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# **SUVANNABHUMI:**

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SUVANNABHUMI means “The Land of Gold” in Pali, which location implies Southeast Asia.

Cover Photo: The gate of the A Famosa, Portuguese fort in Malacca, Malaysia, built in 1511.

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# Introduction to the special issue





## **Alternative Approaches in Southeast Asian Studies: Compounding Area Studies and Cultural Studies**



Victor T. King\*

### **I . Context**

The papers in this special issue were presented at a conference organized by the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies at Busan University of Foreign Studies (ISEAS-BUFS) on 10-12 May, 2018. The conference theme “Alternative Approaches” is included in the title of this introduction. It marks the beginning of the third stage of a 10-year research program which commenced in 2009 at ISEAS-BUFS, funded by the National Research Foundation of Korea. The overall focus of the program is the “Recognition and Construction of Southeast Asia as a Holon: Building Southeast Asian Studies on Compounding Area Studies and Cultural Studies”. The third stage (September 2015 to August 2019) is entitled “Revisiting and Reinterpreting Southeast Asian Characteristics and Methodological Quests for Southeast Asian Studies”.

The rationale for the conference was posted on the website’s “Call for Papers” as follows in this edited paragraph: “Area studies had been regarded as a practical research field of study and conducted by scholars from various disciplines [see Salemin’s

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\* Professor of Borneo Studies, Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Emeritus Professor of South East Asian Studies, University of Leeds. victor.king@ubd.edu.bn

paper for a discussion of the spatialized and analytical dimensions of the concept “field”]. It was one reason why area studies has not been established as an academic discipline furnished with its own unique research methodologies. Today, area studies is experiencing quantitative recession due to decreasing strategic interests and also an identity crisis in its lack of a unique academic profile. Such a state of affairs urges us to redirect the conventional approaches of area studies as a practical research endeavour to one which is based on studies of culture and identity. Furthermore, in order to establish area studies as an academic discipline, in-depth discussions for developing unique research methodologies should be followed. Given this background, this Conference aims to explore new approaches in area studies, specifically for Southeast Asian Studies, by compounding area studies and cultural studies. The concept of ‘culture’ here covers not only arts and humanities but also the general intellectual transmissions that influenced politics, economy and society”.

Even with these central themes it was to be expected that several of the papers presented did not fit very comfortably within the main preoccupations of the conference. However, in reading the abstracts and listening to many of the presentations, I thought that there might be sufficient synergy between some of the papers to construct a reasonably coherent special issue. This special issue contains the two keynote addresses (Thongchai Winichakul and Victor T. King), three papers delivered in Session 1 entitled “Methodological Quests for Southeast Asian Studies” (Stephen Keck, Oscar Salemink and Janus Isaac V. Nolasco), and a departure from the normal practice of the journal, the inclusion of the discussants’ observations on the three presentations in that session (Sinae Hyun on Keck, Maitrii Aung-Thwin on Salemink, and Maria Serena Diokno on Nolasco). We then decided to include a final paper delivered by Rommel A. Curaming in Session 5 on “From Southeast Asia to ASEAN” which fitted well with some of the debates examined in this special issue.



## **II . Other Southeast Asias: “Insiders” and “Outsiders” and the Construction of a Region**

Several of the papers continue to engage with the enduring problem of defining, delimiting and conceptualizing Southeast Asia as a region. The difficulties we face in this endeavor are considerable. In my paper in this special issue, I emphasize the diversity of approaches and perspectives, based on a range of elements and criteria which have been deployed in an attempt to define the region. I state: “We have moved from definitions based on distinctive social and cultural content; an indigenous genius; distinctive historical moments and processes; scholarly styles, traditions and methodologies; a locus of theoretical innovation; a particular geographical environment; alternative, locally-constructed paradigms; a multi-sensory arena; a negatively defined region in relation to China and India; and a unity-in-diversity model which postulates paradoxically that differences (core-periphery, majorities-minorities, lowland-upland) bring a certain coherence”. All these attempts remain unsatisfactory in one way or another and I have been especially critical of approaches which seek to establish distinctive scholarly styles, traditions and methodologies and alternative, locally-constructed paradigms (King 2001, 2014; and see Goh Beng Lan 2010).

The related question in the attempts at regional definition is to consider critically which voices are heard in these debates and discussions. Should the dominant voices in this arena of contention, disagreement and diversity of opinion and interest be increasingly those of local scholars, who primarily live and study within the region as “insiders” or will there be a continuing dominance, sometimes referred to in more stark terms as a “hegemony”, of Euro-American “outsiders” following in the footsteps of Benedict Anderson, Clifford Geertz, James Scott, Anthony Reid and W.F. (Wim) Wertheim, among many others? The issue of Orientalism and the external construction of a region, a culture, a people, on the one hand and the need to develop and support a locally-generated Southeast Asian Studies on the other, is complex and will probably never be fully resolved (King 2016). The theme of binaries such as

local-external, “insider”-“outsider”, East-West frequently resurfaces in this special issue.

It is extraordinarily problematical to divide scholarship into “camps” (inside-outside, Southeast Asian-Euro-American) in that since Southeast Asia emerged as a recognized and accepted field of study in the immediate post-Second World War period the boundaries (if that is the right word?) between local and non-local have been blurred, and have become increasingly difficult to disentangle. There are all kinds of combinations of academic background, location, ethnic identity, training, methodologies, collaborations and research activities within and beyond Southeast Asia combined with the mobilities and interactions between “those within” and “those without” which render binaries of very little analytical utility. In this connection the view that the concept of Southeast Asia (leaving aside what terms have been used to designate it) is primarily an external, American, strategically- and politically-generated post-war construction has to be heavily qualified, though it has continued to comprise an important part of the historical consciousness of many scholars working on the region (Park and King 2013; King 2013).

It is an inaccurate perception and one which Anthony Reid, among others, has dispelled in his investigation of the roots of Southeast Asia as a concept in, for example, Austro-German scholarship at the turn of the twentieth century (1999). We can go back further to the mid-nineteenth century to detect an emerging sense of a Southeast region in some of the research (of George Windsor Earl, John Crawfurd and J.H. Moor, among others) that was published in Singapore in *The Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia*, edited by James Richardson Logan, and which appeared in 12 volumes between 1847 and 1862. These Singapore-based perceptions, though expatriate, came from within the region not outside it (King 2013b).

It is no coincidence that a formative influence on the development of a concept of region (and the field of Southeast Asian Studies which was established to study it) was the University of Malaya founded in Singapore in 1949, and then extended to

Kuala Lumpur in 1959. Both universities after independence went on to establish Southeast Asian Studies programs. Singapore and Malay(si)a, occupying sites at the Straits of Malacca, the fulcrum of Southeast Asia, perceived Southeast Asia in a different way from the mainland Southeast Asian states, large parts of Indonesia and the Philippines. Those who claim post-war American dominance in this field should recognize the scholarly activity that was taking place within the region, particularly in Singapore and Malaya, in the early post-war years; admittedly, initially it was largely a colonial enterprise (Ernest H.G. Dobby is an appropriate representative of this period), but local scholars at the university soon emerged (among them Wang Gungwu and Syed Hussein Alatas). The local dimension, though, again, expatriate, was rather diverse; the University of Rangoon had a part to play in the interwar years with DGE Hall and others studying and teaching there; as well as colonial administrators (Oliver Wolters comes to mind) and those who served in the military during the Second World War (Charles A. Fisher is prominent among them). These scholars promoted Southeast Asia as a “holon”, the theme of Busan’s research program, and did not focus only on particular Southeast Asian nation-states.

The USA was also fortunate in receiving an infusion of European scholarship in the study of Southeast Asia at crucial times in its post-war development. The Austro-German connection was obvious: at the New York Southeast Asia Institute, Robert Baron von Heine-Geldern; at Yale, Southeast Asian Studies, Karl J. Pelzer, followed by Bernard Dahm and Hans-Dieter Evers; Harry J. (Jindrich) Benda from Czechoslovakia also arrived there in the 1950s; at Cornell, Benedict Anderson and Oliver Wolters; DGE Hall, after his retirement from London, also spent time in Southeast Asian Studies at Cornell. Via the University of Malaya such distinguished scholars as Anthony Reid and Paul Wheatley also subsequently worked at Berkeley, California. Interestingly, Jan Otto Marius (J.O.M.) Broek had been there in the 1930s.

Following the theme of locally-emerging constructions of region and their interrelationships with external perceptions, keeping in mind that these are rough-and-ready discriminations, we begin the special issue with a paper by Rommel Curaming on “From

Southeast Asian Studies to ASEAN Studies: What's in a Name Change?". He investigates in some detail, based on a survey of university MA programs in the region, the viability and utility of the division between area studies, covered in this case by the term "Southeast Asian Studies", and institutional/organizational studies embraced by the term "ASEAN Studies". He concludes that it is possible for area studies programs to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate components which focus on ASEAN as a regional organization, and, therefore, in academic terms, the separate study of ASEAN is unnecessary. Yet the term "ASEAN" is being used increasingly as an alternative to the term "Southeast Asia" and also as a replacement for it, and ASEAN Studies programs are flourishing.

Curaming then contextualizes these changes in terms of arenas of knowledge production and organization (in this case, the construction of a region) and the power relations which are implicated in these processes, in that the ways in which knowledge is generated, framed and deployed serves to express power relations, empowering some and excluding or marginalizing others. What he detects is the increasing popularity of the term ASEAN as a means of identity formation among an increasing number of Southeast Asians, encouraged by the frequency and intensity of interactions across the region, the promotion of the term ASEAN in the media, electronic communication, and commercial life, and its increasing use in politics, international relations and regional diplomacy. He suggests that this might mark "a new stage in the evolution of regional identity" in that it is a means, or an agency for more and more citizens of the region to feel part of a wider locally-meaningful entity rather than an abstraction ("Southeast Asia") which was largely externally-derived. He recognizes the potential advantages and disadvantages in political terms of these developments. But it would seem, on the basis of his analysis, that the process of "ASEANization" will continue apace.

Curaming's paper fits neatly with that of Victor King's "Other Southeast Asias? Beyond and Within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations", but for different reasons. I argue that the configuration and content of Southeast Asia, at least in nation-state

terms, has been defined for us by ASEAN, though this configuration was already determined before the five-country ASEAN was formed in 1967. I approach the issue as an outsider, though someone who has spent a considerable period of time undertaking research and teaching in different parts of the region. When writing general books on Southeast Asia my motivation for using the ASEAN-defined Southeast Asia (based on a collection of ten nation-states [and, on occasion, Timor Leste]) is that it is a convenient regional construct understood and accepted by academic publishers, and which feeds straightforwardly into the academic infrastructure of most Southeast Asian Studies programs around the world. Furthermore, although Curaming indicates that ASEAN is primarily an institutional-organizational construct, in my recent research into the regional development of tourism, it became clear that ASEAN is also developing a social and cultural identity through region-wide initiatives which involve collaboration, interaction and exchange; regional planning has symbolic and cultural resonance.

I go further in the paper and suggest that, in spite of ASEAN's utility in conveniently defining the region, as academics, we should retain flexibility in that there are always research problems which require us to both step into and step out of ASEAN. In this respect Heather Sutherland's concept of regional definitions as a "contingent device" (2005) enables us to construct, in Ruth McVey's terms, "other Southeast Asias" (1995). I then suggest tentatively that the twin concepts of culture and identity (again using the concept of a "holon") might provide us with the means to address contingency and multiple regional (and sub-regional) identities. In recognizing the different scales, levels and kinds of identity in operation, their shifting and fluid character, and both their objective and subjective dimensions, we can conceptualize different culturally defined populations at the territorial margins of ASEAN extending and intruding into, spilling over and interacting and engaging with populations residing in areas which are now defined as "Indian" and "Chinese". This seems to be a more satisfactory way of addressing the issue rather than, in negative terms, counterposing Southeast Asia to India and China.

### **III. Southeast Asia, Constituent Nation-states and New Transnational Developments**

Many scholars (perhaps the majority) in Southeast Asian Studies programs usually focus on one country in the region. Given the region's cultural and linguistic diversity it is difficult to become a "Southeast Asianist" in the true sense of the word. The American tradition in Southeast Asian Studies has been overwhelmingly to focus on nation-states. In the early days of Cornell, for example, from its foundation in 1950, the central axes of the mandala were Lauriston Sharp's Thailand Project and George Kahin's Indonesia Project. When Frank Golay joined the Cornell Southeast Asia program, a Philippine wing was added (Seap, Cornell 2018). Maitrii Aung-Thwin, in his comments on Oscar Salemink's paper (see below), also draws attention to the preoccupation with the nation-state within Southeast Asia in the period 1950 to 1990.

Janus Nolasco, in his paper "Between Philippine Studies and Filipino-American Studies: "Transpacific" as Area and the Transformation of Area Studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century", considers the case of the Philippines in Southeast Asia, and notes, more generally in the region, that there are increasing numbers of local or indigenous scholars engaged in Southeast Asian Studies. He also draws our attention to an interesting development: that the demise of Southeast Asian Studies in some parts of the Western academy is being replaced by such new fields as Asian-American Studies and the contribution to this field of diasporic indigenous Southeast Asian scholars such as Filipino-Americans who live and study in the USA (and see Rafael 1994). Nolasco, posing the question is there a "second life" for area studies? - then examines the dialogue between scholars in Filipino-American Studies who have focused predictably on such topics as US imperialism and US-Philippine relations, migration, diaspora, racism, identity and assimilation and those Philippine scholars working "back home" in Philippine Studies. Here the inadequacies of the "insider-outsider" dichotomy are clearly demonstrated. Nolasco argues that Filipino-American scholarship, which has increased in profile considerably during the past two decades in the American academy has important implications for

area studies; in particular, these scholars have examined in some detail the issues of US imperialism in the Philippines, a neglected subject in American historiography, as well as the marginalization of Filipinos in American history. These concerns have in turn been paralleled by an increasing interest in the USA in America beyond its territorial borders in transnational American Studies, and particularly in the study of transpacific histories, relations and processes.

These intellectual impulses within the USA, both from Filipino-American and American scholars, have intertwined with the field of area studies, re-energized it, and taken it in different directions, just as ASEAN Studies has done within the region. Area studies (Southeast Asian Studies, Philippine Studies) has emerged in new guises in Asian-American Studies programs and in those fields of study concerned with culture, ethnicity and identity. These developments have not been without their tensions expressed in opposition from area studies purists, and anxieties about the possibility of a new American-centric epistemic hegemony which runs counter to the main thrust of Philippine Studies, seen to be based on local priorities, perspectives and interests within the nation-state of the Philippines. In spite of these concerns Nolasco points to overlaps, common ground and synergies between Filipino-American research and that undertaken in the Philippines by Filipinos and the value of these externally-generated scholarly activities to the area studies project. He suggests that transnational/transpacific studies might be a way of bridging the gap or division between American-based and Philippine-based research, effecting a hybridization, whilst recognizing the differences between these two fields of inquiry; he favours a dialogue, and, in breaking down boundaries and barriers between them, he sees opportunities rather than disadvantages. Furthermore, he points to the fact that nation-state-based studies within Southeast Asia can exist side-by-side with Southeast Asian Studies with each feeding off the other.

In her comments on Nolasco's paper in her "Transnational Studies and Attempts at Inclusivity", Maria Serena Diokno draws attention to the diversity of historicities and contexts in Filipino diasporic experiences in the USA, and therefore the diversity of

Filipino-American scholarship; the same applies to Philippine Studies. Her paper highlights, yet again, the problems of binary thinking, and the presentation of categories as relatively homogeneous. She also explores the nature and antecedents of transnational histories which seek inclusivity and a deeper understanding of humanity and everyday life, “the uncomfortable parts of history, the silenced voices and those forgotten or ignored”. She suggests that the recent move towards transnational historiography gives assurance to “the place of Filipino-American studies within a transnational or transpacific strand of American studies regardless of whether Southeast Asian studies, within which Philippine studies are positioned, wither away or survive in the near future”.

In regard to the issue of who possesses the authority to speak for the Filipinos and the Philippines she draws attention to the increasingly aggressive stance of Filipino-Americans to ensure that their place and roles in American history are fully recognized and included in the historical narrative.

In another paper which focuses on a particular nation-state in Southeast Asia, in this case Vietnam, Oscar Salemink, in his “Southeast Asia as a Theoretical Laboratory of the World”, presents us with an intriguing personal intellectual journey from Vietnam to Europe and back again where, through force of circumstance in his professorial post in Denmark, he had imaginatively to bring together his in-depth cultural, linguistic and historical (“ethnographic”) knowledge of Vietnam with European constructions and concerns about cultural heritage, heritagization, and contemporary arts and museums which also generated comparative studies that traversed Japan, China, India, South Africa, Brazil and Europe. Vitally important dimensions in this endeavor are his skills and willingness to deploy an area studies-type enterprise with the development of conceptual frameworks which address European issues and those of a wider world beyond Europe and Southeast Asia; and then subsequently to return to Vietnam and translate these experiences, in the context of his research on “cultural production”, in a meaningful way to the country and culture from whence his journey began.



He also demonstrates the problematical nature of the “insider-outsider” or “local-universal” binary but also the ways in which in-depth knowledge of a particular country, culture and history can feed into debates which are European-focused; local knowledge of another place, in this case Vietnam, can act to transform those debates but can also lead to theoretical innovation and empirical findings which can then be translated back to the country and culture in question. He commences his discussion by pointing out the enduring dilemma of area studies; the multidisciplinary study of specific localities is usually “empirically rich” but “theoretically poor”. The field of area studies struggles when it comes up against the “universalizing” predilections of such “hard” disciplines as sociology, economics and politics. For the “soft disciplines” like history, anthropology, and cultural studies there is the problem of generalizing from a particular case or site, and Salemink suggests that, in this arena, area studies “is increasingly fought out by resorting to philosophical concepts which usually have a Eurocentric pedigree”.

Quite rightly, Salemink also argues that these so-called universalizing concepts are themselves an expression of Euro-American parochialism (such concepts as religion and the secular, culture, heritage [cultural heritage], arts, and identity), and they do not address the crucial issue that these trans-local frameworks are then adopted, adapted, changed in “meanings and connotations”, localized, translated and incorporated into vernacularized discourses in other places. In other words, their claim to universality can be challenged by the knowledge accumulated from non-Euro-American experiences. We must keep in mind, in reading Salemink’s contribution, that he is an anthropologist and historian, and that anthropology, more than any other discipline provides the closest fit with the rationale for area studies in its emphasis on the command of the local language(s), in-depth knowledge of a particular field-site developed through a long encounter with it, empathy with local concerns, interests and perspectives, and a sense of place (a geographically-defined field) and history. He styles himself “a relative outsider”, but he is clearly someone who can and does move “inside”.

In his objective to bridge area studies and disciplinary-based

work in the context of Vietnam/Southeast Asia and to “overcome the limitations of both area studies and Eurocentric disciplines”, he is involved in a similar exercise to that of Nolasco, who, in the Philippines case, wishes to transcend the limitations of area studies and Filipino scholarship through the medium or agency of transnational/transpacific studies. Nolasco too is moving from a spatialized field (the Philippines/Southeast Asia) to an analytical field (in transnational studies).

In his response to Salemin, Maitrii Aung-Thwin, in “Rethinking the Field: Locality and Connectivity in Southeast Asian Studies”, draws attention to the parallels between Salemin’s scholarly journey from the “thick description” of Vietnam (and Southeast Asian culture and history) to the conceptualization and analysis of European culture and the wider world with what is happening to the study of Southeast Asia within the region. He notes that Salemin, among other matters, is interested in understanding Vietnam, as far as is possible, from within but also within “global knowledge structures”, and, in comparative mode, to analyse such matters as European heritage in relationship to Vietnamese experiences and vice versa. Like others in this volume, this also brings Aung-Thwin into contemplating the “East-West binary”; the external understandings of Southeast Asia as against the search for local genius, essence, agency and initiative which can give expression to the distinctiveness of Southeast Asia as a region, and reveal “local meanings, structures and ways of life” while questioning Euro-American perspectives and constructions.

Aung-Thwin suggests that between 1950 and 1990 celebrating “the local” within Southeast Asia meant, with a few exceptions, celebrating “the national”. Subsequently, however, and with the further development of such regional organisations as ASEAN and with the globalization of scholarship, ideas, and information, the study of Southeast Asia from within, is increasingly addressing the processes and consequences of boundary-crossing, regionalization and the transcending of regional borders. In the case of the work of Singapore universities, he notes two trends; one in which Singapore serves as a gateway to the region and pursues the development of regional perspectives and the study of ASEAN and other regional

initiatives and activities, and the other which challenges the relevance, fixity and boundary obsessions of area studies, and looks beyond Southeast Asia to connectivities with other parts of Asia and the wider world. In this regard it acknowledges that there are “multiple points of reference”, as Saleminck has done, in his criticisms of Eurocentrism and the universalizing impulses of European social science, and in his globe-trotting approach to cultural heritage, museums and the arts.

#### **IV. The Futures of Area Studies and Southeast Asian Studies**

The final section ponders our current dilemmas and what the future holds in store for us. Thongchai Winichakul in his “Southeast Asian Studies in the Age of STEM Education and Hyper-utilitarianism” locates the dilemma of area studies in two major developments: the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a technology-driven transformation of global society and economy; more particularly a digital revolution (computer coding, artificial intelligence, robotics and nanotechnology and so on) which intrudes into all aspects of our everyday lives. Global transformations far from leading to greater homogeneity are generating cultural and ethnic diversities, socio-cultural fragmentation and increased opportunities for mobility and cross-cultural encounters and relationships, but, Thongchai argues, the emphasis on [S]cience, [T]echnology, [E]ngineering and [M]athematics and “hyper-utilitarianism” at the expense of cultural, linguistic and area studies knowledge, is not equipping future generations to navigate this increasingly complex world in what has been referred to as the “Disruption Era”.

Faced with these challenges Thongchai proposes that Southeast Asian Studies and Asian Studies more widely must re-examine their “values and relevance” in the context of the world’s changing higher education systems. After providing a brief history of the study of Asia/Southeast Asia which he divides into the colonial era of Orientalism with its demand for knowledge of ancient civilizations, deploying “classical” scholarly expertise, and the Cold War era with its strategic needs for modern social science knowledge in addressing

the political economies of developing countries, Thongchai then explores the ramifications of the post-Cold War digital era. The preceding eras were primarily generated by the interests and requirements of the West, and resulted in the construction of “Oriental Others”. In local anti-colonial responses and in the urgent need for post-independence nation-building, Southeast Asians began to construct their own notions of “Self” which tended to be, in their first stage, “nationalistic” and preoccupied with policy-oriented and practical social science research deployed with the aim to modernize and develop societies and economies within a defined and bounded national space.

In this current advanced technological era the value of the arts and humanities is in question and “[s]cience, rational choice, big data moved in at the expense of area studies in many social scientific disciplines”. As Thongchai indicates, these developments have resulted in the demise in certain Western countries of some higher education programs such as Southeast Asian Studies, though in certain disciplines and subject areas in the humanities (and in area studies) there have been exciting and positive responses. “Intellectual interests in geopolitics or the economy are declining, but have become stronger in critical studies in, for instance, popular culture, media studies, and religious studies”. This, coupled with economic growth and increasing prosperity in Southeast Asia and the wider Asia and a concomitant expansion of higher education have resulted in a strong interest in the “knowledge economy” and in locally-generated Asian and Southeast Asian Studies programs to ensure that one’s citizens have improved knowledge of their neighbors and more effective and informed interaction with them, economically, politically and culturally.

Thongchai points to a decentering and diversification of area studies programs and a positive development of scholarly capacity and expertise in Asia/Southeast Asia, as well as a greater interchange of personnel and knowledge between Asian and Euro-American/Australian universities on the basis of greater equality. Again the “insider-outsider” division becomes less relevant and viable in this context. With the increasing need for flexibility, decision-making, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, and language-based cross-cultural

sensitivities and knowledge, Thongchai argues that “training in critical thinking, skeptical questioning, and comparative and interpretive reasoning ..... is the realm of social studies and the humanities”. Furthermore, the “greater understanding of cultural differences and how to deal with them, as a society and as individuals, require education and scholarship provided in such fields as area studies”. Thongchai concludes by setting out an agenda for a new Asian and Southeast Asian Studies: to examine “the social and human dimension of technology-driven transformation”; to provide areas studies knowledge to encourage and support “competency in cultural diversity” which over time should become “a natural way of thinking”; to change the ways in which languages are taught making much more use of “ issues of interest or via popular culture, films...”; to encourage “[g]eographical flexibility [as] the methodology and the outcome of area studies knowledge to enhance our student’s ability to think, switch back and forth, among different spatial parameters in their dealings with the global, trans-national, border zones, and transcultural diversity”. In summary, he makes a strong case for the importance of the humanities and area studies in the digital age, but that scholars in these fields need to respond to these transformations positively and imaginatively.

Finally, there is Stephen Keck’s paper “Introducing SEABOT: Methodological Quests in Southeast Asian Studies”, which, like Thongchai in contemplating the problems which Southeast Asian Studies and area studies face in the digital age, takes us on a futuristic journey into the world of internet robots (“bots”), artificial intelligence and artificial neural networks, data analytics, big or “massive” data, brain-computer interfaces, and virtual and augmented reality. Unlike Thongchai who provides a discursive piece on the past, present and future of Southeast Asian Studies, but contemplates the possible future roles of the humanities in the context of area studies and the training and skills that are currently and will be increasingly required in a rapidly changing, mobile and diversifying world, Keck gives us a much more technical and institutional examination of the potential uses and advantages (and abuses) of

web robots (in this case his imagined robot for Southeast Asian Studies, SEABOT).

His investigation and projections and his search for new methodologies are rooted in a world of “infoscapes” in which there is an increasing “capacity to create, shape and interact with information” and “in which data are mined, harvested, traded, stolen, sold, resold and, most important, fiercely protected”. His premise is that “scholarship itself will change, possibly—if not probably—almost beyond our recognition”. In my view, certainly research and scholarship will be reconfigured. In regard to Southeast Asia, the accessibility of data and the ways in which we can use it will require us to reconceptualize “some of our frameworks”. In addition, his fictional SEABOT, given its properties as “an open source online platform which would serve all researchers throughout the world”, is then examined to determine how our practices and outputs might alter. Though it is for Keck a heuristic device at this moment, the technology currently available and that which is likely to be developed in the near future suggest that something like a web robot for Southeast Asia could be produced within the next decade. Keck also considers some of the potential problems which scholarship might face in a SEABOT environment.

Keck qualifies his argument by stating categorically that his intention is not to predict the future or to encourage changes in research agendas, but to begin a conversation about possible scenarios for Southeast Asian Studies in the next several years. He also sets out the possible institutional, legal and ethical dimensions of the SEABOT environments and the threats and disruptions that it poses for academic life (issues of privacy; control of research and the political uses made of it; intellectual property rights; academic inequalities, exploitation, selectivity and marginalization). However, his supposition is that SEABOT is “a platform which enables scholars who study SEA to communicate, share information, receive assessments of their work in real time, and connects them to both data bases and data analytics”. It can gather and store vast amounts of information and, as it is based on artificial intelligence, it is able to carry out mental operations and learn independently. The supposition is that researchers would undertake much of their

scholarly work within the SEABOT network in an interactive environment, and the platform could independently pursue research on specific topics on request. Most importantly, researchers, policy-makers and others interested in research findings would pose questions, infinitely variable, “so that SEABOT would know how to first focus on relevant topics, analyze them and then reply with information, suggestions and above all some kind of accessible data interpretation strategy”; it would also ensure their authenticity, gather data on the use of research and evaluate the research and its findings, identify dominant research trends, record citations, recommend publication of the research or not, identify suitable publication outlets, assess the productivity and quality of researchers comparatively and their future potential in the context of their particular research fields, provide guidance in the writing of papers and the appropriate references to use, promote team research, and so on. If SEABOT or something like it does make an appearance on the academic scene the prospects are both exciting and daunting.

In her comments on Stephen Keck’s paper Sinae Hyun in “Southeast Asianists in the Digital Age” strikes a cautious note. She ponders the issues raised for a South Korean in choosing to become a “Southeast Asianist”. From the relative cultural homogeneity of her homeland she was confronted by bewildering ethnic diversity. In finding her way through the cultural and historical maze, she found encouraging support in the “digital humanities” platform, a more straightforward online vehicle than the SEABOT envisaged by Keck. But like Keck she notes the advantages of digital information in addressing Southeast Asia’s diversities, but also the problems occasioned by the increasing move towards digitized data in that it “has affected methodologies of academic research in recent decades, calling for an attention to more innovative ways of controlling the regimes of information and data in relation to the transformation of human lives as well as historical analysis”.

Hyun focuses on certain conceptual and methodological issues raised by SEABOT. On the matter of concepts, Keck raises the issue and Hyun discusses the problems of definition and “commonality” in a situation of considerable political, economic, social, cultural, historical and geographical diversity in a Southeast Asian region

which has been open to a range of external influences over a very long period of time – from the Indian sub-continent, mainland China and the wider East Asia (particularly Japan), the Middle East, Europe and the Americas. Overall, she views diversity in a more positive light rather than seeing it as a negative characteristic of Southeast Asia.

In her consideration of methodological changes in the digital age, she poses the question of who would benefit from SEABOT and who would be able to access its databases? Her suspicion is that these big databanks might well be accessed by policy-makers (and those with political interests) to enhance their means of control. She also questions how SEABOT might contribute “to enhancing global, regional and national recognitions of Southeast Asia’s unique and authentic identity”, and how precisely would it evaluate the quality of research outputs and the potential political sensitivities that a research paper might engender. Hyun also emphasizes, as others have done in this special issue, the substantial increase in scholarly expertise in Asia in the study of the Southeast Asian region which has particular methodological consequences for area studies in terms of language use, cross-cultural encounters, and research priorities and approaches. With or without SEABOT methodologies and approaches are changing. She takes the example of her own country, South Korea, as an example of this expanding interest in “Other Asian Studies”.

## **V. Concluding Comments**

Several themes have been addressed in this special issue; a most pervasive one is the problematical nature of binaries or dual categorizations: “insider-outsider”, local-global/universal/external, Euro-American-Southeast Asian, Orientalism-local/alternative constructions. The increasing globalization of research and training and the mobility of academic staff suggests that the division between the inside and the outside is no longer tenable, if it ever was. However, in our deliberations on ASEAN as a means of thinking about the Southeast Asian region we are drawn into the possibilities of



defining the region in terms of an internally-generated concept. This in turn is linked with the increasing importance of scholarship within the region, which, given the problematical division between “insider-outsider”, is generated both by citizens of the region and expatriates living and working there, and researchers from outside the region collaborating with locally-based scholars. Local scholars also travel outside the region to institutions abroad for periods of time to engage in collaborative research projects and training directed to the Southeast Asian region or they are part of diasporas and have settled overseas as in the case of Filipino-Americans. There are now multiple “voices” speaking about and for Southeast Asia and “multiple points of reference”. Elements of Southeast Asian Studies also appear in other programs: Asian-American Studies, Transnational/Transpacific Studies, and Ethnic Studies. However, where they continue to have life Southeast Asian Studies programs must respond proactively and imaginatively to the opportunities presented to them in the digital age, but be fully aware of the threats and hazards as well.

There is also some attention to personal research trajectories and how force of circumstance sometimes directs us into unanticipated projects and the development of new approaches and new conceptual thinking, as demonstrated in Salemin’s paper. These unexpected happenings can influence the ways in which we perceive and think about Southeast Asia as a region and they can affect the ways in which we connect our field sites and findings in Southeast Asia to the wider world, to processes of change occurring elsewhere and to conceptual developments beyond our region. We have discussed some of these concepts (culture, identity, contingent devices, other Southeast Asias, heritagization, translocalities, field of cultural production and knowledge production, historical inclusivity, binaries) which may provide a way forward in our analysis of a diverse and rapidly changing region.

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# I. Other Southeast Asias: “Insiders” and “Outsiders” and the Construction of a Region





# From Southeast Asian Studies to ASEAN Studies: What's in a Name Change?



Rommel A. Curaming\*

## [ *Abstract* ]

This paper is a preliminary attempt at making sense of the increasingly common use of the term ASEAN Studies as interchangeable with, or as replacement for the older and more established counterpart. It speculates on whether this development represents the beginning among local people of “owning” the region, as well as whether this forms part of the continuing effort to wrest the initiative or control of knowledge production in and about Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** Area Studies, Institutional Studies, Southeast Asia, ASEAN

## I . Introduction

The boom in ASEAN Studies in recent years marks an intriguing development in Southeast Asian Studies. This boom is evident in the proliferation of ASEAN Studies in various universities and research institutes across the region. Five Open Universities in the region<sup>1</sup>,

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\* Assistant Professor, History and International Studies Programme, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Rommel. Curaming@ubd.edu.bn

for instance, have collaborated to develop and offer ASEAN Studies at the graduate certificate or MA level. Earlier on, Thammasat University and University of Malaya have established their respective International Masters programs in ASEAN Studies<sup>2</sup>. A PhD in ASEAN Studies program has also been established at the Naresuan University in northern Thailand.<sup>3</sup> It is probably the first of its kind, at least in name. At the Bachelor level, majorship in ASEAN Studies has also begun to be instituted, as exemplified by the BA in ASEAN Studies at the Prince of Songkla University (PSU) in Thailand.<sup>4</sup>

ASEAN Studies research centres have also multiplied<sup>5</sup>, with emphasis on policy-oriented research and in facilitating academic exchange and collaboration. The ASEAN Studies Centre at the Institutes of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak) in Singapore is possibly the oldest and most developed example of this effort in the region.<sup>6</sup> In Indonesia such centres were reportedly established in five universities, namely Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM), Universitas Indonesia (UI) Universitas Andalas (Unand), Universitas Airlangga (Unair), and Universitas Hassanudin (Unhas). In Thailand, a similar facility was set up in Chulalongkorn University, National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), Chiang Mai University, Prince of Songkla University, Khon Kaen University, among others. In the Philippines, New Era University established such a center in 2016 which was the first in the country.<sup>7</sup> Beyond

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<sup>1</sup> Universitas Terbuka (Indonesia), Open University of Malaysia, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (Thailand), the Hanoi Open University (Vietnam) and the UP Open University (Philippines).

<sup>2</sup> For University of Malaya's (UM) programme, see <https://www.um.edu.my/academics/master/asia-europe/international-masters-in-asean-studies-imas> and for Thammasat University, see <http://www.pbic.tu.ac.th/asean/> (Accessed April 4, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> See the program website, <https://cacs.nu.ac.th/academics/phd-program/> (Accessed April 4, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> See the program website <https://fis.psu.ac.th/en/index.php/course/ba/asean-studies/> (Accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> According to ASEAN Foundation website, there are 18 ASEAN Studies Centres as of Nov. 2013, <http://aseanfoundation.org/newsroom/asean-studies-centres-gear-up-to-establish-its-network> (Accessed April 14, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/centres/asean-studies-centre> (Accessed April 14, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.neu.edu.ph/main/asean-studies-center-and-center-for-international-linkages/>, <http://www.eaglenews.ph/neu-asean-studies-center-launched/> (accessed on 2 August 2018).



the region, Josai University in Japan put up its own ASEAN Studies center in 2015, while in India it was inaugurated in 2016 in Shillong, in northeast India.<sup>8</sup> Earlier in 2009, the American University launched the ASEAN Studies Forum. It was a pioneering effort in North America.<sup>9</sup> In Europe, the University of Antwerp in Belgium established an institute called ASEAN Studies Center. Having been established in 1994, it is possibly the earliest outside the region. In the case of the academic journals, ASEAN Studies has also been explicitly used as part of the title—in *Journal of ASEAN Studies* by Indonesia's Bina Nusantara University (BINUS).<sup>10</sup>

Given the fairly long institutional and academic history of Southeast Asian Studies as a field of studies (Abdullah and Maunati 1998; Baviera, Tadem, and Malay 2003; Bowen 2004; Hirschman, Keyes, and Hutterer 1992; Park and King 2013; Reid and Diokno 2003), this recent development raises intriguing questions. Why ASEAN Studies rather than the long-standing name Southeast Asian Studies? Is it not the case that the long provenance of Southeast Asian Studies as a field of study already provides a well-tested structure and conventions that are suitable for the purpose? Are newly-instituted ASEAN Studies programs significantly different to merit the name change?

One may say that opting for ASEAN Studies is understandable because it suits the focus on ASEAN as an institution or international organization, not on Southeast Asia as a whole. The MA in ASEAN Studies programs offered by Thammasat University and University of Malaya, for example, seem to be largely institutional studies in orientation, with emphasis on ASEAN as an international organization. In this sense, ASEAN is taken as a subset of the bigger entity Southeast Asia. It is relevant to ask whether a demarcation line may be drawn between ASEAN Studies as a form of institutional studies, on the one hand, and Southeast Asian Studies as a conventional area studies, on the other. Pending a close

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<sup>8</sup> See the institute's website, <http://ascshillong.org/> (Accessed August 2, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> See the website of the ASEAN Studies Initiative, <http://www.american.edu/sis/aseanstudiesinitiative/> (Accessed August 2, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> See *Journal of ASEAN Studies* by Bina Nusantara University in Indonesia, <http://journal.binus.ac.id/index.php/jas/> (Accessed August 2, 2018).

examination of the contents of various ASEAN Studies programs, and comparing them with their counterparts, which I will try to do in a preliminary manner in the next section, the purported area-organizational studies divide can only be conjectural.

