at SOAS in 1949 and as Head of the Department of South East Asia and the Islands. At this juncture it is important to note that in the restructuring of the School’s programmes in 1932 (and even before the term Southeast Asia came into much more regular use) six departments devoted to the study of regional languages and cultures were established. One of these was “South East Asia and the Islands” which, given the long-standing British interest in the Malay-Indonesian world, recognized the Austronesian diaspora into Oceania as well. But the pre-war emergence of a clearly defined Southeast Asia program was short-lived; it was discontinued in 1936 and absorbed into other departments until its resurrection under Hall in 1949 (Phillips 1967: 23).

During the early 1950s Hall travelled to many parts of Southeast Asia, and following his retirement in 1959, he was appointed to a Visiting Professorship of Southeast Asian History in the American heartland of Southeast Asian Studies, at Cornell, which he held until 1973. The close links between Anglo-American Southeast Asian Studies was forged by Hall and others through the London-Cornell Project (1962-1972). Not only did Hall bring together an outstanding team of historians in London in the 1950s, including Charles Boxer, C.D. (Jeremy) Cowan, Hugh Tinker, Oliver Wolters and Merle Ricklefs, but he also presided over the development and expansion of the Department of South East Asia and the Islands (Braginsky 2002: 16; Brown 2016). The staff involved in the study of the languages, literatures and art of Southeast Asia during the 1950s reads like a “Who’s Who of British Southeast Asian Studies”: Anna Allott, Johannes de Casparis, Anthony Christie, Patrick Honey, Christiaan Hooykaas, Judith Jacob, Gordon Luce, Gordon Milner, Harry Shorto, Stuart Simmonds and Cyril Skinner.

Hall, in the “Preface to the Fourth Edition” of *A History of South-East Asia* re-emphasizes the point that he made in the 1955 edition, that his objective has been “to present South-East Asia as an area worthy of consideration in its own right” and to understand its history in the context of local rather than external perspectives, and not just as a part of the world which in much previous scholarship has been depicted as being influenced, shaped, understood and given meaning from Indian, Chinese and Euro-American activities and perspectives (1981: xvi; and see 1961, 1973). As Smith notes, Hall was also “rebelling, above all, against the idea that Burma (of which he had most experience) was merely a part of ‘greater India’” (1986: 18). Also significant in understanding Hall’s approach to regional history was the influence which other European scholars had on his work including Dutch scholars: Jacob van Leur, Bernard Schrieke and Wilhelm Wertheim, and, from the French academy, Georges Coedès, whose study of the Hinduized states of Indo-China and Indonesia Hall regarded as “a work of rare scholarship”, but more than this “for presenting for the first time the early history of South-East Asia as a whole” (1981: xxviii). What is also of interest in Hall’s prefatory statements is the broad experience that he had of the region; located primarily in Burma for much of his Asian career, his book was also based on university lecture courses delivered in London, Rangoon and Singapore, and papers delivered in Jakarta and Bangkok (1981: xxix).

But he was dogged by his Anglocentrism (Sarkisyanz 1965, 1972). “Hall, [was] a man of his times”. Nevertheless, whatever evaluation we place on Hall’s work as Anglocentric and in terms of historical narrative and analysis, old-fashioned, he was the pioneer; the man who put Southeast Asia on the agenda of historians of the region (many of them not working in spatial but temporal terms) who had not even thought about Southeast Asia as a region worthy of comprehensive historical treatment.

Hall also makes reference to the work of his colleague, Charles Fisher at SOAS to the effect that for both of them Southeast Asia has an integrity, distinctiveness and personality of its own in historical, geographical and cultural terms (1981: xvi-xvii). In his introductory chapter he then refers approvingly to the contributions of Victor

Purcell and E.H.G. Dobby to our understanding of the region (ibid.: 3). Hall, in his *History* sets the grounds for the debate about the integrity of Southeast Asia as a region in uncompromising terms. Here the argument for the newly-created Southeast Asian programs at SOAS was given its scholarly justification (King 2005, 2006). Hall says

The use of such terms as 'Further India', 'Greater India' or 'Little China' is to be highly deprecated. Even such well-worn terms as 'Indo-China' and 'Indonesia' are open to serious objections, since they obscure the fact that the areas involved are not merely cultural appendages of India or China but have their own strongly-marked individuality. The art and architecture which blossomed so gorgeously in Angkor, Pagan, central Java and the old kingdom of Champa are strangely different from that of Hindu and Buddhist India. For the key to its understanding one has to study the indigenous cultures of the peoples who produced it. And all of them, it must be realized, have developed on markedly individualistic lines (ibid.:4).

Nevertheless, and as has been pointed out on numerous occasions, in the first edition of his *History* Hall did not include the Philippines (Smith 1986: 12). In this regard Hall was still conforming not only to an Anglocentric but also to an Indian-centric perspective on the region shared by the French and Dutch. Furthermore, given the rather fluid character of British Southeast Asian Studies, when Hall was later to address an audience in British Hong Kong in May 1959 on the subject of "East Asian History", he sometimes had the tendency to bring Southeast Asia under the umbrella of East Asian or Far Eastern Studies (1959). Nevertheless, what he did in his address, referring admiringly to the work of Van Leur (1955) among others, was to return to one of his favourite Southeast Asian themes, and argued decisively for the understanding of Southeast Asian history "from within" and in terms of local categories and perspectives (ibid.:7-9, 14-15).

The statement that Hall "by the 1960s had already been christened the father of Southeast Asian studies" made by one of his doctoral students, the distinguished Philippine scholar Reynaldo Ileto, may well be disputed (2003:8), but there is no doubt that, with

all the faults of his *History*, and specifically the criticism of his Anglocentrism, Hall had made, through his breadth of scholarship and his crucial institutional contributions in Rangoon, London and Cornell, a major contribution to the academic construction of Southeast Asia. In my view, there is no American scholar that could compete with him in his regional reach.

6.2.3. Benedict Richard O’Gorman Anderson (1936-2015)

Another substantial scholar at Cornell was Benedict Anderson, whose background and experiences are captured in a memoir on which he was working when he died in Java, published a year later (Anderson 2016). *A Life Beyond Borders* expresses precisely his approach to the understanding of Southeast Asia and the wider Asia, and his work on nationalism and “imagined communities” drew significantly on his experience of the formation of Asian nation-states (1983/1991, 1998). Anderson was a global nomad. Born in Kunming, China, in 1936 of an Anglo-Irish father and an English mother, the family fled to California to escape the Sino-Japanese war. Then they moved to Ireland in 1945; subsequently the young Benedict was schooled at Eton College in England; he graduated from Cambridge with a Classics degree in 1957. Eventually he settled in Ithaca, New York where he was awarded a doctorate in 1967 under the supervision of George Kahin (Wikipedia 2019c).

Anderson died in Malang, Java in 2015. His main research focus had been Indonesia, and particularly Java. But he was not confined to one nation-state. In addition to speaking Indonesian and Javanese, he learned Tagalog and Thai and was comfortable with several European languages. Like others whom I have chosen in this “compendium” Anderson was a “Southeast Asianist” who worked in both island and mainland Southeast Asia. But unlike these others, his major works were global in their importance. His interests ranged from the sub-national, particularly Java, to the national level, Indonesia and Thailand especially, to the regional level of Southeast Asia, to the even wider area of Asia and finally to the global in his work on nationalism and “imagined communities” (1983/1991, 1998). He died in Java, somewhat appropriately, given his contribution to Javanese society, culture and

history (if we can say this of the deceased), as Aaron H. Binnenkorb Professor Emeritus of International Studies, Government and Asian Studies at Cornell.

6.3. University of California, Berkeley

The University of California, Berkeley does not fit precisely into my template of expatriate interventions. For a very good reason; it was established in 1960, and by then, with over ten years' of training in Southeast Asian Studies, California could draw on locally-trained American expertise, which Yale and Cornell did not have available a decade before. After 1960 the Center for Southeast Asia Studies enjoyed nine years of independence and was then merged with the Berkeley Center for South Asia Studies in 1969. It was separated from South Asia in 1990 and then some 27 years later in 2017 it became part of the Institute of East Asian Studies (Institute of East Asian Studies 2017).

But even California's origins were not focused on Southeast Asia as a region, rather it concentrated on the Philippines. In its foundational history and the development of interest in Asia, it lists primarily American colonial scholar-administrators preoccupied with their American colony in Southeast Asia, not so much with the region: David Barrows, Robert Sproul, Alfred Kroeber, and Bernard Moses taught there, and Clive Day, Lawrence Briggs, Clifford Geertz and Daniel Lev, among others, held visiting posts there. But, in my view, they were not involved in developing a Southeast Asian perspective. Who did? Interestingly we have to go back first-of-all to the Dutch geographer, Jan Broek.

6.3.1. Jan Otto Marius Broek (1904-1974)

It tends to be forgotten that Broek was an early champion of Southeast Asia as well as scholarship on the then Netherlands East Indies; he landed in California well before the university had even thought of a Southeast Asia program. In the institutional memory of Berkeley and its development, Broek, a Dutch cultural and historical geographer, tends to be forgotten. Yet early on he was using the term "Southeast Asia" and grappling with a theme which was to

become familiar in the study of the region: unity and diversity (1943a, 1944b, 1944; Loeb and Broek 1947). He graduated from the University of Utrecht with a first degree in geography (1924-1929) and then a PhD in 1932 (Prabook 2019a; Wikipedia 2013). He undertook his doctoral research as a Rockefeller Foundation Fellow at the University of California in 1930-1931 on the cultural landscape of the Santa Clara Valley. His mentor in California was the distinguished cultural geographer, Carl O. Sauer. Broek returned to Berkeley in 1937 and remained there until 1946, first as Assistant Professor and then Associate Professor; he took American citizenship during this time. Following two years back in Utrecht as Professor of Social Geography, as the successor to his former doctoral supervisor, Louis van Vuuren, he was then appointed as Professor of Geography at the University of Minnesota (1948-1970); he spent time at the University of Malaya, Singapore, as a Fulbright Visiting Professor in 1954-1955. On his retirement from Utrecht he became Emeritus Professor there (1970-1974). During his retirement he also spent a period back in Berkeley as a Visiting Professor (1970-1972) (Prabook 2019).

6.3.2. Paul Wheatley (1921-1999)

Paul Wheatley was one of a distinguished group of geographers recruited to the Department of Geography at the then University of Malaya in Singapore by Professor E.H.G. Dobby (Wikipedia 2019d). Professor C. Northcote Parkinson was Raffles Professor of History (1950-1958; Wikipedia 2019e) during Wheatley's tenure (1952 to 1958); they had met previously at the University of Liverpool. During the 1950s Wheatley was studying for his PhD (completed in 1958 at London) and from which his widely cited book *The Golden Khersonese* drew material (1961; Encyclopedia.com 2005; Forêt 2000; Prabook 2019b). In Singapore he was founding editor of the *Malayan Journal of Tropical Geography* and acquired a reputation as a formidable historical geographer working on non-Western urban forms, their origins and development; as a skilled linguist, he used sources in Chinese, Arabic and Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek. One of his later books examined the origins of Southeast Asian urban traditions (1983).