Others take the name change as meaning nothing really significant. With Timor Leste the only remaining non-member in the region, and its membership is likely to be realized sooner or later anyway, Southeast Asia and ASEAN are in many ways practically co-terminus. The apparently significant overlap between the contents and structure of the ASEAN Studies program offered by the five open universities noted above, and those of “conventional” Southeast Studies programs, as will be shown below, seems to support this observation. It should also be noted that this name change is possibly a pragmatic move, riding on the hype surrounding the launch of the ASEAN Community in 2015, as noted by Charnvit Kasetsiri (Kasetsiri 2013).

The aim of this paper is two-fold. It seeks to assess in a preliminary way the viability of the area studies-institutional studies divide. I also wish to speculate if there could be something more substantive in the rise of ASEAN Studies beyond the hype and pragmatism generated by the launch of the ASEAN Community? I recall van Schendel’s insights on “geographies of knowing” and the “geographies of ignorance” that it engenders (van Schendel 2002). These ideas refer to the power of geographic concepts such as region or nation to frame and organize knowledge production in ways that includes, enables and empowers certain groups but simultaneously excludes, prevents and emasculates others that subscribe to different ways of knowing. Given that Southeast Asian Studies is a long-established and largely externally-driven enterprise, one may be tempted to guess if the use of ASEAN Studies as nomenclature heralds the coming to the surface of the impulses that have fairly deep historical groundings within the region. These impulses are rooted in the region’s decolonizing history—the kind of history that seeks to wrest from outsiders the control over a range of things including the engine of knowledge production.

## II . Area versus Institutional Studies?

The development of area studies such as Southeast Asian Studies in the USA is usually traced to the war-related efforts to “understand the enemy” during the Second World War and the subsequent Cold war era (Bowen 2004; Szanton 2004a). While one can argue for a much earlier provenance, going back to the colonial, pre-colonial or even classical periods (Hall 1947; Mojares 2013; Reid and Diokno 2003; Winichakul 2005), much of the development of Southeast Asian Studies as we know it today was to an extent driven by the needs or interests since the 1940s of extra-regional players, such as American and European colonial administrators, military strategists, intelligence agencies and university-based and think-tank-based scholars. This kind of area studies, at least that which developed in the USA, may be characterized by the shared commitment to some, if not all, of the following features (Szanton 2004: 4)

(1) intensive language study; (2) in-depth field research in the local language(s); (3) close attention to local histories, viewpoints, materials, and interpretations; (4) testing, elaborating, critiquing, or developing grounded theory against detailed observation; and (5) multi-disciplinary conversations often crossing the boundaries of the social sciences and humanities.

The emphasis on the study of a foreign language and on in-depth research using vernacular sources is premised on the presumed depth required to uncover some distinctive features (in addition to shared characteristics) of a particular area. The logic of cultural systems that are operative in an area is believed to be embedded in linguistic codes, hence the need for language competence. Moreover, because of the inherent complexity of reality on the ground, none among the various disciplines can capture it by itself. This is why an effective multi-disciplinary or interdisciplinary approach is called for. This humanistic, liberal side of area studies coincides and, at the same time, is in tension with the more pragmatic, politically-driven impulses to use linguistic competence and other area studies practices to “know the enemy” more accurately and deeply. One can argue that the rather uneasy alliance between scholarly, for-public good ideals of liberal scholars, on the

one hand, and the pragmatic aims of the conservative elements in the government enabled to a significant degree the development of area studies in the USA. The controversy in the late 1960s and 1970s surrounding the birth of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS) and its breakaway journal, the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* (BCAS, since 2000 *Critical Asian Studies*) seems to have exemplified clearly the tensions between two competing, but in some ways also complementary, impulses that undergirded the development of area studies in the USA (Lanza 2017).

The characteristics noted above define what may be considered as “conventional” area studies in the USA. This label is at best of limited heuristic value; it is no more than a convenient aggregation or fossilization of the otherwise varied, changing and complex practices. Nonetheless, it helps drive home an important point: as a “contingent device” (Sutherland 2005) area studies in various parts of the world, such as the USA, UK, continental Europe, Australia, Japan, China, Korea and Southeast Asia, are shaped by the confluence of different and changing contextual matrices in their respective contexts.

To what extent, if ever, are these features reflected among Southeast Asian Studies programs in Southeast Asia? As a methodological preface, the choice of cases to be examined here was informed mainly by the accessibility or availability of data, not by carefully considered criteria for importance or representativeness. Be that as it may, the Southeast Asian Studies programs at the National University of Singapore (NUS), University of Malaya (UM), and Chulalongkorn University and the University of the Philippines-Diliman (UP-D) are arguably important in their own right in terms of distinctive features or levels of prestige and development, even if their inclusion here was prompted mainly by the accessibility via internet of detailed information about their programs.

In terms of multi- or interdisciplinarity, all programs as specified in Table A qualify. What they varied in is the extent of emphasis on certain discipline-clusters. University of Malaya’s (UM) version, is characteristically emphatic on economy, development,

management, and trade issues whereas NUS's curriculum is rather sparing on this aspect. While UM does not have a module on the history of Southeast Asia, and only a few modules on culture and the humanities, NUS, on the other hand, is heavily concentrated on history, humanities and anthropology. This point must be tempered by the fact that the undergraduate program on Southeast Asian Studies at NUS offers several modules from a wide arrange of relevant disciplines.

To an extent the same may be said of UM's undergraduate program on Southeast Asian Studies. The versions of the MA in Southeast Asian Studies (in the case of UP, major in Southeast Asia under the broader frame of MA in Asian Studies) offered by Chulalongkorn and UP-D appear to provide a fairly balanced coverage of social science and humanities disciplines. Focusing on the MA level programs alone, without regard to undergraduate module offerings, it may be said that UM, followed by NUS, are the least multi-disciplinary among the four.

<Table 1> MA in Southeast Asian Studies

	<b>National University of Singapore (NUS)<sup>11</sup></b>	<b>University of Malaya (UM)<sup>12</sup></b>	<b>Chulalongkorn University<sup>13</sup></b>	<b>University of the Philippines<sup>14</sup></b>
Core Courses	SE5151 Approaches to the Study of Southeast Asia	ATGH6101 Theories and Methods of Comparative Development in Southeast Asia ATGH6102 Research Method in the Social Sciences ATGH6103 Regionalism in Southeast Asia	2015 704 Southeast Asian Civilization 2015 706 Modern Southeast Asia: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Democratization 2015 708 ASEAN in Regional and Global Context 2015 710 Research Methodology in Southeast Asian Studies	201 Asia in Antiquity. 201-A Modern Asia. 210 Theories and Perspectives on Area Studies 299- Thesis Required Major modules (SEA Studies stream) 250 Seminar on Southeast Asia 255.1 Social and Economic Development in Southeast Asia 255.2 Politics and Governance in Southeast Asia 255.3 Culture and

				<p>Society in Southeast Asia</p> <p>256 International Relations of Southeast Asia and ASEAN</p> <p>Note: It is also required to meet proficiency requirement in a SEA language. Offered at the Asian Center are the following:</p> <p>Intensive Bahasa Indonesia/Malaysia</p> <p>Intensive Thai</p>
Electives	<p>SE5201 Supervised Research Project</p> <p>SE5211 Socio-Economic History of Southeast Asia</p> <p>SE5213 Revolt and Revolution in Southeast Asia</p> <p>SE5219 Technopolitics in Southeast Asia</p> <p>SE5222 The Arts in Contemporary Southeast Asia</p> <p>SE5223 History of Sexuality in Asia</p> <p>SE5224 Religion and Society In Southeast Asia</p> <p>SE5226 Race and Ethnicity In Southeast Asia</p> <p>SE5229 Anthropological Approaches to Southeast Asia</p> <p>SE5232 Southeast Asia and Regionalism</p> <p>SE5233 Economies of Southeast Asia</p> <p>SE5234 The Political Economy of Southeast Asia</p>	<p>ATGH6302 Economic Development in Southeast Asia</p> <p>ATGH6304 Trade, Port and Shipping in Southeast Asia</p> <p>ATGH6305 Politics and Regional Governance of Southeast Asia</p> <p>ATGH6311 Regional Economic Co-operation in Southeast Asia</p> <p>ATGH6312 Worker and Employment in Southeast Asia</p> <p>ATGH6313 Economic Development of Maritime Communities in Southeast Asia</p> <p>ATGH6314 Management of Coastal Environment and Marine Resource in Southeast Asia</p> <p>ATGH6315 Management of Tourism Development in Southeast Asia</p> <p>ATGH6316 Urbanisation of</p>	<p>2015 712 State and Society in Mainland Southeast Asia</p> <p>2015 714 Local Autonomy in Southeast Asia</p> <p>2015 715 Southeast Asian Arts and Culture</p> <p>2015 716 Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia</p> <p>2015 718 Regionalism and Regional Organizations in Southeast Asia</p> <p>2015 720 Ecology and Nature in Mainland Southeast Asia</p> <p>regional movement environmental conservation.</p> <p>3(3-0-9)</p> <p>2015 721 Urbanization in Southeast Asia</p> <p>2015 722 Southeast Asian Values and Worldview</p> <p>2015 724 Gender in Southeast Asia</p> <p>2015 726 Globalization and Local Identity in Southeast Asia</p> <p>2015 727 Human Rights in the</p>	<p>202 The East-West Encounter</p> <p>203 Nationalism and National Development</p> <p>204 Agrarian Development and the Peasantry in Asia</p> <p>205 Industrialization and Urban Development in Asia</p> <p>206 Philosophies and Religions of Asia</p> <p>207 Arts of Asia</p> <p>208 Socialism and Capitalism in Asia</p> <p>211 Security Issues in the Asia Pacific</p> <p>212 Regionalism and Community Building in Asia.</p> <p>252 Readings on Southeast Asia I.</p> <p>253 Readings on Southeast Asia II.</p> <p>Note: there seems to be many more electives both from Asian Studies and Philippine Studies programs that students can choose from, but in the absence of clear, accessible guidelines</p>

SE5241 Country Studies: Mainland Southeast Asia	Southeast Asia ATGH6301 Arts and Cultures of Southeast Asia	Southeast Asian Context 2015 728	on the extent of elective modules which students may choose from, I decided not to include them here.
SE5242 Country Studies: Thailand	Southeast Asia ATGH6303 Population and Demography in Southeast Asia	Multilingualism in Southeast Asia 2015 730 Southeast Asian Landscape and Society	
SE5243 Country Studies: Indonesia	ATGH6306 Language and Society in Southeast Asia	2015 731 Literature and Society in Southeast Asia	
SE5244 Country Studies: The Philippines	ATGH6307	2015 732 Folklore in Southeast Asia	
SE5245 Country Studies: Malaysia	Ethnography and Belief Systems in Southeast Asia	2015 734 Southeast Asian Theatre and Film	
SE5246 Country Studies: Myanmar	ATGH6308	2015 735 The Politics of the Narcotics Trade in Southeast Asia	
SE5247 Country Studies: Vietnam	Comparative Religions in Southeast Asia	2015 736 Islam in Southeast Asia	
SE5263 Cultural Resource Management in Southeast Asia	ATGH6309 Culture and Politics in Southeast Asia	2015 738 Vietnam from the Colonial Period to the Present	
SE5264 Archaeology and Art Of Ancient Southeast Asia	ATGH6317	2015 739 Vietnamese Communism	
SE5294 The Politics of Environment In Se Asia	Comparative Gender Systems in Southeast Asia	2015 740	
SE5660 Independent Study		Traditionalism, Revolution, and Consolidation in Cambodia	
SE5880 Topics in Southeast Asian Studies		2015 742 Myanmar as a Militaristic State	
		2015 743 Buddhism and Spiritualism in Myanmar	
		2015 744 External Impact and Cultural Integration in the Making of the Laotian State	
		2015 746 Islamic Tradition, Modernization and Race Relations in Malaysia	
		2015 747 Current Research on	

			Southeast Asia 2015 748 Seminar on Southeast Asia 2015 750 Individual Study 2015 751 Directed Reading on Southeast Asia Supervised reading of assigned works in Southeast Asian Studies. 3(3-0-9) 2015 752 Special Topics on Southeast Asia 2015 755 Labor and Industrial Relations in Southeast Asia 2015 811 Thesis 12 credits	
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If learning at least one Southeast Asian language is a hallmark of conventional area studies, only the program offered by the University of the Philippines explicitly qualifies among the four programs. No modular credits are allotted to language, but before one is allowed to take the comprehensive examination and embark on thesis writing, one should have satisfied the language requirement. The three other programs do not require learning a Southeast Asian language. Being an alumnus of the program, I recall the NUS MA in Southeast Asian Studies program used to include language modules among electives, but these modules have been

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.fas.nus.edu.sg/sea/graduate/module-information/level-5000.html> (Accessed April 4, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.um.edu.my/um2017/academics/master/art-and-social-science/master-of-southeast-asian-studies> (Accessed April 4, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> See [http://www.seachula.grad.chula.ac.th/web/course\\_description.php](http://www.seachula.grad.chula.ac.th/web/course_description.php) (Accessed April 5, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> At the University of the Philippines, Southeast Asian Studies is offered as one of the streams (or majors) under MA in Asian Studies, <http://ac.upd.edu.ph/acmedia/pdf/Asian%20Center%20Catalog.pdf> (Accessed April 4, 2018). In a personal communication with the Dean of Asian Center, Dr. Joefer Santarita, he confirmed the effort to include ASEAN Studies among the streams students may opt to take (May 15, 2018).



excluded since over a decade ago.<sup>15</sup> It must be specified though that the Southeast Asian Studies program both in NUS and UM have undergraduate counterparts, where language competence is given due emphasis. Any graduate of these programs who wishes to pursue a MA degree in Southeast Asian Studies no longer needs language modules. However, for those who were admitted into the program but did not have an undergraduate degree in Southeast Asian Studies, the lack of opportunity for language training leaves a hole in their pursuit of an area studies program. If any language requirement is stipulated in admission policies, it is proficiency in English, as all the programs are delivered in English.

The proximity of the UP version of Asian Studies to the American model of area studies may be explained by the close academic and intellectual ties between the USA and its former colony. With early generations of Filipino scholars in various disciplines being trained in various graduate studies programs there, the area studies versus disciplines debates that were persistent in the US academy were echoed in the academic discourses in the Philippines, at least in the flagship institution, University of the Philippines in Diliman (UP-D) and a host of other major universities. The Institute of Asian Studies (IAS) was established in UP-D in 1955, and it was reorganized as the Asian Center in 1968 with the explicit intent to pursue area studies objectives. Part of the reasons for the decades-long tension between the Asian Center and other discipline-based faculties at the UP-D such as College of Social Science and Philosophy (CSSP) and College of Arts and Letters (CAL) were rooted in the tensions between area studies and disciplines that were persistent in the USA. As an iteration of the American-style area studies it is probably the earliest of its kind in the region.

One of the hypotheses that this study seeks to address is whether the existing Southeast Asian Studies programs can accommodate greater emphasis on ASEAN so as to render a separate ASEAN Studies redundant or irrelevant. If the curricular

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<sup>15</sup> I undertook the MA Southeast Asian Studies at the NUS in 2000-2001 and I remember Bahasa Indonesia and Thai among the language modules which MA students may opt to take. I took Bahasa Indonesia for two semesters.

structures prove amenable to accommodating ASEAN Studies elements, the question becomes why still develop separate programs, given the built-in accommodative mechanism within existing programs? Examining closely the module offerings of the four programs reveals that the NUS version offers three modules that are closely related to the study of ASEAN as institution or organization (SE5232 Southeast Asia and Regionalism, SE5233 Economies of Southeast Asia, SE5234 The Political Economy of Southeast Asia). Chulalongkorn's program structure indicates two (2015 708 ASEAN in Regional and Global Context and 2015 718 Regionalism and Regional Organizations in Southeast Asia). UP's version, for its part, offers five<sup>16</sup> and UM's version offers only one (ATGH6103-Regionalism in Southeast Asia). If regionalism, ASEAN and their cognate subject matters have long been a part of the curricular offering of the four programs, there seems to be no reason why they (NUS and Chulalongkorn, and to a lesser extent UP-D) cannot be revised to accommodate more detailed or specific modules on ASEAN as an institution or international organization. That UP's version has five ASEAN-related modules suggests that the existing Southeast Asian Studies framework is flexible enough to absorb such modules. The implications seem to be that there is really no need for separate ASEAN Studies programs.

If that is the case, what could have prompted the creation and proliferation of separate ASEAN Studies programs? Pending verification by those who were actually involved in the formative processes of ASEAN Studies programs, the following points are offered here as hypotheses that await testing. I reiterate that accessibility and availability of information is the main reason for choosing the three ASEAN Studies programs as spelled out in detail in Table 2. The first is the joint-program offered by five Open Universities in the region. The second is offered by University of Malaya and the third was established in Thammasat University in Thailand. The case of the University of Malaya (UM) is striking

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<sup>16</sup> Security Issues in the Asia Pacific (AS211); Regionalism and Community Building in Asia (AS 212). Social and Economic Development in Southeast Asia (AS 255.1); Politics and Governance in Southeast Asia (AS255.2); International Relations of Southeast Asia and ASEAN (AS256).

because the University offers both a MA in Southeast Asian Studies (noted above) and International Masters in ASEAN Studies, which raises the question of why the need for two programs?

A standout feature of UM's ASEAN Studies program is the unequivocal focus on ASEAN as an institution or organization. The modules being offered in this program seek to discuss in detail institutional structure, integration processes, political-security agenda, cooperative framework, decision-making processes, external and inter-member relations of ASEAN as an organization, not as a geographic area. This fits into the suggestion that ASEAN Studies is a form of institutional or organizational studies, and not area studies. It is pertinent to note that this program was developed and is offered by a different unit of the University of Malaya, the Asia-Europe Institute (AEI). This institute has a fairly autonomous developmental history from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) which offers a MA in Southeast Asian Studies.<sup>17</sup> The institutional studies focus of this program, thus, owes this focus to the orientation of the AEI, which seeks to promote understanding of EU and ASEAN as international organizations. It is tempting to speculate about the inter-faculty/departmental rivalry or academic politics being involved in the establishment of two separate programs in the same university, but it cannot be ascertained at this point.

The ASEAN Studies program offered jointly by the five Open Universities and by Thammasat University are interesting in that most of the modules offered therein refer to ASEAN as the region, and rather sparingly to ASEAN as an organization (e.g. ASEAN 204 - Comparative Study of the History, Culture and Religion of ASEAN Countries; ASEAN 205 - Comparative Study of Social, Economic and Political System of ASEAN Countries; ASEAN 206 - Comparative Study of the Geography and Natural Resources of ASEAN Countries). In addition, Thammasat's version also offers languages (Burmese, Vietnamese, Indonesia), which as noted earlier is a key feature of conventional area studies. One can say, thus, that the Open

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<sup>17</sup> I wish to thank Prof. Dr. Kim Hyung Jong of Yonsei University who studied at the University of Malaya and who served as a reactor to this paper for bringing this to my attention.

Universities’ and Thammasat’s programs lean more towards area studies with some emphasis on ASEAN as an institution. Such orientation is not dissimilar to the MA in Southeast Asian Studies programs of the NUS, Chulalongkorn University and UP-D as discussed earlier. Pending interviews with those involved in designing the program to clarify what were the considerations they took in designing the programs, we cannot really know for sure. However, in a communication with Dr. Jean Saludez, a professor at the University of the Philippines Open University who was also a member of the committee that designed the joint ASEAN Studies program, she confirmed that they took ASEAN in three senses: “as a collaborative-multilateral organizational identity, as a geopolitical region, and as the region bound by a common agreement” (email 30 April 2018). What may be said at this point is that given UM’s International Masters in ASEAN Studies program’s institution-oriented focus and that of the Open Universities’ ASEAN Studies look more like a conventional area studies, the typological divide between area studies and institutional studies seems of limited use to demarcate the current use of the terms Southeast Asian Studies/ASEAN Studies. While such a typological divide seems, at first glance, to make sense, in practice these names are being used interchangeably in the contemporary academic community. It appears that increasingly, the term ASEAN is now being viewed by more and more people not just as an organization, but also as the region as a whole. ASEAN seems to have evolved to become a short-hand for the more “mouthful” term “Southeast Asia”.

<Table 2> MA in ASEAN Studies Programs

	<b>Joint Graduate Certificate in/MA of ASEAN Studies (5 Open Universities)<sup>18</sup></b>	<b>International Masters Programme in ASEAN Studies (University of Malaya)<sup>19</sup></b>	<b>MA in ASEAN Studies (Thammasat University)<sup>20</sup></b>
Core Courses	ASEAN 201 -ASEAN Studies I ASEAN 202 -ASEAN Studies II ASEAN 203 -The ASEAN Organization ASEAN 204 - Comparative	QXGX6103 Research Methods and Data Analysis for Social Scientist QXGD6101 History, Society and Culture in Southeast Asia QQD7003 Political-Security Agenda of ASEAN	PD 601: ASEAN Cooperation in Political, Economic, and Socio –Cultural Dimensions PD 602: Institutional Structure and Decision Making in ASEAN PD 603: Research Methodologies in Social Sciences

	<p>Study of the History, Culture and Religion of ASEAN Countries</p> <p>ASEAN 205 - Comparative Study of Social, Economic and Political System of ASEAN Countries</p> <p>ASEAN 206 - Comparative Study of the Geography and Natural Resources of ASEAN Countries</p>	<p>QQD7004 Socio-Cultural Cooperation in ASEAN</p> <p>QQD7005 Economic Integration in ASEAN</p> <p>QQX7001 Research Methodology</p> <p>QQD7002 Research Project</p> <p>QQX7002 Advanced Studies in ASEAN Regionalism</p> <p>QQX7003 Advanced Studies in Europe and European Integration</p> <p>QQX7004 Regionalisation and Regionalism: Theory and Practice</p> <p>QXGD6105 Economics and Political Policy Agendas</p> <p>QXGD6108 Functional Cooperation in ASEAN</p> <p>QXGX6105 Advanced Studies in Malaysian Politics, Government and Economics</p> <p>QXGX6106 Advanced Studies in Europe and European Integration</p> <p>QXGD6181 IMAS Project Paper</p> <p>QXGD6190 IMAS Internship</p>	
Elective	<p>SEAN 211 -ASEAN in Transition</p> <p>ASEAN 212 -The Positioning and Contribution of ASEAN in the Regional and Global Context</p> <p>ASEAN 221 -ASEAN Cultural Heritage</p> <p>ASEAN 222 -Art in the ASEAN Region</p> <p>ASEAN 223 -Music in the ASEAN Community</p> <p>ASEAN 224 -Food Culture of the ASEAN</p> <p>ASEAN 231 - Communication and Media in the ASEAN Context</p> <p>ASEAN 232 -Health, Social Welfare and Educational Issues in ASEAN</p> <p>ASEAN 233 -ASEAN Economic Development and Business Community</p> <p>ASEAN 234 -Politics and</p>	<p>QQX7005 Multiculturalism in Asia and Europe</p> <p>QQB7001 History, Society and Culture in Europe</p> <p>QQB7003 Political-Security Agenda and Foreign Policy of the European Union</p> <p>QQB7004 Socio-Cultural Cooperation in the European Union</p>	<p>PD 611: ASEAN's External Relations with Other Regional Cooperation</p> <p>PD 612: ASEAN Economic Cooperation</p> <p>PD 613: Political and Security Cooperation in ASEAN</p> <p>PD 614: Socio-Cultural Cooperation in ASEAN</p> <p>PD 615: Role of Thailand in ASEAN</p> <p>PD 616: Law and Regulation on Trade, Investment, and Labour Mobility in ASEAN</p> <p>PD 617: Media in ASEAN</p> <p>PD 618: ASEAN and Fast Growing Economies</p> <p>PD 619: Multiculturalism in ASEAN</p> <p>PD 620: Non-Traditional Security in ASEAN</p> <p>PD 711: Comparative Study of ASEAN Countries</p> <p>PD 712: Seminar on</p>

<p>Governance Dynamics in ASEAN</p> <p>ASEAN 241 -Environmental Issues in ASEAN</p> <p>ASEAN 271 - Country Study</p> <p>Diaspora in ASEAN</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Indigenous Peoples in ASEAN</li> <li>◦ ASEAN Labor Economy and Human Resources Development</li> <li>◦ Agriculture and Food Security in ASEAN</li> </ul> <p>ASEAN 281 –Special Topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Gender Dimensions of Development in ASEAN</li> <li>◦ ASEAN Science &amp; Technology</li> <li>◦ Peace and Security in the ASEAN</li> </ul> <p>ASEAN 291 Evolving Framework for ASEANOLOGY Research</p> <p>ASEAN 299 ASEAN Colloquium</p> <p>ASEAN 300 Thesis</p>	<p>Contemporary Issues in ASEAN</p> <p>PD 713: Seminar on Selected Issues in ASEAN Studies I</p> <p>PD 714: Seminar on Selected Issues in ASEAN Studies II</p> <p>PD 715: Guided In-depth Study of a Selected ASEAN Country</p> <p>PD 716: Guided In-depth Study of a Selected Trading Partner of ASEAN</p> <p>PD 621: Burmese I</p> <p>PD 622: Burmese II</p> <p>PD 623: Vietnamese I</p> <p>PD 624: Vietnamese II</p> <p>PD 625: Indonesian I</p> <p>PD 626: Indonesian II</p>
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### III. What's in a name change?

The most clearly identifiable possible impetus for the proliferation of ASEAN Studies in the past several years was the launching of the ASEAN Community in 2015. The ASEAN Community was originally envisioned to start in 2020. During the 12<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in Cebu in 2007, however, the members had agreed to accelerate the

<sup>18</sup> See the program website at <http://fmds.upou.edu.ph/asean/> (Accessed April 4, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> See the program website at [https://aei.um.edu.my/programmes/masters/2016-2017/international-masters-in-asean-studies-\(imas\)](https://aei.um.edu.my/programmes/masters/2016-2017/international-masters-in-asean-studies-(imas)) (Accessed April 4, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> See the program website at [http://www.pbic.tu.ac.th/main/sites/default/files/20155%20ASEAN\\_Studies\\_Course\\_Offerings.pdf](http://www.pbic.tu.ac.th/main/sites/default/files/20155%20ASEAN_Studies_Course_Offerings.pdf) (Accessed April 4, 2018).

timetable and set the target for 2015 instead. The Roadmap for the ASEAN Community was adopted in 2009 stipulating the steps to be taken towards the goal. Since ASEAN's inception in 1967, promoting the study of Southeast Asia has been one of the organizations avowed key objectives. However, the organization appeared to have not been proactive in this area. Southeast Asian Studies as a field of study developed rather slowly and unevenly in the region since the 1950s. This development was principally driven by efforts of foreign and local scholars, foreign donors, universities and professional organizations, and largely outside the ambit of ASEAN's institutional efforts. It appears only in the past ten years in the lead up to 2015 that ASEAN exerted some proactive effort to promote ASEAN/Southeast Asian Studies.

An anecdote shared by Charnvit Kasetsiri, a respected Thai scholar, suggests the increasing popularity of ASEAN vis-à-vis Southeast Asia, at least as terminology for a field of study. He has noted the case of Southeast Asian Studies program in Walailak University. Established in 2002, the program was initially doing fine but in due course suffered a sharply declining enrollment with only ten students left. When the program was re-branded in 2011 to become ASEAN Studies, its subscribers suddenly increased eight-fold (Kasetsiri 2015: 120). Charnvit attributed the rather sudden "trendiness" of ASEAN Studies in Thailand to a strong push to promote the study of ASEAN initiated since 2008 by the then Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan. It was a move that came in the wake of the Cebu declaration in the previous year, as noted above. The ASEAN Studies boom in Thailand which Charnvit observed was paralleled by what was happening in other parts of the region, where ASEAN Studies also proliferated. It is easy to see this development as a pragmatic response to prepare for the greater regional integration envisioned in the launch of the ASEAN Community in 2015. But beyond pragmatic considerations, is there anything more fundamental or substantive that we can infer from this development?

Thus far I have found no hard, statistical evidence that indicate people's preference for, or closer affinity to ASEAN than the much older term Southeast Asia. Anecdotal evidence and personal

observations, however, suggest that this may be the case. The decades-long effort of ASEAN to popularize itself, including the hype surrounding annual ASEAN Summits, and to construct an “ASEAN identity”, whatever that means, seems to be bearing some fruits. A fairly big survey done among university students across the region, for instance, that was carried out in 2007 and 2014-2015 indicate the high and increasing awareness and sense of positive identification with ASEAN among these students who, rather importantly, would constitute the next generation of leaders (Thompson and Chulanee Thianthai 2008; Thompson, Chulanee Thianthai, and Moe Thuzar 2016). This survey explicitly focuses on ASEAN and it does not deal with Southeast Asia as a separate identity marker. The increasing number of opportunities for intra-ASEAN people-to-people interactions via student exchange, tourism, study tours, youth forums, region-wide organizations, etc. help catalyze the process of regional identity-formation. The visibly more frequent use of ASEAN as an adjective to describe, say, an airline (Air Asia as “ASEAN airline” or the “ASEAN pass”), a space (“ASEAN lane” at airports for example), group (“ASEAN countries” rather than Southeast Asian countries), self (“I am ASEAN” or “I am from ASEAN”) just to mention some examples, suggests the multiplication of meanings surrounding the name “ASEAN” and its unshackling from its hitherto official mooring. It appears that people on the ground are using it more frequently for their own purposes. It has, or is about to assume(d) a life of its own, circulating as it has been in more varied and wider social and popular cultural spaces. Amitav Acharya’s (2017:36) observation that “ASEAN’s quest for a regional identity has come a long way” seems to ring true.

Archarya captures so well the dichotomy between Southeast Asian and ASEAN identities in these words (2017:37):

(T)he identity of Southeast Asia as a region should not be confused with the identity of ASEAN as a regional organisation. Although the two identities can overlap and be mutually reinforcing, they also have different sources and distinctive trajectories. Southeast Asia’s regional identity predates ASEAN’s identity...The Southeast Asian identity is more grounded in historical and socio-cultural factors than the ASEAN identity, which is more of an institutional, political,



and strategic phenomenon and is fundamentally statist and elitist in nature. Hence, although both identities have their limitations, the Southeast Asian identity is potentially more robust and enduring than the ASEAN identity, and could outlive the weakening or unravelling of ASEAN.

What Acharya may have missed is the blurring that seems to be happening on the ground between Southeast Asia as a geographic region and ASEAN as an organization. For an increasing number of people, the erstwhile purely international organization—elitist and detached or distant from the life of ordinary people—is the region, *their* Southeast Asia. Their experience of the region materializes every time, say, they go to neighboring countries flying on an “ASEAN airline” (Air Asia is keen to promote itself as one) without the hassle of visa application, queuing in the “ASEAN lane” at the airport, befriending “fellow ASEANs” through, say, the ASEAN University Network (AUN) gatherings or student exchange as well as via other “ASEAN youth” forums, or joining “ASEAN music” festivals or receiving “ASEAN scholarships” or watching “ASEAN football (AFF games), or reading blogs on “ASEAN life”. And when they go to other countries beyond the region where ASEAN is more familiar than Southeast Asia or their own country, when asked where they are from, they respond, “I am from ASEAN!” Life on the ground has its own dynamics that creates, re-creates, even mutates an entity, like ASEAN or Southeast Asia, in the process of day-to-day appropriation. This blurring is happening not just at the grassroots level, but also in the academe as suggested in the rather fluid demarcation line between ASEAN Studies and Southeast Asian Studies, as discussed in the previous section. Overall, the list is admittedly still limited, but it is expanding steadily in recent years. This development makes me wonder if the tipping point has already been reached.

Perhaps as a reaction to the supposed “constructedness” (constructed by outsiders at that) and fragmentary character of the region, efforts to push the internalist and collectivist viewpoint has a long history in the study of the region. It may be traced back to as early as the scholastic work of Rizal and fellow propagandists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, or even earlier (Mojares 2006, 2013). Mining

the works of Southeast Asianist scholars, Amitav Acharya explores the deep historical roots of the regional identity of Southeast Asia (2000, 2012). This point is the basis for his prediction that the identity of Southeast Asia will outlive that of ASEAN, with the latter's history going back to only five decades. But this deeply historicist interpretation misses important developments both at the grassroots and at the academic level. What seems suggestive in the recent proliferation of ASEAN Studies, both as terminology and as a separate field of study, is the beginning of a new stage in the evolution of regional identity. Possibly, I hazard a guess here, it heralds a shifting attitude or mindset among more and more people in the region which might lead towards finally embracing or "owning" the region and calling it by their seemingly more preferred term, ASEAN rather than Southeast Asia. Despite its longevity the term Southeast Asia seems to have remained an abstraction for many of them, removed from the daily life of the people. What ASEAN has done in the past 50 year is, among other things, to set off a chain of complex processes, the latest being the launch of the ASEAN Community that nurtures thoughts and practices among a greater number of people that, intended or not, crystallize, manifest or embody the hitherto purely abstract idea of the region.

Southeast Asia is an externally imposed terminology. While it grants this part of the world a geographic identity, it is nevertheless in reference to something outside of itself, that is, the rest of Asia or the world. Arguably, it is better than the terms Indo-China, or the Far East, whose reference points are the giant civilizations of India and China and Europe, respectively. Nevertheless, it remains reminiscent of the time when the region was viewed from or created by outsiders. ASEAN on the other hand is, at least partially, internally constructed, and if we follow Acharya, parts of the impetus that gave rise to it grew from the impulses that have deep roots and a long history within the region. It is certainly an elite-driven project, originally in response to Cold War imperatives. For that it is often chided or faulted for its alleged complicity with the powers-that-be. But since "Southeast Asia" itself is a product of construction, and the processes of its construction were also compatible with the interests of certain groups (Bowen 2004),

neither of these entities or terminologies can truly claim innocence or moral ascendancy.

What seems to be happening underneath the apparently innocuous name change may be functionally related to van Schendel's (2012) idea of "geographies of knowing". Under this conceptual rubric, certain geographic concepts such as region, sub-region, nation, etc. serve as frames for organizing knowledge production, and the change from one to another could carry significant implications. "Southeast Asia" is a patently geographic concept and ASEAN is as we know an institutional or organizational name. But through time, as I have alluded to above, in the minds of more and more people ASEAN has become (or is becoming) co-terminus or even a replacement for the earlier Southeast Asia. The "geographization" (along with pop culturalization) of ASEAN, expanding its conceptual reach oblivious to the conceptual discipline scholars wish to impose upon it, is happening on a daily basis, as more and more ordinary people act out or consume anything ASEAN, "ASEANized", or "ASEANizing" (media coverage, music and telenovels, tourism experience, lessons in schools, friendship with fellow SEAns, etc.). Besides the top-down injunction from ASEAN and respective governmental functionaries, the proliferation of ASEAN Studies may also be partly due to the enterprising impulses of university administrators who saw the opportunities in bridging the official injunction and the growing curiosities and interests in ASEAN among the general public.

Lest I be misunderstood, let me offer a caveat. My attempt to explain the proliferation of ASEAN Studies is not meant to validate whatever conservative and self-serving political interests ASEAN as an organization represents. I recognize the risks of putting ASEAN as the central object of study. With or without intent, ASEAN Studies could and does legitimize the institution and practices that serve, among other things, the politically conservative interests that ASEAN and its leaders have promoted or defended since the 1960s. As I have earlier conceded, ASEAN Studies is far from being politically innocent. That said, conventional area studies as represented by Southeast Asian Studies has also been proven to serve certain political purposes (Szanton 2004b). So what difference does the

naming of a field of study by one or another term make? In my mind, at the very least by being explicit and calling this field of study ASEAN Studies, it is transparent or honest about the interests it serves.

#### **IV. Concluding Remarks**

From the purely speculative standpoint, the rise of ASEAN Studies and the incipient “pop culturalization” of ASEAN may represent one among several possible ways of pushing the boundaries of the logic that underpins the long-drawn out, endogenous effort to create and understand the region from within. At the initial stages this effort is understandably elite-led (in an intellectual and political sense) as exemplified, for example, in the aspirations of Rizal (and his fellow propagandists), Wenceslao Vinzons, and later on in the founding of the short-lived Maphilindo, but the vision was to trickle it down and encompass the common people. It is too early to say where the trajectory is heading, if the initial “pop culturalization” of ASEAN would be sustained, and if ASEAN Studies would continue to proliferate. These processes, like any other that depends on social dynamics, are open-ended.

If indeed the rise of ASEAN Studies suggests a reconfiguration of power relations, with the insiders taking over, or at least sharing equitably the driver’s seat of regional knowledge production, it only affirms the logic of power/knowledge. That is, whoever is more empowered--politically, economically, socially, culturally, religiously or whatever—tends to find ways to naturalize, normalize and justify their exercise of such power. When the proponents of ASEAN Studies readily accepted ASEAN as a given, both as an institution and as region, and at the same time take it as the area boundary of their epistemological geography, it was part of their interests, conscious or not, to relegate other things to the confines of “geography of ignorance.” Doing so has its consequences, good or bad. Contrary to the common tendency within the large part of the academic community to associate power with negativities (partiality, bias, self-interest, inaccuracy, etc), I take it as an opportunity for us to really notice the elephant in the room. However, in reconceptualizing

the notion of area to make area studies more relevant, it will inevitably reflect, sometimes without us being aware of it, the deep-seated desires, anxieties and interests of groups vying for better positions in the matrix of power relations. There is nothing inherently wrong with that, so I suppose. It may be in the nature of human beings, political animals as they are, to have self-interests and to work hard to pursue and nurture them. What seems worse is to deny it and mobilize and appropriate scholarship to conceal such denial. In the process, well-meaning scholars may end up doing harm in their pursuit of a perceived public good.