Berry and Dahmann, in evaluating Wheatley's achievements "In Memoriam", emphasize that "Wheatley's work has structured thinking about the premodern city since he articulated the cosmological paradigm. No serious student can proceed without acknowledging the immense debt owed him for the conceptual structure he has provided" (2001: 742). He therefore worked boldly across a range of comparative issues and subjects: social structures, urban origins, religions and cosmologies.

From Singapore Wheatley went to the University of California, Berkeley as Professor of Geography and History (1958-1966), and in 1960 was appointed as the Chair of the newly-established Center for Southeast Asia Studies. He returned to the UK to the Chair in Geography at University College London in 1966 (Wheatley 1969), and then moved back to the USA in 1971 to the Chair of Geography at the University of Chicago. In 1977 he was appointed to the Irving B. Harris Professorship and Chair of the Committee on Social Thought (until 1991 when he retired as Emeritus Professor of Comparative Urban Studies and Social Thought). It is no exaggeration to say that Paul Wheatley had a major intellectual influence on the direction of American-based research on Southeast Asia and the wider Asia in both California and Chicago, but he did this, as did Anthony Reid and others, in their engagement with the region within the region.

VII. Conclusions

Interestingly our journey has gone full circle. There is still much more to do in the examination of the construction of Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian Studies, particularly in our attention to the history and achievements of personages within this field of studies in the region itself. However, Anthony Reid who, among others, stimulated my interest in returning to the origins of Southeast Asian Studies (though drawing on Emerson's work [1984]), and who "discovered" the region in his tenure at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, later, in the course of his distinguished career, took up the post of founding Director of the Center for Southeast Asian

Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (1999-2002) at a time when the Center had recently joined a national consortium with the Center for Southeast Asia Studies at Berkeley (Wikipedia 2019f; and see Institute of East Asian Studies 2017). Reid then returned to Southeast Asia and took up the position of founding Director of the Asia Research Institute (ARI) at the National University of Singapore (2002-2007) where the story of the University of Malaya began, where I would argue one of the important origins of Southeast Asian Studies (and Southeast Asia) began, and where Reid's own story began in the second half of the 1960s (though, in his case, at the Kuala Lumpur end of the original bipartite campus).

I now return to Ralph Smith, in a paper I continue to admire, who refers to the early development of Southeast Asian Studies, particularly in Britain, as primarily dependent on "people whose experience of the region....has been acquired in an official capacity as members of the colonial or the diplomatic services" (1986:19) (we can say much the same for the study of Southeast Asia in the former Dutch and French colonies with their scholarly centers in Batavia and Hanoi; see King 2013). In the British context we must include those who worked in higher education during late colonialism in Rangoon, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore (and to some extent Hong Kong) and also emphasize the involvement of (mainly) young men in military campaigns in Asia, some of whom subsequently went on to academic careers (among them Fisher, Honey, Shorto and Simmonds at SOAS). In contrast to the American approach this route to scholarly activity was "grounded". It is unsurprising that many of the post-war British scholars in Southeast Asian Studies had seen military action in the East, and taken together with those who had served in the British dependent territories and colonies as administrators, it marked out a particular cast of mind in approaching the study of a region in which they had a personal, professional and undoubtedly an emotional involvement and an emerging sense of region, partly in combat with the Japanese. In the post-war period this also applies to those who worked in the University of Malaya and lived in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur.

In this respect Smith drew attention to the generally comfortable engagement of British scholars with the region – in that they were

familiar with it and less prone to “culture shock”; they were living, working and serving there, which helps to explain their “highly pragmatic approach” to the study of local histories, geographies and cultures (ibid.). Above all, for Smith the British approach, at least in its immediate post-war manifestations was strong on empirical matters and historical-geographical narrative and less prepared to engage in generalization (ibid.: 20). Smith contrasts this with the more “conceptual orientation of American historians and political scientists” (ibid.:19).

There is a measure of truth in this: British academe (and, with very few exceptions, we can also say this of the French and Dutch contribution) did not produce a Clifford Geertz or a James C. Scott. It did, however, produce E.H.G. Dobby, O.W. Wolters, D.G.E. Hall, Charles A. Fisher and John S. Furnivall. What is more these scholars single-handedly wrote major books on Southeast Asia; Dobby: *Southeast Asia* (1950); Wolters: *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (1999); Hall: *A History of South-East Asia* (in four editions, 1955, 1964, 1968, 1981); Fisher: *South-East Asia: a Social, Economic and Political Geography* (1964, and then 1965, 1966, 1967, and 1969); and Furnivall: *Progress and Welfare in Southeast Asia* (1940), *Educational Progress in Southeast Asia* (1943) and *Colonial Policy and Practice* (1948). In addition, in the post-war period we had Benedict Anderson: *The Spectre of Comparisons* (1998); Paul Wheatley: *Nagara and Commandery: Origins of the Southeast Asia Urban Traditions* (1983); and Anthony Reid: *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce: 1400-1600*. Vol. 1, *The Land Below the Winds*, and Vol. 2, *Expansion and Crisis* (1988/1993), and *A History of Southeast Asia: Critical Crossroads* (2015).

From continental Europe I have referred to Robert von Heine-Geldern, Karl J. Pelzer, Paul Mus, Harry J. Benda, George Coedès, and Jan Broek. With apologies, I have not had the space or time to examine the contributions of such home-grown scholars as Wang Gungwu, Kernial Singh Sandhu and Syed Hussein Alatas among many others. Nor have I addressed the contributions of sociologists and anthropologists, including W.F. Wertheim, Hans-Dieter Evers, Edmund Leach, Rodney Needham and P.E. de Josselin de Jong, all of whom bridged the mainland-island Southeast Asia

divide, or indeed of other prominent historians, including Merle C. Ricklefs (2010).

As Reid says of regional perspectives in relation to American and non-American research, “Cornell itself was rather slow to produce publications that covered the whole region...” (1999: 10). Given the anti-imperialist stance which the Americans adopted in post-war global affairs, it was the nationalist agenda which was of utmost importance, and, though the USA was important in the creation of Southeast Asia as a region, particularly in its institutionalization, organization and funding of Southeast Asian Studies, and its international profile in the development of multidisciplinary centers of study, there has always been a tension between the wider regional perspective and the view that expertise should be developed on particular countries.

It was therefore unlikely that in the first two decades of the post-war development of Southeast Asian Studies an American scholar could produce a regional text on Southeast Asia. As Reid also confirms, as an example, “The George Kahin edited textbook on *Governments and Peoples [sic:Politics] of Southeast Asia* (1959/1964) was the most influential, but it consisted entirely of discrete articles on each country without any argument as to why they were put together” (1999: 10). Well before Reid’s paper, Ralph Smith had reached the same conclusion. He suggested that it took Hall (and Harrison) to write a general history text on Southeast Asia; moreover, geographers outside the USA (Fisher, Dobby, Fryer) produced sole-authored regional geographies (1986: 16-18). The American approach, on the other hand, was to produce nation-state-based compilations. Smith refers to the major historical text edited by David Joel Steinberg in which there were contributions from David K. Wyatt, John R. W. Smail, Alexander Woodside, William R. Roff, and David P. Chandler (1971). The second revised edition added Robert H. Taylor to the list (1985, 1987). It then took Anthony Reid, schooled at the University of Malaya, to produce a major single-authored, two-volume history on Southeast Asia, primarily of the island world (1988/1993; and see 2015), and Victor Lieberman, a graduate of Yale (1967), but then a doctoral student at SOAS, London under the supervision of C.D.

Cowan (1976) to provide another two-volume history of mainland Southeast Asia (2003/2009).

Therefore, though I still operate with the rough-and-ready distinctions between local and foreign, Southeast Asian and Euro-American, indigenous and exogenous, these are not sufficiently seductive in examining the origins and construction of the region and the field of studies designed to understand it. The claim that the region is an external, largely American-generated concept and that Southeast Asian Studies was formed in a particular geo-political and strategic context also needs considerable qualification. Finally, the elements which have been claimed to define Southeast Asian Studies in terms which have been characterized by external agendas and interests are also in need of rethinking both with regard to the overly simple dichotomy of local and non-local as well as the supposed distinctiveness of a multidisciplinary field of academic endeavor as against the contributions of disciplinary methods, approaches, concepts and perspectives (see, for example King, 2005, 2006, 2014, 2016).

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Area Studies, History and the Anthropocene



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[*Abstract*]

The term Anthropocene encapsulates the idea that the human impact on earth has already reached the level of a geological force with catastrophic consequences, such as global warming or climate change. The envisioning of an apocalyptic future of the possible demise of the human race is central to this idea. This paper seeks to explore the implications of the Anthropocene on the very idea of history and area studies. Does the planetary scope of the Anthropocenic condition, and the concerted effort in the global scale in the need to address it, mean the end of area studies, which is premised on a particularity of an area? Is a posthumanist history feasible? If yes, how can it really help address the problem? Or, it will merely muddle the issues?

Keywords: Anthropocene, Area Studies, Environment, Climate Change, Humanism, Post-humanist History

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I . Introduction

That we live under a posthuman condition is a talking point that has become increasingly common, at least among scholars (Ferrando 2016; Herbrechter 2013; Pepperell 2003). This era is supposed to be characterized by, among others, the decentering or deprivileging of human beings in the scheme of things. Ostensibly it is a response to the supposed excessive arrogance of humanism, at least the European version which stands in contrast to, say, the communitarian orientation of humanism in the Confucianist tradition. This supposed arrogance is exemplified, for instance, in the declaration attributed to Protagoras that “Man is the measure of all things” (Pepperell 2003). For centuries this attitude had encouraged humans, slowly for millennia but exponentially since the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to recognize no barrier in the attempt to control, manipulate and alter the natural environment, in pursuit of progress in practically all spheres of human endeavor. The result is the “Great Acceleration” of the anthropogenic or human impact on the environment, particularly since 1945 (McNeill and Engelke 2014; Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeill 2007).

The rise to prominence in the past two decades of the idea of the Anthropocene foregrounds the gravity of the situation. The Anthropocene encapsulates the idea that the human impact has already reached the level of a geological force with catastrophic, even apocalyptic, consequences, such as climate change and the possible demise of the human race (Crutzen 2002; Steffen et al. 2007). Against this context, posthumanism has been given an extraordinary salience beyond the sphere of the philosophical. The urgency for action that the Anthropocene implies has prompted an increasing number of scholars—historians and philosophers among them—to raise alarm over this matter and in response propose various measures, including a fundamental shift in mindset or values away from anthropocentrism or human-centrism.

Humanistic and social science disciplines, including Area Studies, were initially slow in noticing and engaging with the idea of the Anthropocene and posthumanism. But once it started there has been a flurry of discussions of the implications of the

Anthropocene on practically every field or sub-field (Latour 2017; Lidskog and Waterton 2016; Menely and Taylor 2017; Polt and Wittrock 2018). In history, Dipesh Chakrabarty's article, "The Climate of History: Four Theses" (2009) raised provocative points and triggered animated discussion on the possible role of the modern, human-centric historical mindset in facilitating the process leading to the Anthropocene (Emmett and Lekan 2016; Moore 2016a). The salience of Chakrabarty's article may be glimpsed in the fact that it has been translated into several languages. In addition, it was the main subject of organized workshops. The field of Asian Studies has also pitched in with the *Journal of Asian Studies* featuring six articles in its November 2014 issue on the theme "Human Engagement with the Environment". The Association of Asian Studies (AAS) has also initiated an Emerging Field Workshop on Asia and the Anthropocene, which was held on 23-27 August 2018 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

History and area studies are two fields where the implications of the Anthropocene may be clearly unsettling and hard-hitting. The history discipline as we know it is a product of modernity and the long humanist traditions rooted in the classical Greek, Renaissance and Enlightenment periods. In Chakrabarty's view, the idea of the Anthropocene envisions the demise of the future for humankind which means disruption of the supposed linked and mutually reinforcing and mutually presupposing relationship between the past, the present and the future. In his words: "The current crisis can precipitate a sense of the present that disconnects the future from the past by putting such a future beyond the grasp of historical sensibility" (Chakrabarty 2009: 197). It may mean the end of history as we know it. Zoltan Simon (2017: 243) articulates a similar point in these words:

...the sudden occurrence of a novelty that is not the result of a continuous long-term development that originates in the deep past. This is what I call the prospect of unprecedented change, the prospect of a singular event expected to defy all previous human experience. It appears as the ultimate threat insofar as the future becomes incomprehensible to human cognition, due to the possibility of losing control over what originally was a human-induced change.

The possibility of reaching a point when nature takes over anthropogenic climate change is the singular event whose consequences are inaccessible not only to human cognition, but inasmuch as all previous human experience is defied, even to human imagination.

The philosophical underpinning of these claims is, understandably, not easy to grasp and I shall come back to this point later. Suffice to note here that our values and historical mindset today are largely in line with our vision of, or aspiration for the future, which at the same time influences the way we interpret the past. This interconnectedness or interdependence between our conceptions of the past, present and future—a fundamental feature of modern historical consciousness as we understand it—is bound to be sharply disrupted in the event that the vision of the future is lost or becomes murky.

In the case of Asian Studies, the rationale for existence often cited for area studies is the supposed distinctiveness of an area, however it may be defined, be it in local, national, regional, civilizational, or transnational terms. As Mark Hudson (2014: 943) observes: “the concept of the Anthropocene can be said to work against the regional and bounded ideas of Asia and Asian studies. One of the great strengths of area studies lies in its local contextualizations, yet the cumulative effects of global human activities over at least the past 200 years have resulted in changes to the basic biological, chemical, and climatic processes of the whole earth, changes that ultimately affect all humans”. In other words, the Anthropocene raises the question of what use is there for an area studies when the unit of analysis or the area that is the object of analysis, is now scaled up to the planetary level, and the notion of human agency now operates at the most encompassing collectivity, the human race? To note, a crucial element of Chakrabarty’s proposal is deep history, or species history, or a history of life (including other life forms) rather than just life history or the history of humans (Chakrabarty 2009; 2016).

This paper seeks to explore in a preliminary manner the implication of the notion of the Anthropocene and the post-humanist turn in area studies and history, with a focus on

Southeast Asian history. My arguments are two-fold. First, granting the species- or planetary-level of analysis presupposed in the Anthropocene, it does not render area studies obsolete; the contextual distinctiveness of local or regional contexts is necessary in understanding the differentiated and uneven conditions that gave rise to the lived experience of the Anthropocene. Blanket blaming of the *anthropos* or the entire humankind is counterproductive and misleading as it elides proper, moral-ecological apportioning of responsibility and, thus, muddles the question of who ought to shoulder proportionately more in designing corrective or ameliorative measures. Also, insofar as the search for alternatives—philosophical, attitudinal, cultural practices, etc.—that could help humans to address and/or adapt to the challenges of the increasingly more menacing natural environment, area studies such as Asian Studies are repositories of relevant ideas and approaches. The area studies approach is not just compatible but essential in promoting efforts along these lines.

Second, the apocalyptic implications of the Anthropocene—demise of civilizations or the human race—is disruptive of the long-held or long-settled past-present-future interconnection that characterizes modern historical consciousness. This calls for re-orientation or recalibration of historical approaches to accommodate a form of post-humanist history, where humans and their values no longer enjoy analytical priority. How I see it may play out in Southeast Asian history is what I wish to explore in this paper

II . Area Studies

The Anthropocene is a highly contested concept (Hulme 2009). At a fundamental level, a question has been raised whether indeed there is a climate change crisis and if there is whether it has been caused by humans (Powell 2012). Another is the time-frame: is the Anthropocene a post-war phenomenon, or does it go back to the last 200 years since the onset of the Industrial Revolution, or even further back since 10,000 years ago with the onset of agriculture, or

any period in between? (Smith and Zeder 2013). For the purpose of this paper I leave these aspects of the controversy aside. Rather than question or down play the “existence” of climate change and/or the role of humans in it, as so called “climate change deniers” do (a term that admittedly does not do justice to the complexity and range of ideas from people who raised questions about the cause of climate change, see Powell [2012]), I take the decisive role of humans in global warming or climate change as an acceptable claim. I also side with those who propose that the clear break, a “rupture” or a tipping point, happened in the post-war years, specifically starting from 1945 (Hamilton 2016; Zalasiewicz et al. 2015). There is no denying that before this point, humans had already affected or altered the environment, but arguably the earth as an eco-system could still absorb or accommodate human-induced impacts without risking imbalance. The point of dispute which I wish to discuss here rests on whether humanity as a generic category, as a species, is collectively responsible for climate change, or a more differentiated approach is necessary. The latter refers particularly to the highly developed nations whose economic activities in the past 200 years, and particularly in the last seven decades, had imposed enormous strain and destructive impacts on the environment. In a situation where only about 7% of the world population consumes about 50% of energy, and about half of the world population have a combined use of only about 7% of world energy resources, it seems utterly unfair to hold the whole humanity, the *anthropos*, accountable for climate change. There must be a way to distribute accountability proportionate to the weight of each group’s use of the earth’s resources (Malm and Hornborg 2014). The proposal to adopt other terminologies to highlight the decisive role of more specific forces such as capitalism (thus Capitalocene) (Moore, 2015, 2016a) or the plantation system (Plantationocene) (Haraway et al. 2016) is precisely in response to the overly aggregated causal attribution. The detailed and contextualized approaches in Area Studies are not just compatible but essential in this undertaking. It must be emphasized, however, that the methodological nationalism or regionalism (Thompson 2013) for which conventional Area Studies has been guilty of, cannot do the job. Access to and use of resources is also disproportionate

and badly skewed in developing societies towards certain groups such as the upper classes, not all the people. The more local and cross-boundary network approaches to area studies seem more suitable.

One argument against the idea of disaggregated humanity as causal agents is the danger of inaction or political paralysis that ambivalent or nuanced explanations can give rise to (see (Rudiak-Gould 2015). After all, there is only one earth and the task is to reverse, or at least slow down the spiral to catastrophe, thus benefiting the entire humankind. What good is it to put a blame on capitalism or capitalists, for instance, if the entire earth is doomed, so this line of argument goes? As Chakrabarty (2009: 221) opines, “the whole crisis cannot be reduced to a story of capitalism. Unlike in the crises of capitalism, there are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged...” The point is to save the earth, not to score analytic point. The problem here is that the analytic point raised by the call for “differentiated responsibility” may be necessary in crafting a workable response to the crisis. Those who are most resistant to the apocalyptic climate change narrative seem to be also the ones who have reaped the most benefit from, and are most attuned to, the mindset and practices that gave rise to climate change. Being also the most powerful and having control over or access to resources, they are at the same time the most well-positioned to do something about the problems. Without them self-realizing or being forced to realize and be held accountable for the destructive consequences of their values, mindset and practices, there is a danger the problems will be ignored or downplayed, at worst, and at best the adopted measures to address the crisis may be no more than stop-gap, superficial and oblivious to the deep and real roots of the problems.

At first glance, this concern appears irrelevant to or is beyond the scope of Area Studies. Admittedly, the conventional nation-state-focused type of Area Studies can hardly be helpful. However, the penchant for details, the sensitivity to contexts and the presumption of distinctiveness of an area that characterize the logic of the Area Studies approach are in line with efforts to “provincialize” Anthropocene (Morrison 2015). It also coincides with

Mark Hudson's (2014: 954) observation:

If... the goal of Asian and other area studies is to 'document the existence, internal logic, and theoretical implications of the distinctive social and cultural values, expressions, structures, and dynamics that shape the societies and nations beyond Europe and the United States' (Szanton 2004: 2), then the study of Asia can certainly contribute to our understanding of the local contextualization of systems of adaptive learning, providing us with case studies of long-term strategies for sustaining diversity, memory, and crisis response within Anthropocene social-ecological systems.

By helping to map out the debates around climate change along the fault lines of class, geography, economic interests, gender and ideology, area studies could be a valuable tool for deepening the understanding of the local roots and environmental manifestations of the Anthropocene. More importantly, effective adaptive mechanisms to deal with climate change may better be forged by factoring into the equation distinctive socio-economic, political and cultural factors as well as available resources in the local contexts, such as traditional knowledge and cultural practices. While it is true that traditional societies are among the most vulnerable to the hazards of climate change, it is also true that their resilience in the face of environmental challenges as a repository of adaptive practices and traditional knowledge may prove useful. In the era of rising sea levels, for instance, people of the seas (Orang Suku Laut) that are scattered in littoral regions of Southeast Asia may have much to offer. Studies that used to be marginal or those which tended to be viewed as esoteric about these people are bound to assume a new level of significance, perhaps even become central (e.g. Boomgaard 2007; Chou, 2010 2016)

Area Studies also stands as an antidote to the "false" universalisms that enabled, justified or naturalized the human conquest and destruction of nature. It offers a stark reminder that the modern mindset or value-system or lifestyle that forms part of the factors that push us to the Anthropocene, were just one of the possibilities. The existence of ancient civilizations with their own philosophical and religious traditions in Asia or Southeast Asia that had their histories and cultures rooted in the past that was as old

or even older than those of Europe drives home this observation. At some points in the past, choices were made among possible options by certain groups of humans that eventually led us to the Anthropocene. In short, the European-type modernity was by no means an inevitable trajectory. As a choice was made, we also have a choice to embrace an alternative mindset and cultural practices that are more nurturing of the environment.