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## Other Southeast Asias? Beyond and Within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations



Victor T. King\*

### [ *Abstract* ]

The debates continue on the conceptualization of Southeast Asia and the ways in which those of us who are concerned to attempt scholarly interventions in the region define, conceive, understand and engage with it. But, in an important sense, the region has now been defined for us by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and whatever academic researchers might wish to impose on Southeast Asia in regard to their priorities and interests, it may make little difference. Given the politically-derived, nation-state definition of Southeast Asia, are all our problems of regional definition resolved? In some respects, they have been. ASEAN has constructed and institutionalized a regional organization and an associated regional culture. But in certain fields of research we still require academic flexibility. We cannot always be confined by an ASEAN-derived regional definition. The paper will explore other configurations of 'region' and its sub-divisions and propose, that in the spirit of academic freedom, we can continue to

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\* Professor of Borneo Studies, Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Emeritus Professor of South East Asian Studies, University of Leeds. victor.king@ubd.edu.bn

generate imaginative depictions of Southeast Asia and its constituents both within and beyond the region.

**Keywords:** ASEAN, Southeast Asia, nation-states, beyond regions, sub-regions, other conceptualizations.

## I . Introduction

This was my view of various of the matters which I discuss in this paper which was presented in 2014, and it has not changed much since then.

“I have been unable to identify a particular methodology or set of methodologies which have been generated within the general field of area studies or specifically in the study of Southeast Asia. Alternatively, there is nothing distinctive that I have discerned in the practices of knowledge generation in Southeast Asian studies that has not already been developed within discipline-based research; epistemologically and ontologically, we are in known and well-trodden territory which has already been traversed by those who have undertaken research using disciplinary perspectives and methods. Or, to put it another way: the multidisciplinary field of Southeast Asian studies, which in any case is not a unitary or homogeneous field of studies, as Szanton (2004: 3) has already indicated, has not produced, in my view, a set of specific practices which we might follow in order to go about formulating research questions..... and developing or choosing concepts or theories to make sense of, give some kind of logical and coherent form to, and draw conclusions from the data collected” (King 2014: 44).

I find it increasingly difficult to distance and perhaps entirely remove myself from the personal involvement in a debate which I entered in a determined way almost thirty years ago (King 1990). At that time my frame of mind was primarily Western-centred but it was attempting to find a sociological perspective that I had been working on since the early 1980s which would help generate an intellectual construction of Southeast Asia (King 1981). At that time

it had not yet been attempted, and the major contributions to Southeast Asian sociology were Western-derived and not devoted specifically to regional definitions. In other words, it appeared that those sociologists working in and on Southeast Asia did not see it as a clearly defined region in sociological terms.

Likewise in examining the anthropological literature on Southeast Asia in the 1980s, there seemed little prospect of discovering or devising an anthropological vision of a Southeast Asian region unless we tried to make something of the early work of such scholars as Robbins Burling, which, in regional terms, was deficient in many respects (1965 [1992]). The anthropological enterprise was far too localized and parochial, and, if it was not preoccupied with small-scale communities and particular ethnic groups (usually minority groups), anthropology confined its scholarly efforts to one Southeast Asian nation-state, or a sub-region (Highland Burma, northern Luzon, Borneo, Sumatra), or a little more ambitiously to mainland or island Southeast Asia (rarely to both). Burling, for example, whose work was used as a vehicle for defining a Southeast Asian socio-cultural area on the basis of social organization (for example, relative gender equality) or cultural values (arising from animist beliefs and practices) or of different socio-cultural and ecological forms (hill and plains people), based his work on mainland Southeast Asia and not the whole region. And there are significant differences between human and geographical configurations between island and mainland Southeast Asia.

In my own case, having been appointed to a Professorship in Southeast Asian Studies in the United Kingdom in 1988, when area studies, having languished for a while, was given a new lease of life, it was incumbent on me to contribute to the construction and consolidation of the region which had given its name to the title of the Chair. I duly set about this task, as many others had done before me. In political terms and with reference to ASEAN,

Southeast Asia was still not a clearly defined region, though in scholarly and diplomatic circles it was reasonably well established. Brunei Darussalam had only joined the “original ASEAN five of 1967” in 1984. After my appointment it was another seven years before Vietnam joined the Association and then, in the second half of the 1990s, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia. In the United Kingdom there were also still lingering doubts about the credentials of the Philippines, even in the 1980s, which stemmed from D.G.E. Hall’s legacy and his monumental history of Southeast Asia, when he initially excluded this important Southeast Asian nation-state, from his conception of the region (1955). In Western European perspectives, not only in the United Kingdom, but in continental Europe as well, in the immediate post-war period, the Philippines was thought of as part of a trans-Pacific Ocean theatre which did not participate in the major cultural and historical trajectories of Southeast Asia. It was also, in scholarly terms, the domain of American researchers. Very few Europeans undertook research in the Philippines. And, in fairness to Hall, it is very doubtful that a major contribution to the post-war construction of Southeast Asia as a region in the 1950s and 1960s would have emerged from the Philippine academy, either American or local Filipino.

Therefore, looking back some 30 years ago, we still seemed to be faced with substantial uncertainties surrounding the definition of the Southeast Asian region. If one wanted to embark on the writing of general books on Southeast Asia, then what would you include and exclude? And what was the rationale for that inclusion and exclusion? For me, the basic principle on which I operated was dependent on the particular disciplinary approach adopted, the research project and questions which were being pursued, and the appropriate methodologies chosen. Therefore, for me, in intellectual terms, Southeast Asia was a shifting field of study. I could traverse it as I wished, with little concern for political, strategic or diplomatic

definitions, though my approaches were still somewhat Orientalist or at least Western-centric, which are not necessarily the same object of analysis (Said 1978).

But here is the compromise. When you are writing a general book on Southeast Asia can you afford to indulge yourself in this ad hoc world of scholarship, distant from the concerns of politicians and academic publishers? When I look back on what decisions I made about the parameters of the books I would write on Southeast Asia I was already into the period when ASEAN was finally consolidated in its present form. I started writing and editing general volumes on the region in the late 1990s and I simply adopted the ASEAN definition of Southeast Asia, a definition, with some qualifications, which had been established in the colonial period during the 1930s and 1940s (King 1999, 2008 [2011]; King and Wilder 2003 [2006]). It also conveniently fed into the academic infrastructure which had been established by the West and then adopted by various institutions in Asia: what we had to recognize was the institutionalization of Southeast Asian Studies, and long after it may have created doubts and uncertainties as a coherent academic project in the minds of some of those studying Southeast Asia (because academic support, interest and funding increasingly came under threat) Southeast Asian degrees and programmes of study, departments, institutes and schools, journals, publication series, scholarly associations, named posts, and regular scholarly gatherings were nationally and internationally embedded. They may have had to experience an inevitable decline in particular nation-states but, importantly, institutions in Southeast Asia/Asia took over the terrains from which the West had withdrawn. Southeast Asian Studies (separately or within wider Asian Studies programmes) as a field of study continued and took on a life of its own, and an increasingly Asian-based life, outside the anxieties and desperation of those (primarily in the West) who had devoted their academic

lives to area studies and had endured the suffering which resulted from the erosion of their life-support systems.

## **II. Is there a way forward?**

We have a surfeit of ways forward which have been adopted in recent years to address the problematical issue of Southeast Asia as a region, and attempts to give it form, substance and a rationale. In the following very brief overview, there is no point going endlessly over old ground. I have already detailed the toings-and-froings of debates on Southeast Asia as a region and the multidisciplinary field of studies designed to study it (King 2014, 2015a, 2016a). We have moved from definitions based on distinctive social and cultural content; an indigenous genius; distinctive historical moments and processes; scholarly styles, traditions and methodologies; a locus of theoretical innovation; a particular geographical environment; alternative, locally-constructed paradigms; a multi-sensory arena; a negatively defined region in relation to China and India; and a unity-in-diversity model which postulates paradoxically that differences (core-periphery, majorities-minorities, lowland-upland) bring a certain coherence. For me, these are no longer ways forward. They have all been criticized and they should be assigned to the graveyards of human endeavour; they provide partial pictures, but they are not sustainable in academic terms. Furthermore, these concerns have been much more prominent in those academic disciplines which have a greater preoccupation with location, contextualization, concreteness, and the need for grounded and detailed understanding. History, archaeology and pre-history, geography, and linguistics immediately come to mind; whereas regional definition is not such a preoccupation for such universalizing academic disciplines as economics, political science and international relations and sociology. Anthropology has tended to be

the odd-one-out in the regional ball-game – grounded but not especially interested in regional definition, and though comparative in its interests not a universalizing discipline in regard to Southeast Asia.

Most of the very recent attempts at discerning a distinctive methodological and conceptual contribution in Southeast Asian Studies is exemplified in the edited book by Huotari, Rüländ and Schlehe (2014, and Huotari 2014). There is much in it which demonstrates an imaginative, collaborative approach to research on the region; the involvement of locally-based scholars and those from outside the region in projects which enable free and equal interchange and exchange of personnel, ideas and findings; and it provides interesting insights into both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Yet, in my view these approaches do not constitute something distinctive which has emerged from area studies and multidisciplinary endeavours. Most of the proposals in the book stem from already established methods and approaches in the social sciences, particularly anthropology.

These efforts from our German colleagues continue in, for example the Southeast Asian Studies programme at Freiburg University: “Grounding Area Studies in Social Practice”, and this may be something to do with German funding initiatives in area studies and the need to present a case and a rationale for their utility, viability and sustainability. A recent edited volume by Mielke and Hornidge (2017) demonstrates this continuing preoccupation (see King 2017a). This particular project is supported by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research of Germany in the development of interdisciplinary projects in what is termed the “Global South”. It is an approach of which I continue to be sceptical in regard to the suggestion, in this recent volume, that area studies specialists should devote themselves to the development of “mid-range concepts”, and “cross-cultural translation”, which includes all those other elements

with which, we must remind ourselves, we have been engaged since the creation of area studies as a separate field of academic endeavour in the immediate post-Second World War period: these comprise linguistic competence; “grounded knowledge” with frequent references to the importance of historical and geographical contextualization; and inter- and multi-disciplinary engagement. The proposal that we develop mid-range concepts is especially vague: including that of the concept of “social order” (a complex concept in itself), and the attempt to connect “local realities” (derived from research in area studies) to “concepts and theorizing” and to something which one contributor to the volume refers to as “global ethnography”. We must also take into account the changing character of Southeast Asian Studies and its increasing domestication and localization, which, in turn, requires us to qualify and modify our perspectives on what defines area studies.

What exercises Mielke and Hornidge is the problem and process of increasing mobility in a globalizing world, and how regional constructions have to address the movement of people, commodities, capital, ideas, and images, and the increasing power of the internet, electronic communication and the global media. It also expresses an underlying anxiety among scholars and practitioners in area studies in their need to continue to justify what they do and what they have been doing for over 70 years since the American government and academy, among others, decided that area studies was worthy of scholarly attention. In the foreword to the volume James D. Sidaway suggests that area studies is “an enduring source of fascination” and that this book “marks a coming of age” (2017: v). I wonder whether this expression of confidence can be supported. Overall the volume does not, in conceptual terms, suggest to me that area studies can produce something that it is arresting and distinctive. The mid-range concepts proposed have already been generated within disciplines; they are not the product



of area studies.

### **III. ASEAN: the way forward?**

From this brief critical diversion into a recently published book on area studies (and there will be more published, undoubtedly, within the next few years) I have therefore committed myself to what seems to be an impossible position, in stating that much of what has gone before in the academic construction of Southeast Asia remains problematical. One way in which we can save debate is simply accept, for most purposes, the ASEAN-defined parameters of the region and its institutionalization in the academy and in international affairs and diplomacy. In my own case, when I write or edit a general book on Southeast Asia I focus on the ten member states of the Association, and possibly Timor Leste. In doing this, those reading the book will know what I am talking about. This is my dilemma in writing in general terms about Southeast Asia, in that I have to make decisions about the audiences which I wish to address. The quite simple and straightforward way out is to use the definition as defined by ASEAN. Southeast Asia, in general publication terms, is ASEAN, no more, no less. And why should it be otherwise? But there is a complication which I will introduce a little later in this paper. In any case, I do not think that we shall ever agree about what constitutes the region in any cross-disciplinary debate.

In consequence of this decision to accede to an ASEAN definition of region, I may have assigned myself to a conceptual and analytical cul-de-sac, and to the very margins of academic debate on what constitutes Southeast Asia. But forgive me for returning to a position, arrived at quite independently, in this ongoing debate about the definition of Southeast Asia, a position that has been presented by Heather Sutherland (2005: 20 - 59) and her depiction of regions as "contingent devices". In spite of the travails and

misdirections of academic debate on the construction and rationale of regions, I remain a faithful disciple of Sutherland, as providing the most appropriate way to conceptualize Southeast Asia in intellectual terms (also see McVey 2005: 308 – 19, 1995). Her solution links, in a quite fundamental way, the problem of defining Southeast Asia with the consideration of the appropriate disciplinary-based methodologies to engage with the Southeast Asian region; McVey, in similar vein, says, we should be prepared to deal with several Southeast Asias (1995; and see Kratoska, Raben and Nordholt 2005a, 2005b). In this respect, the nation-state-based definition provided by ASEAN constitutes one major definition but it requires complementary categorizations as well.

But what does Sutherland mean by “contingency”? We are in a realm, I think, which I have occupied for most of my career in an area studies environment. We are not constructing coherent theoretical approaches to a set of research problems; we are not generating distinctive paradigms, even middle range concepts, or distinctive methods which have emerged exclusively from a multidisciplinary area studies programme of work, least of all from interdisciplinary endeavours; instead what we are doing is defining our chosen area in terms of shifting concerns and interests; we adopt ideas and geographical/location boundaries according to the research problem defined; and we do this with no planned future agenda; and whatever comes our way in terms of a promising research project, often opportunistically, unexpectedly and randomly, we prepare as best we can to engage with what is presented to us; and we then do so imaginatively, using whatever research tools and concepts are available; and we operate with low-level concepts which are sufficient for our purposes and which do not comprise a coherent, integrated set of ideas (King 2009: 15-40; 2017b: 511-532). Nevertheless, here I return to my earlier argument; we can only do this within our disciplinary training, not with something which some

area studies specialists expect and hope will emerge by some spontaneous experience in a multidisciplinary environment.

But I would add a qualification to Sutherland's eloquent disquisition. Contingency is also something which is increasingly difficult to realize in personal academic decision-making and discussion about the issues and questions to be pursued. Researchers, especially, although not exclusively, locally-based researchers in the Southeast Asian region, no longer have complete discretion over what they define as a research problem and what they do to address it; indeed, much of what we now do, is defined by others: by university senior management; by an ethical, health and safety secretariat; by research funding bodies; by governments; by academic publishing conglomerates; by the policies of academic journals and their senior editors and editorial boards; and by a virtual world of political correctness, which involves a whole complex of NGOs, pressure groups, lobbies and government agencies.

#### **IV. ASEAN institutionalization: tourism as a case**

Like the European Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations has situated and embedded itself in its constituent member states. This is its mission; it is creating a regional culture, developing an ASEAN way of doing things, and implementing a bewildering range of policy and practical initiatives to integrate its members into a regionally coherent body. Member states have to surrender certain of their decision-making powers and their capacities to decide on behalf of their citizens to a greater supra-national organization. Some regional organizations have gone further than others in this adventure to stake a greater claim to a voice in the global community at the expense of the individual decision-making capacities of their member nation-states.

As an informative case-study, when I embarked on a project examining the administration of tourism development in ASEAN, I was particularly interested in how far the Association had developed a regional agenda (see, for details of ASEAN activities, King 2015b, 2018). The findings, at least in terms of meetings, committees and policies are impressive. And tourism is but one example of regional cultural construction; ASEAN is active in so many other fields (the building of a socio-cultural community; the rights of women and children; gender issues; education development, cooperation and exchange; sports; youth; museums; cultural and natural heritage; management of the arts; health; environment and conservation; rural development and poverty eradication; social welfare and development; working conditions and labour, and so on). It has also spawned a whole host of other regional initiatives, simply because the member states are part of a regional organization, whose mission is to promote regional integration and its associated bureaucratization. Create a bureaucracy and it usually takes on a life of its own. What would it do otherwise? However, I fully recognize that some member states in a regional body have greater degrees of leverage and manoeuvre than others; a regional organization is never a partnership of equals.

In the case of Southeast Asia, regional committees and organizations in tourism development abound. Some have been created by ASEAN itself; others have been formed by private interests and companies, or in joint ventures with public bodies. For example, following the 46<sup>th</sup> meeting of the ASEAN Tourism Ministers and the National Tourism Organizations in January 2017 a set of committees were created: the Tourism Competitiveness Committee; Sustainable and Inclusive Tourism Development Committee; Tourism Resourcing and Monitoring Committee; and the Tourism Professional Monitoring Committee.

Other developments comprise the ASEAN Tourism Forum,

which commenced its meetings from 1981 in Kuala Lumpur; the Forum comprises suppliers and buyers; meetings were held as follows during the last seven years: 2012, Indonesia, Manado; 2013, Lao PDR, Vientiane; 2014, Malaysia, Kuching; 2015 Myanmar, Nay Pyi Taw; 2016, Philippines, Manila; 2017, Singapore; (with the theme 'Shaping our Tourism Journey Together'); 2018, Thailand, Chiang Mai (with the current preoccupation expressed in the title of the programme of work 'ASEAN Sustainable Connectivity, Boundless Prosperity'); then there is the ASEAN Tourism Ministers Meeting dating from 1996 in Surabaya; the ASEAN National Tourism Organisations Meeting, with its 46th meeting in Vinh Phuc Province, Vietnam; the ASEAN Tourism Association, founded in 1971; and, as a clear expression of regional institutionalization, the ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan 2011-2015; and the current plan for 2016-2025; the ASEAN Tourism Marketing Strategy, 2012-2015, and with the recently introduced Strategy for 2017-2020; and finally, the Visit ASEAN Year from 1992 and the ASEAN Tourism Campaign 2002.

ASEAN has also made major statements about the identification and conservation of its cultural and natural heritage, and the relationships of these concerns to tourism development, as well as the recognition of the increasing availability of leisure time of growing numbers of ASEAN citizens to learn about and enjoy that heritage without threatening its sustainability for future generations. In the cultural field there have been numerous statements, policies and declarations, among them (1) The Strategic Plan on Culture and Arts, 2016-2025 promulgated by the relevant ASEAN Ministers, senior officials, and the ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information; (2) the Vientiane Declaration on Reinforcing Cultural Heritage Cooperation in ASEAN formulated by the ASEAN Heads of State in 2016; (3) the Declaration on Culture and Arts to Promote ASEAN's Identity Towards a Dynamic and Harmonious ASEAN

Community, pronounced following a meeting in Bandar Seri Begawan in 2016; (4) the Declaration on Culture for ASEAN Community's Sustainable Development, following the Hue meeting in 2014; (5) the ASEAN Declaration on Cultural Heritage issued by the ASEAN Foreign Ministers in 2013; (6) the Declaration on ASEAN Unity in Cultural Diversity in Bali in 2011; and (7) the ASEAN Declaration on Cultural Heritage issued in Bangkok in 2000, which marked the emerging significance of cultural heritage in ASEAN policy-making circles.

In regard to natural heritage ASEAN has also made substantial progress. At the meeting of the ASEAN Ministers responsible for the environment in 2003 it was decided to implement the ASEAN Heritage Parks programme; the ASEAN Centre of Biodiversity served as the secretariat of this initiative. To date 38 parks have been inscribed with all ASEAN countries represented (with Myanmar at 8 parks down to the Lao PDR and Brunei Darussalam with one each). The programme is designed to promote and organize the conservation and protection of biodiversity and exceptionally unique environments. What is more seven of these parks are also UNESCO World Heritage Sites, out of the 38 sites which UNESCO currently oversees and monitors.

Whether or not some of these policies and planning are realized in practice, in promoting regional tourism development across borders and in a cooperative spirit, I would suggest that this is not the primary object of the exercise. The decision-makers in ASEAN realize that there are major players in the tourism industry in the region, and that the nation-states which monopolize tourism in ASEAN will not surrender their advantages to other emerging tourism markets lightly; but they will cooperate with other member-states, if it is of advantage to them, in developing cross-national tourism packages and regional tourist hubs. But we have to accept that this is also an exercise in the tourism field which

has symbolic and cultural resonance. It is not just about on-the-ground results; it is about disseminating statements that ASEAN is a region which promotes a regional tourism strategy and a set of plans, whatever the practical results of those statements. I am not entirely sceptical about ASEAN's approach; I think it will have positive results, but these will not be at the expense of the major nation-states in the tourism industry.

My view overall is that tourism development is important for the Association because it enable several development and inter-regional co-operation initiatives which are usually less contentious modes of engagement; it is easier to organize cross-border package arrangements; it continues to permit the development of national tourism agendas as well as allowing the complementary development of cross-national packages; although, the industry is constantly upgrading skill levels, expertise and language abilities, it still depends on a low level of skills, and remuneration in the industry for many workers is still relatively low. But it does promote regional development in areas where there are few developmental alternatives. Finally, the purpose of this excursion into the field of tourism which has preoccupied me for some 30 years is that it confirms my view that if you want to write generally about Southeast Asia, then it is much more easy do so within the parameters set by ASEAN (see Hitchcock, King and Parnwell 1993, 2009, 2010). It also enables comparisons to be made between the different nation-states in the Southeast Asian region in terms of their achievements in the development of tourism and in their planned trajectories for the future.

## **V. Culture and identity**

Having declared that I am being ruthlessly pragmatic in the way in which I approach my definition of Southeast Asia in ASEAN terms

(in response primarily to the global publication regime and its permutations: see Cohen, Cohen and King 2017), Southeast Asia for me, in other respects, is intellectually, a fluid, open-ended, ever-changing concept (see, for example, King 2015a, 2016a). This is in stark contrast with my desire some 30 years ago to find a non-ASEAN way of arriving at a satisfying and defensible definition within a sociological and anthropological framework. Leaving aside the ASEAN definition, the region can be divided and extended for academic purposes, depending on our research interests. We can operate within and beyond its parameters.

I may now seem to be in an impasse, rather like the impasse that development studies experienced (interestingly another field of multidisciplinary studies which came to a dead-end in the 1990s, see Booth [1994]). I must add that I see gender studies going the same way in the era of globalization. Let me set out my thinking on this cultural direction. But keep in mind that this is a difficult transition for me as a British-trained social scientist who has to engage with the American-dominated field of cultural anthropology and a rather conservative sociology. I suppose my defense is that there was some multidisciplinary interest in the concept of culture and in cultural studies in the British academy (in such places as the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham from the 1960s led by Richard Hoggatt and Stuart Hall) even in the overwhelming environment of British studies of social structure and organization, political economy, structuralism, underdevelopment and dependency, and Marxist sociology; but also in the inspiring environment of Professor Wim Wertheim's Non-Western Sociology in Amsterdam and the work that emerged from it by Professor Syed Hussein Alatas in Malaysia and Singapore and carried forward by Professor Syed Farid Alatas in the current generation of scholars. Although these were my main influences, I was also attracted to the possibilities of cultural studies through my



growing interest in ethnicity and identity in the 1990s.

The cultural turn in social science emerged much more decisively during the 1980s with the increasing interest in post-modernism, post-structuralism, and post-colonialism and the multidisciplinary enterprise of cultural studies, focusing on the expanding impact of the global media, and communication and information technology on developing societies, as well as the increasing mobility of people and objects (Jenks 1993: 136-158). In Southeast Asia these cultural interests have flourished in the concerns among social scientists with “ethnicity” and “identity” (Brown 1994; Kahn 1998; King and Wilder 1982, 2003 [2006]). Goh Beng Lan has said appositely “What appears to characterize late twentieth century modernity – whether Southeast Asian or Western – is the concern with the issue of cultural identity and difference” (Goh 2002: 21). Moreover, the centrality of culture in Southeast Asia has encouraged some social scientists to pursue these cultural expressions in order to develop a particular way of understanding and defining the region (Bowen 1995, 2000; Steedly 1999; and see King 2001, 2005, 2006).

I have already explored the concept of culture and its relationship to ethnicity in some detail in other publications in regard to Southeast Asian identities and regional definition, and there is little point in rehearsing the arguments here (2015a, 2016a, 2016b, 2017c). What does require further elaboration are the ways in which culture and identity enable us to expand and contract our analytical categories both within and outside an ASEAN-defined Southeast Asia, without becoming too obsessed with formulating an exclusive definition of the region.

## **VI. Contraction, expansion, borders and boundaries**

A focus on ethnic identities, and on processes of cultural differentiation

and convergence enables us to examine categories of analysis at different scales or levels of magnitude and contrast (Hitchcock and King 1997). The colonial carving out and the cartographic fixing of boundaries and demarcated territories which were bequeathed ASEAN and its constituent nation-states required a “filling in” of these spaces with identified political units carrying constructed national identities. However, by its very nature “the definition and domain of nationhood are not given... [rather they are] ... always unfixed, ambiguous, self-contradictory, too restricted, yet too extensive” (Thongchai 1994: 173). In all cases identities, ethnicities, nations and regions are constructed (or “imagined” or “invented”; Anderson 2006; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), and as constructions, they are subject to debate, disagreement and transformation. Certain identities, particularly national ones are usually more resistant to change than others, such as minority ethnic identities, at the sub-national level. Nevertheless, these ethnic identities frequently cut across political boundaries, both within the ASEAN-defined region and beyond it, and it is in these circumstances that we can expand and contract our definitions of region, or more particularly the analytical categories which inform our research.

It has long been established that the several criteria for delineating identities rarely coincide; they overlap and cross-cut in complex ways (Moerman 1965). Individuals and groups can also embrace more than one identity according to context and discourse (Leach 1954). The acceptance of these simple facts which focus on the construction, expression, representation, imaging and transformation of identity can therefore include populations beyond the ASEAN-defined entity which are culturally related to those within the region, as well as giving us the capacity to examine ASEAN as a segment of the global system which can also be defined in terms of culture and identity.

In recognizing that Southeast Asia is not a unitary and fixed

region, other than in the increasingly concretized, essentialized and culturalized body of ASEAN, we can then move on to disaggregate the populations and territories of our variegated and diverse Southeast Asia. We can do this by addressing the constituent nation-states of ASEAN as entities obviously defined by political criteria but also demarcated and expressed by a constructed cultural identity, and as units continuously engaged in the process of imagining and creating those identities. Then at the sub-national level we have to engage with constituent ethnic groups, some of which are contained within nation-state boundaries, and others which cross boundaries. Indeed in addressing the issue of boundary-crossing and the fact that ethnic groups are distributed across territorially demarcated states within and beyond the ASEAN-defined Southeast Asia, the interrelated concepts of culture and identity can comfortably handle these circumstances, specifically by having the capacity to engage with units of analysis at various levels and scales (extra-regional, regional and sub-regional).

Examples are numerous: within Southeast Asia and at the sub-national level there are assemblages or congeries of populations or ethnic groups which can be productively analyzed together: northern Luzon, central Borneo, Highland Burma, the hill areas of Thailand, interior Sumatra, and so on (see King and Wilder 2003 [2006] for examples). Ethnicities, majorities and minorities within nation-states and the interaction between nation-building policies and practices and the responses of ethnic minorities can also be profitably addressed at the sub-regional level. More ambitiously, mainland Southeast Asia or the Malay-Indonesian archipelago as major sub-divisions of the region might be examined, not as coherent and integrated entities, but as sites and populations which are serially connected in terms of what Rodney Needeham has explored in the concept of “polythetic classification” (1975).

Within and beyond the region, the immediate construction which comes to mind, which requires an approach bringing together the twin perspectives of culture and identity, is that of Zomia, a cultural and geographical concept originally formulated by van Schendel (2002), which embraces a large part of the highlands of mainland Southeast Asia and adjacent uplands beyond, and the adaptation of Zomia by Scott (2009), which has been referred to alternatively as the Southeast Asian Massif (Michaud 2016).

## **VII. The return to the “old” Southeast Asia**

These shifting frames of reference seem to me to offer more analytical promise than approaches which attempt a definitive regional demarcation. Some recent volumes will suffice. The introductory history volume by Osborne, now in its 12<sup>th</sup> edition (2016), does not develop the arguments that have been forwarded during the past 15 to 20 years about the problematical character of Southeast Asia (see, for example, Kratoska et al. 2005a). The author chooses to dwell on established propositions: there is unity and similarity in the social (kinship, family, gender), religious (court rituals and so on), political-international (a regional pattern of international relations), and linguistic fields (this latter is very dubious). But he then addresses the considerable diversity found in the region which seems to overwhelm his consistent argument for similarity (2016: 4-17). Osborne’s Southeast Asia is based on the standard nation-state-ASEAN definition. Similarly Neher’s book, in its second edition, rehearses the established arguments about unity and diversity, and also opts for the nation-state-based region (including Timor Leste) (2010). As does Rush’s very recent introduction, which again provides us with diversity and yet talks vaguely about “shared traditions”, but also the very old argument about the strategic and geo-political position of Southeast Asia wedged between India and China (2018).

Moving on, Winzeler's book which focuses on ethnography, ethnology and change among the peoples of Southeast Asia, accepts that the delimitation of Southeast Asia is problematical in that, in his view, it was "a creation of European colonialism, rather than a reflection of natural, geographical, cultural, or linguistic boundaries" (2011: 1). He is, at once, sceptical that Southeast Asia has socio-cultural and geographical substance and unity in that the political boundaries of nation-states cannot be tidily mapped onto the distribution of ethnic groups. Instead Winzeler chooses to address the character of Southeast Asia in a series of contrasts, acknowledging that the region is diverse rather than unified (2011: 6). Some of Winzeler's contrasts were explored early on in anthropology (see for example, Burling 1965 [1992]; Leach 1954). He draws attention to the differentiation between upland/highland and lowland populations, majorities and minorities, the local and the immigrant (overseas minority) communities, mainland and island cultures and languages, and world religions and local religions. However, these contrasts do not serve to define the region.

Finally, Anthony Reid, a distinguished historian of the region, who has been a strong advocate of a Southeast Asian identity, continues to argue strongly for its integrity, in his recent and impressively detailed general history (2015; and see King 2017d). However, we find that in defining the region it is constructed and envisioned as an entity defined in negative terms; 'Not China, not India' (2015: 26-29). This seems a little unfortunate in relation to Reid's commitment to the positive virtues, genius, shared history and social organization, and the character of Southeast Asia. In this juxtaposition and contrast we then must engage with the problem of defining what is "India" and "China". This is problematical. Indeed, Reid says "the region has its own distinct environment that produced many common features of material culture and social structure, and preserved political and cultural diversity by limiting

the extent to which foreign models could assimilate what had gone before" (2015: 26). But he acknowledges that the region received "most of its modern gene pool and language stocks from the north, in the Asian mainland now occupied by China, and its religions and written cultures (except the Viet) from the west" (ibid.). Up until the formation of ASEAN and the consolidation of a regional identity and the development of "a common front" against China in particular, I for one continue to struggle with claims for a Southeast Asian distinctiveness. Leaving aside Reid's geographical focus, he acknowledges the region's diversity: imperial divisions, linguistic complexities, religious-cultural pluralities, social and national inequalities, and the artificial nature of political boundaries between Southeast Asia and its neighbors. His other defining features of Southeast Asian regionalism are gender ("a 'Southeast Asian' pattern of relatively balanced roles and economic autonomy for women and men", and "the complementarity of male and female principles", 2015: 24), and the "softness" of Southeast Asia's nation-states (2015: 421-422). I continue to entertain a degree of scepticism with these attempts to seek definitions of a Southeast Asian region distinct from China and India (which are in themselves relatively modern constructions), but, as Reid indicates, undoubtedly the region has gained a coherence and solidity with the development of ASEAN.

Reid argues, in the Preface to his book, that with reference to nation-states, "there is a seductive pressure to use these known contemporary boundaries to describe locations in an earlier period, thereby encouraging the inappropriate reading-back of national units into the past" (2015: xx). He prefers to deploy geographical features such as the "Irrawaddy", "Chao Phraya", "Mekong" and "Red Rivers"; and instead of "Malay Peninsula" he prefers to use "Southeast Asian Peninsula" or "the Peninsula". However, the Mekong is given brief references in the index but the other rivers are not. Thus, for someone wishing to navigate the historical,

geographical, ethnic and political complexities which Reid addresses in such admirable detail, then they will not find their way using the index; invariably some of the main locations in the index are the nation-states of Southeast Asia and not the innovative geographical features which Reid wishes to draw to the reader's attention.

## VIII. Conclusions

In this paper I argue, as I have done elsewhere, that in terms of the concepts of culture and identity, it is possible to accommodate what we conceptualize as a Southeast Asian culture as spilling over, intruding into, and interacting and engaging with the areas which are now defined as "Indian" and "Chinese". In other words, we should not counterpose Southeast Asia negatively with these neighbouring Asian nation-states. We need to implicate them in the process of defining Southeast Asia. For certain purposes we should also continue to define Southeast Asia in ASEAN terms, and recognize that the Association is constructing a set of cultural practices and processes to promote regional identity. Therefore, the main purpose of the excursion into the seemingly never-ending debates on the question of "What is Southeast Asia?", is to propose that we engage more thoroughly with the twin concepts of culture and identity. They do not provide perfect solutions to the problem. But in the Southeast Asian case a concept of cultural identity which can be deployed to address different scales, levels and kinds of identity, and the shifting and fluid nature of how local communities identify themselves and how they are identified by others, might provide a potential route out of the difficulties with which the field of multidisciplinary area studies has been grappling for some considerable time.

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## II. Southeast Asia, Constituent Nation-states and New Transnational Developments







# Between Philippine Studies and Filipino-American Studies: The Transpacific as an Area and the Transformation of Area Studies in the 21st Century



Janus Isaac Nolasco\*

## [ *Abstract* ]

In this paper, I argue that while area studies in the United States has declined since the end of the Cold War, its area impulse of has emerged in other fields of inquiry, particularly Asian-American Studies. Accordingly, I explain how the collective reflections of Filipino-American scholars on empire, migration, diaspora, and identity point to the consolidation and viability of the transpacific as an area, which spans both the United States and the Philippines. Addressing several problems with this straddling—mainly as criticisms of Filipino-American Studies—I show how the transpacific serves as a bridge between Philippine Studies and Filipino-American Studies, and helps define the boundaries and overlaps between both fields of inquiry.

**Keywords:** Philippine Studies, Filipino-American Studies, Area Studies, Transpacific Studies, Transnationalism.

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\* University Researcher, Asian Center, University of the Philippines Diliman, jvnolasco@up.edu.ph

## **I. The Rise and Fall of Southeast Asian Studies in the United States**

Area studies as we know it today was born and institutionalized amidst the exigencies of the Cold War. The United States government, along with foundations such as that of Ford, funded area studies programs in different universities, including Cornell and Yale, through the National Defense Act of 1958. For policy-makers, area studies was essential to understanding regions of geopolitical importance to the United States, and to preventing the spread of communism. This political impetus helps explain, among other things, the United States' profound interest in agrarian issues—such as peasant unrest—in Southeast Asia. Thrust into the post-war world as a superpower and defender of the Free World, it confronted a predominantly agrarian Asia that it knew little about (Culather 2010) but wanted to develop and modernize. It was in this geopolitical context that scholars such as Harry Benda, James Scott, Clifford Geertz, and Benedict Kerkvliet—whatever their political affiliations and intentions—conducted their groundbreaking research into the Southeast Asian peasantry. In the 1960s and 1970s Philippines, the peasantry was likewise a hot-button research topic. At that time, rural discontent provided fertile ground on which communists or farmers themselves could mobilize, and the research of many intellectuals was conducted or could be marshalled, for or against these movements.

The Cold War, along with the rise of revolutionary movements across the Third World, adversely shaped the scholarship of Filipino historians across the political spectrum, from the anticolonial nationalism of Teodoro Agoncillo (1950s onward) and Reynaldo Ileto (since the 1970s) to the less radical, if not conservative historiography of Horacio de la Costa and John Schumacher. Southeast Asian Studies received additional impetus from, and reached its heyday during, the Vietnam War (Lanza 2017), but once the US forces were defeated, the field steadily declined. By 1982, a scholar had noted its “contraction [in] at least a dozen (other) universities” in the United States (May 1987: 177). Eight years later in 1990, the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) held a conference,

which featured papers noting the crisis.

The numbers of Southeast Asia scholars [in the AAS] were 713 in 1978, 710 in 1983, and 630 in 1988 (Ness 1984: 27; Association for Asian Studies 1988) .... these figures are alarming. There is a very thin academic base of scholars in the United States with any interest in or knowledge of Southeast Asia.....Even more alarming are the numbers of scholars who claim a specialization for specific Southeast Asian countries. (Hirschman 1992: 42–43)

For Rafael (1994: 98), the papers in the 1990 AAS conference identified the hope for Southeast Asian Studies: “indigenous scholars trained in the West but are based in the countries in the region itself.” These academics have taken a more prominent role in conducting and problematizing area studies scholarship since the 1980s. In 2007, Ariel Heryanto, an Indonesian Southeast Asianist, could write that “the last decade or so has actually witnessed a slow but progressive growth of interest and activity in locally based Southeast Asian studies” (2007: 76) and that “the number of Southeast Asian nationals in Southeast Asian studies has increased” in the same period (2007: 78). In addition, the fate of Southeast Asian Studies in the region saw a watershed with the establishment of the Consortium for Southeast Asian Studies in Asia (SEASIA) in Kyoto in October 2013, which comprises ten leading area-studies institutions in the region. The picture is far from rosy, however. As Heryanto points out, “...Southeast Asian studies...have always occupied a subordinate or inferior position within the production and consumption of this enterprise” (i.e., Southeast Asian studies), and “their modern intellectual apparatus has largely been both indebted or subordinate to the West” (2007: 78).