III. History and the (im)possibility of post-humanism

Along with literature, history is the most humanistic of all disciplines. However, along with the development of the historical profession since the 19th century as represented most starkly by Leopold von Ranke, history as a discipline has shed much of its literary and humanistic properties as it assumed more scientific and objectivist posturing. This rather dichotomous formulation ought not to be exaggerated; humanistic elements remain in constant and creative tension with scientific aspirations of the modern historical methodology. Despite scientific aspirations, history remains human-centric if not humanistic at its core. In understanding the engine of historical process, it allocates a central position to human agency and the forces understandable in human terms. It is easy to see in conventional narrative histories the centrality of humans; it is much more challenging to see it in structural approaches and even more in macro-structural histories, like the Annales School. Marxist approaches, for instance, de-emphasize individuals, even more so does the French Annalist approach, where time-scale is not limited to humans (events and conjunctures) but also to the *longue durée* (including geological time). In Marxist history, the end-goal of equality is for the well-being of humans. On the other hand, humans hardly matter in a geological time-scale, but the role of humans remain central at the very least as the knower or perceiver or adjudicator of what is acceptable as historical evidence. Also, the end-goal of the Annalist approach in emphasizing the multiple time-scale and the underlying mentalities redound to what is beneficial to human society. In other words, notwithstanding its variety, history remains fundamentally humanist. And if humanist

hubris is among the key reasons for the Anthropocene, and some scholars mull over post-humanism as a potential source of inspiration and ideas that may be useful in dealing with it, it is pertinent to ask what implications the Anthropocene holds for history in general and Southeast Asian history, in particular.

The critiques (postmodern, feminist, postcolonial, decolonial) of the linear view of history that underpins the idea of modernity and progress are long-standing. Despite that, it seems they hardly made a visible dent on the mentality of most people across the globe who have long taken for granted modern progress as a natural trajectory of human and societal development. There has long been a feeling of disenchantment with a dark side of modernity among increasing though still a limited number of people particularly in the developed world (e.g. Mignolo 2011), but the fantasy of “the modern” persists among many, particularly in the developing countries. The narrative of catch-up with the West is one of the outstanding features of the postcolonial histories in much of the developing world. I must add, though, that this observation ought to be tempered by the possibility that this may be an elitist or vanguardist view, propagated as supposedly reflective of the aspirations of the whole or the majority of people in a nation-state. Perhaps it is merely a projection of the views of the most powerful, the most well-educated and the well-positioned in particular countries.

Confusions surrounding history often arise from the tendency to ignore its multi-faceted nature. That history as past could be different to different people in different temporal and socio-cultural settings—in essence the application of the fundamentally historicist assumption to history itself—is a truism. However, the tendency among many professionally-trained historians to privilege academic history as the only right or legitimate form of history limits the application of this assumption within the parameter that privileges academic history and professional historians, and sidelines or ignores history’s other facets. Perhaps as an indication of the high-level of respect or esteem academic historians enjoy among the socio-politically influential groups in society (e.g. economic, political and intellectual elites) as well as common people, the historians’

position elicits a broad if not universal concurrence among them. Other peoples' understanding of the past which do not conform closely to the requirements of scholarly history are often referred to in derogatory or dismissive terms, such as legend, myth, folklore, gossip, hearsay, popular history, or "mere" memory or recollection. By doing this, academic historians, with tacit support from other influential members of society, arrogates upon academic history the sole legitimate right to represent what happened in the past. No wonder then the common tendency to conflate what happened in the past with what can be read in history books written or sanctioned by professional or academic historians. It does not mean, of course, that academic historians go unopposed. The roots of tensions between popular and academic historians as well as among academic historians themselves are ancient, similarly between historians and non-historians particularly in the era of fake news. So far, any attempt to adjudicate between competing sides resorts to measures or procedures authorized by, and which also favor the scholarly class.

Understanding the differentiated implications of the Anthropocene and post-humanism for history requires disaggregating history's various facets and pinning down exactly which one or two in fact we refer to. It is important to do this because their implications for history depends on different facets. I can identify at least five of these. First, history as knowledge about the past; it is written by trained historians as well as untrained "others" who are interested in the past. History as an authoritative knowledge about the past is the most common understanding of what history is. It corresponds to Michael Oakshott's (1983) idea of the historical past, which may be distinguished from the practical past. The historical past or written history is the product of historians' attempts to re-construct what happened based on the available evidences. As the pool of evidence is likely to be incomplete with many past events not leaving traces that are usable in full form as evidence, or these traces having been destroyed either by natural or man-made means, or they simply remain hidden and are awaiting discovery, written academic history is tentative. It could change depending on the latest acceptable interpretation among scholars of the existing body

of evidence.

The second facet of history is, for lack of a better term, “actual history”. Referring to the totality of everything—processes, events, big and small, significant or not from the human standpoint—that happened in the past, the idea of actual history is intuitively simple or common sensical, but due to the triumph of the “scientific”, evidence-based history since the 19th century, invoking this idea might raise eyebrows among historians. By definition, this history is fixed (as opposed to tentative), complete, accurate, from the omniscient standpoint, and it is not based on available evidence. It is simply the past as it actually happened in all its details. Admittedly, it is a metaphysical conception of the past. It is a past that only an absolute all-knowing supreme being such as God (granting there is such a being) or the Spirit in Hegelian sense “knows” in its entirety. Invoking an absolute, metaphysical, extra-human standpoint is of course out of the purview of the currently accepted legitimate historical procedures, but I believe this conceptualization is necessary to, among other things, underscore the discrepancy between the representation (history as knowledge) and what historians attempt or purport to represent (actual history). Historians know very well about this discrepancy, but many tend to be coy about it, playing it down before the public. This tendency helps nurture the widespread perception that equates or conflates the authoritative written academic history with actual history. By highlighting the potentially discrepancy between actual and written history, I foreground the limits of any historical representation. Doing so opens up pathways to re-examining the rupture between the accepted and the range of possibly acceptable parameters of historical practice (White 2014). More importantly, the very idea of actual history, a form of history beyond humans—beyond what humans imagine, know and write about—may prove to be a defining element of post-humanist history that is in the process of re-emergence or being re-acknowledged. What Chakrabarty (2009) calls deep history is an example of this post-humanist history. I highlight “re-emergence” as post-humanist history is not really a new type of history. Before modern historical practices started to dominate during the 19th century as exemplified by von Ranke,

much of historical practice was essentially post-humanist in that it gave room for the affective, fantastic and metaphysical—those that were not based on documentary and other concrete evidences.

Thirdly, history as profession; the community of professional historians embodies the set of ideas, procedures and practices relevant to understanding and representing the past. It also includes the logic or particular ways of conceiving the past, the so-called historical sensibility or consciousness that governs historians' analytical approaches, and which history education seeks to promote among students. As a profession, it acts as the gate-keeper of acceptable ontological, epistemological, methodological and ethical standards or procedures among historians and history enthusiasts.

Fourthly, history as a subjective experience of/in the past by individuals and groups of people; the idea of history as experience is rather tricky because all experiences are by strict definition happening in the present. Also, it is not only the conscious apprehension of such experience, but also the affective and aesthetic elements, that solely define it. The moment the present passes on and moves in the domain of the past, or history as we commonly know it, what is left is only what is remembered of it, the memory or consciousness of this experience and no longer the experience itself. Thus, one can argue that the idea of history as experience is an oxymoron. However, from an existential standpoint, humans do experience things and such experience unfolds like time; as time passes, so does experience. The time-bound character of experience raises the critical question of whether experience can ever be considered history (in the sense of something that happened in the past) or, more crucially, whether history needs to be redefined to include the present in its conceptual domain. Perhaps Heidegger's idea of *worlding* may be the best reference point to conceive of history as experience. To simplify an exceedingly complex philosophical idea, *worlding* refers to the perpetual process of how being (everyone's or everything's thingness) gets constituted (Polt 1999).

Another reason why this notion is tricky is that what is remembered of this experience could be significantly different from

the experience itself. This is precisely the reason for making memory as the fifth important facet of history. Often dismissed or even denigrated by some professional historians as “mere” memory, as opposed, implicitly, to “real” history, owing to its well-known attributes of being changeable, unreliable or inaccurate, memory is in fact very important because what one remembers, regardless of whether it is true or false, affects how individuals and groups think and behave at any particular point in time. Most people’s intimate link to the past takes the form of memory. Insofar as they are concerned, what they remember is the right history. Referring back to Oakeshott’s classification, history as memory falls under the notion of the practical past, which incidentally was the object of Hayden White’s (2014) lengthy meditation.

The different facets of history noted above seem to have a differential relationship with post-humanism as it relates to the Anthropocene. At first glance the notion of the Anthropocene appears to have no analytical implication concerning the ideas of actual history and history as experience, as by definition they have already happened. Regardless of the shift in mindset, such as that prompted by the notion of the Anthropocene, and which Chakrabarty (2015) believes entails a change in “epochal consciousness”, nothing can be done anymore with actual history and individual or group experience as they are already in the past. Among facets of history, they are ones that accommodate bodily performance—by acting out “in the flow” of the unfolding of time—as opposed to what is simply in the mind, as part of the notion of history. They are free from interpretation that depends on, or is influenced by, the present circumstances and visions of the future. But as a continuous process of unfolding in time, actual and experiential histories are not exclusively confined to the past, but they also accommodate the present and will continue to flow into the future. Herein lies the opportunity for humans to do something to alleviate, if not reverse, the impact of the Anthropocene.

The implications of the notion of actual history on the apocalyptic character of the Anthropocene seem to be more consequential, radical and disturbing. The notion of actual history, the kind of history that “merely flows” and is unmindful of the

anthropocentric cognitive and moral preconceptions, implies that as the Anthropocene wreaks havoc on Earth what happens is a “mere” transformation of the Earth to a different kind of Earth, or of life to a kind of life that humans today are not used to, but in due time they will be, as they adapt to the planetary and biological changes that accompany the Anthropocene. In Heideggerian term, this is yet another way of worlding, a different experience, by no means necessarily better or worse, just different in its own being. The amorality of this implication is disturbing particularly to those who believe in the need to conserve nature or keep the earth alive and nurturing of all forms of life as it is.

Theoretically, the third facet of history—individual and collective memory—may be affected by change in the vision of the future, which is implicit in the notion of the Anthropocene. Memory is functionally similar to the written or academic facet of history in that they are dependent on interpretation, which takes place in the present, which in turn may be affected by the vision of the future. When the vision of the future is suddenly disrupted, by, say, “the prospect of unprecedented change” (Simon 2017), it also affects how the past may be interpreted. Suppose, for instance, NASA or other similar agencies have found out that a huge asteroid is on track to hit the Earth in a few months’ time, and it could possibly cause extinction of species similar to what happened, or so is claimed, to the dinosaurs millions of years ago. This news can possibly induce a massive shift in individual and group interpretation of their past and present life. Without a future to envision, things that the forward-looking and hyper-modern hegemonic value system takes for granted now—say, human relations, love, simple life, faith—in favor of the grand aspiration (say, to be technologically sophisticated, rich, powerful or famous) in the future, are likely to assume much greater importance. And things they did or did not do in the past (say, the pursuit of modernity) in line with the future vision may also assume a different meaning. A sense of loss or regret may replace the sense of achievement, or vice versa.

But this point is hardly consequential from the post-humanist standpoint. As humans are endowed with a mind, memory is quintessentially human-centric, and thus just like the two previous

facets, actual and experiential history, the post-human turn may not have an appreciable impact on the facet of history as personal memory. But the notion of collective or social memory is different. As the idea of the Anthropocene permeates social or collective consciousness, it will simultaneously affect individual thinking and behavior, as in fact has been happening in a still limited and uneven but quickly expanding scale across the world.

For threats in the future not as shockingly immediate as the hypothetical case noted above, such as, for instance, the Anthropocene and climate change, it seems unlikely to generate the same effects among many people. It is doubtful whether people will drastically re-order their priorities or invert the hierarchy of the values they uphold. Global warning or climate change is extremely important, but the demise of the human race and all life on earth which could result from it appears to lie in still a distant future, at least in human or generational timescale. People tend to ignore things if they are not truly imminent, and they go on with their lives as usual. This is one of the many reasons why many people are skeptical about climate change and the Anthropocene (Hulme 2009). The awareness of this human tendency is perhaps the reason why Chakrabarty (2009) exaggerated the immediacy of the supposedly dire consequence of the Anthropocene, as if the worst scenario is already upon us. He made it a pretext for calling for a drastic shift in historical sensibility away from the human-centric to life-centric. He supports the idea of deep history and species history and doubts the allegedly deterministic role of capitalism (as encapsulated, for instance, in the concept of Capitalocene [eg. Moore, 2015, 2016a, 2016b]) in reaching the tipping point that is the Anthropocene. As far as he is concerned, the gravity and immediacy of the problem requires a drastic and collective measures from all of us, such that the urge to blame capitalism or globalization or any other factors ought to be subsumed under the need to protect all of us from the impending catastrophe, as if the two are mutually exclusive.

The facets of history that Chakrabarty is concerned about are the written history and the modern historical consciousness or rationality that undergirds the practice of the historical profession. His critique also implies adjustment in historical methodology,

which entails non-human-centric historical narrative and analysis. As Chakrabarty's ideas represent perhaps the most forceful articulation of the centrality of history in causing and averting the Anthropocene crisis, and I believe such ideas are both ethico-politically questionable and analytically problematic, I shall scrutinize his ideas in some detail.

Is there really a need for a fundamental change in the way history is written, as argued by Chakrabarty? So far it is unclear to me what the deep history or species history that he favors as an alternative looks like, but what is clear is that he supports a non-human-centric history as supposedly the type of history that can help address the Anthropocene crisis. The assumption here is that the ascribed centrality of humans in historical processes nurtures and justifies the excessive self-serving pursuit of human interest at the expense of nature to the point that the Anthropocene is reached. A cursory glance at the development of knowledge about the past across various cultures (not only the modern Euro-American historical traditions) reveals that a non-human-centric history is very much alive in spheres outside of, beyond, or even before, modern, historical scholarship. Religious and spiritual traditions or the worldview that used to dominate before the eighteenth or nineteenth century and which up to now billions of people, mainly in the developing world subscribe to, all teach a non-human-centric ethos and ideas of the past and the future. Francesca Ferrando (2016) appears to be on point when she argued that "(h)umans have always been post-human" as evident in spiritual traditions that developed from the dawn of humanity, earlier than the start of civilization, and which persist up to now. Does it mean that post-humanism is, at least partly, a revival of old ideas and practices which were suppressed, supplanted or marginalized by the rise of science and humanism to a hegemonic position during the past two centuries?

Ferrando's point draws attention to the importance of distinguishing various facets of history. For most people among whom the facet of history that matters most in their life is their personal memory of what happened in the past—hardly the history produced and espoused by academic historians—their conception

and understanding of the past may indeed be far from the human-centric history that Chakrabarty blames and seeks to replace. This may be particularly true among people of poorer and middle-class backgrounds who struggle on a daily basis living in developing countries; and perhaps due to their constant life-struggles their religiosity or spirituality is high. They thus tend to attribute to God's will whatever happened in their past and whatever will happen in their future. In other words, the modern notion of historical consciousness that assumes agency for humans to design historical trajectories as they envision the future is a luxury for many people even in the current era of unprecedented wealth. Such a kind of historical sensibility seems to be a preserve of those endowed with enough intellectual, economic and political resources. Perhaps that only a few truly proletarian revolutions succeeded in history (China and Vietnam among them) is a living testament of the persistence of non-human-centric historical sensibility. The category "human" in the notion of human-centric historical consciousness is simply too large or too generalized to encapsulate the complexity of real people on the ground, which is why the context-sensitive orientations of Area Studies and History are essential.

Even in Euro-American modern historical traditions, history is also not singularly viewed as human-centric, as exemplified, say, by the Braudellian approach or the French Annales School. Long before the recent explosion of interests in environmental and planetary history, they have pioneered the broad-sweeping, non-event focused, *longue durée* and the multi-time-scale (including geological time) approaches to historical analysis. Humans hardly occupy a privileged position there. But even in non-human-centric approaches, the fact that historians are humans and members of an academic or professional community with its own interests to pursue and promote, and they write with a human audience in mind, then it raises the question of the extent to which history, as is written, can avoid or negate its human-centricity. Perhaps the idea is not to avoid or negate but to come to terms with it, and do something to alleviate the its potential harms.

The long-established approaches to, or conceptions of, history

—both modern scholarly history and those which may fall under the facet of memory—are varied or wide-ranging. The possible alternatives to human-centric history may be found not necessarily in the supposedly new post-humanistic approaches but among existing ideas or approaches that have long been sidelined or obscured by the rise of hegemonic human-centric history since centuries ago.

One area is which post-humanism may have a profound implication is in the logic of historical consciousness. What has long been taken for granted in historical analysis is the human-centric yardstick in determining what is historically relevant or important; in other words, what is useful for and rationally defensible from the standpoint of humans. The destruction of the environment, for instance, has been justified in terms of the needs of the ever-expanding human population. Jason Moore (2016) argued that human-made ideas and practice of capitalism has rendered nature cheap for human exploitation. By locating humans as equal to other living creatures, the calculation of importance will have to be correspondingly re-calibrated. The human-centric attribution of causality in historical explanation will also have to be adjusted, along with the admission that understanding should not be conceived in exclusively human terms. Consciousness is hardly exclusive to the human mind, as Pepperell (2003) argues.

IV. Conclusion

The epoch-making condition captured by the term the Anthropocene is viewed by some scholars as foregrounding the post-human age. The catastrophic future envisioned in this concept prompted philosophers and historians, among other scholars, to offer dire warnings and proposals to address this serious problem. Dipesh Chakrabarty's forceful articulation of the serious implications of the Anthropocene exemplifies this effort. While the notion of the Anthropocene foregrounds the central role of humans in this predicament, Chakrabarty's proposed solution of de-centering or de-privileging humans in historical narrative or analysis appears too

far removed from the baseline of the problem. The unsavory implications of his suggestion include the collectivization of responsibility for the problem for which certain groups, small in number but which have considerable political and economic power (the rich nations, voracious capitalists and industrialists) had greater responsibility. With their responsibility inadvertently absolved by the “entire humankind”, there is a danger that those who have the most political and economic resources to make things happen would not move decisively enough to address the problem simply because it is everyone’s responsibility. Worse if they deny that there is a crisis at all, which is what Donald Trump and many Republicans have done.

Despite doubts raised about Chakrabarty’s analysis, and that the Anthropocene may not be the best case to illustrate the need to rethink history, the post-human condition that the Anthropocene helped to highlight does carry important implications for Area Studies and History. As for Area Studies, despite the global scope of the challenges, local and regional contexts remain important in understanding the local roots, manifestations and possible adaptive mechanisms to address climate change. It may not reverse or slowdown the Anthropocenic conditions, but it could assist in preparing people to meet the challenges by drawing on the repository of cultural and ecological adaptive practices in relevant local areas.

As for History, the implications operate unevenly depending on different facets of history, which is why the multi-faceted nature of history needs to be underscored. It is misleading to assume that the kind of history or form of historical sensibility favored by academic historians are the same as those of common people for whom their “practical past” is more resonant—personal, affective, perhaps inaccurate but useful for their purpose. Serious research needs to be undertaken on how common people, particularly those who are at the margins (politically, economically, socially, culturally) practice historical mindfulness. Do the disempowered or marginalized think historically in the same way as is encapsulated in human-centric, human-driven modern historical consciousness? Aware of the possible differentiation, we shall be in a better position to tailor to their characteristics whatever program or initiative we intend to

pursue.

The adjustments that need to be carried out to realize a post-humanist history may not at all be new. We can draw from the pool of historiographic knowledge, both from ancient and modern times, which have been sidelined, ignored, or obscured by the preference for scientific, evidence-based history by the hegemonic groups of historians. What needs to be worked out, possibly from scratch, is how historians would undertake historical interpretations by employing a value-system or value-assessment that does not privilege humans but which allots equal value to the interests of other life-forms. This is a challenging task as it entails the re-examination of many fundamental presuppositions that we have held since time immemorial. It will also mean the re-formulation of the rules on assessing historical evidence and what qualifies as acceptable historical sources. At an even more fundamental level, the singular rationality that we have taken for granted for so long may have to give way to multiple rationalities. One may say that all these suggest the end of history as we know it. Alternatively, one can say that this is reclaiming histories that we have abandoned in the past in our pursuit of “modernity”. Alternatively, it may be simply acknowledging openly the existence of plural histories that exist side-by-side on an everyday basis, then as now.