Even so, there is no doubting the growing presence of Southeast Asian scholars today, who continue to problematize the nature of Southeast Asian Studies both in the United States and Southeast Asia itself (Sears 2007; Chou and Houben 2006). At the same time, the decline of area studies in the United States has been undeniable. However, its regional thrust would shift to other fields of inquiry, including Asian-American Studies.

## II . The “Second Life” of Area Studies: From Area to Empire

Rafael (1994: 103) marked the potential of “indigenous scholars” including Filipino-Americans in transforming area studies, among other fields.

It is my sense, then, that to speak of “indigenous scholars,”.....in the late-twentieth-century United States simultaneously raises the question of the immigrant imaginary in the configuration of area studies. For what if one were to take seriously the position of Southeast Asian scholars who, for various reasons, cannot or choose not to return to their “homes”? What are the predicaments faced by immigrant scholars once they are part of a plural diaspora? How do these predicaments differ from those of American and indigenous scholars? (Indeed, what is “American”? How secure is that term? And isn’t “indigenous” always already a historical and therefore negotiated term?) How does one begin to think about the works of Southeast Asian scholars ..... who are no longer, if they ever were, indigenous to any one place? How might their work - inescapably written in conversation with other disciplines and other areas and engaged in various projects of affiliation both within and outside the academy - play differently to “American” and “Southeast Asian” audiences? Indeed, how would such Southeast Asian scholars negotiate the difference in what counts as “scholarship.....” (1994: 103).

In 1994, Southeast Asian scholars in the United States were relatively few; today, academics from the region have come to the fore in American academia. Filipino-Americans occupy various teaching positions in the country, especially in the “Big Ten” universities in the American Midwest (Manalansan and Espiritu 2016), though many are also based in the West Coast, particularly in California. Together, they have produced a venerable body of scholarship not just on Filipino immigrants in the United States but also on US-Philippines relations.

In the ensuing decades, Filipino-American scholars would discuss, through their scholarship, the issues that Rafael adumbrated. I will not, however, dwell on the complex dynamics of these matters.<sup>1</sup> I simply want to highlight how the work of

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<sup>1</sup> As with any field, there has been much rethinking in area studies. New trends can

Filipino-Americans in US academia—specifically their focus on American imperialism in the Philippines—has (had) vital implications for area studies in the 21st century.

### III. The emergence of Filipino-American scholars and American imperialism in the Philippines

The entry of Filipino-Americans in U.S. academia has much to do with the entangled histories of Filipino migration to the United States. In 1905, Filipino laborers worked in Hawaiian plantations; they were the first of several waves of migration there and to the mainland. Some Filipinos were sent to the United States to study as *pensionados* or came as nurses or farmworkers in the West Coast. In 1965, the relaxation of immigration quotas initiated yet another batch of immigrants, mostly doctors, nurses, and medical professionals. In the 1970s, the deteriorating Philippine economy—and the declaration of Martial Law in 1972 and its crackdown on anti-Marcos activists—gave yet another impetus to immigration to the US and elsewhere, particularly Western Asia. The Filipino-American scholars of today are the (grand)children of these immigrants. And their presence in the United States has roots in, among other factors, the civil rights movements of the 1960s—their call for social diversity and representation—and the subsequent development of Asian-American studies as an academic discipline.

The intellectual production of Filipino-American scholars is vast, but even a cursory survey will note the prominence of the issue of empire in their scholarship (Claudio 2014; Rafael 2008).

In recent years, [the] majority of scholarship on the Philippines produced in the United States has been concerned with the Philippines in the context of U.S. Empire. On the Proquest database of American dissertations, a search for titles with the word “Philippines” from the last five years will yield 91 results, and a search for titles with the words “Philippines” and “Empire” or

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be seen in *Area Studies at the Crossroads: Knowledge Production after the Mobility Turn* (Mielke and Hornidge 2017) and *Comparative Area Studies: Methodological Rationales & Cross-Regional Applications* (Ahram, Köllner, Sil 2018).

“Imperialism” will yield 51 results. This means 56 % of doctoral scholarship about the Philippines in America in the last 5 years has concerned empire (Claudio 2014).

In his discussion of “the imperial turn,” Claudio discussed dissertations in the United States in their titles; other works, however, do not necessarily contain the word but are equally concerned with “imperialism”.

- *The American Colonial State in the Philippines: Global Perspectives* edited by Julian Go (2005)
- *The Star-Entangled Banner: One Hundred Years of America in the Philippines* by Sharon Delmendo (2004)
- *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino-American History* by Catherine Ceniza Choy (2003)
- *Dead Stars: American and Literary Perspectives on the American Colonization of the Philippines* by Jennifer McMahon (2011)
- *The Third Asiatic Invasion: Empire and Migration in Filipino America* by Rick Baldoz (2011)
- *Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive* by Nerissa Balce (2016)
- *American Tropics: Articulating Filipino-America* by Allan Punzalan Isaac (2006)
- *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire* by Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns (2012)
- *Legitimizing Empire: Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican Cultural Critique* by Faye Caronan (2015)
- *Islanders in the Empire: Filipino and Puerto Rican Laborers in Hawai'i* by Joanna Poblete (2014)
- *Metroimperial Intimacies: Fantasy, Racial-Sexual Governance and the Philippines in U.S. Imperialism, 1899-1913* (2015) by Victor Roman Mendoza

Apart from empire and US-Philippines relations, Filipino-American scholars have written about the Filipino-American

experience in the United States, dealing with questions of racism, identity, and assimilation; a few address contemporary relations between the United States and the Philippines.

- *Migrant Returns: Manila, Development, and Transnational Connectivity* by Eric Pido (2017)
- *Home Bound: Filipino American Lives Across Cultures, Communities and Countries* by Yen Le Espiritu (2003)
- *Transpacific Femininities: The Making of the Modern Filipina* by Denise Cruz (2012)
- *Between Homeland and the Diaspora: The Politics of Theorizing Filipino and Filipino American Identities* by Susannah Lily Mendoza (2002).
- *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila: Working-Class Filipinos and Popular Culture, 1920s-1950s* by Linda Espana-Maram (2006)
- *Practicing 'Enlightened Capitalism': 'Fil-Am' Heroes, NGO Activism, and the Reconstitution of Class Difference in the Philippines* by Faith Kares (2014)
- *Locating Filipino Americans: Ethnicity and the Cultural Politics of Space* by Enrique Bonus (2000)
- *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* by Martin Manalansan (2003)
- *Imagining the Filipino American Diaspora: Transnational Relations, Identities, and Communities* by Jonathan Okamura (1998)

Filipino-American scholarship on American imperialism in the Philippines and Filipino migration are part of a scholarly recovery of empire in American historiography. Oscar Campomanes (Tiongson Jr and Campomanes 2008: 32) speaks of “multiple effacements of U.S. imperialism across U.S. historiography, U.S. culture studies.” Campomanes adds that several scholars have noted this elision. Edward Said, for instance, “once castigated US humanist scholars for their readiness to talk about all kinds of imperialisms and postcolonialities except that of, or associated with, the United States” (2008: 33). The two Gulf Wars (1991 and 2003), and the War on

Terror, have been factors as well (Rafael 2008, 479).

And if empire has been obscured in American historiography, the focus on diaspora and migration among Filipino-American scholars attempts to redress the invisibility of Filipinos in US history, and their relative marginalization even within Asian-American Studies. "The history and politics of the self-invisibility of U.S. imperialism .... had everything to do with the conspicuous invisibilization.... of the Philippines, Filipinos, Filipino-Americans..." (Tiongson Jr and Campomanes 2008: 33). Their scholarship attempts to voice and resurface their presence in (Asian-)American history and society. Indeed, this very assertion affirms the connection between identity and belonging to and in a multiracial United States. "[T]he discovery of or engagement with the Philippines (including through "exposure trips" and "immersions" organized by universities) is ultimately an avenue to assert an ethnic identity in a pluralistic and multiethnic US" (Aguilar 2015: 452).

This recovery of empire parallels a call within American historiography for a transnational American Studies.

[C]ontemporary American studies scholars cannot ignore the fact that the United States is itself a transnational circuit of physical, economic, and cultural exchanges whose dominion extends to regions that cannot be contained within the nation's geographical territory. Nor can they simply refuse to recognize the complex networks interconnecting regions (like the newly industrialized South), multinational corporations (like Google and General Electric), diasporic sites (such as Aztlan and Chinatown), and subnational formations (for example, the ecology and women's rights movements) within the territorial United States to processes that extend beyond its boundaries. While the twentieth century was a time when the nation and the idea of national culture predominated, the twenty-first century is marked by crossnational linkages and transnational processes (Shue and Pease 2015: 2).

Another more recent work, *Transnational Crossroads*

...interrogates "America" as a placeless place that does not neatly index the mainland territory of the United States but instead



corresponds to the larger geopolitical boundaries of the Americas and the American Pacific.....[the book] foregrounds the cultural contact and political alliances that have shaped the newly defined force field of America and examines how this region is profoundly affected by a long history of colonialism and imperialism. (Fojas and Guevarra 2012: 3)

American scholars themselves have accordingly taken to studying America's transnational excursions anew, including its imperial venture in the Philippines, focusing this time on culture and social history and their implications for colonial power (previous work by Americans on the Philippines centered on high politics and economics). Warwick Anderson's *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine, Race, and Hygiene in the Philippines* (2008) discusses the workings of American imperial power via the public health system; Michael Salman's *The Embarrassment of Slavery: Controversies over Bondage and Nationalism in the American Colonial Philippines* (2001) unpacks how slavery rhetoric figured and underpinned the US occupation of the Philippines; Paul Kramer's *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States and the Philippines* (2006) exposes how race affected, and was affected by imperial governance; *Making Moros: Imperial Historicism and American Military Rule in the Philippines' Muslim South* (2013) by Michael Hawkins looks at American governance in that part of the archipelago; and *Colonial Crucible: Empire in the Making of the Modern American State* (2009) illustrates the adverse ways in which American imperialism shaped the development of domestic politics in the US itself.

Furthermore, the proliferation of studies on the American empire has in turn paralleled the rise of transnational, even global historiography since the 1990s (see Iriye 2013: 1–18). Even European, Spanish and Latin American scholars are turning towards the Pacific, with works such as *The Age of Trade: The Manila Galleons and the Dawn of the Global Economy* by Arturo Giraldez (2015) and *Spain, China, Japan in Manila, 1571-1644: Local Comparison and Global Connections* by Brigit Tremml-Werner (2015). In 2014, the *Pacific Historical Review* released a special issue, "Conversations on Transpacific History" (Kurashige, Hsu, Yaguchi 2014: 183–184) that

sought to study identities that involve “Chinese diaspora and maritime networks, Southeast Asian studies, Pacific Islander studies, Asian American studies, and the historical fields of U.S. immigration and ethnicity, U.S. race relations, the U.S. early national era, and modern Japan.”

#### **IV. From area to empire and back**

American imperialism in the Philippines implies a “space” that transcends the geographical boundaries of both the United States and its former Southeast Asian colony. That area spans yet brings together both core and periphery. This area may be called the transpacific/transnational, and points to a common ground of, and an arena of dialogue and interdisciplinary exchange between, Philippine Studies and Filipino-American scholarship. In reconstituting the transpacific/transnational<sup>2</sup> as an area covering two disciplines, I give a different twist to Claudio’s (2014) observation regarding area studies and (Filipino-)American historiography.

The imperial turn also coincided with a decline of Southeast Asian Studies programs in the United States. The increased interest in places like the Middle East and China diverted funds away from Southeast Asian studies..... This would have two implications. First, students studying the Philippines now had fewer funds to conduct long-term research in the Philippines, limiting their knowledge of domestic concerns.... Second, the decline of Southeast Asian studies has made it easier for Philippinists to converse with American Studies.

Claudio is correct to point out the inverse relationship between the imperial turn and area studies in the United States.

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<sup>2</sup> In using “transpacific/transnational,” I consider ‘transpacific’ as a specimen of the transnational, which generally pertains to movements and processes to and from national boundaries, which, in this case, concerns those of the Philippines and the United States. Thus, to examine Filipino migration to the U.S. or to look at American empire in the Philippines involves an optic that traverses the Pacific, and posits the Philippines and the United States as part of the Pacific Rim. Discussing the Pacific as an area-bigger than traditional regions like, say, Southeast Asia-has some parallels in the new Mediterranean Studies (Watkins 2013).

However, I argue that the regional impulse of area studies shifted to, or at least emerged within, Filipino-American scholarship and its concern for empire and US-Philippines relations. While area studies as an academic program did decline, its area impulse thrives in Asian-American Studies departments or in ethnicity departments, the institutional bases from which much Filipino-American scholarship has been conducted. While scholars in these fields are not trained as, or see themselves as area studies specialists, they have produced much work that could well be construed as, or dovetails at least with Philippine Studies, especially when it concerns the American colonial period. For instance, Catherine Choy's *Empire of Care* (2003) deals with the history of Filipino nurse migration to the United States. But parts of her work still discuss the role of the American colonial government in developing nursing as a profession in the Philippines. The overlap is hardly surprising since the early American colonial period was a time when U.S. imperialism clashed, colluded, and mutually influenced Filipino nationalism, resistance, culture, and society.

## V. The transpacific/transnational as an area: objections

As with most scholarly endeavors, straddling two separate fields—Philippine Studies and Filipino-American Studies—is by no means unproblematic, and will obviously elicit concerns and criticisms, if not outright rejection from each camp. Allow me to anticipate and address several issues. The following section engages with critiques of Filipino-American scholarship, which pertain to the integrity of, and boundaries between, Philippine Studies (as area studies) and Filipino-American Studies.

First, area studies scholars themselves are said to be threatened by the new, transnational American Studies. For instance, Rowe writes of an

enormous institutional resistance of scholars trained in area studies, still committed to their specializations, and in some areas, notably "East Asian," "South Asian," "Middle Eastern," and "Latin American," benefiting, rather than suffering, from the collapse of "Southeast Asian

Studies" and "Soviet Studies." Area Studies are alive and well, defending their territories with the determination of scholars whose very existences depend on this fight and have at their command an impressive arsenal of "common-sense" arguments opposing coalitions with "new" American Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Cultural Studies, and virtually any version of "postmodernism" and its assorted complements, "cosmopolitanism" and "post- or neo-Marxism (Rowe 2011: 18).

Such an objection echoes that of Latin American area specialists, who object that a transnational American studies is "simply the next stage of US imperialism stretching from the Monroe doctrine through the Spanish-American war to the Pan-Americanism of the Cold War era" (Rowe 2011: 19). This critique echoes similar claims in the Philippines: that studies of US Empire in the country does not comprise Philippine Studies, but American Studies, which focus more on American activities in the archipelago. This argument has had many advocates, including the late nationalist historian, Teodoro Agoncillo (1958), who once remarked that Philippine history before 1872 was not the history of the Filipinos but of the Spaniards. Some strains of nationalist historiography often insist that Philippine history be told from the viewpoint and interests of Filipinos, who were its rightful agents (Patajo-Legasto 2008).

This insistence forms the basis of several criticisms of Filipino-American scholarship on American imperialism in the Philippines. Most of the criticisms come from the vantage point of Philippine Studies.

..... the imperial turn may mirror some aspects of orientalism in that it distances the study of a people away from those people.....The imperial turn privileges America not through the exoneration of its crimes, but through foregrounding America as a privileged analytic lens. This is an epistemic empire as opposed to a political one.... (Claudio 2014).

Also, the "frameworks" of Asian-American Studies, as applied to Filipino immigration to the US, are "United States-centric" (Tiongson Jr and Campomanes 2008: 216, n8). Aguilar (2015)

likewise cautions against this privileging, which risks imposing the Filipino-American experience on other diasporic communities in, say, Western Asia. This bias dovetails with a relative neglect of sources in Philippine languages.

Much of the recent work on the American empire share with previous scholarship a common shortcoming. This has to do with the failure to engage vernacular source materials and the alternative views of empire, nation, and everyday life that these contain.... The widely known works by Reynaldo Ileto, Milagros Guerrero, Resil Mojares, Bienvenido Lumbera, Soledad Reyes, and others testify to the great richness of vernacular sources and literature in delineating the varied response of colonized subjects. With rare exceptions, American scholarship, unlike British, French, or Dutch scholarship on empire, seems unable to invest the time and cultivate the sensibility required to develop a degree of fluency in the languages of the colonial periphery.... (Rafael 2008: 484).

The focus of Filipino-American scholarship on diaspora studies has elicited some caveats and concerns, if not criticisms. One pertains to the fluidity and heterogeneity of the Filipino diaspora, which is "constituted through internal differences (immigrant from second-generation Filipino gay men; middle-class from working-class Filipinos in Los Angeles; migrant workers abroad from their children and domestic servants in the Philippines), through external differences (bakla from African, Asian, and white American gay men; Filipina from Latina and African American domestic workers)..." (Ponce 2008: 94). One also notes of Aguilar's (2015) problematizing of the Filipino diaspora as a diaspora.

The problems with diaspora are shared by others outside Filipino-American scholarship, who likewise point to the imprecise scope and lack of clear definitions of the term.

When do ethnic communities become diasporas? Are the criteria for such a distinction inherent in the object under study or in the eye of the beholder? Are (im)migrant communities ethnic when placed within a national frame and diasporic when seen from a transnational perspective? Who defines diasporas as diasporas and to what purpose? .....Are diasporas harbingers of a coming reorganization

of society, alternatives to the nation-state, and agents of its necessary dissolution? .... The precise meaning of the term in this connection will not be easy to determine.... Are diasporas communities in exile or in a process of spatial and/or temporal transition? Do migrants eventually become immigrants, and members of diasporas hyphenated citizens? There are evidently great differences within diasporas as well as between them.... (Ickstadt 2007: 7–8).

## VI. Ripostes

The criticisms against the US-centricity of Filipino-American scholarship spring from a defense of Philippine Studies, echoing the nationalist preference for the Filipino point of view in Philippine historiography. At stake are questions of “epistemic privilege” (Hau 2017: 245–89)—who gets to speak to, for, and about the Philippines and Filipinos: is it Filipinos in the Philippines, or Filipinos abroad, or Filipino-Americans?

But this nationalist-inspired criticism posits a too sharp divide between the Filipino and the Filipino-American. Are there absolutely no overlaps? Plus, doesn’t it overlook the fact that even if Filipino-Americans study “what the Americans were doing in the Philippines” and ignore Filipino or vernacular sources, American activities in the Philippines are part and parcel of Filipino history? Even if they tell the story of American imperialism in the country from the perspective of Americans, their work still overlaps with the concerns of Philippine Studies. After all, Filipinos are as much the subjects and objects of historical forces. What was done to them inescapably belongs to their history, which should be studied alongside what they themselves actually did.

The relative lack of engagement with local scholarship and languages is indeed lamentable, and it would indeed thus be ideal if (Filipino-)Americans engage with vernacular sources more often. However, this may be an unfair imposition from an area-studies perspective. Is it reasonable to expect Filipino-American scholars were not trained to be area studies specialists—learning languages and engaging in sources therein—when the impetus of their scholarship arises from different social and historical contexts?

Strictly speaking, Filipino-Americans were not trained in area studies, and many of them came to American academia (the 1990s onward) at a time when that field was already in relative decline. Thus, to expect them to (also) be area studies scholars who study the Philippines would impose an area-studies approach to their scholarship, just as it would equally be an imposition if Filipino scholars based in the Philippines uncritically adopted empire as “an analytical lens.”

These criticisms point to a “cleavage between Philippine Studies in the Philippines, and Philippine Studies in the U.S” (Claudio 2014). This is a divide engendered by different social and intellectual frameworks of both fields. And the charge of the America-centric nature of Filipino-American scholarship on US empire represents an understandable wariness of Philippine Studies scholars, who fear that their Filipino-American colleagues are not doing Philippine Studies right, or are approaching the Philippines from a foreign point of view. Philippinists desire to protect the integrity of the national (the Filipino) over the (Filipino-)American. However, this alleged disciplinary intrusion and flawed perspective overlooks the fact that precisely because both fields have their own assumptions, methodologies, and frameworks, Filipino-American scholarship is *not* doing Philippine Studies, even if it concerns the country. And as much as Filipino-American academics examine American imperialism in the Philippines, they do not claim, or even pretend to be Philippinists to begin with. So, in that sense, they are not encroaching on any one’s turf. If Filipino-Americans conduct their scholarship from different perspectives or intellectual contexts, this should not be taken against them. For to do so would mean insisting, unfairly, that they practice Philippine Studies the way it is practiced by Filipinos.

Moreover, to recognize the differences between Philippine Studies and Filipino-American scholarship foregrounds the independence and autonomy of both fields. There is certainly a cleavage, but is this *ipso facto* to be lamented? Why must we assume that Philippinists in both the Philippines and the United States (if Filipino-Americans are to be considered Philippinists?) should have no cleavages? Aren’t their divergent priorities precisely an opportunity

for continuing dialogue and mutual learning? Can't they simply develop different perspectives on the Philippines, which, when put side-by-side, could deepen knowledge about the country and opening up new perspectives that transcend the division between American and Philippine views? Furthermore, they may differ from each other, but does this preclude an overlap or common ground? Why must we assume in nationalist, anticolonial vein, that Filipino and Filipino-American perspectives should be 100 percent contrary to each other?

## VII. The transnational/transpacific as common ground

The transnational/transpacific serves as a common ground where the concerns of Philippine Studies and Filipino-American Studies overlap, and where interactions between Philippine and (Filipino-)American history can be explored. The relationship of both fields with each other can be described with a Venn Diagram. For example, the work of Catherine Choy on Filipino nurses in the United States straddles the two disciplines. On the one hand, it examines the development of nursing in the Philippines and unpacks the experiences of nurses in the U.S. on the other. Similarly, Denise Cruz's *Transpacific Femininities: The Making of the Modern Filipina* shows how the Philippines' (neo)colonial relationship with the United States helped defined and constructed the gender norms in the (neo)colony. In the meantime, Philippine Studies itself has undergone a transnational turn (Nolasco 2016), which looks Philippine history and society as part of an area-empire, region, etc-larger than the nation-state. For instance, *Patricio Abinales' Making Mindanao Cotabato and Davao in the Formation of the Philippine Nation-State* (2000) looks at, among other things, the role of the American colonial regime, and US domestic affairs, in shaping Philippine politics. Migration studies have also been part of the transnational turn, examining the forged connections between the Philippines and Filipino migrants' destination countries, as well as the impact of migration on Filipino identity and society (Aguilar 2014).

The transnational/transpacific by no means implies one-way



traffic or an imposition from the United States to the Philippines. A two-, even three-way exchange between and among regions is only fitting; McCoy and Scarano (2009: 3) write that “innovations in discrete areas of American colonial governance—from police and prisons to education and environmental management—migrated homeward to influence U.S. state formation in the early decades of the twentieth century”. In this respect, Philippine Studies and Filipino-American Studies—as constitutive of the transnational/transpacific—resembles the notion of a “common culture,” which refers not just to a culture shared by all, but one that everyone has a hand in constructing (Eagleton 2000). With its collaboration of various areas of inquiry, it is also akin to the ideal of Walter Mignolo’s “border thinking,” which

.... brings different kinds of knowledge and actors together in order to displace European modern epistemologies. Critical border thinking engages us in two processes long advocated by pan-African decolonial thinkers: that of ‘decolonizing the mind’ (Fanon 1952/1993; Nkrumah 1970; wa Thiong’o 1986) and of “moving the centre” from its assumed location in the West to a multiplicity of locations in cultural spheres around the world (Amoo-Adare 2017: 277).

Framed this way, the transnational/transpacific does not entail the loss of the autonomy of Philippine Studies and Filipino-American Studies. It can be conceived in ways that are more inclusive yet respectful of independence, the traditional lines of inquiry, and the methodological preferences of each field. A transpacific history covers “.... the study of Chinese diaspora and maritime networks, Southeast Asian studies, Pacific Islander studies, Asian American studies, and the historical fields of U.S. immigration and ethnicity, U.S. race relations, the U.S. early national era, and modern Japan” (Kurashige, Hsu, Yaguchi 2014: 183–184). These topics are independent fields of inquiry, and by themselves do not always have a “trans” component. Clearly, however, that does not preclude their inclusion in a transnational/transpacific inquiry. In the same way, why can’t a transpacific/transnational history cover the American imperial bureaucracy and Filipino peasant revolts? Each field can stand alone, and not all studies therein have to have

a transnational dimension to be part of transnational/transpacific history.

Furthermore, the transnational/transpacific need not entail a totalizing impulse that unites all fields of inquiry under Philippine Studies and Filipino-American Studies, a stance unlike that by Kurashige, Hsu, and Yaguchi (2014: 183-184), who write, “While recent historical studies of transnational processes, persons, and events within and across the Pacific Ocean have proliferated, they have yet to cohere as part of a single scholarly field”. The issue editors continue, “instead, they stand as hybrid studies bridging two or more conventional fields, including histories of the American West, US immigration and ethnicity, US diplomatic and international relations, Asian American studies, East Asian studies, and Pacific Islander studies”. But there is no reason to suppose, and it is unfair to expect, that transpacific historiography—given all its diversity—should cohere “as part of a single scholarly field.” For instance, a transpacific history may cover, say, a study of Filipino-American struggles for identity in the United States, and a monograph examining the identity of Filipinos residing in the Philippine nation-state. But their being part of one field—transpacific/transnational—need not mean that both studies have to cohere. They can be compared for sure, but that is another matter altogether. As it is, the two studies maintain their autonomy and independence from each other without ceasing to be part of a larger scholarly enterprise. Indeed, *Pinoy Capital: The Filipino Nation in Daly City* (Vergara 2005), which talks about the lives of Filipinos in Daly City in California, is classified mainly as Asian-American Studies while, say, *Authentic but Not Exotic: Essays on Filipino Identity* (Zialcita 2005) falls under Philippine Studies. Both have little to do with each other, but they are both part of an area that is the transpacific/transnational. This belongingness is akin to the relationship between Southeast Asian Studies, and the country studies it consists of. Southeast Asian Studies exists as a field of inquiry, but not at the expense of, say, Philippine Studies, Thai Studies, Indonesian Studies, and so on. Individual country studies can stand alone without ceasing to be part of Southeast Asian Studies.

Lastly, transnational studies have also been criticized precisely because it blurs disciplinary boundaries. One scholar writes, “as much as I accept the relevance of transnational studies, I have yet difficulties imagining such a field in terms of teaching and research—how it can be organized, intellectually and structurally; how its scope can be defined and delimited; and how it can be taught in its social and cultural diversity....” (Ickstadt 2007: 7–8).

These are legitimate points, but it is strange to read these remarks, especially since area studies itself has always been hospitable to, and even more conducive to, the interaction and cross-pollination of various disciplines. It has always been interdisciplinary. It is true that a reconstitution of the transpacific/transnational as an area risks expanding and blurring the boundaries between and among Philippine Studies and Filipino-American Studies. But this particular confounding need not be seen as a flaw, for the transpacific/transnational works as an area precisely because of their inclusive and broad applicability across all regions and nations. The confusion, confounding, and conflation that inhere between and among these areas of inquiry are less a drawback than an opportunity for interdisciplinary dialogue and exchange, a model of openness, and the *raison d’être* that made area studies possible and desirable. The very fact that scholars contest the boundaries and relationships among different fields of inquiry is part of the transnational enterprise, not an impediment thereto. It is a strength, rather than a weakness. In this respect, I take inspiration from Campomanes (Tiongson Jr and Campomanes 2008: 42), who discusses the complexities and nuances of terms such as Filipino and Filipino-Americans and remarks that “I prefer to work from this confounding... rather than insist on particularity and disarticulation...”

## VIII. Moving on

In bringing together Philippine Studies and Filipino-American Studies and their parallels with transnational/transpacific historiography, I follow the lead of recent academic work that has likewise broached the possibilities of diaspora and/or transnational

studies for area studies. Aguilar (2015: 451) writes that “although possibly anathema to ‘Filipino studies’ – as it could restore preeminence to area studies – scholars of diaspora stress that the homeland, whether empirical or imaginary, is crucial in constituting the basis of collective identity”. Heinz Ickstadt speaks of “American Studies as Area Studies as Transnational Studies? A European Perspective” (2007). Even some Filipino-American scholars have recognized the intersections among their field, transnational studies, and area studies. Surveying works on Asian-American history, Espiritu (2008: 181) notes that “...there is a new and developing transnational history that can be read from an area studies as well as an ethnic studies approach, and in many cases even from a comparative colonialism standpoint.”

What’s next for Philippine Studies and Filipino-American Studies? Like a couple about to divorce, each field can simply go its separate ways. Given their differences, both will continue on their respective trajectories and break new ground. But these differences do not preclude dialogue as a part of transnational-transpacific studies; they can enrich their respective contributions thereto. They each have something more to bring to the table, as it were. This dialogue can simply involve reading or juxtaposing each other’s works, though practitioners of both fields need not do this themselves. But in this exchange, both fields learn from and fill gaps in each other’s work, despite their different research agendas and intellectual contexts, and push the boundaries of scholarship further. Indeed, the work of Filipino-Americans has shed additional light on the American colonial period in the Philippines. And what if these studies are then placed side-by-side with Filipino perspectives? Will we find overlapping concerns as well as contrary viewpoints?

This dialogue and juxtaposition also point to a mutual imbrication of perspectives. And their differences conceal an underlying similarity or affinity even so. Such linkages are already evident in more recent scholarship, including those for the early American colonial period, where the opposition between the Filipino and American collapses. Contrary to nationalist scholarship in the Philippines, the line between the two is not always clear-cut. Philippine history from 1898–1946 was as much about conflict and

collaboration between Filipinos and Americans. There was rejection of, and resistance to, the American imperial project, but there was also—for better or worse—mutual influence. Emblematic of this hybrid thinking is a remark by Oscar Campomanes (Tiongson Jr and Campomanes 2008: 42), for whom the term, Filipino American, is a “redundancy.” “To be Filipino,” he said, “is to be American.” It is from this kind of paradox that the transnational/transpacific as an area takes off.

## IX. Conclusion

I have argued that the intersections between Philippine Studies and Filipino-American Studies points to the viability of the transnational/transpacific as an area that spans the United States and the Philippines (if not Southeast Asia) and incorporates many disciplinary areas of inquiry. I anticipated and addressed several objections and criticisms to this reconstitution, and I argued that the breaking down of boundaries is less of a problem and impediment than an opportunity for interdisciplinary dialogue that has always been the *raison d'être* of area studies.

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## Transnational Studies and Attempts at Inclusivity



Maria Serena I. Diokno\*

### [ *Abstract* ]

This paper provides comments on Janus Nolasco's paper and the role that transnational or transpacific studies can play in overcoming the division between Philippine Studies (area studies) and Filipino-American scholarship. It draws attention to the fact that the crossing of localities and boundaries is always historically grounded and that the historical contexts in which Filipino diasporic communities are located vary one from another. It also considers the antecedents of more inclusive approaches to understanding the past and the present, and historical agency.

**Keywords:** translocalities, transnational studies, Philippine Studies, Filipino-American scholarship, historical context, agency

Janus Nolasco makes an interesting argument about the capacity of transnational or transpacific studies to encompass Philippine (and more broadly, Southeast Asian) studies, which are oriented toward the Philippines/Southeast Asia, and Filipino/Asian-American studies,

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\* Professor of History, University of the Philippines, Diliman, [maris@diokno.org](mailto:maris@diokno.org)

which examine the life and place of Filipinos/Asians and Filipino/Asian communities in the USA in the past and the present. He also maintains that in a sense, the imprecision or open-mindedness of transnational studies is a virtue rather than a weakness because it enables this emerging field to take in a broad range of themes, frameworks, and approaches to the study of Filipinos and the Philippines. Philippine studies, he concludes, can happily co-exist with transnational American studies.

And, indeed, it can, just as Philippine studies can stand alongside global studies that examine movements and themes that cross and cut across localities and regions of the world. What is important is to keep in mind that the mobility or crossing of localities is always historically grounded and that the conditions in which these translocalities developed are entirely different from one another even if their end destination is, in the case of Filipino Americans, the United States. The historicities of Filipino diasporic communities in the USA are not exactly the same and neither are their contexts. Even the resulting identities and affiliations are different, which explains the diversity of Filipino-American scholarship, notwithstanding the effort to recover empire, as Nolasco puts it. In fact, a good number of the titles Nolasco cites in his paper speak of US translocalities rather than of the Philippines, such as Choy's *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino-American History* (2003), Isaac's *American Tropics: Articulating Filipino-America* (2006), Baldoz's *The Third Asiatic Invasion: Empire and Migration in Filipino America* (2011), and Balce's *Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive* (2016).

The effort within American studies to broaden its ranks toward transnational studies is, as Nolasco points out, a response to the reality that the USA "is itself a transnational circuit of physical, economic, and cultural exchanges whose dominion extends to regions that cannot be contained within the nation's geographical territory" (Shue and Pease 2015: 2, cited in Nolasco). This call for a broader outlook is in one sense a form of restitution, and it might help if we were to also consider the antecedents that sought a more inclusive approach to and understanding of the past and the present. The earlier antecedent is the attempt by UNESCO in the

late 1940s to produce history materials aimed at “international understanding” by including in historical works, the everyday life of people and not just national events that typically edify the nation. UNESCO reasoned that greater inclusivity would highlight the common humanity that binds all peoples and races.

If the teaching of history in the past has not always helped to bring nations closer to one another, this can often be attributed to the nature of the subject matter taught: a mutilated history, limited to a chronicle of political conflicts resolved by wars. All too often everything has been omitted which, in the interludes between great national events, makes up the real life of a people and the history of humanity: everyday existence, ways of life and national customs, interchange of ideas, scientific improvements, and the common heritage of literature and the arts. Without in any way attempting to eliminate or even to curtail the teaching of political and military events, Unesco aims at restoring the balance between the various factors that enter into the historical process, thereby enriching the contribution of history to the development of international understanding. (Foreword to Febvre and Crouzet 1951: 1)

For this reason, in 1949 UNESCO commissioned Annales historians Lucien Febvre and François Crouzet to produce a textbook history of France. The resulting manuscript, titled “International Origins of a National Culture: Experimental Materials for a History of France,” was novel, intriguing and, I imagine, unsettling to some. The two renowned historians explained, for instance, how even the simplest things commonly assumed as French, such as the chestnut tree, had originated from Asia in the early 17th century, and how ‘classic’ French food such as green beans, potatoes, and tomatoes came from the New World and citrus, from Asia. As the authors asserted:

When we come to consider it, we see that there is nothing in this splendid structure of France that we French can claim as our own single-handed achievement except the act of creation itself, the art of the building and the general style of the whole; there is nothing else which can be called our own exclusive property. All the materials our forefathers used to build their civilization, the civilization of France, they took wherever they were to be found,

wherever they were to be taken, from every quarter and from every hand.

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When we consider the great events in our history – the history of France – we see that not a single one of them, however definitely it may appear to bear the stamp of French genius, could have taken place, had it not been foreshadowed, in some cases, induced, and anyway given a particular turn, by the joint endeavours of other countries, other peoples and other nations. (Febvre and Crouzet 1951: 3-4)

The purpose of this international outlook was neither to denigrate France nor adulate external influences, but to highlight the membership of the French in the larger community of humankind. Now what happened to the textbook? Hunt points out that it did not see print until sixty-three years later (Paris 2012) because of objections from “those who disliked its de-emphasis on the nation and Europe.” (Hunt 2014: 47)

The fate of this inclusive textbook is not unlike the National History Standards that spurred the history wars in the USA in the 1990s. This second strand, more recent than the UNESCO attempt, was directed not only at competence-based history learning (by exposing American students to excerpts of primary texts) but also at a more inclusive history of the United States. As Nash explains (1997), inclusivity embraces the uncomfortable parts of history, the silenced voices and those forgotten or ignored. The project was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), then headed by Lynne Cheney, a historian in her own right. Cheney, predicting what she called “the end of history” (1994), and conservative pundits like Rush Limbaugh lambasted the standards as biased, unobjective, and unfair to the American nation and people. As an example of this highly politicized history, Cheney pointed out that McCarthy and the Ku Klux Klan, for instance, were mentioned 19 and 17 times, respectively, while Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address and Ulysses S. Grant were each cited only once, and Paul Revere, J. P. Morgan, and the Wright Brothers, not at all.

Taken, therefore, from a larger historical context, the recent

move in American historiography toward transnational studies continues the effort toward an inclusive history though framed in 21st century conditions. What this new effort assures is the place of Filipino-American studies within a transnational or transpacific strand of American studies, regardless of whether Southeast Asian studies, within which Philippine studies are positioned, wither away or survive in the near future.

The other concern Nolasco raises deals with who possesses the authority to speak on behalf of the Philippines (Hau 2014, cited in Nolasco). This question relates to the more fundamental historical tenet of agency not only in the making of history (as it happens) but also in the writing of history (as it happened). Of late it appears that Filipino-Americans have become more aggressive politically in making their voices heard in American textbooks. In 2013, the governor of California signed into law the requirement that the narrative of Filipino-American farm workers be included in the history curriculum of schools in the state. The bill's sponsor, Assembly member Rob Bonta, speaking on behalf of the Filipino American community, explained that the measure aimed

to supplement California's rich farm worker history with the contributions of the Filipino American community. The Filipino American population composes the largest Asian population in California and continues to grow; yet the story of Filipinos and their crucial efforts ... [in] the farm labor movement ... [are] an untold part of California history. ("Governor Signs Bonta's Filipino American Farm Worker Bill, AB 123," 2 October 2013)

The addition of Filipinos to the current narrative dominated by Mexican American labor leaders César Chávez and Dolores Huerta fills a gap in the curriculum of California schools that omits, for example, the Delano Grape Strike of 1965, which was led by the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), composed of first generation Filipinos. After the strike, the Chávez- and Huerta-led National Farm Workers Association combined forces with the AWOC. The growth in membership—mostly Filipino and Mexican—was phenomenal: from some 2,000 in 1966 to 10,000 in 1970. The Governor's press release asserts that with the passage of

the law, California students will now be given “a more complete account of California’s farm labor movement and ensure that these important leaders, such as Philip Vera Cruz and Larry Itliong, are remembered by future generations of Californians.” (Ibid.)