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Hijacking Area Studies: Ethnographic Approaches to Southeast Asian Airlines*



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[*Abstract*]

Area Studies, by definition, conjure ideas of emplaced knowledge; in-depth interdisciplinary understanding of language, history, culture and politics of a nation or region. Where detractors might see this approach as overly empirical, therefore precluding theoretical sophistication, others argue that “places” are either artificially constructed, or that processes of globalisation have obliterated the cultural zone. But what if we turn an ethnographic eye to those very processes and technologies themselves? Can Area Studies take to the air, and if so, what are the attendant challenges and benefits? Based on insights from ethnography amongst airline customer service workers, ground and cabin crews in

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Thailand and Myanmar, this research examines the airline cabin *as a field* for ethnographic study, and as an emplaced site for political and cultural processes. With participant observation-based knowledge of Southeast Asian cabin crews, this paper examines the 1990 hijack of Thai Airways TG 305 from an emplaced cultural perspective.

Keywords: area studies, aviation, hijack, Myanmar, Thai Airways

I . Introduction

Taking seriously the title of historian John R. W. Smail's now-classic 1961 article, "On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia," students and scholars alike are challenged to debate whether an approach, a cultural notion, a paradigm is something which can truly be emplaced, or autonomous. Can there be a local phenomenon which is understood heuristically? With an Area Studies discipline like Southeast Asian studies carrying such a value-laden heritage of both colonialism and Cold War geopolitics, scholars continue to question what an autonomous history might even look like, or how it might be pursued today. Have technologies of transportation, communication, indeed, globalization itself, rendered this idea helplessly outdated?

Theoretical frisson regarding globalization and neo-liberal vectors aside, the notion of emplacement - "a place" - forms the backbone of Area Studies, and indeed, institutions were established along that very paradigm, though power dynamics inevitably frame how regions are conceptualized, what they include and what they marginalize or erase. Studies of transnationalism and globalization tend to posit that such notions of "societies and cultures" are mere artifice, and if not hopelessly outdated, certainly are no longer believed to be true today due to the massive scale of mobility and cultural interconnection facilitated by technologies of communication and transport. Amidst COVID and the grounding of aviation for many passengers, the social role of the Internet has become more pronounced. Even so, epidemiology statistics are calculated according

to regions and places.

On the other hand, as we have been reminded, globalization is hardly a new phenomenon (Mintz 1998). Geographers have challenged their own former paradigms with theories predicated on mobility. Taking this one step further, if technologies of communication and transportation are considered by some to signify the end of local, emplaced knowledge - the very nuance prized by scholars and practitioners of area studies - can we turn back on “global” transportation and challenge its hubristic paradigm with methodologies of the deeply locally-embedded area studies? And even more specifically, can we look at the airline cabin – an apparent juggernaut which obliterated the local - as an area, a place, to be studied using ethnographic field methods?

In this sense, this research will combine these problematics and explore ostensibly “global” transportation through using ethnographic methods. Following an overview discussion of ideas about area studies, mobility and social science of aviation work, this paper will examine the 1990 hijack of Thai Airways flight TG #305 as a specific ethnographic case study. The event is politically and culturally rich, and some of the issues it presents demand ethnographic scrutiny; as we will find, long-term participant observation that comes from what might be understood as “local” knowledge is essential to understanding the events which took place in their particular cultural and symbolic milieu. This includes familiarity with both the airline cabin as well as the local cultures of Thai Airways flight crews in particular, and airline cultures writ large.

II . Mapping Southeast Asian Studies

With Southeast Asia as concept of region already in Japanese parlance by World War One (Hayami 2006: 66), in the United States, Southeast Asian studies as a scholarly discipline is rooted in the aftermath of World War Two. It came into full swing in universities outside the region at the height of the Cold War, and trends in support for the discipline have followed governmental directives as

well as broader social concerns about the region, not just in terms of the growth of programs, but even how they would grow (Chou and Houben 2006: 4-7; Mintz 1998: 129; Scott 1992:2). Debates within area studies among students and practitioners frequently revolve around the ways in which Southeast Asia is constructed, and reified; a dozen programs in the United States were established at the height of the Cold War, where such Area Studies knowledge was seen as part-and-parcel with expanding US (and NATO) strategic interests overseas, and often sold on the premise that such knowledge and understanding would promote global peace (Rafael 1994: 96). Political and regime changes, together with institutional structural changes repeatedly call the *raison d'être* of such programs into question; political pundits and university CEO-type figures alike will question the value of funding programs that teach so-called less commonly taught languages (again, this would be from the perspective of university administration in the United States, Europe, and Australia. That there are over a hundred million speakers of Javanese certainly makes it “taught”). Programs with few students are repeatedly forced to make their case; in this sense, practitioners of Southeast Asian Studies at universities tend to be more adept at defending their work; they lack the complacency and taken-for-granted-ness of political gravitas that other established and better-funded programs might have.

For area studies, regardless of discipline, it is strongly believed that fine-grained understanding of place, predicated on language fluency and interest in “general knowledge (the Burmese term *bahututha*)” outside of the theory and methods of one’s academic discipline make one an excellent area specialist. By staying within the theoretical and methodological confines of one’s own academic discipline, one fails to appreciate the ways in which other approaches enhance and even interrogate one’s own work, let alone see the “big picture”. The area studies foundation gives one the insight and methodologies to identify and study questions that are culturally specific (Mintz 1998: 131). They are defined as area specialists in terms of having “devoted their scholarly life to work on the region or nation” (Bates 1997: 166). Can one, therefore, be an area studies specialist on aviation, an industry predicated on global

mobility?

Just as geographic regions may very well be artifices (Mintz 1998: 130), the built, regulated and highly controlled airport and the aircraft cabin are obviously constructed as well. But, in spite of their ostensible status among some social-sciences as non-places (Augé 1995), these purpose-built locales are not bereft of organic culture (Ferguson 2014). Aside from studying those whose occupations and leisure make them temporary, but repeated denizens of these places (the “frequent flyer” as temporal native), there is an increasing amount of social science literature studying the occupational cultures of cabin crews, in terms of their performance of emotional labor (Hochschild 1983; Murphy 1998, 2002; Arratee 2015, 2016) and issues of social identity, especially nationality, gender, sexuality and race (Evans 2013; Tiemeyer 2011; Yano 2011; Ferguson 2013; Ferguson and Arratee 2019). There is ethnographic work on Thai flight attendants, taking seriously their understanding of their role as signifiers of Thainess (Ferguson 2013) as well as the ways in which Buddhist philosophy combines with corporate ethnos in forming their understanding of a flight attendant’s soul, or what they refer to as *winyann aer* (Arratee 2015).

Like the study of the cultural and psychological presence of US military bases overseas (Enloe 2014), there is a tendency to study the flight attendants as icons and stereotype, and their emotional work as individuals rather than the geopolitical implications of what they are part of; or to see these as separate topics entirely. At the same time, focusing on the crew themselves and the sociological conditions which constrain them should necessarily consider them as also embedded in broader hegemonic processes of neoliberal economies; while 40 per cent of global value is flown by plane, and the union movements have made important strides to provide airline crews with some of the most gender/sexuality-blind benefits in the industry, their living wages and benefits have been stripped away, especially for European, North American, and South Pacific flight attendants.

III. Ethnography of People Who Fly

While scholarship of airline hijacks is dominated by international relations and policy analyses – setting aside, if we can, the popular books and spin-off Hollywood style exposés – what can we learn with an ethnographic eye to these kinds of situations? Taking into account workplace culture, role dynamics, relative power and subjective limitations, how might these change our understanding of the hijack as an event, and in turn, how we understand airline work? For the rest of this paper, I will think critically about flight attendants as agents of history, borrowing from Giddens’ notion of the “practical consciousness” not just for participating in historic events, but also in a savvy for talking about them and connecting them to the political (Giddens 1984).

First of all, cabin crews are hyper-aware of the ways in which they are expected to represent both the face of the company and the face of the nation. Thai Airways flight attendants, for example, have been described as “ambassadors of Thainess” (Ferguson 2013). While flight crew jobs are frequently presented in advertising and popular culture as glamorous icons, for the workers themselves, the act of maintaining that “face” means constantly confronting the general public’s impressions and stereotypes about the job. Wan, a 29-year veteran flight attendant, explains this dilemma succinctly,

When people ask me what I do, and I tell them I am a flight attendant, so many times, they start to complain about how the service on the airline was bad, or how their checked luggage got misconnected. It’s hard to have to apologise to people all the time, especially when off the job. If we give people good service thirty times, then just once when we mess up, they will only talk about the one time they got bad service.

In addition to the fact that bad experiences are indelible in ways that mediocre (or perhaps even good) experiences are not, the common experience of blaming the brand, the airline, for the bad experience, and projecting it onto an individual employee is reflective of a certain kind of tribalism, where the individual is expected to apologise regardless of her lack of any role contributing

to the situation. A Thai Airways flight attendant, Nu echoes this experience,

As soon as people – especially Thais - know you work for Thai Airways they immediately say something bad. They tell me the in-flight meal is not delicious. So what? What can I do? Especially when it is not during a flight, I don't want to apologise because someone didn't like the food. I just let them talk and hope to change the topic. ... In another example, I was in uniform, driving to the airport to work a flight and I got pulled over by the police for speeding. The policeman told me the fine was 200 Baht, so I tried to bargain him down to 100 Baht. Then he looked at my uniform and charged me 400 Baht, I was so mad, but what could I do? A lot of people resent you because being a Flight Attendant with Thai Airways is a good job with good pay. Wearing the uniform makes others ^{มัน} ^{ใส่} man sai – (aggravation/annoyance/ “bugs” them).

The *man sai* feeling undoubtedly connects to flight attendants' attendant stereotypes and iconography, as paragons of glamor and cosmopolitanism, and advertising icons. In job performance, sociologist Arlie Hochschild's now-classic study *The Managed Heart* aptly describes the process of emotional labor or “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” which creates an emotional response in the customer (Hochschild 1983: 7). In her ethnography of Thai flight attendants, Arratee Ayuttacorn challenges this notion of “emotional labor” arguing that it is predicated on Western conceptions of self and emotion. Instead, she argues, Thai flight attendants have a *winyann aer* “Flight Attendant soul” which is based on Buddhist notions of soul or spirit, connected to affective performance, suffering, and empathy, but also engaged as corporate ethos by the airline. Even so, both the managed heart and the *winyann aer* are intrinsically and almost exclusively empathic to their study groups. What about other studies of flight attendants?

Sociologist Drew Whitelegg noticed in his snowball technique for interviewing flight attendants, he felt that his interlocutors were often assessing him, deciding if he was genuine and trustworthy – would he get it wrong and misrepresent flight attendants?

Anthropologist Christine Yano in her book about retired Nisei Pan Am flight attendants, has encountered this issue, noting that the stories she received were overwhelmingly positive; no-one had bad things to say about Pan Am as a company. This could very well be a function of nostalgia. For cabin crews in the present, in my experience socializing with flight crews at happy hour, all sorts of negative opinions about management came to the fore. Were airlines simply wonderful employers back in the day, or nostalgia notwithstanding, is there an aspect of the story which is missing?

After having spent over a decade engaging in participant observation with flight crews on layover, going on hikes, playing tennis, going for meals and happy hour, I developed a very different impression about crews' relationships with each other and with the company. When "unloading" at happy hour together, flight crews complained about company management, gossiped about other crew members who were in trouble with the company, or shared stories about the latest spectacular incidents, such as flight diversions, passenger deaths in-flight or as they said, "killing them with kindness" and how some junior crew were engaging in unethical practices to circumvent the seniority-based bidding systems. Whereas layover happy hours were a space to unwind and enjoy the companionship of friends and fellow crew members, gossip frequently found its way to topics most unflattering to the company and colleagues not present at the table. Sharon, a Purser with a North American airline, once said, "We tell stories like cops. We see the worst of humanity, but unlike cops, we're always supposed to smile when someone gets irate. It's after work that we want to tell these stories, to get them off our chest, but it's often hard on our spouses."

A Thai flight attendant, Nam, said her husband once asked her to stop talking about work so much. She noticed that when she had other Thai Airways friends at her home for a meal, her husband became less interested in sitting with them. He would socialize a bit, say hello and be polite, but did not want to endure work gossip. Other flight attendants are often quick to tell each other if they are in the company of a non-flight attendant: the question is usually, "Do you fly?" but talking about someone in the third person is to

describe her as “she’s a regular person,” and often with terrific adroit, code switch and discuss topics of general interest. Similarly, in discussing her scholarship about flight attendants, Arratee later commented, “I was a flight attendant for twenty years, these people are my friends. I know how hard they work and how they suffer; people complain about the airline *all the time*. How could I write about poor service, or say bad things about these people, when the public is so eager to say bad things anyway?”

Because of the occupational requirement that crews be adept at performing emotional labor, this can transfer to the situation of ethnography and dealing with an ethnographic interview. A major taboo when talking with customers is to complain about the airline, as well as to bad-mouth other employees. To disparage the employer leads to dismissal; this has long been company policy at Thai Airways. I would like to underscore this point, employees caught complaining about Thai Airways can lose their jobs.

IV. The Hijack as an Extreme Event

In dealing with a hijack, I am looking at an extreme situation, an exceptional test to emotional labor – and later how that work is represented. Wan once described a situation where she saved a passenger’s life: the woman suffered a heart attack, and she attached the defibrillator electrodes to her chest and side, and successfully revived her. I asked her how she felt in the moment – wasn’t she nervous? And she responded, “my training kicked in,” to express that she did not panic or hesitate. Crew members describe this kind of detachment from emotional hang-ups as going into “flight attendant mode.” Can people consistently perform this well under extenuating circumstances? There is a surfeit of historical examples of cabin crew heroics.

The history of the Pan Am flight 73, is a prime example. In 1986, the plane was taken over on the ground in Karachi by a heavily-armed Libya-backed Palestinian terrorist group, Abu Nidal. Pan Am flight attendant Neerja Bhanot hid the passports of some passengers targeted by the hijackers, and after 17 hours of

unsuccessful negotiation, the gunmen lost patience and started a bloodbath – spraying the cabin with bullets while passengers flocked to exit. Bhanot frantically evacuated people, and according to legend, “died while shielding three children from a hail of bullets.” Posthumously, she received the Ashok Chakra Award, and her story was made into a movie.

In another case, in 1992, TWA flight 843 erupted into flames at take-off at Kennedy Airport in New York City due to a fire in the cargo bay or tail engine. All 291 passengers and crew evacuated safely within two minutes, attributed not just to the 9 working flight attendants, but also because there were five off-duty cabin crew flying standby; they helped evacuate the plane (McFadden 1992). But by doing the job under such extreme circumstances, does everyone respond like these heroes did, and switch into “flight attendant mode?”

In 2000, when SQ006 pilots mistakenly attempted take off from a Taipei runway under construction, the crash into equipment and resulting fire killed 81 of the 179 people on board. A variety of reports depict flight attendants as heroes. A *Weekend Australian* news report suggests that some flight crews did not offer adequate assistance – a few fled the plane before it was evacuated, others were so paralyzed by fear that they could not even instruct others to open the door (AFP 2000).

For this paper, I will turn my ethnographic attention to a specific incident: the 10 November 1990 hijack of Thai Airways flight #305. Originally the first segment of a “quick-turn” trip from Bangkok to Yangon, the A300 aircraft was hijacked by two Burmese student activists of the “88” generation, Soe Myint and Htin Kyaw. Rather than continue to Yangon, the flight was diverted to Calcutta. The goals of the hijack were political: the Burmese activists had become impatient with the pace of political change in their country. Some of their comrades had hijacked a Union of Burma Airways domestic flight the previous year, and diverted it to Bangkok’s U-Tapao field the year before. Rather than being extradited to Burma, the hijackers were tried in Thai courts and subsequently given light prison sentences in Bangkok for the crime.

Soe Myint and Htin Kyaw had hoped that hijacking an international flight would attract more attention to their cause. And it certainly did; following the diversion to Calcutta, and a ten-hour hostage situation, both hijackers were given asylum in India, and the press conference that was one of their demands. All ended peacefully; nobody was hurt and none of the passengers sued the airline. A few of the tourist passengers decided not to go to Myanmar for their holidays as planned.

Turning to ethnographic methods, now this paper will consider how an emplaced understanding of flight attendant cultures will challenge how an historical event has been written about. How can an ethnographic lens, with empathy towards cabin crew as complex cultural and political actors affect how we understand historical events in the past?

My partner in research, Arratee Ayuttacorn was essential in helping to arrange this interview. Herself a former Thai Airways flight attendant, as well as an ethnographer in her own right, it was through her connections that we were able to get in touch with Pornsuang Nalampoon “P’Namtao” who was duty crew on TG 305, and the primary contact with Htin Kyaw throughout the hijack. In the initial conversation with her I had over the phone from Canberra, she commented, “I know it happened a long time ago, but before I didn’t want to talk about it. It was an incident with implications for international relations. But now that I’m retired, I have less to worry about.” She was friendly, welcoming and charming.

When I was in Chiang Mai two years ago, Arratee and I drove an hour and a half to Pornsuang’s home; we visited over two weekends. At the first visit, following some niceties, snacks and chatting, we sat down to discuss the events of the flight. To aid her retelling of the story, Pornsuang drew a careful diagram of the aircraft, a seat map, with the locations of the doors, also showing where she was standing when the hijackers stood up, and where one moved toward the cockpit while the other showed the bomb to the passengers. She describes the plane and the personnel according to the company designations, and as she tells the story to Arratee,

they engage in a quick back-and-forth using Thai Airways industry speak, discussing who was the “IM” the “SO” and discussing according to zone, door number, and section. The shared argot was initially reassuring that we were getting a very precise rendition of what happened that day; the story would not be watered down for an outsider, even for a non-Thai Airways flight attendant.

Pornsuang was careful to describe where each person was stationed, and during the hijack how the male stewards were told to sit in the back. Another female flight attendant was too frightened to engage. In Pornsuang’s active role running back and forth, one of the other flight attendants teasingly called her “Florence Nightingale.” Within her arc of the story, she mentioned various incidents coming up, such as a passenger with an asthma attack, a passenger sharing his bottle of water, or details about how the cockpit crews were civilian hires, not recruits from the Thai Airforce, so they spoke better English. All sorts of details to describe how the ordeal was experienced by herself and the others.

She narrated various stressful incidents that came up, including once they were on the ground in Calcutta, having to negotiate to free some of the hostages. Htin Kyaw told her they would set 10 of the hostages free, and that she had to choose which ten. She said she was weeping, not knowing how to choose.

As time wore on, babies cried, passengers wanted to use the toilet. Pornsuang got permission from Htin Kyaw to let passengers use the lavatory, but they would only be allowed to get up from their seats one at a time. After a Thai man had been gone from his seat for a long time, Htin Kyaw told her to go check on him and report back about what was going on. As Pornsuang told the story,

One Thai male passenger went to use the toilet, but after that, rather than walk back to his seat, he sneaked and crawled to door 4R. He grabbed the door handle. I saw him doing that, and I asked him what he was doing. He said he was not ready to die, that he has a wife and children back in Thailand. I responded, “Do you think you’re the only one with a family? All of us have families too – and if you escape and something happens, they might set off the bomb and we all die.” He gradually was convinced and returned to his

seat.

After the hijacking was resolved, the crew were given hotel rooms at the local layover hotel in Calcutta; fortunately, the city is regularly served by Thai Airways anyway, so there was a KK, or spoke station manager there and an existing corporate agreement with a hotel.

Within the crew, it was only the captain and the IM, or in-flight manager who were called upon to testify at the police station in Calcutta – corporate structure dictated their responsibility for reporting what happened on flight. One of the other stewards who had hid in the back was quick to give interviews with the press after the event. Even Arratee knew him from having worked with him, and it was fun to watch Arratee and Pornsuang agree that he is *khi mo* ^{နှိုးစရာ} meaning overly talkative, even boastful. Incidentally, I attempted to contact him over social media, and he didn't respond.

After their return to Bangkok, Thai Airways arranged for the whole crew of TG 305 to meet with an occupational psychologist. At the meeting at the crew center in Rangsit, the group sat in a circle and talked about the event. According to Pornsuang, some who didn't do so much during the hijack wanted to talk a lot about what happened. After the group meeting, there were individual meetings with the psychologist, and Pornsuang said she talked more; she said it was easier to talk without the rest of the crew in the room. The occupational psychologist also needed to find out if the crew was fit to return to work. All of them would later be put on lines of flight that did not include Yangon; even though the flight is a quick turn, in the event of a return flight cancellation, they would have to stay in the country, and there was concern that the Thai crew would be treated by the Myanmar government as enemies of the state.

Later, Thai Airways hosted a ceremony to give awards to the cabin and cockpit crew for keeping the passengers safe through the hijack. The airline praised them for their crew unity in handling the situation. The airline wanted to demonstrate that the success came from the crew as a team. Pornsuang also received a phone call from the QV – airline marketing director – telling her to think of the airline when talking about the event. Although commemorative

events and articles about the incident emphasize crew unity and teamwork, mentioning the captain and the purser and others, for veteran Thai Airways flight attendants, Pornsuang Nalampoon “P’Namtao” is known in company folklore as the person who managed the hijack.