In a way these efforts and those of local historical societies such as the Filipino-American National Historical Society (33 chapters strong) are “vernacular sources” (to borrow Rafael’s term, 2008: 484, cited in Nolasco) of Filipino-American studies that scholarship in the USA would do well not to ignore. The public practice of history is another exercise of agency in writing about the past and the authority to do so is shared by academic and public historians alike.

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## Southeast Asia as Theoretical Laboratory for the World



Oscar Salemink\*

### [ *Abstract* ]

Area studies are sometimes framed as focused on specific localities, rooted in deep linguistic, cultural and historical knowledge, and hence empirically rich but, as a result, as yielding non-transferable/non-translatable findings and hence as theoretically poor. In Europe and North America some social science disciplines like sociology, economics and political science routinely dismiss any reference to local specifics as parochial “noise” interfering with their universalizing pretensions which in reality obscure their own Euro-American parochialism. For more qualitatively oriented disciplines like history, anthropology and cultural studies the inherent non-universality of (geographically constricted) area studies presents a predicament which is increasingly fought out by resorting to philosophical concepts which usually have a Eurocentric pedigree. In this paper, however, I argue that concepts with arguably European pedigree – like religion, culture, identity, heritage and art – travel around the world and are adopted through vernacular discourses that are specific to locally inflected histories and cultural

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\* Professor in the Anthropology of Asia, University of Copenhagen,  
o.salemink@anthro.ku.dk

contexts by annexing existing vocabularies as linguistic vehicles. In the process, these vernacularized “universal” concepts acquire different meanings or connotations, and can be used as powerful devices in local discursive fields. The study of these processes offer at once a powerful antidote against simplistic notions of “global”/“universal” and “local,” and a potential corrective to localizing parochialism and blindly Eurocentric universalism. I develop this substantive argument with reference to my own professional, disciplinary and theoretical trajectory as an anthropologist and historian focusing on Vietnam, who used that experience – and the empirical puzzles and wonder encountered – in order to develop theoretical interests and questions that became the basis for larger-scale, comparative research projects in Japan, China, India, South Africa, Brazil and Europe. The subsequent challenge is to bring the results of such larger, comparative research “home” to Vietnam in a meaningful way, and thus overcome the limitations of both area studies and Eurocentric disciplines.

**Keywords:** Area Studies, Eurocentric concepts, Vernacular discourses, Comparisons, Cultural production, Vietnam

## **I . The field of Vietnam as a laboratory for theorizing**

For more than three decades since 1987 I have been perfectly happy to describe myself as an anthropologist and historian of Vietnam, having invested heavily in learning the language and in establishing networks during the more than ten years that I spent in the country in my various capacities as a student, researcher, teacher and development professional. While focusing on one country, my thematic interests traveled to different substantive topics. I started my career with an interest in ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands and in the ways that they were integrated into the subsequent precolonial, colonial, neocolonial and postcolonial states from 1850 onwards. The encounters between Highlanders and outsiders generated knowledge that we usually call “ethnographic knowledge”. I traced the genesis and development of the various

ethnographic discourses about the Central Highlanders, linking the production of specific textual foci and tropes with the historical contexts giving rise to these encounters and with the specific political and economic interests of the ethnographers – be they Catholic missionaries, military explorers, colonial administrators, plantation owners, military officers, journalists or professional anthropologists. On the other hand, I traced the impact of these ethnographic discourses on the Highlanders who were represented through these discourses, in terms of (loss of) land rights, of ethnic identification (tribalization, ethnicization), gender transformation and religious conversion. This resulted in a PhD thesis, a monograph, and two edited volumes on the history of anthropology.

After 2001 I began to focus on religious change in Vietnam, not just among the Central Highlanders (who converted massively to Evangelical Protestantism in the 1990s and 2000s), but also among other Highlanders and among lowland Vietnamese in various parts of the country (Salemink 2003a; 2003b; 2004; 2015). This interest was triggered by the religious efflorescence which became apparent in the 2000s. This substantive interest took me out of the Central Highlands – which had become mostly inaccessible to foreign researchers because of political developments – into various parts of Vietnam, including the northern, central and southern lowlands and some of the bigger cities (Salemink 2007a; 2007b; Turner and Salemink 2015). In other words, while I extended my interest geographically to many other parts of Vietnam, I remained firmly focused on Vietnam in my empirical research. My interest in a wide variety of religious practices – including Buddhism, Christianity, Islam but especially various forms of spirit possession – in various parts of Vietnam allowed me to conceptualize post-Revolutionary Vietnam as a veritable religious laboratory which enabled me to question the usual categorical distinctions and classifications regarding the religious and the secular, the sacred and the profane. After all, in contrast with Weberian prophesies concerning rationalization, secularization and disenchantment there is a growing awareness that the world is embracing a plurality of “modernities” that are often defined as religious rather than secular (Hefner 1998; Van der Veer 1996). Globally, this is evidenced by the growing social

visibility of religious beliefs and practices in the public sphere (Casanova 1994; Turner 2006a) and – within Europe – by enhanced religious plurality as a result of migration and religious experimentation (Katzenstein and Byrnes 2006; Turner 2006b).

Yet, in spite of Asad's (1993; 2003) analysis of religious and secular categories as genealogically and historically connected, Eurocentric assumptions of religion as a discrete category denoting a separate domain of social and cultural practice still dominate scholarly and public debate. Thus, conceptual dichotomies between the religious domain and this-worldly, secular domains of political and economic practice are kept in place. As secularization in Europe is historically connected with the separation between church and state, one could question whether Western categories of religion and the secular make sense in other parts of the world (Kipnis 2001; Turner 2006a). Raymond Lee asserts that secularization in Asia assumes the form of individualization of religious choice and a concomitant competition for local religious “consumers” in a globalized religious market that is both local and simultaneously integrated into national spheres and transnational networks (Lee 1993; Turner 2004; Salemink 2007b). In Vietnam's impressive “religioscape” (cf. Appadurai 1996; Turner 2006a) more or less institutionalized religions like Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Sinitic religious ideologies of Confucianism and Daoism are practiced side by side with local community religions or in combination with spirit or ancestor worship.

It is a truism to state that religious beliefs and ritual practices have made a “come-back” in post-*Đổi mới* Vietnam, as is obvious from the expansion of religious organizations, the proliferation of ritual practices and the seeming ubiquity of pilgrimages, festival and other events. This observation of a religious revival – evidenced by the currency of such terms as *đạo* [(religious) ethics / creed], *tôn giáo* [religion], *tín ngưỡng* [(religious) beliefs], *dị giáo* [heresy], *mê tín dị đoan* [superstition], *sùng bái* [pray(er)], *thờ cúng* [worship], *ngghi lễ* [ritual], *linh thiêng* [miraculous / enchanted], *giác ngộ* [enlightenment / consciousness], *tinh thần* [spiritual], *thiêng liêng* [sacred] – is predicated on two assumptions. The first is that this ‘religionization’ follows on a period of secularization, actively promoted by the Communist

Party before 1986. The second assumption is that the distinction and the boundaries between the religious and the secular, between sacred and profane, are clear and unambiguous. Neither of these two assumptions, however, hold against available evidence, as the communist and capitalist projects can be analyzed as political religions as well (Salemink 2003b; 2004). In other words, as a hotspot of neoliberal globalization and rapid cultural change, post-Revolutionary Vietnam can be regarded as a religious laboratory and Vietnam constituting a promising field for theorizing the study of contemporary religion. From this geographically bounded field of Vietnam – which I re-baptized a religious laboratory – I engaged with theorizing about Asian forms of religion and secularism, both in Vietnam and in other parts of Asia, and published a number of theoretically inclined papers and edited a number of collective volumes, including the *Routledge Handbook of Religions in Asia* (Turner and Salemink 2015).

To a large extent my reconceptualization of Vietnam as a religious laboratory was in line with wider trends within anthropology that sought to reconceptualize the Malinowskian “field” as a spatial metaphor derived from biology, namely the geographically bounded, often far-away site where the “fieldwork” takes place and which forms at once the methodological basis for the ethnographic encounter and the object of ethnographic description and analysis. In his book *Localizing Strategies: Regional traditions of ethnographic writing* Richard Fardon (1990) had shown that this geographic focus of anthropology (and, of course, of area studies) gave rise to distinctly different thematic, analytical and theoretical emphases in different parts of the world. At the time of the publication of Fardon’s book, for instance, one would look in vain for studies of social and political movements in Asia, whereas Latin America would be a fertile field for theorizing about social movements – not because Asia lacked social and political movements, but rather because Asian protagonists might use a different vocabulary and especially because scholars would engage with an established anthropological canon and discursively re-inscribe the categories used in that canon.

In the mid-1990s this notion of the geographically bounded

field came under attack from the likes of Arjun Appadurai, Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, and George Marcus. In “The production of locality”, Appadurai (1996) argued that locality and the spatialized sense of belonging associated with it – which he calls “neighborhood” – is not a given but a fragile accomplishment against the backdrop of perennial change and (internal and external) threats to cohesion. Locality must be constantly produced and re-produced through, for example, ritual and kinship work and Appadurai suggests therefore to reinterpret the anthropological canon as ways to produce locality than as depictions of the status quo. In *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*, Gupta and Ferguson (1997) move away from the concept of the anthropological field as a bounded spatial site towards the concept of the field as a political location with its localized historical, linguistic and cultural peculiarities, simultaneously connected up with other places and larger contexts, and hence subject to outside interventions – including ethnographic interventions. Finally, in “Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography” George Marcus (1995) then drew the methodological consequence from the unpacking of the ethnographic “field” as a bounded, unitary site of encounter by proposing to do multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in various – and variously interconnected – places. Regardless of their theoretical and methodological innovations, these authors nevertheless re-inscribed spatialized notions of the “field” as a site – however contextualized, connected up and cross-cut – or as a multitude of sites of ethnographic encounter, thus remaining firmly tied up with spatialized notions of the field prevalent in both anthropological and area studies.

## **II . The field of cultural production**

Around the same time that religion appeared on the forefront in Vietnam (seducing many Vietnamese and international scholars to study religious practices), the country rapidly developed a “heritage craze.” Since the 1993 inscription of the former imperial capital of Huế on the World Heritage List, Vietnam has made great efforts to

have its cultural heritage recognized by UNESCO as world heritage. Belatedly beginning with its monumental (Huế town, Hội An town, Mỹ Sơn temple complex, Thăng Long citadel, Hồ dynasty citadel), natural (Hạ Long Bay and Phong Nha Kẻ Bàng national park) and mixed heritage (Tràng An landscape complex), Vietnam has more recently focused on its “Intangible Cultural Heritage” (abbreviated by UNESCO as ‘ICH’). In 1994 Vietnam hosted UNESCO’s first ICH “expert meeting” on the cultures of ethnic minorities and of Huế, and invited me to be the “rapporteur” for the first meeting on ethnic minority cultures, and subsequently the editor of its first country-specific volume on ICH (see below). Even before the ICH lists were formalized, *nhã nhạc* court music from Huế was recognized as a cultural treasure (in 2003, the year of the ICH Convention), and in 2005 the gong music (*không gian văn hóa cồng chiêng*) of ethnic minorities in Vietnam’s Central Highlands. In addition, since 2009, *Quan họ*, *Ca trù*, *Xoan* and *Đon ca tài tử*, *Ví* and *Giặm* singing and the *Gióng* Festival of Phù Đổng and Sóc temples and the Worship of the Hùng kings in Phú Thọ, Tugging rituals and games (in Cambodia, Korea, the Philippines and Vietnam), Practices related to the Viet beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms (northern Vietnam), and the art of Bài Chòi in Central Viet Nam have been inscribed. In total, since 2003 12 ICH “elements” have been inscribed by UNESCO, with the nomination of Practices of Then by Tày, Nùng and Thái ethnic groups in Vietnam pending.

In contrast with World Heritage, ICH focuses on cultural practices, which have historically been the object of anthropological research. Much like the booming interest in religious practice among Vietnamese and foreign scholars, I witnessed a similar interest in cultural heritage, but primarily among my Vietnamese colleagues rather than my international colleagues. Since this interest in cultural heritage emerged within my geo-ethnographic field of Vietnam, I also became involved at an early stage of “ICH development” in Vietnam as rapporteur for the 1994 UNESCO expert meeting in Hanoi. This developed into an edited book project for UNESCO Publishing’s Memory of Peoples book series, and which was published in three languages (*Viet Nam’s Cultural Diversity*:

*Approaches to Preservation and Diversité culturelle au Viet Nam: enjeux multiples, approches plurielles* [2001]; *Tính đa dạng của văn hóa Việt Nam: Những tiếp cận về sự bảo tồn* [2002]). Yet the editorial experience made me unenthusiastic about working for or with UNESCO – which I felt was an impossible organization to work with – or indeed for working on the question of cultural heritage – which I felt was a theoretically stale topic within the UNESCO parameters. But towards the end of the 2000s I was – like my Vietnamese colleagues – gripped by the “heritage fever” when I was invited to take part in their projects and to critically reflect on heritage as process – as “heritagization” – with myriad interlocking dimensions (spatial, temporal, cultural, religious, social, economic, political) which intersected various social domains.

My interest in heritage and especially in what might be termed the “heritagization of living culture” in Vietnam was piqued in different ways, which somehow came together in 2009. Firstly, I was invited to a conference organized on the side of a major celebration in Pleiku in Vietnam’s Central Highlands of the UNESCO recognition of “The space of Gong Culture” as ICH. The event was unforgettable as a travesty of everything that was special, remarkable and sacred about the ritual gong music that I had experienced during my ethnographic research in that region. It taught me that ICH recognition does not necessarily and inevitably produce the results desired by UNESCO. Secondly, I participated in a Harvard workshop on property in Vietnam, convened by Professor Hue-Tam Ho Tai, where I presented a paper on intangible cultural heritage as a form of property – or rather: as political appropriation – which was eventually published in a volume on *State, Society and the Market in Contemporary Vietnam* edited by Mark Sidel and Hue-Tam Ho Tai (2013). A few years later, I was invited by Vietnamese colleagues to be an advisor of an independent assessment of the social and cultural effects of UNESCO recognition of four different ICH “elements” in a number of different locations in Vietnam. The results were mixed but, according to my Vietnamese colleagues, tended to disenfranchise the local heritage communities or constituencies. During the meeting in 2011 I used the Vietnamese neologism *di sản hóa* [heritagization] which was quickly adopted in



the meeting as a term that covered the various heritage-related processes on the ground. The report (issued in 2012) was published in 2014 in a volume on *Di sản văn hóa trong xã hội Việt Nam đương đại* [Cultural heritage in contemporary Vietnamese society] edited by Lê Hồng Lý and Nguyễn Thị Phương Châm (2014).

Gripped by the analytical potential of the concept of heritagization – which has been coined in the late 1980s but had enjoyed fairly limited traction until the mid-2000s – I explored the literature in the anthropology of heritage and in critical heritage studies which I now discovered to be an exciting empirical field with analytical and theoretical potential (see Salemink 2016). This field was not a spatial one evoking specific geographic, national or otherwise spatial delimitations – like Vietnam – but indeed a field understood as a specific subset of social or cultural dimensions of life. This brings us to the non-spatial definition of “field” that the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu coined in “The field of cultural production” (1993 – or. 1983; see also Bourdieu 2005), where he proposed a radically different conception of field, made possible by his ruminations about the field as a system of position-takings within a substantive domain (of arts and “high culture”). For Bourdieu, “the field of cultural production” is at once hierarchically encompassed within a larger capitalist system and relatively autonomous as predicated on “degree specific consecration” (Bourdieu 1993: 34-8). This non-spatial, analytical definition of “field” is made possible by an un-reflected ethnocentric focus on the West – in particular France – which, as metropolitan center, did not seem to require the same historical and cultural contextualization and spatial circumscription as “marginal” fields outside of Europe. In spite of the implicit ethnocentrism in Bourdieu’s approach to the field, his recasting of the field from a spatialized metaphor to an analytical concept as a system of power-related position-takings potentially creates space for a view of the field – or better: of *fields* in plural – that does not re-inscribe its boundaries while seeking to overcome them. This was a position that I eventually found myself thrown into because of external funding requirements, but only after developing a renewed interest in cultural heritage, following developments in Vietnamese society.

### **III. Funding constraints and theoretical opportunities**

In February 2011 I moved from the Netherlands to Denmark for a variety of personal and professional reasons. Although I had left a full professorship in Amsterdam for another full professorship in Copenhagen, I knew very little about Danish academia and felt that in practical and professional terms I had to start all over again, lacking networks and indeed credibility in my new academic home. One expectation that I encountered was that I would write successful grant applications, which is not easy in an unfamiliar place. One thing that I found out quickly was that to enhance chances of success, grant applications needed to have some connection with Denmark or at least Europe, which is an obvious constraint for someone who had staked his career on research in Southeast Asia. It meant that I could not be content with defining my empirical field in narrow spatial terms: Vietnam or Southeast Asia. Instead, it forced me to think creatively and work with the theoretical insights that I was developing on the basis of my Vietnam material in order to travel those concepts to other parts of the world. In other words, I had to redefine my spatially-defined field as an analytically-defined, Bourdieuan field. With heritage, and the multiple dimensions and intersections of heritagization, I had developed the theoretical toolbox to conquer Denmark's and Europe's research funding bodies.

One such idea for a funding application was a more or less direct result from my empirical and analytical preoccupations in Vietnam, namely related to heritage and to religion. In Vietnam I observed that many sites, object and practices that are recognized as cultural heritage – material or intangible, by the state or by UNESCO – are simultaneously perceived and experienced as religious. For Vietnam we can think of sacred sites such as temples (in Huế and Hội An; the temple of the Hùng kings in Phú Thọ; ancient Chăm towers, etc.); sacred objects (including statues, reliquaries and amulets in temples); and ritual practices (like gong music played at funerals and other life cycle rituals, for instance). With this hint I looked in other places and found that with the increased recognition of shared heritage after the devastation of

World War II, buttressed by UNESCO's 1972 and 2003 heritage conventions (Meskell 2013), a process of heritagization of religious sites, objects, and practices was initiated around the world under the auspices of expert knowledge, authentication, and the simultaneous emergence of mass tourism (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Hitchcock et al. 2010). This is not an uncontested process as heritagization implies a secular gaze on things that are often experienced as religious (Paine 2013), which may lead to tensions, conflicts and even destruction. The global criteria for heritage recognition, as brought out in the UNESCO heritage conventions, are secular in nature in the sense of immanent, predicated on this-worldly values—cultural, aesthetic, historical, communitarian—but never or seldom on transcendental, religious values. In that sense, validating specific religious sites and objects as cultural heritage partly secularizes them, and potentially desecrates them by overlaying their sacred character and religious uses with a secular heritage gaze.

But heritagization may also sacralize such sites, objects and practices, to the extent that heritage recognition renders them non-every day and non-profane, to be separated from the everyday, treated with awe and contemplated for their inherent values. Thus, while heritagization comprises a secular gaze, it simultaneously authenticates, validates and *sacralizes* specific sites, objects and practices not for their inherently religious aspects, but for their *secular* meanings for specific populations (nations, ethnic groups, religious communities) or for humankind in forging a temporal connection between present and past, and through conservation with the future (Fillitz & Saris 2013; Lowenthal 1998). As pointed out by Meyer and De Witte in their Introduction to a special issue on "Heritage and the Sacred": "Not unlike religion, heritage formation involves some kind of sacralization, through which cultural forms are lifted up and set apart so as to be able to speak of what is considered to be central to social life" (Meyer and De Witte 2013: 276).

The governance of religion and of cultural heritage implies very different attitudes: For instance, if a site, object or practice is considered religious, then the (liberal) state must take a backseat,

foregrounding the principle of freedom of religion. If the same object is considered heritage however, then the state must take a front seat and assume responsibility for protection. On a more bottom up level, these different attitudes manifest themselves in the practices involved in recognition and maintenance of heritage. Local and national, religious and secular sentiments play overlapping roles. What is more, both heritage and religion depend on everyday commitments of volunteers and non-professionals whose commitment impacts and is impacted by the processes of sacralization as outlined above. Inversely, the role of the state in recognizing heritage means that minority religions might have more difficulty in gaining public recognition, protection and financial assistance in highlighting cultural relevance. In short, these two forms of sacralization are not mutually exclusive and in practice the heritage and religion labels oftentimes function as mutual authentication, but they may evoke tensions and conflict as well. It is this mutual authentication and mutual tension that are at the heart of this equation.

I translated these ideas into a Europe-wide project involving research partners in five different European countries as well as non-academic partners like museums, NGOs and media organizations. The resulting project application, titled “The heritagization of religion and the sacralization of heritage in contemporary Europe,” was funded in 2016 and focuses on the heritagization of religious sites, objects and practices in relation to religious and secular experiences connected to these, thereby exploring secular and religious forms of sacralization. The project plays into a European anxiety about cultural heritage which since World War II is increasingly seen as defining identities in times of change. The project seeks to understand the consequences of the heritagization of religious sites, objects and practices which were not considered heritage before. Where the object of heritage is experienced as religious, heritagization may lead to tensions and conflicts as it involves an explicitly secular gaze that sacralizes non-religious aspects of religious sites, objects and practices in a cultural, historical, or otherwise secular, immanent frame. Sometimes this creates tensions between religious and secular forms of sacralizing

heritage. As heritage and religion are studied by separate disciplines and subject to different policies, this process is poorly understood – both theoretically and practically, which the project promises to remedy by producing new insight which can be used to understand, manage and defuse tensions, benefiting both religious and heritage constituencies within Europe. In other words, I suddenly reinvented myself as a scholar of Europe, but focusing on the “field of heritage.”

For another project I was inspired by Michael Herzfeld’s notion of the “global hierarchy of value” (Herzfeld 2004), which is a classificatory concept that he developed with reference to his seminal work on cultural heritage. Oftentimes, the heritage of today is the art of yesterday, which would imply that today’s “global hierarchy of value” is predicated on yesterday’s art production. But in a globalizing world characterized by a rapidly changing geopolitical constellation it would be a valid question to ask how today’s worldwide artistic production, circulation, collection and exhibition of art in museums and other artistic venues articulate possibly shifting global hierarchies of value, given the global rise of the BRICS countries (Brazil, India, China, South Africa), especially China. I had been grappling with similar questions in the early stage of my career when I researched and published on the history of anthropology in its wider historical – social, political, economic and cultural – context. While I was interested in continuing to do research in Asia, I knew that such research could not be done in Vietnam, but that it had to involve major emerging nations with established or emergent art scenes, such as China, Japan, India, Brazil and South Africa.

But in order to “sell” the project to the Independent Research Fund Denmark I knew I had to create a connection with “home,” so I called the project “Global Europe: Constituting Europe from the outside in through artefacts,” and again playing into present-day European anxieties about loss of power and identity. The project, funded in 2015 as a major “advanced grant” of which only five per year are awarded across all disciplines, investigates the idea of Europe – as continent, as civilization, as social imaginary, as transnational territorial institution – which has been studied from

various disciplines, but usually from within Europe. Historically, the idea of Europe emerged through the collection, circulation, classification and museum exhibition of objects from outside of Europe – Africa, Asia and the America – in the curiosity cabinets of the early modern period when Europe rose to world dominance. The heirs of the curiosity cabinets – museums – became public institutions that classified and exhibited the nation and the world in a hierarchical manner, and that as exhibitionary technologies were imposed and/or adopted in colonial, neocolonial and postcolonial contexts. The aim of the Global Europe project is to explore how the collection, circulation, classification and museum exhibition of objects define Europe from the outside in during Europe's present loss of global hegemony – especially in relation to Japan and four non-European BRICS countries, in comparison with the early modern period of European ascendancy. The research involves five researchers doing anthropological, historical and museological research in museums in these five countries as well as in European museums, with myself doing research in China.

These two ongoing projects appear to resonate with emerging scholarship in a variety of different disciplines and fields, and the research teams have finished most of the field research and are currently planning for the publications and exhibitions that will be among the project outputs. At the same time, the projects raise new theoretical questions which allow me and my fellow researchers to think about follow-up projects. Last year, one big European H2020 application which I led was not successful in acquiring funding, but this year (2018) I am again part of a heritage-related application by a European consortium (albeit this time fortunately not as principal investigator). Whatever will be the outcome of that application and whatever the merit of the publications in the making, this trajectory shows that there may be theoretical merit in shifting from a spatial definition of one's empirical field (Vietnam) to an analytical definition (heritage, material culture). My research questions were inspired by my research in Vietnam, by developments in Vietnamese society, and by the responses of my Vietnamese colleagues to these developments. The funding constraints that I encountered in my new abode – Denmark – forced me to be more creative with the

insights and questions that I developed in Vietnam, and to travel my ideas to other geographic areas while defining my empirical field analytically in a post-Bourdieuian (and hopefully less ethnocentric) manner.

#### **IV. Beyond spatial and theoretical straightjackets**

Using analytical insights and theoretical inspirations from my Vietnam-related research to formulate research questions helped me craft projects that turned out to be competitive in terms of acquiring research funding. This success in raising money required and requires me to do field research in China and Europe which enriches my research experience immensely but which inevitably takes much time away from Vietnam. In practice, this means that I spend much less time in Vietnam now than before, when I visited the country on average twice a year, in different capacities (teacher, researcher, advisor, conference participant), for various purposes (research, teaching, presentations) and for varying lengths of time. But this does not mean that I abandoned Vietnam – on the contrary. I continue to engage with the country and its people and scholars, and I still find time to engage with my Vietnamese colleagues and with a wider Vietnamese audience by publishing in Vietnamese. Over the past year I managed to get four publications out in Vietnam covering a variety of topics, and three of which are in Vietnamese – something that never fails to elicit feedback from Vietnamese colleagues, both familiar and unbeknownst to me.

But there is something even better that my recent theoretical and empirical forays outside of my spatial field of Vietnam brought me: I have become “attractive” to scholars and artists within Vietnam because I am now increasingly seen as someone who brings something more than an outsider’s knowledge of Vietnam to Vietnam. I am still considered as someone familiar with Vietnamese language and culture, but in addition as someone familiar about certain analytical fields – fields of cultural production – outside Vietnam. The combination means that I can be relied upon to connect Vietnamese colleagues to global domains of scholarship.

One recent example is that I was asked to act as discussant for a Vietnamese-initiated and -organized panel at the Association for Asian Studies annual meeting in the US, and subsequently as guest editor for a theme issue of an international journal that this same group of Vietnamese scholars wish to target - both on the theme that connects and excites us, namely the politics of intangible cultural heritage in Vietnam. In other words, my position as a relative outsider makes me attractive as a node of connection with, and possibly a gateway to international scholarship.

One development more outside my comfort zone is the fact that my current research on contemporary arts - globally but especially in China - helped me understand that contemporary artists and anthropologists share many things: they read the same philosophical literature and social theory; they use the same embodied, qualitative research methods; and they develop similar perspectives on the social issues that they research. But the output of the respective research by artists and anthropologists is very different, as anthropologists produce mostly texts while artists also produce material, embodied and performative work (which in the present often requires textual interpretation and explanation as well). My foray into contemporary arts outside Vietnam was quickly picked up by old acquaintances in the Vietnamese art scene, resulting in reconnections, joint appearances in meetings and conferences, joint performances, and joint publications in art-related outlets. My learning from these encounters inspire me to more deliberately than before seek to involve artists in my research projects. In August 2018, for example, I convened an international conference on "Changing Global Hierarchies of Value?" in Copenhagen as part of my Global Europe project, and the keynote speech on the first day was followed by an art performance by a young South African artist at the National Museum in Copenhagen. In current grant applications that I am co-developing, artistic performances, museum collection formation and exhibitions are part and parcel of the project, along with the more traditional textual work that scholars usually produce.

This is an unplanned but very fortunate turn of events which would not have happened if I would not have distanced myself



somewhat from the spatial field of Vietnam in order to focus on the analytical fields of heritage (art of the past), contemporary arts and museums. What I learn from my interactions with Vietnamese artists and art and museum professionals is that I can and should integrate their work – their research, their analysis, their output – into mine, and vice versa. This effectively broadens the scope of my theoretical and practical interactions both outside and within Vietnam. In other words, my adoption of an analytical field beyond – but not outside – the spatial field of “Vietnam” that I defined in the 1980s as the empirical delimitation of my scholarly endeavor helped me reconnect with Vietnam in different, and theoretically fertile, ways. This is not to say that the field of Vietnam studies is theoretically barren – far from that! My study of a wide variety of processes in various locations in Vietnam helped me understand those in their mutual interconnection and frame analytical insights and theoretical research questions that helped me understand the world beyond Vietnam better – which in turn helped me understand Vietnam better, and with a novel theoretical vocabulary.

## V. Vietnam as a theoretical laboratory for the world

Against the backdrop of an all too common distinction between things deemed “global” and “universal” and things deemed “local,” I show in this paper that concepts with arguably European pedigree – like religion, culture, identity, heritage and art – travel around the world and are adopted through vernacular discourses that are specific to locally inflected histories and cultural contexts by annexing existing vocabularies as linguistic vehicles; their universalizing pretensions obscure their own Euro-American parochialism (Chakrabarty 2000; Trouillot 2002; 2003). In the process, these vernacularized “universal” concepts acquire different meanings or connotations and can be used as powerful devices in local discursive fields; one simple example is the (Marxist) term for consciousness in Vietnamese, which was tagged on the existing Buddhist term for enlightenment: *giác ngộ*.

But such terms and concepts produce different socio-cultural

effects in different places, evoking new questions that can be researched and theorized effectively. In this paper I show how my encounter with the – historically fairly recent – adoption of notions and practices of heritage (and attendant preservation, conservation and safeguarding practices) in a Vietnamese context allowed me to understand “cultural heritage” differently from the continent where the authoritative discourse of heritage emerged: Europe. One fairly common scholarly response to such an observation could be to just compare situations and note discursive and practical differences. But another road would be to use the analytical insights from that specific Vietnamese research experience and question supposedly “universal” notions of cultural heritage that are still stooped in Eurocentric assumptions. I was more or less forced – or at least incited – by specific funding constraints to take this second road, and develop penetrating research questions underpinning research applications that focus on other spatial fields than Vietnam.

The study of these traveling concepts and practices and the locally inflected effects they produce offer at once a powerful antidote against simplistic notions of “global”/“universal” and “local,” and a potential corrective to localizing parochialism and blindly Eurocentric universalism. With reference to my own professional, disciplinary and theoretical trajectory as an anthropologist and historian focusing on Vietnam, I showed in this paper how I used that experience – and the empirical puzzles and wonder that I experienced – in order to develop theoretical interests and questions that became the basis for bigger, comparative research projects in Japan, China, India, South Africa, Brazil and Europe. In addition, I show that the subsequent promise – and ongoing challenge – is to bring the results of such larger, comparative research projects “home” to Vietnam in a meaningful way, and thereby overcome the limitations of both area studies and Eurocentric disciplines.

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# Rethinking the Field:

## Locality and Connectivity in Southeast Asian Studies



Maitrii Aung-Thwin\*

### [ *Abstract* ]

The paper comments on the contribution of Oscar Saleminck on his personal intellectual journal from Vietnam to Europe and back again. This then leads to the contemplation of the construction of Southeast Asia as a “place” or “locality”, early preoccupations within the region of the national dimension. And more recent developments in universities in Singapore, examining the continuing perceptions of Southeast Asia as a region and Singapore as its “gateway”, and the increasing interest in “connectivities” and transnational relations between the region and other parts of Asia and the wider world.

**Keywords:** Locality, Connectivity, East-West, Transnational relations, Southeast Asia

## I . Introduction

Oscar Saleminck's contribution to this special issue provides critical insight into how we might think about Southeast Asia as a unit of

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\* Associate Professor, National University of Singapore, hismvat@nus.edu.sg

analysis, the region as a field of study, and the potential of comparative Asian Studies. In his article, "Southeast Asia as a Theoretical Laboratory of the World" Salemink reflects upon his distinguished career as a way of thinking about how scholars of Southeast Asia in Europe coped with fundamental shifts in the way academic knowledge was conceptualized, funded, and produced. The article traces his scholarly career from his early years as a researcher focused deeply on Vietnamese language and culture, his contributions as a consultant to national/international heritage organizations in Vietnam, and finally to his current "incarnation" as a scholar focusing on the epistemological construction of Europe. His narrative is particularly instructive for what it tells us about how a research agenda is formulated in certain contexts and settings; how territorial conceptions of space/place shape and define our intellectual affiliations; and how Southeast Asia might serve as a "method" towards rethinking the scope and scale of intellectual fields beyond the region.

In many respects, Salemink's intellectual journey from Vietnam to Europe parallels how Southeast Asia was socially constructed by external scholars as both a field of study and as "a place". His early work on highland communities in Vietnam brought previously ignored landscapes and cultures into sharper focus, enabling English-language readers to consider the range of ecologies and experiences that might be called "Southeast Asian". His introduction of concepts into Vietnamese intellectual discourses helped shape internal discussions about Vietnamese heritage, ritual, and space. Whereas an earlier generation focused on establishing key centers, broad unities, and the dominant core cultures of the region, Salemink's work on highland/minority life-ways was foundational in that it refined the internal, conceptual pillars of Southeast Asia as a distinct region (usually in reference to India and China) while at the same time contributed to how we understood "Vietnam" and the range of communities who were included within that spatial entity.

Salemink's early work on the languages and cultures of highland peoples in the broader Vietnamese zone exemplified the type of critical research that sought to complete (and correct) the knowledge left behind by colonial administrators and domestic



"nationalist" scholars. The call to depict a Southeast Asia that privileged local perspectives and world-views was an important objective for scholars over the generations who were concerned with legitimizing the region as a serious field of study. Much of this vision emerged as an attempt to address well-documented imbalances within colonial scholarship that operated within an East-West binary framing. This genre of Europe-Asia comparison was at the root of the models, periodization, and categories that contributed to the obfuscating of the "local". Recovering the hidden, obscure, or deeply embedded elements of the region resulted in generations of scholars joining the quest to rescue indigenous Southeast Asia from more global knowledge structures that would otherwise blur those local traditions and experiences from immediate view. Saleminck's work on highland communities and lowland minority groups intersected with this broader commitment to pursue the local as a way of delineating the region's distinctiveness.

## II . Southeast Asian Locality

The emergence of Vietnam as both a "field" of research and as an intellectual community was also based on a shared commitment to rediscover, preserve, and understand Southeast Asia's defining features for its own sake and within its own terms. The rise of Southeast Asian Studies in Europe, North America, Australia, and eventually Japan was the result of an international project that was meant to identify, insulate and legitimate what was regarded as the local. Scholarship highlighted instances of "local initiative", "local genius", and "localization" in order to recognize the agency of the peoples living in the region and the persistence of a regional character. Much of this initiative was driven by foreign scholars, local interlocutors, administrators, and research assistants were involved in this endeavor at the ground level. In broad terms, this project was mainly (with notable exceptions) external to the region. Through the combined efforts of local scholars, students, and research associates, foreign scholars gained the capacity to engage in fieldwork, create focus groups, and decipher local sources in

Southeast Asian languages. The result was a field of analysis supported by a vast infrastructure of funding bodies, university degree programs, professional associations, journals, books series, library collections, and language programs designed to produce understandings of local experiences in Southeast Asia.

Engaging in "thick description" of local communities, texts, and rituals was the mantra of the day; a calling if you will, to privilege and preserve the perceived distinctiveness of a region that had withstood "the thin and flaking" influences of West Asia, South Asia, East Asia, and Europe over the centuries. The rise of Southeast Asian Studies in its various incarnations across the globe was also part of a broader effort to differentiate it from other regions in Asia ("Indian" and "Chinese" civilizations). Cold War priorities aside, scholars set out to detect and decode a regional "grammar" that they envisioned to be imbedded in its languages, texts, material cultures, and histories; a system of knowledge that had interacted with the cosmopolitan influences of Indic, Sinic, Islamic, Christian, and secular civilizations, yet managed to retain local meanings, structures, and ways of life. Scholars from this generation pursued projects that aimed to uncover the essence of a region through the local. To study "autonomous" Southeast Asia (or an autonomous Vietnam in Saleminck's case) was for many generations of scholars an invitation to assert the region's very existence.

While Saleminck's early work contributed to our understanding of the region's definitive shape, it also challenged our understanding of Southeast Asian culture as fixed via ethno-historical research. One of his seminal articles "The Return of the Python God: Multiple Interpretations of a Millenarian Movement in Vietnam", made the important case that our understanding of social movements in colonial Southeast Asia were not necessarily constrained to or even defined by political or millenarian aims of highland peoples to restore a previously displaced order or jump-start a prophesied Golden Age in response to colonialism. Rather, this article demonstrated how French scholar-officials, domestic scholars, and later area-studies scholars constructed particular interpretations of resistance movements that reflected their position within particular historical and intellectual contexts---in other words, the "Python

God" movement and its portrayal as a millenarian movement was less an illustration of Vietnamese highland belief-systems as it was an expression of colonial, nationalist, and area-studies writers who sought to interpret these movements for different reasons. This type of intervention was extremely important for it began to question the very categories and concepts with a "European pedigree" that scholars had used to construct Southeast Asia. For Saleminck (and for scholars such as myself who followed his work) questioning "how do we know what we know?" would lead to new lines of inquiry about Southeast Asian distinctiveness, how our knowledge about the region was constructed, and how the region (as a unit of analysis) was (and continues to be) produced in a variety of settings. Questioning how we understand "the" field of Southeast Asian Studies and its role in producing meaning about the region was an important element in Saleminck's research that paralleled intellectual turns by other Southeast Asian scholars of that era.