The day after the first interview, I received a long message from Pornsuang on my phone:

.... Today I want to add a bit that I forgot to tell you yesterday. When the Thai passenger asked to use the toilet and then secretly crawled to try to open the door, I had to work to calm him down for a long time. But, I believe the paragraph that I told him that day, what made him give up his plan and come back and cooperate peacefully was this:

We all were born and we all must die, everyone. But if we have to die for the nation, it is a way of dying which has value and pride, right? There are soldiers, they are ready to fight, they are ready to die for the nation, right? As for me, even though I am a woman, I have a young child, I have an elderly mother that I need to look after, but I am ready to sacrifice my life for the people. Who do you think you are, huh? If you think you’re not ready to die for the people, then I am confident that even if we die for the nation bravely, as a sacrifice, our children, our family, will walk bravely on Thai soil with honour and recognition from others, for sure. We need to be patient and united to sacrifice for the Thai nation together.

The quotation might not be so articulate, or precisely what I said because it’s been a long time. But this is the idea. He listened to this and turned his face and said, “I believe you, what do you want me to do?” I told him to return to his seat and grab Sawasdee in-flight magazine and read it, and don’t look at the faces of the hijackers.

Talking with Arratee, who also had her notes from the interview, and in showing her Pornsuang’s updated version of what she “really” said to the man at door 4R, she was initially a bit confused by the update. I pointed out that it sounded way too patriotic, almost over the top. While I was incredulous, after talking about it for several minutes, Arratee added that she thought it was plausible.

When dealing with a difficult Thai passenger, she explained, you try saying all kinds of things to get them to co-operate. If a normal coax doesn't work, with a fellow Thai, you bring in the reinforcements of Buddha, King, and Country. The possibility that it could have happened in the moment is certainly there, that Pornsuang did say this to the man, but what is meaningful too, is that she wanted to make sure that I knew, so much that she would type and send such a detailed message to me over social media.

Pornsuang has not seen or heard from Htin Kyaw or Soe Myint since the hijack, but how she describes them is nothing but in the kindest of words. As she said, "I talked to Htin Kyaw for a long time. He was the same age as my younger brother. I wanted him to trust me, and he told me about the situation for him and his family in Burma, the refugee camps ... they also saw corruption in Thailand, they couldn't work, they were angry with the police". The more she talked about it, the more I could see that she identified with the political movement. During the 14 October 1973 uprisings in Bangkok against the military dictatorship of Thanom Kittikachorn, Pornsuang was then a student in Bang Saen Teachers college. She joined the protesters at Rachdamnoen Avenue, and during the army crackdown, ran all the way to Saphan Khwai – about ten kilometres - to escape.

"As for my opinion about Burma," she told me, "I still empathize with the students. I always wonder how Htin Kyaw is doing. After thinking about it, maybe it is Stockholm Syndrome. But the point is that I agreed with their ideals. In a hijack, maybe if it was a different political objective ... if it was for violent Muslim *jihād*, I would be angry at them". On a more personal note, in the decades since then, Pornsuang goes to a Mon Buddhist temple on the anniversary of the hijacking, and makes merit on behalf of Soe Myint and Htin Kyaw. "When I am reborn in a future life," she told me, "I would like to be a flight attendant again".

V. Conclusion

In symbolically heavy, historically significant events, there are also

many incentives to present the “best” history possible, the motivations will be seen with good intentions, and the idea that one’s perspective will be immortalized, even if it is in the seldom – if ever - riffled pages of an obscure academic journal. Ideology plays a major role in what aspects of an event are remembered, what kinds of events become emotionally embedded in one’s personal historical narrative. There is the possibility they want to pre-empt positive feedback about their work and their employer. Knowing these aspects about the structure of historical production of the event offers key insight to critique how the event might be presented to us in the history books.

On top of all of this, there is the problem of a Cartesian notion of self, an idea that there would be a single, discrete personal experience – the “inside scoop” of what “really” happened. But in retrospect, the corporate ethos, the power dynamics of the job and the cultural configurations of Thai flight attendant work also factor into how flight attendant history can be told. Their technical role of cabin crews, the emotional labor, is directed towards nurturing and taking care – not so much about political agency or affiliation involved. To be a high-profile company representative is hard work, but at the same time, provides a different kind of fractal for studying history. Histories of flight attendants in the West have observed that they have manipulated their high profiles to fight for labor rights, particularly in the middle-to-later decades of the twentieth century (Barry 2007). In the hijack situation, we can also consider the ways in which Pornsuang’s past as a student activist against the Thanom dictatorship might not be included in some accounts of the hijack. It wasn’t mentioned in any of the news articles I had read about the event.

The ways in which image is maintained connects – albeit imperfectly – to the kinds of corporate ethos and job cultures that are created and constantly reinvented by the people themselves. Through examining this narrative, we find an intense pressure to present a certain kind of image of crew unity in the face of adversity. Recall also, that Thai Airways will fire employees that speak badly of the company. That corporate ethos is further tried by frequent interactions with passengers, and then off the job, the

general public.

Detractors of area studies have been noted to dismiss the discipline as tending to “foster ideological and theoretical particularism” (Chou and Houben 2006: 1). But, in studying the hijack of TG 305, we can see how nuanced understandings of Myanmar’s and Thailand’s political histories are necessary to appreciate the context and the circumstances for the hijack; it is an event in international relations. With an ethnographic eye to closer examination, we discover the cabin crew, as actors with agency, have been encultured in an occupational corporate ethos. Flight attendants gain their abilities to react to adversity via the emotional conditioning and affective economies which are part of the job itself (Arratee 2015). The emotional conditioning and affective economies can be studied ethnographically, though the space of the aircraft cabin (while not “grounded” in a region) is its emplacement. Importantly for the study of this hijack as an historical event, we can see how corporate structure not only dictated how the event would be archived in the police records (only the pilot and the in-flight manager filed the police reports at the station in Calcutta) but the airline’s marketing department sought to narrate a history that would not just present their cabin crews in a positive light, but also one which would be consistent with their corporate ethos which emphasizes crew unity.

Pornsuang’s remarkable stories and how they operated within the aircraft cabin are further connected to flight attendant culture, and finally the cockpit crew’s response as following ICAO protocol; although linguistic and cultural understanding of Thai culture and history are essential, so are the broader protocols and understandings of flight attendant culture, and Thai Airways cabin crew cultural dynamics within those. In addition to learning about the cultural aspects of the job, the “boundedness” of the behavior possibilities of flight crews, it is key to see beyond their technical role and respect the ways in which they are both creative as well as political. In this sense, area studies knowledge can tap into the nuance of a situation, but it is also imperative that such background training appreciates that more and more of these investigations will take place in strange new “emplacements.”

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SUVANNABHUMI

Multi-disciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies

Text and Manuscript Guideline

1. TEXT STYLE

1) Language

The manuscript should be written in English.

2) Length

The manuscript should be between 5,000 to 10,000 words in length, including references, appendices, tables and figures. Book Review or Research Report submissions must be between 1,000 to 2,000 words.

3) Format

All pieces must be encoded in a Microsoft Word file, 1.5-spaced, in Times New Roman, Font Size 12.

4) Spelling

The Journal uses US spelling, and the author should therefore follow the latest edition of the Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary.

5) Abbreviations

In general, terms should not be abbreviated unless they are used repeatedly and the abbreviation is helpful to the reader. Initially use the word in full, followed by the abbreviation in parentheses. Thereafter use the abbreviation only.

6) Sections, Tables and Figures

Sections and sub-sections should be divided by "I, 1.1., 1.1.1." And tables and figures should be numbered by <Table 1>, <Figure 1>. The Journal prints papers in black and white but upload PDF files in full color at the journal homepage.

7) References

References should be in Roman script and placed at the end of the manuscript in alphabetical order.

2. FOOTNOTES AND CITATIONS

1) Footnotes

Notes should be kept to a minimum and numbered consecutively throughout the manuscript. Notes should be included as footnote, and not as endnote. Footnotes with more than 5 lines will be inserted into the text.

2) Citations in the Text

All source references are to be identified at the appropriate point in the text by the last name of the author, year of publication and pagination where needed. Identify subsequent citations of the same source in the same way as the first. Examples follow:

- If author's name is in the text, follow it with year in parentheses.
Wong (1986)
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James (1979: 56)
- If author's name is not in the text, insert, in parentheses, the last name and year. (Duncan 1986: 76)
- Give both last names for two authors. Give all last names on first citation in text for more than two authors; thereafter use "et al." in the text. When two authors have the same last names, use identifying initials in the text.
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(Edwards 1981: 43; Lee et al. 1983: 112).
- In case of daily, weekly, monthly publications and similar references, pagination follows 'dd/mm/yyyy' after a comma.
(Korea Times 01/04/2014, 3).
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Taylor (n.d.)

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Detailed information on all literature mentioned in the text and footnote shall be shown in <References> at the end of the text. Literature that was not mentioned in the text and footnote shall not be included.

1) Books

- In case of one author: for author name that is Romanized, family name and first name shall be put in order.

Jessup, Helen I. 2004. *Art & Architecture of Cambodia*. London: Thames & Hudson.

- In case of more than 2 authors: for the text and footnote, 'et al.' shall be written, but for references, all names of co-authors shall be written. However, if 'et al.' is written on the book cover from the first, it shall be as it is.

Freeman, Michael and Claude Jacques. 1999. *Ancient Ankor*. Bangkok: Asia Books.

- In case of an edited book, it shall be written in ed.

Steinberg, David Joel, ed. 1987. *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

- In case of translated books, it shall be in the order of original author, year of publication of translated books, name of translated book, author and publisher.

Coedes, George. 1968. *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*. Susan B. Cowing, trans. Honolulu: An East-West Center Book. The University Press of Hawaii.

2) Journal Articles/ Monthly Magazine

- In case of papers such as journals, monthly magazine, etc, volume and number shall be in volume (number), and the relevant pages shall be definitely indicated.

Egreteau, Renaud. 2008. India's Ambitions in Burma. *Asian Survey*, 48(6): 936-957.

3) Chapter in a Book

- In case of the text in a compilation, it shall be in the order of author, year of publication, compilation name, compiler, related page and publisher. If there is no compiler, then it can be omitted.

King, Victor T. 2006. Southeast Asia: Personal Reflections on a Region. *Southeast Asian Studies: Debates and New Directions*. Cynthia Chou and Vincent Houben, eds. 23-44. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

4) Thesis and Dissertation

- In case of a thesis or dissertation, the following form shall be followed.

Parker, John. 1988. The Representation of Southeast Asian Art. PhD Dissertation. Harvard University.

5) Newspaper Articles

- In case of a daily newspaper, by-line story of weekly magazine and column, the following form shall be followed.

Peterson, Thomas. 1993. The Economic Development of ASEAN. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 22: 23.

6) Internet Sources

- In case of the internet searching, it shall be in order of author, year of production, subject and web address (Accessed Month DD, YYYY).

Hadar, Leon. 1998. U.S. Sanctions against Burma. *Trade Policy Analysis* no. 1. <http://www.cato.org/pubs/trade/tpa-001.html>. (Accessed May 07, 2008).

SUVANNABHUMI

Multi-disciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies

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