In order to address often-cited shortcomings of both area studies and the disciplines for their alleged theoretical deficiencies, Saleminck describes how new funding regimes and institutional contexts in Europe compelled him to rethink not only his ethnographic work in Vietnam, but whether the use of Vietnam as a spatial framework of analysis would be a viable and effective way to push the scope of his research beyond Vietnam. By recalibrating his intellectual gaze away from spatially defined fields of study "Vietnam" and/or "Southeast Asia" to more analytical categories that might be used across area studies fields, Saleminck was able to redirect findings he accumulated from decades of research in Vietnam to develop new ways of understanding Europe. Saleminck's career shifted from preserving Vietnamese culture as a way of reaffirming the distinctiveness of Vietnam (and Southeast Asia more generally) to connecting Vietnam's heritage practices to projects and settings around the world. By incorporating a "return" loop into the often linear trajectory of knowledge transfer, Saleminck suggests that his research on heritage in Vietnam offers new ways of critiquing and understanding heritage in Europe, connecting the epistemological construction of Vietnam to the epistemological construction of Europe. In many ways, Saleminck's insights anticipate the growth of

Southeast Asian Studies within Southeast Asia and the current effort to connect local cultures and histories to the wider world.

### **III. Southeast Asian Connectivity**

The emergence of Southeast Asian Studies within Southeast Asia intersects with the development of the field as it took shape in Europe, America, Australia, and Japan. While the earliest programs in Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia emerged in tandem with Cold War priorities and national interests, the growth of Southeast Asian Studies was a more uneven development. Most regional tertiary institutions and research institutes between 1950s and 1990s were focused on developing national educational curricula and establishing knowledge about the nation, especially given the often fractious socio-political situations that followed the end of World War II. The rise of the nation-state in the context of post-World War II devastation, civil war, ethnic separation, and identity politics required an emphasis on the making of the nation. Post-World War II educational/research efforts were overwhelmingly more oriented towards sustaining and substantiating the nation-state.

Thinking about Southeast Asia was not a priority—it was a luxury—especially at a time when competition for resources, influence and power dominated domestic contexts throughout the region. Writing about the coherency of the region was not as pressing for domestic scholars between 1950-1990 when the very coherency of the nation was (and in some cases is still) in question. For domestic scholars, exploring the common dynamics and patterns that linked the region were not as important in the days of the Cold War as constructing the bonds that might link the nation. For the minority of scholars that travelled to Europe, America, Australia, and Japan for their doctoral training, Southeast Asia was certainly a reality to be pursued via research. However, for the vast majority of teachers, local scholars, and university administrators, the idea of Southeast Asian Studies was perhaps as distant a vision as ASEAN Studies is today.

To be sure, there were important initiatives that attempted to

compliment/counter the focus on the nation, evidence that the current interest in the "transnational" is not as new to the region as some might expect. The establishment of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) in 1965 and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore in 1968 were more exceptions than the norm, and it would be nearly thirty years later for the Southeast Asian Regional Exchange Program (SEASREP) was founded in 1994 in Manila. The establishment of the *Journal of Southeast Asian History* in 1960 (that was later changed to the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*) was as much a product of local Singaporean initiatives as much as it was tied to knowledge production in the area-studies programs in North American, the United Kingdom, and Australia. These important institutions and "knowledge infrastructure" were part of the production of Southeast Asia in the region, not entirely home-grown, but certainly more than a product of Cold War funding streams. Suffice it to say that Southeast Asian Studies, until very recently, was not a feature of most universities within the region. Celebrating the "national" in many Southeast Asian contexts meant celebrating the local as a way to cope with the legacy of colonialism and its knowledge production.

More recently, it might be observed that Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore might be going through a transformative moment given its exposure to new initiatives favoring more inter-Asian approaches and trans-regional perspectives. Drawn from scholarly discussions in primarily North America but with complimentary streams stemming from Europe, Taiwan, and Australia, a somewhat renewed emphasis on exploring the flows that cross boundaries and transcend regional borders is now challenging the relevancy and fixity of area-studies regions and the boundaries that demarcate it. While scholars of Southeast Asia had always emphasized such perspectives especially on research concerning topics such as Indianization, Sinicization, and colonialism, this collection of interdisciplinary approaches explores the circulation of peoples, ideas, technology, goods and languages across the traditional area-studies regions. At its core, this interpretive stream seeks to promote research that examines connections across regional and national boundaries; shifting attention away from the nation as

a unit of analysis to the circuits and networks that link and define communities.

This approach to studying Southeast Asia has a fair number of advocates. It places emphasis on flows across time and space and in doing so recognizes the transnational/trans-regional nature of movement and its effects on community formation. It establishes and provides a more inclusive platform for studying borderland zones, peripheral areas, and the interaction of social groups that move across such boundaries, disrupting their association or non-recognition with the nation-state. Further, it challenges the spatial constructs that influence and constrain our definitions of what we identify as a "Southeast Asian" experience. Under this framework, the interaction between monasteries in historical Sri Lanka and classical Bagan (Myanmar), might be compared with the parallel circulation of monks travelling southward from "China" through the Straits of Malacca to regional ports that are connected via this religious network across maritime Asia. No longer constrained by area-studies borders, this type of project emphasizes the connections and circuits that define the Buddhist world while drawing our attention to the circulation of Buddhist ideas across South, Southeast, and East Asia. By distilling these experiences from the exclusive histories of Sri Lankan, Burmese, or Chinese Buddhism, conceptual constraints that might be associated with the boundaries of area-studies regions are eased. Like Salemin's connecting of Vietnam heritage practices to European experiences, this approach privileges a comparative perspective that promotes multiple points of reference defined by the flows under examination, not the fixed boundaries of nations or regions.

For those who are still feel that there is much more to be accomplished through area-studies regions, there has been some pushback. Some scholars are wary about the implicit emphasis on breadth at the expense of depth that was the hallmark of area-studies research. Mastery of languages and literatures are still illusive for new scholars coming into the field while funding cuts to language study continue to hamper research into the different linguistic worlds of the region. There is still much to be done on the literary, material, and performances cultures within many nations

(let alone the region). Others hesitate to endorse this initiative due to the geo-political baggage of such an approach: just as the region begins to integrate through the auspices of ASEAN and other regional channels, foreign academics begin to promote an approach that fundamentally challenges the area-studies model and its legitimacy as a geo-body. Critics of area-studies and the regional idea often point to the Cold War origins of Southeast Asia as a way of highlighting its flawed nature; it has not been missed that current geo-political priorities of world powers today are not necessarily aligned with the existing currency of national and regional sovereignty within Southeast Asia. For some detractors, the transnational turn threatens the intellectual and political position of Southeast Asia as a field and ASEAN as a political unit.

At the same time Singapore's position in Southeast Asian Studies is both a node in a larger global network and a gateway to the region. In its capacity as a node, its universities feature strong support for these new intellectual trends that may transform how we think about Southeast Asian Studies. A key member of an inter-Asian Studies network of institutions throughout the Asia region, the National University of Singapore (and specifically the Asia Research Institute) has hosted conferences and produced numerous publications that have established itself as a promoter of this trans-Asian initiative. In its role as a gateway to the region however, a more traditional understanding of Southeast Asian Studies is also promoted in Singapore. Shifting its gaze inward towards regional universities and research institutions, Southeast Asian Studies had for some time served as a platform to promote regional education and research. The ISEAS-Yusaf Ishak Institute continues to lead a more classically-defined regional research agenda while promoting ASEAN studies. Thus, Singapore represents at least two scalar positions when it comes to its place in Southeast Asian Studies: on the one hand it is connected to a much more global network of intellectual currents that promote transnational and transregional approaches that efface, in some ways the regional contours of Southeast Asia. On the other hand, Singapore is a Southeast Asian hub, a gateway to the network of universities that today are in the midst of reifying and developing nascent Southeast

Asia programs.

Despite these different intellectual trajectories, the discussion about establishing new Southeast Asian Studies programs is beginning to gain traction in countries that up until recently were more concerned with national studies. Recent discussions about developing a diploma program on Southeast Asian Studies at Yangon University (Myanmar), for instance, is very much the result of recent changing domestic educational, economic, and political interests. Local scholars are keen to engage Southeast Asian Studies scholarship that have been developed in Asia, Europe, Australia, and America. Whereas the promotion of local perspectives and attitudes had always been an important mantra of domestic scholars in Myanmar, the emergence of an interest in Southeast Asian Studies reveals a different dynamic that may well fuel the growth of the field in other settings as well. Within the context of the region, the growth of Southeast Asian Studies in regional institutions may represent an interest in projecting their languages, histories, and cultures beyond the boundaries of their local or national framework, perhaps an internal version of Salemin's "theoretical laboratory". Yangon University scholars are eager to link Myanmar Studies (in Myanmar) to regional and global networks, suggesting that the initiative to make these connections will come from the inside as well as from innovative scholars such as Salemin. In other words, initiatives to start Southeast Asian Studies seems to be driven by the internal recognition that one needs to connect beyond the local. Southeast Asian Studies is becoming associated with connection and interaction with the global as opposed to a calling to preserve traditions from the global.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

At the heart of our earliest constructions of Southeast Asia was the quest to think about how can we "know" this place that we are imagining as a region; how do we start to think about these culture, these peoples, these languages, or these histories? What sort of references, models, or categories will best represent what we sense,



what we experience, what we comprehend about this place we call Southeast Asia? Our starting points for thinking about region (depending on who "we" are, as Vincente L. Rafael queried decades ago) depend on our encounters, our interaction with "the field" and our lived experiences within and without Southeast Asia. For many who consider themselves Southeast Asian-ists or scholars who see themselves as part of a community drawn together by the bonds of research, education, and teaching about the region, these entry points have been facilitated (at least intellectually) by educational training, professional appointments, funding streams and a range of other convictions (religious, political, cultural personal, etc.). As these interpretive communities that make up Southeast Asian Studies have emerged from a range of intellectual, educational, and cultural settings, it is no wonder that one's entry into this conversation can have a range of trajectories. Oscar Salemink's essay is one such journey of a luminary in the field.

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### III. The Futures of Area Studies and Southeast Asian Studies





## **Southeast Asian Studies in the Age of STEM Education and Hyper-utilitarianism**



Thongchai Winichakul\*

### **[ Abstract ]**

Area studies, including Asian and Southeast Asian studies, in the post-Cold War era have been facing an epochal challenge that is rooted in two conditions: on the one hand, the end of the Cold War and the fading geopolitical rationale, and on the other, the emergence of the technology-driven transformation of the global economy and society. The consequences thus far are paradoxical: 1) While the technology-led transformation needs a workforce with critical and innovative abilities, higher education becomes more hyper-utilitarian; 2) While the transformation instigates increasing diversity of identities in global cultures, many countries thrive for STEM education at the expense of learning languages and cultures, including area studies which are essential for diversity. Southeast Asian studies programs need to change in response to these new conditions. These changing conditions and paradoxes, nevertheless, take different forms and degrees in the American, European and Asian academies, thanks to their different histories of higher education. The prospects for Southeast Asian Studies in

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\* Senior Researcher, IDE-JETRO, Japan: Emeritus Professor of History, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA. Thongchai\_Winichakul@ide.go.jp

these various academies are likely to be different too.

**Keywords:** Area Studies, Southeast Asian Studies, Globalization, STEM education, Hyper-utilitarianism

## I . Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, there have been many discussions about the relevance and justification of area studies and Asian studies.<sup>1</sup> Southeast Asian studies in particular is one of the fields that has generated considerable introspection in order to justify its rationale in the present and future, perhaps more often than other area studies programs.<sup>2</sup> These introspections are symptoms that Asian studies and Southeast Asian studies are facing the changing conditions that require the re-examination of their values and relevance. Most discussions have paid attention to globalization and the changing geo-politics in the post-Cold War period that gave attention to globalization and the changing geo-politics in the post-Cold War period which in turn rendered the nation-states and the regionalism of area studies problematic. Although such arguments deserved a serious consideration, they usually overlooked the most immediate context of area studies, Asian studies or Southeast Asian studies, i.e. the effects of those new conditions on the higher education systems around the world including Southeast Asia. Nor did they examine the differences between higher education systems among those countries and regions due to their different histories. Moreover, they did not consider the factor that probably affects Asian and Southeast Asian studies most directly and effectively, namely the digital revolution and the so-called “disruption” era.

With the benefit of hindsight, this paper attempts to address the changes in higher education worldwide brought by the digital revolution and the disruption era. It will also discuss the future of

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1 For example, Rafael (1999); Miyoshi and Harootunian (2002), and Cheah (2004).

2 Hirschman et.al. (1992); SSRC (1999); Hau (2003); Reid (2004); Kratoska et.al. (2005); Sears (2007); Goh (2011).

Asian studies and Southeast Asian studies in relation to such changes and in the context of different higher education systems. Let us begin with the history of Asian and Southeast Asian Studies and their contexts.

## **II . Past to Present: the previous styles of Southeast Asian Studies**

Broadly speaking, Southeast Asian Studies and Asian studies have gone through two eras, each of which was shaped by and reflected in the political economy that generated the demands for such fields of knowledge: the colonial and the Cold War eras. During the colonial era, Oriental studies, largely led by European scholarship, responded to the demands for knowledge about ancient civilizations in various European colonies. During the Cold War era, American area studies grew out of the demands for knowledge that helped fulfill the twin missions: to fight or contain communism, and for modernization and economic development. In other words, Asian studies before the post-Cold War has been shaped by these environments of the European and American academia.

Although they were not contrasting and in fact were complimentary to one another in various ways, European Oriental studies and the American area studies entailed different “styles” of knowledge, emphasizing different subjects, sub-fields, disciplines, and so on. Under the colonial ideology that claimed itself to be the champion of ancient civilizations, Oriental studies focused on the classical subjects such as philology, epigraphy, archaeology, art history, ancient history and classical literature. American area studies responded to the demand for knowledge for counter-insurgency and economic modernization. It paid more attention to the social sciences and the related humanities, namely political science, anthropology, modern history and the literature on nation-states.

The notions of Asia and Asian regions such as Southeast Asia in those two styles of scholarship were not quite the same either. For the Europeans, the interests in “Asia” varied according to their

respective colonial interests: the British Indian sub-continent, French Indochina, British Burma, the Malay States, crown colonies and northern Borneo, or the Dutch East Indies. For them, the East Asian countries were the “Far East” and the “Near East” and local populations were “Orientals”. For the Americans, “Asia” signified China and Japan first, whereas the rest of Asia – South, Southeast Asia and so on, were defined by geo-political arrangements during and after the Second World War and after. For the European Orientalist scholars, moreover, ancient civilizations were shaped by religious influences from India, hence “India beyond the Ganges”, the “Greater India”, and the inseparability of Sri Lanka and the Theravada countries in Southeast Asia. The Philippines was beyond the “Sanskrit” arch. For Asian studies under American dominance, nation-states in their concept of geo-political regionalism were its primary concern.

Asian studies and Southeast Asian studies in Asian countries have been under the influence of these two scholarly traditions, especially that of America. Despite that, the Asian incarnations of Asian and Southeast Asian studies are unavoidably different from the Euro-American ones due to their different histories and the political economies of higher education.

### **III. Studies of “Others” versus studies of “Self”**

Higher education and the academy in most Asian countries began as a colonial institution to produce civil servants to serve the modern state. The post-World War II period of modernization and development also propelled the rise of higher education to serve the expanded bureaucracy and the early industrialized production that required a more highly skilled workforce. Unlike higher education in the Euro-American world that had its roots in religion and in the knowledge regime which was later called “the liberal arts”, the top priorities in higher education in most Asian countries have been focused on “useful” knowledge, that is, applied science, medical science, engineering and technical knowledge and the applied social sciences. The liberal arts – non-applied science, the humanities, and



the arts – were not as important because they were not obviously seen as “useful” in a practical sense.

Moreover, while the Euro-American academies recognize the significance of research at least in the past hundred years, most universities in Asia, except Japan, remain primarily teaching and technical-training institutions. Research enterprises are limited to specific areas, especially medical science. Even after the efforts to promote research in the past decade or so, and given the enormous resources in many countries, the infrastructure and experience of research institutions are uneven and lacking. In terms of the intellectual climate, the processes and legacies of the anti-colonial struggles, the transition to a post-colonial society, and nation-building under the modernization agenda during the Cold War have all had lasting impacts on the development of academies and scholarship in Asia. In these conditions, the study of Asia and Southeast Asia within the region are different from the Euro-American traditions in fundamental respects.

First and foremost, the European and American interests in Asia and Southeast Asia generated the knowledge of “Others” in Asia, whereas the studies of one’s own country was the knowledge of the “Self” or the “Home”. This fundamental difference has enormous implications politically (such as domestic versus international counter-insurgency), economically (global capitalism versus national economy), and ideologically (nationalism versus “Orientalism” as Edward Said puts it), and so on. The scholarship of the “Self” or the “Home” does not imply any superiority or a better truth. Rather, it tends to respond to a different environment than the one constructed by outsiders. For instance, it often responds to the twin processes of nation-building. First, there was anti-colonialism, or reactions to colonial conditions. Second, there was the subordination of minorities, be they ethnic, religious, or otherwise, and regional identities within the new nation’s territorial “Self”, its geo-body. In some cases, the subordination was rooted in the pre-colonial imperial polity or hegemony whose legacies are part of the post-colonial condition.<sup>3</sup> The scholarship of a home country

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3 This is definitely the case for Southeast Asian countries where regionalism or

tends to be nationalistic. The dominance of certain ethnicities, religions, and political centers, and prejudices towards those outside the dominant group, are usually the results of those processes as well.

Secondly, even the studies of other Asian countries often entail different perceptions and agenda from European or American ones because other Asians could be neighbors, partners, allies, competitors, rivals or enemies in history and at the present time.<sup>4</sup> (The exception to the account here is Japan where those programs that study “Other” Asian countries were established from the early twentieth century.)<sup>5</sup>

Thirdly, the “Self area studies” is integrated into the conventional social science and humanities departments/disciplines in Asian institutions. Until recently, for instance, there was hardly a need for a Thai studies program in Thailand. Asian studies and Southeast Asian studies as a particular field and set of programs had not found much demand or success in Asia and Southeast Asia respectively until recently. Fourthly, the economy of the “Self area studies” is mostly local, i.e. according to the demands, applications, resources, and so on of a particular country. The emphasis for the studies of the “Self” is on the “useful” knowledge for development, i.e. the applicable, policy-oriented social sciences, due to their histories of higher education.

Fifthly, the fields of knowledge without clearly useful applications – such as the humanities and the arts – were not in high demand, hence, they received less attention and fewer resources, although the number of students in these fields may be higher because they are less expensive to deliver.<sup>6</sup> With Japan and

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majority-minorities, or both, remain a problem in the post-colonial nations. These problems have roots in pre-colonial political and cultural conditions but were reformulated and exacerbated in the colonial period.

4 I discuss this point more in Thongchai (2014: 884)

5 See Thongchai (2014: 885-886)

6 The pure science and basic research in science are another area that is relatively less emphasized in most Asian countries, not because they are not useful but because they are too expensive for a country to invest in. The investment in science is the scholarship for students to study overseas.

probably India too as exceptions, the humanities in Asia have been less engaged with the modern higher education systems. It was true that the Orientalist interests in ancient civilizations had been expressed in many fields of the humanities. But they engaged with local intellectuals as informants and assistants, and with local knowledge – such as religions and literature -- that had evolved for centuries, as the object of studies by the outsiders. Local knowledge that is close to the humanities has not engaged and developed in the modern higher education systems. They were left under the authority of traditional intellectuals and institutions, although they have been affected by modern scholarship. As a result, the influences of neo-traditionalism and nationalism were typically stronger in the humanities in the scholarship in Asia.

#### **IV. The Post-Cold War challenges and changes outside Asia**

In the 1990s to 2000s, area studies in the USA, including Asian and Southeast Asian studies, were challenged. First, the notions of regions in area studies that was based on Cold War geopolitics were challenged, thanks to the new geopolitics of the post-Cold War era. The nation-state, the primary geographical unit of area studies, also became problematic, substantively and methodologically, thanks to globalization. It has been increasingly seen as a limited and often mistaken unit for studies unsuitable for the study of global or cross-country phenomena. In addition, intellectually, the validity of area studies within the American academy was questioned in that it was not scientific knowledge. Science, rational choice, big data moved in at the expense of area studies in many social scientific disciplines.

Although area studies survived the challenges, the impacts are still felt, resulting in significant changes to area studies. Geography and the spatial subjects of area studies have been revamped and redefined. The post-national space and new regionalism emerged in studies of regions as well as in reality. Alternative space and scales of human geography have emerged as valid for area studies. Among the exciting and innovative ones are, for instance, border and border

crossing studies, trans-Asia or inter-Asia, and the turning away from the land and lowland; to upland and the ocean-centric or water-centric maritime regions. Nevertheless, the concepts of nation-states and Cold War geo-politics have not disappeared. At the least, I agree with King in this volume and Sutherland (2005) that they are “contingent devices” because they are commonly known, thus useful, and because they express how the world has been organized in the past few hundred years up to the present.

Regarding the epistemological challenge from science, the direct impact was the phasing out of area studies from the major social scientific disciplines in the American academy, particularly in economics, political science, sociology, and demography. Experts of particular world regions and nations become endangered species since their expertise has been no longer the main criteria for their profession or for recruitment. The innovative scientific methodology in dealing with massive data sets is needed.

On the other hand, the linguistic turn and cultural studies have strengthened the humanities, substantively, conceptually, and methodologically in all disciplines and fields. Post-colonialism in scholarship in particular has made area studies innovative and politically rigorous. An epistemological implication is the significance of the study of language as the basis of knowledge production and of the interpretive methods in the human sciences, in contrast with the empirical data for scientific methods. These trends in the humanities are independent from, and are not reactions to, the hyper-scientific trends in social science. The result of these contrasting epistemological forces is the sharp “humanistic turn” in Asian and Southeast Asian studies. Intellectual interests in geopolitics or the economy are declining, but have become stronger in critical studies in, for instance, popular culture, media studies, and religious studies. One ample indicator has been the steady decline of members of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) from social science disciplines since the 1990s.

## V. The Post-Cold War opportunities in Asia

Around the same period in the 1980s-2000s, the globalized economy benefited many Asian countries enormously. Many Asian countries were no longer underdeveloped, but became middle-income economies and, in addition to Japan, many have joined the league of industrialized nation-states. New economic regionalism, multilateral partnerships, and intra-Asian investments and trade gave rise to the demands and interests in Asian countries. These conditions, plus the desire for the “knowledge economy”, has propelled the dramatic change in higher education in Asia since the 1990s. Not only was it affordable for the government to invest and expand it, but the demands from people also increased rapidly as reflected in the enrolment that tripled from 1965, the previous boom in higher education.<sup>7</sup> Universities and educational institutions proliferated, especially private ones, while public institutions expanded into many more fields and turned their attention to more research, including the attempt to establish research universities.<sup>8</sup>

Ruth McVey (1998) observed that globalization marginalized Southeast Asian studies. This might be the case in the European and American academies. But it was not the case in Asia. In the post-Cold War economic globalization, the knowledge of other Asians and Southeast Asians is needed, and it is affordable to many Asian countries. The potential for Asian and Southeast Asian studies within Asia has changed dramatically. Since the 1990s, aside from Japan, such programs in many countries have emerged, developed and become more visible.<sup>9</sup> Within Southeast Asia, Southeast Asian

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7 See Task Force on Higher Education and Society (2000: 16-20 and 27-28) for the enrolment statistics. Although the report does not focus on Asia, it suggests the phenomenon is world-wide, with some examples from Asia. I concur with the report, as the similar changes were visible across Southeast Asia and India. The exception may be the countries in the bottom tier – Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar.

8 Task Force (2000: 28-33). For the surge of research universities in Asia and beyond since the 2000s, see Altbach and Balan (2007).

9 For example, in Korea, Southeast Asian studies was not a legitimate, institutionalized field of study until the 1990s. It has grown even further since the 2000s (Joan, 2011). A similar history can be found in Thailand and other countries. The Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore was an exception,

studies programs have become more common in major universities in the region.

A superficial observation may suggest that those Asian and Southeast Asian studies programs are the outgrowth of American area studies. This is true to some extent, as the proliferation of those programs usually involved scholars who graduated from the USA, and whose number and authority in their respective academies have matured. For Southeast Asian studies, the Cornell University model in fact reflects a different environment and era. The Cold War geo-politics and the usual close connection between an Asian country and its colonial metropolis were replaced by the post-Cold War regionalism, multi-lateral partnerships and the realignment of many kinds. Asian and Southeast Asian studies in Asia are fundamentally different.

First, Southeast Asian studies in the region is about one's neighbors and "Asian Others". Whether those countries have been arch-rivals, competitors, untrustworthy neighbors, estranged friends, good friends or comrades in history and in the present, the studies and the "gaze" of those studies in Asia are likely to not be the same as the colonizer's gaze or those of a superpower of the Cold War. Second, the programs in Asia emerged in the context of economic prosperity and the demands for economic relations whereas the previous approach and agenda of area studies in the USA were directed to the development and modernization of Third World countries. The disciplines, fields, major subjects or issues of interests are likely to be different from the Euro-American ones.

Many programs in the leading institutions in Singapore and South Korea, for example, are aware of the different eras, and different environments from the American model, hence the need to recognize the different characteristics of Southeast Asian studies. They are attempting to find their niches and novel ideas to produce a particular kind of Southeast Asian studies appropriate for their regions and countries.

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as it was established earlier in 1968 as part of the foreign ministry, not an academic institution.

## VI. The new landscape of Asian and Southeast Asian studies

The landscape of Asian and Southeast Asian studies has changed since the beginning of the new millennium. First, Asia is not only the object of studies by the “First World” academia but it is also the producer of knowledge. The global productions of Asian and Southeast Asian studies are becoming more diverse, and are no longer an almost exclusively American and European enterprise. The number of recognizable scholars of Asian studies from Asian countries and the generation of original scholarship from Asia have increased rapidly. Many Southeast Asian studies degrees are now awarded in Southeast Asian universities. Many publications and international journals in the field are produced in the region. Moreover, unlike in the previous eras in which a native scholar usually studied his/her own country, nowadays there are more experts on a given country who are nationals of other Asian nations. More Asian students complete their higher degrees in another Asian country (not counting Japan), and more doctoral programs in Asian studies have been established in many Asian countries. It is time, in Hau’s words, to “decenter” Southeast Asian studies from its Euro-American base (2003). This does not necessarily mean that the new sites will become dominant, or the Euro-American programs will deteriorate, let alone disappear. These multiple nodes of knowledge production are under the diverse environments of their respective academia and countries.

Secondly, there has been an important change in the past twenty years or so in the stronger presence of Asians as scholars of Asian studies in Euro-American and Australian institutions.<sup>10</sup> There are also more non-native Asians from the United States and European countries who teach Asian studies in Asian countries.<sup>11</sup> This does not imply that the Asian views and knowledge are more accurate or better. Rather, their approaches and perspectives towards Asia may be different from those from the USA or Europe

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10 Kondo (2001) and Rafael (1995) have made the same observations since the 1990s.

11 Steinhoff (2007: 10) observed that since the mid-1990s “there were American Japan specialists teaching in Japan and in various other English-speaking countries...”, and they probably would increase after that.

because Asian countries are their home. Kondo writes, "... people who were formerly the objects of representation by the dominant are ourselves entering the academy and the arts in order to 'represent ourselves'" (2001: 25). Rafael calls this phenomenon, "migratory scholarship" which is not exactly self or the other, insider or outsider, but the "in-between" (1995). To these expatriate Asian scholars, "home" signifies the place of belonging, care, and even passion.<sup>12</sup>

Thirdly, the relationship of scholars of Asian and Southeast Asian studies has begun to shift. Asian scholars used to play the second fiddle, as students to the Euro-American first fiddler, or as native scholars, informants and subjects of studies.<sup>13</sup> Increasingly this is not the case. More relationships, collaborations, and networking among scholars of Asian studies across the globe and intra-Asian academies are growing quickly.<sup>14</sup>

## VII Present to future: What is coming up?

The socio-economic transformation driven by the digital revolution is under way. Many people, particularly those who are optimistic about the future for humanity, the "techno-optimists", believe it is the "Fourth Industrial Revolution".<sup>15</sup> Schwab, an engineer and a

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12 I have addressed the issue of the "home" scholars, their in-between position in the relations to the object of studies, and the intellectual implications of such a position (Thongchai 2003).

13 Alatas (2003)

14 Examples are the Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchanges Program (SEASREP) which began in the mid-1990s, funded by the Toyota Foundation; the Asian Public Intellectuals project funded by the Japan Foundation that began around the same time; the network that produces the journal *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, several pilot programs such as the Social Science Research Council's (SSRC) *Inter-Asia* conferences, and the recently formed Southeast Asian Studies consortium. Institutions in many Asian countries are also playing active roles in that trend, for example, the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore.

15 The first one driven by the steam engine, mechanical production and the railroads from 1760 to 1840. The second one was mass production driven by electricity and the assembly line, starting in the later 19th century and into the early 20th century. The third was driven by the semiconductor and the early stage of computers (mainframe to the beginning of personal computers) from the 1970s to



business leader who was one of the founders of the World Economic Forum at Davos, has described this revolution succinctly in that the digital technology becomes more sophisticated and integrated, due mainly to the “internet of things”, creating the connectivity, interactions, and fusion between the virtual and the physical systems, and between the physical-digital-biological domains, across the globe. This is the key development of technology that is transforming the world. The current technology has disrupted the usual ways of doing things, from the state to community and individuality, from nations to the global order.<sup>16</sup> Thus, many people, call these current transformations the “Age of Disruption” generated by the “disruptive technology”. The techno-optimists predict a huge leap forward that will bring prosperity to all humans. We may be skeptical or even dismissal of this optimistic forecast, but the transformations due to the digital revolution is undeniable as we have witnessed since the 1990s. The rest of the section below is derived mainly from Schwab (2016), who, in my opinion, represents the moderate view among the techno-optimists because he does not overlook the disadvantages and the obstacles that could derail the optimistic scenario.<sup>17</sup>

In Schwab’s view, the implications of the digital revolution embrace society, human relationships and individuals. He sees it as increasingly empowering citizens, who are likely to become better-informed, and thus commanding a more positive and recognized public voice. But the technology would also increasingly cater for individual interests, needs and opportunities, thus contributing to the greater fragmentation of society. It would be more difficult to govern this much more diverse and fragmented society. Therefore, government will possibly become less effective,

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the 1990s.

16 Schwab (2016: 12-13) chapter 1.

17 As a matter of fact, Schwab does not consider himself a techno-optimist since he also warns us against the potential difficulties due to the limits and constraints from government, politics, failing education, the global uneven development economically and technologically, and so on, hence the unintended consequences. Nevertheless, I use the term techno-optimist to include people like him because he sees the potential brighter future of humanity in the context of the digital revolution and urges us to help make it a success.

forced to decentralize power and allow growing societal competition (Schwab 2016: 66-67). The age of disruption may also give rise to a new kind of inequality and segregation – both economic and technological (Schwab 2016: 77).

As for the individual, mobility will become the norm, instead of their fixity in a local or nation-state context. Before this age, individuals became used to the fixed identification of their lives within a place, ethnic group, a particular culture, or a language. This was the basis of the assumptions of the traditional perspectives of area studies. New individual identities will be more fungible and multiple. A family is likely to become trans-national (Schwab 2016: 78). The new generation is also more multilingual thanks to transnational marriages and family mobility.

The coming age requires an educational system appropriate for the fusion of the digital, physical and biological technologies, and for the increasingly capable, connected and intelligent machines. Demand has and will continue to rise in STEM education (science, technology, engineering, mathematics), but it also needs to address the roles that machines cannot fulfil which rely on intrinsically human capabilities. New professions will emerge, driven not only by technologies but by non-technological factors: demographic, geopolitical transformations and new social and cultural norms. The emphasis will be placed on the ability of a workforce “to adapt continuously and learn new skills and approaches within a variety of contexts” (Schwab 2016: 47), and on the social and creative skills and decision-making ability in situations of constant change, uncertainty and novelty. “[The] complex problem-solving, social and systems skills will be far more in demand...compared to the physical ability or content skills” (Schwab 2016: 44).

The techno-optimists usually take for granted the West/North/digitally advanced urban society as their assumption and the base-line of their analysis and forecast. Cities and urbanity will be globally inter-connected, resulting in a new kind of geography that cuts across the current nation-states. But the hyper-connected world may give rise to a new kind of inequality and segregation, for example, the disparity among countries and in each country,

between the urban and the non-urban, and between the rich and the poor. This disparity could imperil the transformation of the digital revolution (Schwab 2016: 71). Even Schwab sees the disparity and differences merely as the possible cause for difficulties in the digital revolution. In Schwab's words, "hyper-connectivity does not naturally come with greater tolerance or adaptability... However, [it] also contains the potential [for] greater acceptance and understanding of differences..." (Schwab 2016: 77). In my view, those differences are not only the possible obstacle for the new age, but part of the normal condition with which the disruptive age has to contend. In other words, the differences and disparities are unlikely to go away regardless of the transformations. Individuals and societies still need to learn that cultural differences may come in different forms, and then how to deal with them, not only to prevent them from derailing the transformation, but to make them evolve and develop alongside the transformation.

Is the transformation riven by the "disruptive technology" of the "Fourth Industrial Revolution" the environment for the new era of higher education including area studies, Asian and Southeast Asian studies? I believe it is. In my opinion, it has and will affect higher education and scholarship for decades to come.

### **VIII. Response from higher education and its paradoxes**

In response to the digital revolution, higher education across the globe rushes for STEM education. On the one hand, the digital revolution has created the anxiety for countries not to be left behind. On the other hand, they see the new opportunities for the next round of prosperity. The reward is high. So is the grave consequence of being left out. Governments and administrations of higher education in most countries in the world, including in Asia and especially in Southeast Asia, have rushed for STEM education, from the basic knowledge of computer coding to the advanced knowledge contained in artificial intelligence and nano-technology. To ordinary people, the rapidly increasing demand for manpower in the STEM areas is apparent. This rush to STEM has also been

intensified by the influence of neo-liberalism in higher education that has put universities under pressure to make money from the provision of educational services, given the drastic decline in public funding. STEM education is the meeting point between industry, government, the customers of higher education and the university that wants to generate funds. Higher education is becoming hyper-utilitarian.

In most countries, the promotion of STEM education comes with the devaluation of the social sciences and humanities because they lack utility, i.e. they do not make money for universities, industry, the country and individual consumers. This unfortunate vision and policy have various consequences, from verbal comments by government leaders but to no real effect, to actual implementation, namely, increasing class sizes, closing-down courses, down-sizing and abolishing units, reducing funding in research and cutting down the hiring of new staff and the number of available tenured positions. These fields are also often faced with the demand to justify their values in utilitarian terms and often people in these fields comply accordingly in terms of how useful they are for tourism, the entertainment industry, and so on. In reality, I understand that we may not have options but we have to speak in the language that the senior managers and administrators can understand. But epistemologically those answers are misguided. The values of the humanities and area studies are mainly not to be seen in utilitarian terms. They are indispensable for the transformation brought about by the digital revolution.

The visionary advocates of the disruptive age recognize that the next era of digital transformation demands and places more emphasis on the ability of a workforce to adapt continuously and learn new skills and approaches within a variety of contexts. It needs the innovative ability of individuals. It needs an educational provision suitable for people with the social and creative skills and decision-making ability under constant change, uncertainty and novel ideas. The complex problem-solving ability will be far more in demand, and this capacity of individuals is not automatic or given. Nor is it the outgrowth of technical training, coding skills, technological know-how, or scientific empiricism on which STEM

education usually focuses. It requires, I would argue, training in critical thinking, skeptical questioning, and comparative and interpretive reasoning. This is the realm of social studies and the humanities. The greater understanding of cultural differences and how to deal with them, as a society and as individuals, require education and scholarship provided in such fields as area studies.

In my view, the fervor for “big data” and the craze with scientism in devaluing area studies, both of which started in the USA, were also the symptoms of the digital age. The proliferation of studies with “big data” sets was not possible before the age of the personal computer. The “big data” approach and methods produce new kinds of knowledge. But the use of scientific criteria to devalue the humanities and area studies is misguided and unwarranted. It is a corollary of the hyper-scientific euphoria of the digital revolution. The humanities and area studies share at least one fundamental property that makes them categorically different from the sciences, namely, they are language-based knowledge, produced from the understanding of language, culture, and history, and mainly using interpretive methods, not empirical, material-based knowledge, produced mainly by quantifiable and deductive methods. These different kinds of knowledge should not be justified by the same universal criteria.<sup>18</sup> In defending the value of the humanities and area studies, one should not attempt to make them more scientific than they can be, because their values are in the knowledge and wisdom that science cannot produce.

The humanities and area studies should not be required to justify their epistemological values in scientific terms, or their social values in utilitarian terms. They are as indispensable to humanity as

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18 The regime of “Quality Assurance” (QA) that spread among universities across the globe is also suitable to the epistemology and institutional practices in the STEM disciplines more than others, especially those at the opposite end of knowledge, namely the humanities and the arts. The QA has been adopted without adequate attention to the differences among branches of knowledge, disciplines and fields. Besides, the QA serves the neoliberal governance of higher education and the utilitarian purposes, which are beyond this paper to discuss. Lim (2001: chapter 6 and 7) has cautioned against the adoption of QA in developing countries primarily because of their different histories and the different conditions of higher education from the West.

scientific knowledge and STEM. Without this awareness, the hyper-scientific and hyper-utilitarian education in our time have created two paradoxes.

1) The digital age demands critical and complex thinking and the ability to adapt. Innovations come from this intellectual basis. But critical education is put aside in the drive for technical knowledge. The technological-driven economy leads to hyper-utilitarian education which undermines the humanities and other critical learning.

2) The digital transformation is taking place in the context of cultural differences and social diversity, and the transformation requires the ability of societies and governments to deal with the explosion of diversity in collective and individual identities. But the disproportional emphasis in STEM education side-steps the production of knowledge that helps us understand the processes generating cultural diversity

## **IX. Southeast Asian studies in the new era**

These general trends take place differently depending on the historical conditions of the higher education system in particular countries. In the USA, generally speaking, the decline in the humanities is of some concern but not as serious, given its origin of higher education in those non-utilitarian fields of knowledge. The effect of hyper-rationalistic, hyper-scientific knowledge, however, have had a lasting impact on area studies. In Asia, particularly Southeast Asia, modern higher education has always given the higher priority to applied or utilitarian knowledge in the sciences while the value of liberal arts, particularly the humanities and the arts has been secondary. Hyper-utilitarianism is comparatively stronger (than in the American case).<sup>19</sup> In many places, the push for

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<sup>19</sup> In the UK and Australia, despite the liberal arts tradition of higher education, because higher education had primarily been in the hand of the state, neo-liberalism and hyper-utilitarianism seem to cause extreme difficulties for universities more than in the USA, and to area studies more than the challenge from the sciences.

STEM is at the expense of the social sciences and the humanities - the home of area studies - not because of hyper-scientific thinking and methodology, but because of the short-sightedness of how to deal with the digital revolution. On the other hand, however, the prosperity within the globalized Asia allows new areas of knowledge production including area studies. These are two major contributing factors to Asian and Southeast Asian studies in the region. They could run in parallel, and need not be a conundrum.

Nevertheless, area studies cannot be the same. It cannot continue to live on the legacies of the colonial or Cold War scholarship. Despite any skepticism about the age of disruption, it must respond to the new conditions. If the transformation driven by the digital revolution, requires proficiency in global diversity in order to adapt, innovate and live with the increasingly geographically and culturally diverse world, the knowledge of different regions and peoples of the globe is invaluable.

The questions for all of us in Asian and Southeast Asian studies are the following: what are the styles of knowledge, disciplines and fields of emphasis that are pertinent in this new context and environment? What are the visions for these studies? Given the different histories and political economies in Asia and in the Euro-American academies, should the programs in Asia and Southeast Asia follow the humanities turn or take a different path following their own visions for the new Asian and Southeast Asian studies in the region?

## **X. Some suggestions**

We should keep these questions in mind while continuing to explore the innovative styles of Asian and Southeast Asian studies. Nonetheless, I would like to make some suggestions that are relevant to our exploration for the future.

First, in Asia, given the relative weakness in the humanities, Asian and Southeast Asian studies should pay more attention to the technological-related issues, instead of taking the humanistic turn,

thus making area studies more relevant to the social changes of the disruptive age. We need to explore the social and human dimension of technology-driven transformation, in research and in our classroom. The transformation of the digital age needs knowledge on these matters. In some ways, the studies of materials culture, the visual culture, the environment, and others that explore the conjunction of technology, capitalism and cultural studies, have made headways in that direction. Samson Lim, at the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), for example, has created a curriculum that links engineering and design with Southeast Asian studies.

Second, the comprehension of the world nowadays is different from the pre-digital and pre-internet age. We currently live with 24-hour world news and live telecasts from any spot in the world, compared to a printed page in the local newspaper that reported a wired news report. The awareness of global issues is at our fingertips, and is disseminated across the globe at our choice instead of news selected by an editor. Globe-trotting opportunities are easier and more affordable even by students than in the past. A typical middle-class teenager today has experience of international travel, and has been exposed to other cultures much more than previous generations. The world in their reality and imagination is not unfamiliar or so abstract as for previous generations when travel was expensive and difficult; thus, it was exclusively for the rich. Today, young people interested in other parts of the world seem issue-oriented. Also, increasingly, the relevance of knowledge about particular areas and regions is not the substance itself because knowledge is the essential path toward other purposes, such as advocacy for certain causes, politics, philanthropy, adventure, personal improvement, or purely for the intellectual journey. Places and cultures are no longer strange; yet they are different. The comprehension, method and purpose of learning about global diversity have changed. Pedagogy and research on Asia and Southeast Asia cannot be the same.

Perhaps in the near future the content and substance of a fixed area (country, region) will not be as significant as learning how to learn about cultural diversity. Experts on deep regional knowledge



remain important. But students and the non-experts also need area studies knowledge for “competency in cultural diversity” - the ability to take cultural diversity into the natural way of thinking, the normative way of living.

Third, the environment for language learning is radically different too since it is easier for students to acquire a foreign language in local settings, given the increase of multi-lingual students whose linguistic competency comes naturally. The forms, methods, and pedagogy for learning a foreign language have to change. Language experts and teachers are aware of these changes. They are exploring new methods of learning foreign languages. At the University of Wisconsin, for example, the old days of studying an Asian language may be numbered, and the new methods may be realized soon, such as learning languages from issues of interest or via popular culture, films, and so on.

Fourth, in the colonial era, the ancient civilizations were the focus of “area studies”. In the Cold War, geo-politics and nation-states comprised the paradigms and units of analysis of area studies. In the current age, the geo-political basis and the methodological nationalism are justified now for historical reasons and since they are the primary arrangements of the global community today. Nevertheless, they have been modified significantly to accommodate the question/subject that does not fit geo-politics or nations. Geographical flexibility should be the methodology and the outcome of area studies knowledge to enhance our student’s ability to think, switch back and forth, among different spatial parameters in their dealings with the global, trans-national, border zones, and transcultural diversity. The geography of inter-city connectivity, trans-national marriage and adoption, financial flows, and narcotic trafficking, for example, should not be difficult to comprehend regardless of the national context. Each spatial parameter implies its particular history, languages and cultures. I believe many experts in area studies have acquired this ability as an outcome of our life-long learning about other countries. Why not make the “flexible-area studies” a goal for our students too?

## XI. Conclusion

The “disruption era” poses new challenges for Southeast Asian studies far beyond the problematization of the geographical notions of Asia. The misguided direction that does not understand the necessity of the humanities and area studies for an understanding of the transformations driven by the digital revolution are leading higher education to paradoxical trends. These trends are beneficial to neither the understanding of the transformations nor to higher education and area studies. On the other hand, to renew its relevance and to increase the value of Southeast Asian studies, it must recognize the changing environments for such kinds of knowledge and respond to the demands of the new era. To turn challenges into opportunities, I believe, Asian and Southeast Asian studies in Asia should not and cannot replicate the American area studies or the Cornell model of Southeast Asian studies. Perhaps, they should not follow the “humanistic turn” either. Instead, they should develop their own “style”, emphasis, priority in the process of responding to the new era and new demands within the conditions given by their histories of higher education. It is possible, in my view, that the increasing resources and opportunities in Asia may facilitate the emergence of the next generation of Southeast Asian studies in Asia.

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## Introducing SEABOT: Methodological Quests in Southeast Asian Studies



Stephen Keck\*

### [ *Abstract* ]

How to study Southeast Asia (SEA)? The need to explore and identify methodologies for studying SEA are inherent in its multifaceted subject matter. At a minimum, the region's rich cultural diversity inhibits both the articulation of decisive defining characteristics and the training of scholars who can write with confidence beyond their specialisms. Consequently, the challenges of understanding the region remain and a consensus regarding the most effective approaches to studying its history, identity and future seem quite unlikely. Furthermore, "Area Studies" more generally, has proved to be a less attractive frame of reference for burgeoning scholarly trends. This paper will propose a new tool to help address these challenges. Even though the science of artificial intelligence (AI) is in its infancy, it has already yielded new approaches to many commercial, scientific and humanistic questions. At this point, AI has been used to produce news, generate better smart phones, deliver more entertainment choices, analyze earthquakes and write fiction. The time has come to explore the

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\* Academic Director and Professor of History, Emirates Diplomatic Academy, [stephen.keck@eda.ac.uk](mailto:stephen.keck@eda.ac.uk)

possibility that AI can be put at the service of the study of SEA. The paper intends to lay out what would be required to develop SEABOT. This instrument might exist as a robot on the web which might be called upon to make the study of SEA both broader and more comprehensive. The discussion will explore the financial resources, ownership and timeline needed to make SEABOT go from an idea to a reality. SEABOT would draw upon artificial neural networks (ANNs) to mine the region's "Big Data", while synthesizing the information to form new and useful perspectives on SEA. Overcoming significant language issues, applying multidisciplinary methods and drawing upon new yields of information should produce new questions and ways to conceptualize SEA. SEABOT could lead to findings which might not otherwise be achieved. SEABOT's work might well produce outcomes which could open up solutions to immediate regional problems, provide ASEAN planners with new resources and make it possible to eventually define and capitalize on SEA's "soft power". That is, new findings should provide the basis for ASEAN diplomats and policy-makers to develop new modalities of cultural diplomacy and improved governance. Last, SEABOT might also open up avenues to tell the SEA story in new distinctive ways. SEABOT is seen as a heuristic device to explore the results which this instrument might yield. More important the discussion will also raise the possibility that an AI-driven perspective on SEA may prove to be even more problematic than it is beneficial.

**Keywords:** artificial intelligence, SEABOT, Research BOTs, new findings, new methods, big data, Southeast Asia

## I . Introductory discussion

The academic exploration of Southeast Asia (SEA), like that of other regions, stems from multiple needs and aspirations. The scholars who pursue such enquiries are often forced to painstakingly define and adjust their methodologies. Conferences in Busan have, over the years, investigated SEA from multiple angles. One theme has been

the ways in which events such as colonization, world wars, decolonization, and independence have shaped the terrain in which regional scholarship has been first conceptualized and subsequently attempted. It is in the spirit of such a reality that this paper offers a different type of theoretical perspective on the future modes for the study of SEA.

In the years since *Suvannabhumi* has been founded, the world has witnessed dramatic transformations involving the capacity to create, shape and interact with information. These developments are often defined in terms of digitalization and they are associated with rapid investments in technology focused on data, data analytics and artificial intelligence (AI). The claims associated with the advent and future of AI (including heralding a “Fourth Industrial Revolution”) are as wild as they are plentiful, including the idea that it represents the biggest change in life on earth since the Cambrian era brought about many new life forms roughly 500 million years ago (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2018). It might be added that educators are likely to see AI come in relation to virtual reality (VR) and even augmented reality (AR). VR and AR may well do for future scholars what heritage and tourism have done for the study of history and culture. The impacts of these developments are widespread and are occurring in real time. Consequently, unlike the field of Southeast Asian Studies (SEAS), there is not yet a convention or organized modality for assessing both the future of AI and digitalization or its immediate and long-term impacts upon societies and the quality of human life.

Perhaps it is now time to define and identify the study of the scope, depth, breadth and significance of these changes as post-anthropocentric. This field (even the very metaphor of the “field”, with its bias towards roots, cultivation and predictable development might not be sustainable in a world defined by massive data and AI) will necessarily be connected to the changes wrought first by software engineering and possibly last by AI itself, but actually focuses on the human interaction with these phenomena. This field is not to be confused with “digital humanities”, which is often associated with projects to digitize a wide range of sources for academic use or correspondingly

highlights new possibilities in the classroom. Instead, this framework of study reflects the work of scholars who have understood that the concept of “modernity” (as well as “postmodernity”) is inadequate to explain the current situation of both global and human development. Situating the Anthropocene as a new epoch in global history in which human interaction with the earth and its ecosystems is the dominant form of development enables scholars to explain many environmental and biological transformations which have proved increasingly relevant to many types of life. The designation “Anthropocene” is to be distinguished from “Holocene” (which is generally recognized as the current epoch, which originated roughly 11,700 years ago) which is the previous epoch of global time. To underscore the difference, the Anthropocene frame of reference locates environmental transformations, especially climate change, the massive rise in the human population and the extinction of large numbers of species as defining events of this historical era. It might be added that post-anthropocentrism builds upon, but also moves away from the ground- breaking approach to the study which has been articulated by scholars who advocate “deep history”. The project to use neurobiology to redefine the boundaries of humanity’s past (which by itself might have a significant impact on the study of SEA) is relevant to a future which promises significant alteration of some of the key features of the human condition. Post-anthropocentrism does not deny the basic conceptual insights of Anthropocentrism but opens up the possibility of reframing much of the past in light of new ways of thinking about the history of humanity.

That said, neurotechnology might well offer ways to help deliver unprecedented treatments for previously challenging disabilities, but it might also create new models for human expectations. Understanding the brain (and with it many constructive possibilities) opens up not only humanity’s past, but theoretical discourses about “cognitive enhancement”, brain-computer interfaces or what seems like a fantasy—sharing “full sensory and emotional experiences” online. This last vision belongs to Mark Zuckerberg while Elon Musk’s pronouncements on AI and its applications and dangers may well have furnished us with one of



the most memorable soundbites of the decade (Marsh 2018). In practice, the rise of industries such as neurotechnology are likely to produce first broader questions about augmenting human capacity. In turn, the study not of how to augment humans, but which kind of choices are made across cultures could well open up whole new avenues of regional study. While it is beyond the subject matter of this paper, it might be usefully noted that making augmentation itself the focus of analysis might produce very different historical narratives and raise other questions useful for the explication of cultural and social trajectories. With respect to Southeast Asia, it is possible to foresee the study of comparative augmentations as a basis for analyzing the region's many cultures.

Again, the victory of AlphaGo over Ke Je is well known in China—an event that already has the stuff of mythology in the making as it appears to be decisive in the nation's stated drive to become the world leader in AI by 2030 (Addison 2018). Beijing will develop a 2.1 \$billion AI part which will have a supercomputer, biometrics, cloud computing and high speed big data. The focus of the park will be Deep Learning. At this point, China is trying to catch up with 709 AI companies, which compares with 2905 in the USA (Kharpal 2018). If such developments come to pass, it might even be said that mastery of a board did indeed change the world.

However, post-anthropocentrism goes much further: it studies the interaction not only of human civilization with the natural world, but with the regimes of data, information and digital realities which it has produced. Inherent in this field is the study of humanity under the pressures of infoscapes which define many intellectual, ethical, historical and social realities. More important, post-anthropocentrism moves human experience from being the acting subject of the Anthropocene era into an object which is deeply affected by its realities. In other words, the scholar who works with a post-anthropocentrist framework will be interested in the development and application of regimes of information, but also how those data-driven entities continue to shape and reshape human identities. The field of post-anthropocentrism explores not so much the human impacts upon the earth's multiple environments, but the dialectical relationship between humanistic questions (which

certainly include the natural world) and the data regimes and infoscapes which increasingly define many facets of individual development and social life. That is, the student of post-anthropocentrism also works in tandem with political economists, philosophers, ethicists, anthropologists and adherents of other disciplines to define, assay and, ultimately, analyze forms of life under uses of information made up of data mountains and data oceans. (It might be considered that data has always been understood to have an instrumental reality. However, the independent use of data brings to the forefront many ethical dilemmas).

Furthermore, the domain of post-anthropocentrism means the human subject and object is studied within a distinct historical epoch. That is, historical analysis becomes directed to tracing the transformations of human life in relation not only to the natural world, but to the increasingly determinative structures of information and data. Such a path of study might be said to invert “deep history” which has used the development of the human brain to depict historical patterns (Smail 2007). Deep History is worthy of mention because it very aptly illustrates that not only is there more data, but what counts for important data is undergoing profound transformations. As Daniel Lord Smail observed the “new neurohistory” has the potential to alter our understanding of cultural change:

Culture, in some fundamental sense, has been revealed as a biological phenomenon. Wired in neurophysiology, taking shape in the form of neural networks and receptors, culture can operate in a relatively mechanistic, quasi-biological fashion. The wiring can be explicit or intended product of cultural patterns, traceable to sets of social practices that shape children in predictable ways during the development process. The wiring can also be accidental, as in cases where the pregnant women ingest certain drugs or chemicals that are a natural part of their own culture—alcohol, nicotine, coca—and thereby unwittingly shape fetal development. If the historians of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe knew more about the effect of caffeine consumption on fetal development, they might be able to suggest some of the large-scale, albeit wholly unintended, neurophysiological consequences of the rapid growth in consumption

of tea and coffee. In either case, there is not much culture without biology. Culture is made possible by the plasticity of human neurophysiology. With this insight, we can finally dispense with the idea, once favored by some historians that biology gave way to culture with the advent of civilization. This has it all backward. Civilization did not bring an end to biology. Civilization enabled important aspects of human biology (Smail 2007: 154-55).

That meant in practice that the revolutions which occurred in the Neolithic period (agriculture, the domestication of animals, more settled existence, and so on) created a new “neurophysiological ecosystem” (2007: 155). Consequently, it became possible to generate new neural configurations, which might transform “brain-body states” (Ibid.). None of this might worry those with mastery over regional issues, but it illustrates the extent to which the very nature of data itself (in this case brain chemistry) can be made significant for the reconstruction of cultural history. Furthermore, the race for “Superintelligence”, which already has taken a number of forms, suggests that the methods for the acquisition and interpretation of data will almost certainly go through transformation (Bostrom 2014).

Regional study will increasingly be shaped by both the breadth and depth of what might be regarded as new data in its efforts to uncover the multifaceted development of societies, economies and cultures amidst these conditions. Accordingly, the time may come to speak of *homo indicina* in which the human subject comes to be regarded as a kind of index for the data taken from it. Under these circumstances, the subject matter of SEA might not change, but attention would probably be given to how the region’s peoples have had their lives impacted by various information and data regimes.

The dangers of AI having gone mad are well imagined, but the impact on the world of massive data and its applications are only just beginning to be understood. Even if it easy to acknowledge that data sciences may have yet to overcome problems associated with its size, storage, structuring and velocities, it is clear that “big data” has become a significant force in its own right. For our purposes today, it is the improvements in data management coupled with AI platforms which should change the evidentiary basis for most scholarly conversations. The unprecedented availability of information

about human beings, their societies, environments, the DNAs, genomes and other modes of information will reshape many scholarly questions—as it should. New patterns of virtually every aspect of human life will emerge for analysis. Older evidentiary models will almost be outflanked from the start. Just at the factic basis from colonial sources looks primitive to contemporary students of Southeast Asia, so too, in a data-driven world the epistemic basis for much of what is produced today will probably look feeble or under-researched by scholars drawing upon AI and related tools. And, yet, data by itself are not any more real or truthful than are facts. Some will recognize the idea behind the saying that “data will find a use” that data do not guarantee objectivity. In fact, one hardly has to look far in the commercial world to find business executives calling data a new “currency”. Nonetheless, data rather than AI are understood to be essentially neutral and not particularly dangerous.

It might be useful to remember that we can recover a kind of genealogy of anxiety about the impact of technology on human life, especially if it is connected to robotics or other kinds of artificial intelligence. This is a strand of thought with which we are familiar: it might be said to originate with Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s *Frankenstein: or Modern Prometheus* (1818), but became more prominent in the twentieth century. Possibly this strand of thought is best understood as a reaction to the Enlightenment and the naïve worship of technology which has accompanied modernity—and even mistakenly assumed to represent the best features of the modern world. With respect to robotics, possibly the first person to use the term was the Czech writer Karel Capek. Writing after the First World War, Capek, envisioned a future in which the relationship between robots and humans was problematic. Possibly this reflected the legacy of living through the First World War and not any kind of advanced knowledge about robotics. *R.U.R. (Rossum’s Universal Robots)* (1921) was a play in which a robot rebellion destroys humanity. More generally, the fear of untrammelled technological development (possibly in Asia represented by Japan’s rich tradition of the ‘monstrous’—embodied by Godzilla) produces related discourses. However, some of the poignant anxieties about the future involve AI (this is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 2001). Much of

this has produced great novels and films (and many more that struggle to attain basic mediocrity) but for our purposes it has served to enhance anxieties about the use of many new technologies—especially AI. Therefore, from this point forward, a well-known kind of genealogy develops in science fiction that associates robotics (and later AI) with a human apocalypse, but the theme of profound change and human transformation has increasingly become the subject of public debate (Ford 2015; Kurzweil 2005). The legacy can be seen in many science fiction writings and films, but also very recently in the both the paper commissioned by the European Parliament (“Should we Fear Artificial Intelligence?”) and published in March 2018 and the protest led by AI researchers that developed in April 2018 over KAIST’s partnership with Hanwha Systems to build “Killer Robots”.

To cite one example of the increasingly widespread use of AI in many avenues of public life, the work of diplomats is indicative of the broader transformations under way elsewhere. Diplomatic practice illustrates the truism that these technological developments will also alter current practices in commerce, urban planning, policy-making and the delivery of health care. Many in the international diplomatic community are familiar with the *Diplopedia* which was developed under the leadership of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. *Diplopedia* is an online, open source platform (for US diplomats and members of the intelligence community) which is not a blog or chatroom but “is a reference tool for State Department personnel who seek quick access to knowledgeable, useful, timely, current information on foreign affairs issues (US Department of State)”. *Diplopedia* has been able to provide US diplomats with much better understandings of the kinds of local situations they encounter in their work.

Additionally, Seppe Verheyen, a researcher at Emirates Diplomatic Academy, has noted that data analytics are increasingly important for diplomatic practice (2017). For instance, Big Data can be utilized to “address the inefficiency and mismanagement of humanitarian aid by using geopolitical data and real-time mapping (Verheyen 2017: 1). In addition, diplomats can become more effective negotiators because automated content analysis will make it possible

for them to analyze political documents rapidly to understand the positions of other countries (Verheyen 2017)

Former UK Ambassador Tom Fletcher has argued that AI represents the “greatest opportunity and the greatest threat to the UN’s objectives”. In a report entitled “United Networks”, Fletcher observed that AI could be mobilized to bring new approaches to older problems: these might include making existing UN services (particularly health, social and emergency) more efficient and proactive; improve storage and distribution networks (for disaster relief) and forecasting environmental and ecological trends. More interesting for us here, Fletcher understood that the use of robots could have a significant impact upon the delivery of government services:

Allow routine administrative and operational roles to be learned by software agents ('bots'), which can prioritize tasks, manage routine interactions with colleagues (or other bots), and plan schedules. Newsrooms increasingly use machine learning to write sports reports and draft articles; ... similar technology can produce financial reports and executive briefings.” (2017: 35)

Ambassador Fletcher noted that the rapid increases in AI investment meant that the UN would do well to deal with the disruptions and problems posed by the technology’s use. Fletcher recommended that the UN “lead a public debate and develop a code of practice on the use of Artificial Intelligence (2017: 37)”. In addition, Fletcher argues for certification procedures for the creators of algorithms, developing a code of conduct for the use of AI auditing processes that involve machine learning and, more generally, developing international safeguards for the use of the technology (2017: 36).

To think about these developments in another framework, the realities of the digital world might be said to constitute a “hyperobject” which increasingly defines both our daily lives and the scholar’s ability to explore SEA and other subjects (Morton 2010). Even more strongly, if data were originally created by instrumental rational processes, it might be worth considering as a “hyperobject”

now in its own right, which is not only the basis on which human life is examined and understood, but a changing series of entities which might become a source for activity in its own right (Morton 2010). Accordingly, this paper begins with the assumption that scholarship itself will change, possibly—if not probably—almost beyond our recognition. Therefore, to discuss methodological approaches to the study of SEA should consider the impact of the changing status, content and importance of information.

At the same time, AI can contribute to new forms of dystopian practices, including re-humanization. With re-humanization human attribution is given to performances by artificial intelligence or robots. To cite one humorous example, LG's new home helper CLOi was unable to speak or perform the basic tasks of anticipating the owner's needs and it was said that CLOi "had a moment". This gendered remark came during the CES press conference (Tomlinson 2018). Indeed, it might be said that one of the tasks ahead for liberal arts scholarship (and probably comedians and entertainers) will be to evaluate these attempts at "pathetic fallacy" in light of AI and Robotics. Whereas John Ruskin, the dominant cultural critic of Victorian Britain, observed that artist and writers often were engaged in the personalization of the natural world, future writers will doubtless re-humanize digital spaces and practices. This dystopian point of view might be understood as the inversion of things like "Cyberpunk".

Overall this paper focuses on AI because it is likely that the technology will redefine many areas of scholarship, including that which is devoted to understanding SEA. At the risk of stating the obvious, AI is already playing a role in SEA. We have probably all been using AI-related technology for years, but it might be added that within the region it is expected that its use will increase substantially. Singapore is among the cities which envisions improving the quality of life for its people by investing in AI to develop "smart cities" and the same might be said for the delivery of health care. Moreover, in January it was announced that Alibaba would utilize AI to establish a traffic control system for Kuala Lumpur. This would be Alibaba's first such service outside of China (*The Business Times* 2018). The McKinsey Global Institute published

“Artificial Intelligence and Southeast Asia’s Future” (2017) for the Singapore Summit. This study explored the use and potential for AI in SEA, concluding that:

AI technologies may have a disruptive impact on the region’s economies—and its workers. Previously published MGI research estimated that currently demonstrated technologies have the potential to automate roughly half of the work activities performed in ASEAN’s four biggest economies: Indonesia (52 percent of all activities), Malaysia (51 percent), the Philippines (48 percent) and Thailand (55 percent). These tasks currently generate more than \$900 billion in wages (McKinsey Global Institute 2017: 1).

It should be clear that AI’s impacts upon SEA are probably only just beginning to be experienced.

To pull these remarks together, this paper develops three ideas. To begin with, it calls attention to the possible need to reconceptualize some of the frameworks for studying SEA. Students of the region may not be as interested in the discussions regarding “deep history”, the Anthropocene or post-anthropocentric, as scholars in other disciplines, but these concepts may be seen as increasingly relevant to regional study. Secondly, the paper seeks to explore the possible impact of AI and related technologies on SEA by postulating the development of SEABOT—a fictional product—and how its development would alter many of the practices and outputs for researchers. While it is to be emphasized that SEABOT is at this point an idea, a heuristic device only, there are very good reasons to believe that something like it could be invented. More important, SEABOT can probably be built with existing technologies. Predicting the future is dicey at best, but building it might be easier. After all, if the experiences of both the developments in Silicon Valley and the industrial revolution are in any way worthy, then it might easily be said that at any given time there are many “futures” out there, but only some of them are actually built (O’Reilly 2017). Finally, the paper explores both the problems caused by scholarship affected by SEABOT and makes some suggestions about how those who study SEA might actually begin to engage these issues in a proactive way.



There is one important caveat here: even though this paper does not attempt to predict the future it is based upon some common expectations for what the coming decades of the twenty-first century will look like. To begin with, there is no guarantee that the “Fourth Industrial Revolution” will fulfill its potential. AI would hardly be the first technology to raise massive expectations, which are not met. More dramatically, the idea that there will be “exponential growth” (Kurzweil 2005) leading to a set of dramatic changes in human cognition and ultimately to the “Singularity” is not understood here to be in any way inevitable. Nor is the assumption that the big data, the related analytics and data-mining will open as Google is currently is not one held by this author. Instead, there is every chance that we are headed into a very different future: one in which data are mined, harvested, traded, stolen, sold, resold and, most important, fiercely protected. It might be possible to imagine that the race of Superintelligence will continue, but the world will not be shaped by open platforms and a neutral internet, but divided into different data regimes. Indeed, there is a possibility that the social and political application of AI will lead to more restrictions for those who wish to use data for academic study. All of that said, there are still ample warrants to begin a conversation about the importance of data and AI and the future of SEAS.

Given the constraint that the future is inevitably unknowable, this paper describes the SEABOT Project for both scenarios (which might also be regarded as opposite ends of a spectrum). At one end, SEABOT is short-hand for the engagement with an open source online platform which would serve all researchers throughout the world. This platform would be like Google in that it would update itself with constant use from researchers, but also from the other sources of mass data. While this platform has yet to be invented, it could be with the right financial and legal support. In this instance, SEABOT is the engagement with that vast resource. From the other end, SEABOT might be a much more modest product, but one that is devoted exclusively for SEAS. This would be limited, but many of the AI and data-driven issues would still be quite relevant to the work of scholars.

Most important, perhaps, the spirit in which this paper is written is neither to predict the future nor to change research agendas, but it is to begin a conversation about the methods and possible paths which shape SEAS. The point here is that the use of AI and mass data has the chance to produce truly excellent and useful scholarship, but it will be incumbent on scholars and researchers in SEA and elsewhere to work to make the most of these changes. If those who study these subjects remain indifferent to many of these developments, they may eventually be surprised—and probably not in a comfortable way—at the changes around them. In other words, taking shelter in the ivory tower of academe is not a way forward; discussion, new ideas and creative innovation will be.

## **II . Designing SEABOT**

Imagine that it is 2025 and SEABOT has been in operation for about two years. It is a platform which enables scholars who study SEA to communicate, share information, receive assessments of their work in real time, and connects them to both data bases and data analytics. In addition, SEABOT is just one regional program because in other parts of the world similar AI drive platforms exist (i.e., MENABOT, AFROBOT, and so on.) and they are connected with one another. In fact, what is today called “the internet of things” enables them to communicate and provide continuous improvements.

Before going further, it might be useful to clarify both terms and challenges. SEABOT will be a network based on AI, which means that it can perform mental operations autonomously. The limits of that autonomy need not concern us here, but one key point is that AI programs can also learn independently. To make a wide generalization, “machine learning” refers to the ability that AI programs have to mine data, produce results and become smarter at it. The most famous example of this is AlphaGo which played thousands of games of Go with itself, acquiring more capacity as it did so. For those of the anxious bent, it is not clear what the limits of machine learning actually are. Deep Learning refers to the ability of an AI program to learn from new sets of data—even if those data

are unlabeled. Deep Learning will make it possible for a program to encounter new data sets and make decisions about them (a process reinforced by machine learning).

One of the reasons that AI has surged is that developments in Cloud computing has meant that vast amounts of data are now captured on a routine basis. Cloud IT makes it possible to manage and store the vast amount of data generated across virtually every digital product in contemporary societies. Much of the data are unstructured, but the capacity to capture, manage and store it have improved dramatically. Without these developments, AlphaGo could play Go (and Deep Blue chess), but their ability to impact human life would be nearly minimal. AI applications increasingly rely on software to analyze (Data Analytics) data which they first find through Data Mining.

This barely thumb nail sketch of AI capacity is made greater by platforms. A few examples of AI platforms which are available in 2018 might be regarded as precursors to what would be needed for SEABOT. Microsoft Azure Machine Learning is designed to simplify machine learning for business applications; Google Cloud Prediction API can be trained to predict what movies or products a user might like or it can develop recommendation systems; Infosys Nia is useful for those organizations which seek to find additional automations and innovations in order to continuously make core business practices more efficient; Premonition relies on the world's largest litigation database and since it can read more than 50,000 documents a second provides lawyers with the ability to ask questions which have not been asked before; Wit.ai enables developers by providing an open natural language platform; Vital A.I. develops efficient data models and then employs them across its architecture; Kai, designed to be domain specific, is a conversational platform (with a deep learning analytical tool set) which uses assistants and smart bots to meet the needs of a self-serve customer portal; last but not least, Receptiviti addresses emotional intelligence: it allows technologists to develop platforms which discriminate between their user's emotional and psychological profiles (Predictiveanalyticstoday.com 2018).

Possibly the best known, of course, is IBM's Watson. This platform has already had very successful applications and remains as cutting edge as those mentioned above. For example, with respect to medical research, Watson is deployed to work on cancer treatment. It draws (and learns from) upon a vast data base to improve treatment options for individual patients. The success of Watson might be gleaned from the increase in its usage: in January 2017 Watson could report that 9,000 patients had been affected by its recommendations; by 2018 the number is 113,000. The fact that some of Watson's cancer treatment options in 2018 were found to be unsafe, illustrates the challenges facing doctors (who can also make mistakes). In fact, at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC), most of the blame was affixed on the ways in which Watson was trained. More important, perhaps, even with this setback MSKCC continues to use Watson as a kind of "second opinion" (Moon 2018). At the same time, it might be added that it now publishes the "Watson 100" which contained the best studies, posters, white papers and abstracts from 2017 (IBM Watson). Another potentially useful tool for scholars is Watson's Path which allows user to retrace the cognitive steps which it makes as it seeks to find solutions to specific problems.

### **III. The SEABOT Platform**

By 2025 it should be possible to design SEABOT, with many similar features (except it will not engage medical practice). SEABOT will be both a multifaceted platform which will be dedicated to producing constantly improving research projects for those interested in SEA. The first choice that the designers will face is whether it will be an open platform or a semi-open platform. Possibly it might start as open (especially, to enable users to see its immense advantages), become semi-open, and once popular require institutional subscriptions. For our purposes, we will assume that it is semi-open with some services open, but most requiring a subscription. The second set of challenges concerns restrictions on data. These are potentially numerous as they involve national security and intellectual property. Nonetheless, it should be remembered that

vast amounts of data would not be decisively affected by these considerations.

There are basically three different and essential features to the SEABOT Project: (1) a required platform for researchers who will do much of their reading, writing and reflection within the product's network; (2) SEABOT will also provide helper R-Bots which will mobilize AI to interact with scholars as they conceive, research and produce scholarship; (3) last SEABOT would also have a program which could independently research topics at the request of scholars, businesses and governments—and probably not in that order. Taken together, SEABOT might transform scholarship about the region, but as we will see do so in ways which may be unsettling. In fact, AI may well be at heart of future research endeavors, but ironic consequences which usually define human future are applicable here as well: by the time it is all said and done many of the problems will not be new, but quite recognizable to the readers of *Suvannabhumi*. That is, the research yield would almost certainly be of the highest quality, but it would be as predictable that the call to “de-center” and “diversify” SEAS would remain as great as ever (Goh 2011).

In any event, it is almost certain that while researchers will help to program the artificial neural network (ANN) which will make SEABOT possible, it will be an experience which is replicated by other regions, nations and interests. That is, SEABOT might be joined by equivalents for East Asia, Europe, South Asia, and other regions. Given that improvements which are anticipated for the “internet of things”, it might be easily assumed that these platforms will communicate and update one another. Possibly more important, they will be continuously updated by non-research platforms which draw upon data sets for many other purposes. Consequently, when the SEA scholar sits down (or accesses it on his/her phone, while running in the gym) she will be receiving assessments and research paths which are informed by real-time global developments.

Devising and designing SEABOT will be a multifaceted task, but with adequate funding it should be a project which can draw upon work done in other areas of robotics, data cloud and AI. It is

already possible to foresee how this might be achieved and what kinds of resources will be required to make it successful. In this part of the discussion, it is important to identify the mission and purpose of SEABOT. Defining SEABOT's stakeholders should make it evident who might be anticipated to allocate resources to realize its invention. Last, it should then become clear what kinds of research SEABOT would generate.

SEABOT's ANN would be programmed by the region's policy-makers, researchers, business leaders and other educators. Their task would be to provide questions (connected to prefigured hierarchies of knowledge) so that SEABOT would know how to first focus on relevant topics, analyze them and then reply with information, suggestions and above all some kind of accessible data interpretation strategy. Scholars, then would have inputs which would define much of the interpretative apparatus for the data and, of course, the questions put to SEABOT could be of an infinite variety. With that, SEABOT would not only be drawing upon data oceans, but the yield from both scholarly work and other research products.

The SEABOT platform would become the most credible place for recognized research to take place. Scholars would be able to draw upon ongoing data-mining and data analytics, previous and current research and the larger world-wide research and data platforms. One of the immediate advantages is that SEABOT would be able to guarantee (until hackers figure out how to subvert it) the authenticity of scholarly productivity. Probably most people here have already used "Turn It In" and "Safe Assign", in evaluating the integrity of student papers. SEABOT would do this automatically because scholars working within the system would have their sources continuously checked, confirmed or found wanting. Moreover, this feature of SEABOT would have the added advantage of doing all of the citations (assuming that traditional research products are still in use) and even providing information (if needed) on the frequency of use and the way individual sources shaped the project.

SEABOT could also be programmed to recommend or not

recommend publication. This might produce only high yield articles, but a more likely scenario would be the publication with a series of easily grasped ratings (i.e., this is a 2-star paper or a 3-star, or 4-star) which might immediately place the significance and impact of the work. One might easily imagine why this would be attractive to universities, where the ability to accurately or reasonably assess publications is a serious challenge. Scholars might be assessed not only on the star rating, but also on the time it took for the paper to be researched, developed and published. This would probably mean the development of clear metrics for research publications (as opposed to looking at citations) in evaluating the productivity of a faculty member, researchers and research organizations.

SEABOT would be able to devise better ways to assess the research of scholars than we have at present. Rather than rely upon the crude application of data produced by citation indexes, SEABOT would be able to evaluate a scholar in relative terms. That is, SEABOT could draw upon mass data to first predict what a given scholar might be expected to achieve with the publication of an article. Rather than rely upon an impact factor or number of citations only, SEABOT could design metrics which actually reflect the reasonable expectations for a given scholar's research specialization. That is, rather than comparing a scholar's output with those over the whole range of academe, it should be possible to generate what is a reasonable output for a researcher based upon their fields of academic specialization. To be sure, great care needs to be practiced here, but it would enable those who wish (university administrators, grant-awarding bodies, and so on) to evaluate scholarly productivity with the contextualization of research practices, which seems to be increasingly lacking.

To provide an unlikely example, in Major League Baseball (MLB) fans are quite familiar with evaluation schemes which seek to assess how much value a player adds to a team. This is an inherently complex subject, but a couple of points may serve here because the evaluation of a scholar's research is ultimately about how much value has been added by his/her publications. Accordingly, baseball statisticians (sabermetrics—for those who follow the subject) have created a formula known as WAR (Wins

Above Replacement) to evaluate the productivity of individual players. If one wants to understand how much a given first basemen is worth, then that player's statistical output is compared with league average for a player at this position. The idea then is to see how valuable the player was by trying to ascertain the actual value of his hitting and fielding by relating it to his team's wins (also measured against that of other teams). Accordingly, after a great deal of statistical analysis players get a WAR number which denotes their actual value (it is then related to how much they are paid, but that is beyond our needs here). These numbers are used by both MLB and player's lawyers when negotiating contracts.

For our purposes here, SEABOT could do what university administrators cannot: namely draw upon vast amounts to data to set reasonable expectations for research productivity. Hence, a scholar who publishes frequently on Laos would be compared to similar scholars, rather than those (say who work on Japan and China) who at the very outset come with much bigger audiences and then, not surprisingly, quickly have many more citations and are therefore deemed to have a bigger impact and be more valuable. Obviously SEABOT could adjust these metrics for both discipline and age of the scholar. There are probably many better ways to devise academic metrics, but at present scholars have only resources which tend to produce very misleading results.

All told, SEABOT could produce the highest quality of research because the final product will be informed by the broadest set of intellectual considerations. These products will draw upon not only materials from SEA, but in comparison with other regions. The scholarship created by the researcher will provide the opportunity to make comparative study also within SEA. The scholar will have researched the question with reference to both contemporary ideas, but with much of the interpretative history at his/her finger-tips. Most important, perhaps, it will be as close to being comprehensive as possible.

The author will not have to worry about readership because SEABOT will immediately send it to the appropriate journal (or whatever has replaced it) for a review process (also carried out with



the assistance of SEABOT) can commence. More important, the work will be written within an ongoing review process made possible by the R-Bots. In short, a scholar who published (in the online sense) an article on SEABOT, would know that his/her work was of a very high quality.

#### **IV. Research BOTS**

One of SEABOT's functions would be to inform the Research Bots which engage the scholar as they write. A scholar would log into a secured cloud setting to write his/her article. As the author writes the Research Bots would make suggestions about what is relevant to the argument. These R-bots would have already mined the data bases and be able to instantly recommend 5 to 6 articles which have been published on that topic. Of course, they might be programmed for specific applications (cross-disciplinary points of contact, opportunities for comparative study, treatments of related problems in other disciplines or critical reviews).

These R-bots might also present the references in coded fashion (indicating their impact factors, qualities of the referral process, and even funding sources—if applicable). R-bots might also have an enormous source of factual information, which might be regarded as existing as established by convention and understood to be common knowledge. Indeed, the very prospect of an R-bot might make the idea of common knowledge out-of-date. Instead, there might be a CDS (common data source) which might be readily referred to by scholars. These data sources might be subdivided by field, discipline or nationality. Of course, these R-bots would also be programmed to evaluate fake news or its relationship in scholarship and they could troll a scholar's work for plagiarism. Even more happily, they might quickly organize all of the references, saving the scholar to work on more interesting or compelling tasks.

These R-bots would have long passed the "Turing test" in that they could simulate human intelligence. More importantly, their value-added would be their brutal efficiency and tirelessness rather than their forged humanity.

## **V. A SEABOT 100**

SEABOT actually begins with a global platform (following Watson), which would be funded by institutional subscription. This platform requires that scholars register (which initially would include uploading all of their publications). The platform would be many things: most critically for scholarship it would be a virtual academic workstation (VAW), where the researcher would read, acquire data and ultimately produce scholarship. The researcher will work in a transparent way—the entire process of reading, analysis and exposition will take place on this platform. Even if the researcher opts for research privacy, basic information about the scholar (publications, reviews, courses taught, educational background, professional networks and sources of funding) will be public information. Some scholars may object to this, but they will be gaining tools of unprecedented capacity. Universities will require membership as a matter of best practice; anything less than that will raise questions about the credibility of the institution's research output.

However, there is at least one more research yield which would be broad questions about the region. Researchers would be able to ask SEABOT questions—to have it generate data, reports and possibly even algorithms to pursue specific questions. However, the real benefit here would be the collaborative possibilities—across universities, nations and even regions. All of this may imply that the final academic product will change—from sole-authored books and articles to much larger team projects—many of which will furnish outputs as they remain ongoing. In other words, SEABOT will promote collaborative ventures, provide the possibility for continuous referred feedback and ongoing referencing, it is possible that the very nature of the scholarly product will change. Not only will the final product change, but the status of the author will almost certainly undergo transformation (especially if professors and researchers are continuously evaluated for their productivity over time. Under these circumstances—or those related to what is envisaged here—it would be surprising if the expectations for individual scholars were not substantially transformed.

In any event, just as Watson now produces the Watson 100 for medical research, it would not be too hard to imagine that in 2025 SEABOT would do something similar for SEAS. This yield (whatever number) would become a prize for individual researchers or research teams. More important, perhaps, it might begin to produce intellectual products which might be widely consumed across the SEAS ecosystem.

After all, the platform connects researchers across the world and allows them to publish their work at different stages of completion. In addition, it will enable them to generate a broader set of research products. This will include Infographs, VR options and illustrations. The possible and probable rich collaborations with those who develop online gaming can only be imagined.

## **VI. SEABOT's projected research yields**

SEABOT might be expected to produce a range of research impacts which would almost certainly redefine the field of SEAS. To begin with, the scholarship generated by researchers working in conjunction (and with R-bots) will be transparent and also of a very high quality. Scholars will work with immediate conversations and references in mind and their assessments should be built in relation to any kind of well-established consensus. More important, perhaps, SEABOT follows other digital projects in that it should improve scholarly efficiency and therefore provide a greater quantitative output of high-end research. Furthermore, the larger scholarly agenda conducted by SEABOT itself (which ideally draws upon instant data sets, data-mining and scholarly analysis) has the potential to relocate the interests in researchers. One of the strengths of AI is that it has the potential to recognize trends (a critical trend for historians and social scientists) and unlike human scholars will be able to do so based upon the widest amounts of present data and much of what survived before it. More compelling, these trends and patterns will be made in spite of the many language barriers which face all students who explore SEA. It might be remembered that SEABOT should be able to draw upon orl

sources: since another strength of AI is speech recognition SEABOT should have the richest data available—if it is assigned a project such as determining the key factors which make up the evolution of kinship in SEA or if it is called upon to trace the impact of technology transfer to particular places in the region.

For those intellectuals and scholars who at once championed “the end of history” or as postmodernists proclaimed it, the end of grand narratives, it is possible that an AI application will be able to establish dominant trends which are easily the stuff of narratives. Obviously, this would barely be the end of the story, but it is not too hard to imagine that the results generated by SEABOT might result in challenges from academics and the articulation of new scholarly priorities.

One more thing to consider: the use of SEABOT will almost certainly be to forecast the region’s future. This means that the disinterested study of the region’s history and culture will now be carried out within the same platform which governments will use to try to shape the future. Accordingly, SEABOT will almost certainly generate current knowledge, which will not be tied to a particular domain. The divides between policy makers, educators and scholars (to name a few) will not be likely to survive. Instead, SEABOT will connect these disparate groups when the R-Bots make their suggestions and offer feedback.

## **VII. The impact of SEABOT on SEA**

The impact of SEABOT on the region is a bit harder to gauge, but it may be an afterthought compared with the decision to develop it. That is, the potential for a data-driven regional research program which would provide valuable information for policy-makers, journalists, educators, economists, business leaders and politicians is obvious. The outputs of SEABOT would immediately be useful, transparent and stimulating for SEA leadership. In fact, SEABOT—or something like it—could be the instrument which ASEAN might use to become a more powerful block.

Accordingly, SEABOT (or a program like it) should be a project which ASEAN might endorse and promote. Since one of the advantages of AI is pattern recognition: SEABOT generated scholarship may well find and exhibit the region's common characteristics. It might make it easier to follow the path articulated by Victor King: to concentrate on culture and identity thereby "giving us the capacity to examine ASEAN as a segment of the global system" (2016: 38-39). That is, the use of SEABOT might facilitate the exploration of the region, building scholarship on both its cultures (which includes those outside the borders of ASEAN), while depicting their contributions to the political identity of SEA.

In order to realize SEABOT the region's key universities, think tanks, ministries and business leaders could all be involved. These entities would provide the key consultants for the development of the neural network which would be the basis on which the AI applications mining data is constructed. In addition, ASEAN could develop protocols for the use of data which would shape the terms and content for SEABOT's analytical capacity. SEABOT, in both its development and output, would be the basis for region-building. Again, not only would scholarship be affected, but the very basis for regional vocabularies and identities would almost certainly change.

One more consideration: the development and output of SEABOT would be a huge asset in the classroom. At a minimum, it would be a platform for providing information to students (at virtually all levels), but it would also open up a number of pedagogical possibilities. For instance, by drawing upon SEABOT it would be possible to teach thematic courses with students from more than one university. This can already be done, but it would be much easier and possibly become a common practice. Again, it would also be attractive to have classes with students both in and out of SEA. At the same time, the possibilities for the uses of both VR and AR in the classroom are already significant and require little explanation here. The possible combination between SEABOT and VR and AR could carry the teaching of SEAS to a very high standard. It is sufficient to say that the resources provided by SEABOT, would almost certainly facilitate the development of these pedagogical tools.

### **VIII. The impossibility of an “Autonomous History”**

The possibility of developing SEABOT or something like it raises a host of potential problems for students of SEA. Related problems will be experienced in other disciplines, professions and industries. Scholars who have devoted their lives to studying the cultures, languages and history of the region may believe that the advent of AI will have the same effect as the emergence of digital humanities and social sciences, but, in fact, it is more likely to be much more disruptive. In particular, it is possible to anticipate that the negative impact of AI and SEABOT will require significant ethical reflection (and action), questioning of new and suddenly insurmountable orthodoxies and profound inequalities with respect to resources. Teachers and scholars will almost certainly find their immediate jobs altered, even if in ways that are difficult to see with any precision. For our purposes today, it seems clear that the impact of AI on the study of SEA will present a new set of challenges.

To begin with, AI raises a number of ethical questions which will surely be the case for scholars. Data-mining itself raises issues about privacy and whether human subjects have control over the data they generate. These are fairly obvious problems, but they can be extended to communities, cities and nations. As long as AI produces comfortable self-driving cars and better rail transport this is not a problem, but when it encroaches into other domains of human life its impact might not be as positive.

AI-generated research about the region ideally will be carried out with the prospect of moving SEA forward and improving the lives of its peoples. However, there is no guarantee that this will be the case. Instead, it is quite possible that the research trends will be shared selectively or reflect from the very outset political or even commercial agendas. The very recent attention that Cambridge Analytica (and Facebook) received should not have shocked any political establishment, but it remains the case that the same data-driven technologies could well be used for commercial purposes which are even more exploitative. For individual researchers, then, the ethical issues of engaging with AI and yields based upon the aggregation and mining of vast mountains of data pose some new

dilemmas.

A bigger challenge may be preserving the diversity of SEAS in the face of technologies which might prove to be homogenizing. SEABOT will work over the internet and it will be available for all to access, but the key point is that it will likely be backed up by policy-makers, forecasters, commercial interests, think tanks and universities. While it is beyond the scope of this discussion to depict these realities, it is clear that the institutional framework supplied by universities alone which supports SEAS has been and will be critical. SEABOT will be backed by schools which believe that they are in a race to compete in the global knowledge economy. In other words, for those institutions who tout research productivity (now nicely made vivid by Citation Indexes and hiring big name scholars) in the name of being a player in the global academic world, the attraction of SEABOT will be as obvious as it will be irresistible. Universities (and other entities) might be offered the chance to participate in SEABOT, which means that their scholars would access it and contribute to it. After all, scholarship with SEABOT's stamp will guarantee a level of excellence and participation in an elite club.

For academic administrators, the prospect of a SEA-devoted platform which at once improves the quality of research, be alert to new methodologies, draws from the data oceans, defines qualities of scholarly achievement, evaluates regional and global relevance and guarantees academic integrity will be hard to pass up. Assessing faculty research projects will become evident. Universities will also benefit by drawing upon SEABOT as a source for innovative teaching and, in some cases, for new outreach possibilities. More generally, AI will be used for many educational purposes; already universities in Singapore and Malaysia have begun to experiment with predictive software, which might be used to guide interventions that can prevent dropouts (McKinsey, 2017: 23). In addition, if the observation that McKinsey made in 2017 is apt, then institutions will increasingly adopt data-driven forms of management and decision-making (2017:2), then it is easy to imagine that academic administrators and researchers can anticipate an environment in which analysis is driven not only from internal performance measures, but might be found in data bases.

Above all, the universities that have their scholars invested in SEABOT or a similar platform will see it as an essential component of scholarly production. Scholars, whose universities may not have made such a commitment, will be at a significant disadvantage. In short, those entities that make investments in projects that will draw upon AI (such as SEABOT) will be in a separate space than their counterparts; in SEA it is likely to exacerbate the differences between the haves and have nots.

## **IX. Disrupting the disruption: Emerging ethical imperatives for SEAS**

The idea of positing a hypothetical SEABOT was to illustrate the extent of changes facing scholars all over the world—and in this case, SEA. SEABOT, as such, may never be invented or designed, but it would be naïve to think that these technologies will not have huge impacts upon the region. Consequently, it is hardly premature for scholars to consider forward-looking approaches to a changing intellectual landscape. Technologists (and some commercial leaders) have spoken about AI and related topics as “disruptions” because their development disrupts the ways in which many practices have been carried out. This paper sees the use of AI as potentially positive, but it will also insist on disrupting the disruption. As a result, it makes a few suggestions for discussion and possible action:

- Design and identify protocols for management of data, data-driven research and AI-related research for SEA (and for SEAS). These guidelines might then apply to SEAS and related disciplines;
- Insist on preserving the integrity of SEAS, particularly with reference to its research genealogies, methodological quests and above all, its diversity. (The dangers posed by homogenization would be great—and possibly attractive to many);
- Considering some of the dynamics of an AI future when discussing SEAS methodological issues. That is, like many



academic fields, an absence of methodological consensus exists in SEAS. Debates about how to study the region will undoubtedly continue, but it makes sense to see how many of these questions will look in a world in which many evaluations will be data-driven;

- Be alert for opportunities not only to improve teaching, but to produce university graduates with the soft skills useful in a digital world. Many jobs will be at risk because of AI and robotics, but it will take humans to develop the algorithms, manage the software and set the research agendas;

- Develop a consensus - if possible - on how AI might be used to improve SEA itself. Technological change does not inevitably mean equal improvement for all. Instead, there is a real possibility that it will produce profound — indeed, almost unimaginable inequalities. Therefore, students of SEA (and other regions) and other leaders should think quickly and carefully about how the use of these technologies will impact the region; accordingly, there is now ample warrant for developing some type of charter or something which defines the legal and professionally ethical boundaries for the application of AI. At the same time, any such discussion should begin with the stated assumption that AI has the potential to be an instrument which might foster social improvement, regional development and find new solutions to pressing environmental and ecological challenges;

- Regional scholars might consider adopting a post-anthropocentric standpoint or at least one which is sensitive to the changes which will almost certainly accompany AI and the use of big data in analyzing their subject matter. Acquiring a post-anthropocentric view point does not mean abandoning other scholarly priorities, but it does enable a researcher to become sensitive to the ways in which big data (and the related informational products) are increasingly impacting peoples in Southeast Asia;

- Of course, it could be the case that restrictions on data and open source platforms preclude the adoption of a

post-anthropocentric perspective. That is, SEA remains essentially closed (with many countries falling on the wrong side of the digital divide) and does not benefit from the fruits of what will become an increasingly efficient global knowledge economy. If so, scholars should rally their efforts to more open conditions for the dissemination of data, information and, yes, scholarship;

- Researchers in the humanities and social sciences might also look to AI programs for better ways to evaluate scholarship than those which currently exist;

- Last, we have all benefited from the BUFS/ISEAS events which have brought together a very interesting group of scholars to discuss the region and our approaches to it. This last suggestion is that the BUFS/ISEAS collaboration be extended to the creation of SEABOT in that it could become the organizer for a project which could reshape research about the region.

Advocates for the internet-based innovations have frequently spoken of the positive but disruptive possibilities which often mean that traditional modes of business have been made out-of-date. While many of these transformations may well be positive, some are likely to banish many forms of activity to the margins of many societies. By exploring these suggestions (and calling for more) the hope here is find ways to benefit from the emergence of AI, while also “disrupting the disruption”.

## **X. Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to suggest that the recent advances in AI, data-mining, data analytics portend to a future in which SEAS is radically transformed. It has advanced few ideas in order to suggest the extent to which SEAS (like other areas of study) may be presented with both new opportunities and challenges. One technologist recently regarded history as having a kind of blinding effect. Tim O'Reilly observed that when “the past is everything you know, it is hard to see the future .... when we realize that the world has moved on we can understand that we are ‘stuck in the past’”

(2017: 95-96). At this point in time the view of the future offered here has been developed to create a different type of discussion to explore methodologies for SEAS. Nonetheless, if the twenty-first century is to be remembered in relation to *homo indicina* then it follows that the questions, subject matter and methodologies of probably every academic discipline will have to change. Of course, it may not come to all that, but this paper has been written to stimulate thought and discussion about what at a minimum appear to be very powerful trends which are impacting on SEA and other parts of the world.

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## Southeast Asianist in the Digital Age



Sinae Hyun\*

### [ *Abstract* ]

The paper provides an appreciation and critical commentary on Stephen Keck's fictional product, the SEABOT. It examines the problems of regional definition, given Southeast Asia's diversity, and provides a positive gloss on this diversity. It also considers certain conceptual and methodological issues raised by SEABOT, and the advantages and disadvantages of this online platform.

**Keywords:** Digital age, SEABOT, diversity, regional definition, concepts, methods, Southeast Asia

### I . Introductory remarks

I often ask myself what it means to be a "Southeast Asianist". For me I trace this question back to the year 2005 when I told my Korean family and friends of my decision to study Southeast Asian history and politics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Southeast Asia was still an unfamiliar, exotic, and underdeveloped

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\* Assistant Professor, History Department, University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, [hyuns@uww.edu](mailto:hyuns@uww.edu)

region for many South Koreans by then, thus studying Southeast Asia or generally speaking “a different Asia” was seen to be more adventurous than practical, as if I did not care about my future career. Indeed, from the very first semester in Wisconsin, I found that studying Southeast Asia was far too challenging. Not only that I had never learned about the region and its history, it was simply too diverse for a Korean history student who was born and raised in a region where common regional identity markers like the Chinese writing system, Confucianism and Mahayana Buddhism were instilled since childhood. By contrast the list of identity markers for the Southeast Asians is not exhaustive or perhaps, non-existent. I learned in my first semester that what I knew about Asia was simply a fraction of knowledge and

I could not claim that I knew Asia because I am Asian. I had to start everything from scratch. I took Thai language classes and started memorizing names of places, peoples and events in various Southeast Asian languages translated into English. I also had to make myself familiar with several religious and cultural terms like Theravada, sangha, pancasila, and datu. I jotted down terms and acronyms during lectures, carried a pocket dictionary and searched through journal databases using those Southeast Asian terms. This was a decade ago.

Perhaps for the students and scholars of Southeast Asia, including myself, quite overwhelmed by this geographically, culturally, politically and historically varied region, the dramatic evolution of information and communication technologies in the recent decades should have been welcomed as a blessing because it has increased accessibility to, as well as legibility of the general Southeast Asian Studies. While I cannot help feeling some sort of guilt when I download digitized archival documents and published research papers, I also cannot help speaking to myself how easy it has become to be an area studies specialist. Thanks to the “digital humanities,” one of the fast-rising fields of study in the US now, it has become far easier to access archival sources online. I do not need to travel to Thailand or Indonesia just to get “documents” like before. The rise of academic social networking websites and applications on the other hand helped researchers be updated and



alerted about recent trends and interests in their fields of interests. Moving beyond “digitization” of documents and photographs for preservation and wider utilization, the availability of digitized academic information and data has affected methodologies of academic research in recent decades, calling for an attention to more innovative ways of controlling the regimes of information and data in relation to the transformation of human lives as well as historical analysis. This is where Stephen Keck’s imaginary SEABOT—a “fictional product”, comes in.

Keck’s paper brings our attention to the ways in which Southeast Asian Studies should deal with the digital age. In brief, the paper focuses on two issues: first, how to study Southeast Asia by overcoming extant barriers like languages and cultural, political, social and economic diversities? The second issue is the changes that SEABOT would bring to the future of Southeast Asian Studies. In terms of studying Southeast Asia, Keck stresses we need to be aware of two barriers: one is the regional diversity and complexity and the other is extant negative receptions on utilizing technology in humanities research. The second issue is the changes that SEABOT would bring to Southeast Asian Studies. Keck mentions three benefits. The first is that it would help build a professional network and provide a platform for collaborative ventures among policymakers, business leaders, researchers and educators. In addition, it would help improve the quality of research by utilizing data-analytics technology like Research-Bots and Artificial Neural Networks. This information technology would also contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the region and various sub-fields of Southeast Asian Studies. Finally, SEABOT would help improve the transparency of research, predictability of current and future trends and the scholars’ ability to cope with the changes and challenges in the field. Expected outcomes of using SEABOT will be the strengthening of data-driven research methodologies, an increased volume of scholarly productions and a collaborative search for regional commonality and identity.

My comments will focus on examining the conceptual and methodological quests that Keck’s paper raises: the former on the search for regional commonality and identity and the latter on the

urge for embracing the force of digitalization and broadly, globalization. My discussion on the conceptual quests will briefly overview major debates in the development of Southeast Asian Studies in the twentieth century. The discussion of the methodological quests will focus on the divergent nature of the digital age's demands that the twentieth-first century Southeast Asian Studies should consider beyond the quest of digitalization.

## **II. Conceptual Quests: Diversity, an Obstacle or an Opportunity?**

Since the beginning of "Southeast Asian Studies" as a separate field of scholarly inquiry - around 1940s when the region gained a politico-military designation called "Southeast Asia" - many scholars have been challenged by the diversity of the region's histories and peoples. At the same time, they have had to face somewhat emotionally-charged discussions on the enduring legacies of colonialism as well as the overpowering influence of the global Cold War that had heavily affected the writing of regional and national histories on Southeast Asia. Inspired by three influential historians - J.C. van Leur, John R. W. Smail, and Harry J. Benda, the immediate post-colonial Southeast Asianists attempted to "decolonize" area studies from the dominance of Euro-American perspectives. Against the historical backdrop of the dissolution of the European imperial system that had once dominated and constrained the region, van Leur, Smail and Benda's reflections on the domination of Euro-American-centric views accentuated the vast gap between colonial and local perspectives and the heavy political connotations in Southeast Asian Studies derived not only from colonial/neo-colonial political interests but also from the reliance on the colonial archives by researchers (Andaya and Andaya 1995: 94). As such their works reflected the legacies of the decolonization period (roughly 1945-1962) in Southeast Asia that had been expedited by the Second World War (Goscha and Ostermann 2009; Kratoska 2003).

A number of nation-states emerged in the ensuing Cold War

period. Donald Emmerson remarked then that “[B]y attracting world attention and creating a need to talk about the region, political disunity [the rise of separate nations] bolstered the semantic unity of “Southeast Asia” (1984: 10). Although Emmerson concluded that “[W]hat ‘Southeast Asia’ denotes is no longer truly controversial,” students and scholars of Southeast Asian Studies continued to struggle to find the region’s commonality and identity (Emmerson 1984: 16). In fact, it has been further complicated by the additional debates around the sustainability of Southeast Asia as a region. Notably, the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* devoted a special issue “Perspectives on Southeast Asian Studies” in the mid-1990s that included sixteen articles by Southeast Asianists from various academic backgrounds (1995). Broadly speaking, Emmerson and the contributors to the special issue witnessed the end of the Cold War system. During this same historical period numerous individual countries and regions began claiming their autonomy and independence as well as their own place within the growing international community. Therefore, these scholars focused on how the policy-oriented research enterprise boosted political science and anthropology during the Cold War, while delaying the promotion of writing autonomous histories of the region revealing “colonial oppression and the stirrings of national political consciousness” as well as “transnational cultural zones or interactions” (McVey 1995: 5; Emmerson 1984: 13).

In the post-Cold War period, two edited volumes by Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Liok Ee (2003a) and Paul H. Kratoska, Remco Raben and Henk Schulte Nordholt (2005a) devoted their discussions on the concept and identity of the Southeast Asian studies, implying that the task that *In Search of Southeast Asia* (Steinberg 1969) had initiated in the late 1960s amid heightening tension during the global Cold War has not completed yet. The two books also focused on the post-Cold War period coinciding with the age of globalization. This recognition of transnationalism as well as the benefits of comparative research, leads us to the question of whether Southeast Asian Studies could have dealt better with the legacies of the colonial and Cold War eras – such as archive-focused, policy-oriented, western-centered methodologies in

theory production and more importantly the exclusion of local scholarship (Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Liok Ee 2003b: ix-xxv; Thongchai Winichakul 2003: 3-29).

In sum, what these reflections and concerns over Southeast Asian Studies in the second half of the twentieth century largely represent is “dissension” against the dominant powers – be they colonialist, neo-imperialist, or national governments in Southeast Asia – and their narratives that had concentrated on searching for the region’s narrowly-defined “utility” for their cause. In terms of the conceptual quest for regional commonality and identity, the most visible difference between these volumes and Keck’s paper is whereas the former delve into what kind of knowledge has been, or should have been produced in Southeast Asian Studies during and after the Cold War, Keck focuses on how to improve both the quantity and quality of knowledge production in the post-Cold War period by embracing the digital revolution. Simply put, while this earlier work had been finding missing puzzles, Keck is starting a whole new puzzle.

Keck suggests that the utilization of data-analytics technology to enhance the accessibility and availability of data for both the Southeast Asianist and non-area specialists can support a long-delayed search for regional identity and the “basis for region building”. While agreeing with the intention and initiative that Keck has provided with the introduction of SEABOT, I believe we still need to resolve one critical issue before fully embracing the methodological quests of this digital age: Is Southeast Asian’s common characteristics a prerequisite for region-building? Why has the region’s diversity in culture, identity and historical experiences been viewed as an obstacle to the study of Southeast Asia as a whole?

We need to begin with a critical scrutiny of the reason why commonality and diversity are somewhat opposing concepts in Keck’s paper. In my understanding, common characteristics like the Chinese writing system, Confucianism and Mahayana Buddhism in East Asia enhances the legibility of a region, enabling non-area specialists or non-local people to grasp key cultural and political

traits more easily and quickly. In this vein, Southeast Asian diversity has been viewed as an obstacle to understanding or framing the region for many purposes, including that of setting general foreign policy goals by non-Southeast Asian governments as well as regional organizations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

In reflecting on the history of Southeast Asian Studies, the continuous quest from policy-makers for enhancing the legibility of the region has been the most direct factor that has established and expanded this study of area. In 1943 the South-East Asian Command (SEAC) that had given currency to the name “Southeast Asia” was created under the leadership of Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten to meet the aggression of Japanese imperial forces. The sheer necessity of opposing the Japanese imperial military forces and of addressing Southeast Asian anti-colonial nationalist movements accelerated the process of defining the region’s boundaries and identity. Immediately after the end of the war, the Cold War brought not only substantial American funding but also trained researchers - not colonial administrators - and eager students who wanted to contribute their energies to liberating and modernizing the victims of European high colonialism (McVey 1995: 1). The editors of the volume *Locating Southeast Asia* thus remark: “[T]he concept of Southeast Asia evolved from the need of Europe, America and Japan to deal collectively with a set of territories and peoples that felt no particular identification with one another (Kratoska, Raben and Nordhold 2005b: 11)”.

However, as James Scott elaborated in his book *Seeing Like a State*, legibility was a central problem in modern statecraft, because it involved simplification of the region’s multifaceted characteristics by narrowing its diversity and replacing it with a relatively legible commonness which could easily lead to overgeneralization and even manipulation by certain interest groups (1998: 2). In this respect, Emerson’s caution is noteworthy: “The destructive side of this region-forming process should not be forgotten. What had once been considered a culturally derivative periphery, vaguely east of India and south of China, was structured by colonialism and nationalism into a mosaic of specific states” (1984: 10). The region’s

numerous languages, ethnicities, cultures, religions, and geographies that defy simple generalization been an open-invitation to multinational, multicultural and multiracial scholars and interest groups. Although we are talking about Southeast Asian Studies in the twenty-first century, we should not forget that the same region in the twentieth century had a mixed, intricate experience of high colonialism, decolonization and the Cold War. As such, the region served as a destination for modern seaborne empires, Japanese imperial armies, and the American foreign service officers and volunteers. In the post-Cold War era, Southeast Asia has become a platform for scholars from all over the world who are interested in colonialism, imperialism, global trade, nationalism, world religions, separatism, the Cold War and globalization. In short, regional diversity has been an opportunity to test-drive newer approaches and methodologies, even further diversifying the fields of Southeast Asian Studies. The question is from whose views has the region's diversity been considered as an obstacle.

### **III. Methodological Quests: Forces of Globalization that Forces the Digital Age**

Keck's introduction of SEABOT that "would draw upon artificial neural networks to mine the region's 'Big Data', while synthesizing the information" is indeed innovative and proactive in embracing the latest technology for enhancing transparency, predictability and connectivity in Southeast Asian Studies. At the same time, because of the very nature of the digital age, Keck's proposal of using Artificial Intelligence (AI) in research makes me question for whom this new method would serve. Will this new method allow the larger public, both Southeast Asians and non-locals to freely explore the massive range of diversity and opportunity in the region that has been ignored for many decades? Although Keck's paper addresses how to "make the study of Southeast Asia both broader and more comprehensive" through the utilization of the AI and Artificial Neural Networks in research designing, information collecting and final writing, it seems to speak directly to the needs and demands of the policy-planners and -makers, both at the Southeast Asian

national and international levels, who are interested in discovering ways of controlling the rapidly changing global system and its impacts on nation-states.

In the end, it was the age of globalization that incorporated transnational, transregional and interdisciplinary researchers across the world as “the unprecedented development of horizontal networks of interactive communication that connected the local and global” brought together “different and widely spaced people and social connections” (Steger 2013: 35). The same age also brought about another change: the decline in government funding and support for area studies in the Euro-American academy (Andaya and Andaya 1995: 98). Keck mentioned that his search for a new tool stemmed from the context that area studies has “proved to be a less attractive frame of reference for burgeoning scholarly trends.” Even before the digital revolution became an everyday reality, several Southeast Asianists noted that the center of Southeast Asian Studies would shift to Asia sooner or later. McVey stated in 1995 that “[A]fter all, it is in Southeast Asian countries that the requisite language and local knowledge are concentrated; and as official interest in funding area studies continue to decline abroad we can expect the old foreign centres of regional analysis to lose their intellectual grab (1995: 9).” Thongchai Winichakul has also confirmed in his paper in this special issue that “[A] country’s experts of other Asian and SEAsian [Southeast Asian] Others [have] grow[n] in number and quality in the past few decades faster than during the entire colonial and Cold War eras.”

One readily available example can be found in the rise of Southeast Asian Studies in South Korea. The opening of South Korean diplomatic relations and trade with the Asian communist countries commenced with the dissolution of the Cold War system in the 1990s. Under military dictatorship, South Koreans were not allowed to travel abroad without special permission until 1989. The 1988 Seoul Olympics loosened the military government’s grip on the South Korean citizen’s freedom of travel and exchange. After the fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the South Korean government also normalized its diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China in August 1992. With the PRC’s

large-scale privatization policy launched by the time of Deng Xiaoping's death in the late 1990s, economic exchange and trade between the two countries increased dramatically. Likewise, South Korea and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam normalized their diplomatic relations in 1992, which has contributed to the increase of trade and South Korean manufacturing expansion to Vietnam from the new millennium.

Normalization of diplomatic relations with the communist countries and subsequent enlargement in business directly contributed to the rise of "Other Asian Studies" in Korea. When I was preparing for the college entrance exam in 1998, China was the land of new opportunity for my generation. By the time I was preparing for a preliminary examination in my doctoral degree program in 2008, Southeast Asia had replaced that land of new opportunity for many Koreans. The desire for searching for niche markets in Southeast Asia has grown within the Korean business and trade sectors as a number of small, medium and large companies have moved their factories to Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Myanmar in recent years. Similarly, a number of Korean trading companies are now targeting Southeast Asian consumers thanks to the widespread Korean wave or, Hanryu, and many Korean people began seeking new markets and professional careers in the region. Simply put, South Korea currently has an increasing stake in Southeast Asia and in the years to come. Overall, the search for the "Other Asia" by the Asians with the dissolution of the bipolar world system in the early 1990s opened up a new market for Asian Studies specialists.

The rise of Asian Studies in Asia has a broader implication for the changes and challenges that Southeast Asian Studies will have to meet in the coming years. Because of their felt distance and educational training, Asian scholars and students of Other Asian Studies would approach their research subjects differently from American and European scholars and students. Fortunately, because of the earlier-mentioned difficulties of generalizing the region's commonality in addition to the never-ending challenges placed upon the viability of the study of this not-easily-defined region and the endeavors of numerous Southeast Asianists to oppose the



narrowly-defined utility of their research, Southeast Asian Studies has given a birth to a number of innovative and widely-cited works by, among others, Benedict Anderson (1983) and James Scott (1998, 2009). With an attempt to enlarge the field of autonomous history after Van Leur, Smail and Benda, Sunait Chutintaranond and Chris Baker published an edited volume (2002), and Clive J. Christie's modern history book (1996) shares similar concerns about the imbalanced academic interests between the established nation-states and aspiring nations. Recent research trends in Southeast Asian Studies reflect these attempts to address the subject of minorities, identities, and resistance – overseas Chinese diaspora, Muslim nationalism and separatist movements, zomia and borderlands, and ethnic resistance, to name a few. In other words, the region's diversity as well as past endeavors for bringing autonomous and indigenous voices into the Euro-American-centered Southeast Asian Studies will provide a much wider range of opportunities for the newcomers in area studies from the Other Asia.

This last point is related to Keck's conclusion. Quoting Tim O'Reilly's words that we are "stuck in the past", Keck re-emphasized the necessity, or an imperative of proactively accepting the change that the digital age has brought about. I do not disagree with the imperatives of accepting changes by exploring and adapting innovative, cutting-edge technology and research methodologies. My question is in what ways the use of SEABOT can contribute to enhancing global, regional and national recognitions of Southeast Asia's unique and authentic identity; and more importantly to the promotion of originality and quality in the humanities research overall. This is particularly concerned about SEABOT's anticipated role in engaging and increasing the production of research in the field. What if the Research BOT, in its evaluation, decided that an article like John Smail's autonomous history would not meet the scholarly and professional demands and thus would not be publishable in prestigious academic journals? What if the Research BOT tells me that my research would meet opposition from the Thai and/or South Korean governments as it denounces their proclaimed governing philosophy and policies? Again, Keck's proposal of utilizing AI within the digital revolution for enhancing the quality

and quantity of research in Southeast Asian Studies is innovative in the sense that it attempts to proactively deal with the present dilemmas of extending the contribution of digitization of data in the humanities. Still the question remains: "For whom the bell tolls?"

#### **IV. Challenges and Blessings of the Digital Age**

Admittedly, my comments are rather conceptual and could be beyond the scope of Keck's paper. Keck's introduction of SEABOT is after all to search for the ways in which Southeast Asian Studies might redefine itself to ensure its sustainability against the pressures of globalization and the digital age. Nevertheless, I still believe the quest for change to meet future challenges will allow concerned scholars to reflect on what our past and present approaches to the understanding of Southeast Asia have been missing or ignoring. We should be reminded that the digital age offers not only the blessings of high-tech tools. It has also presented challenges for the present generation to cope with the world that has become "noticeably 'smaller' as distant lands are being linked ever more closely together" and at the same time, 'larger' because our horizons have never been so broad" (Osterhammel and Petersson 2005: 3). As with the end of the colonial and Cold War eras when Southeast Asianists were led to reflect on their position, this current age pushes us once again to come to terms with our past and present so that the future challenges can be met naturally and even unconsciously.

In retrospect, my Korean friends were right. I was indeed looking for an adventure when I chose to become a Southeast Asianist in 2005. Now in 2018, Southeast Asia is still a region that defies easy generalization and prediction. And, I still ask myself to what extent my own research can contribute to renovating Southeast Asian Studies in the age of globalization and digitization. So far, the best answer to this question that I have found is from Ruth McVey in 1995: "To this extent, the present lack of a path is liberating. It is in periods of intellectual uncertainty and unease, of a lack of orientation, that scholarship is likely to be most creative, for its own internalized restrictions are far more deadening to thought than

censorship imposed from outside” (1995: 9).

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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. (Effective from the 2017 July Issue, 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 does not accept color figures. Figures should be submitted in black and white only.

## **7) References**

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

## **2. FOOTNOTES AND CITATIONS**

### **1) Footnotes**

Notes should be kept to a minimum and numbered consecutively throughout the manuscript. Notes should be included as footnotes, and not as endnotes. 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)
- Pagination follows year of publication after a colon.  
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.)

- In case of an organization as an author, information that can be identified shall be provided.  
(Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security 1992)

### 3. REFERENCES

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.

Coed S. G. 1928. *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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*SUVANNABHUMI is an international, peer-reviewed journal committed to the publication of scholarship in Southeast Asian Studies. It aims to offer a scholarly platform for original works drawn from research findings, theoretical thought, reflection, and/or reinterpretation of long-held viewpoints, ideas, or methodologies. The scope covers in particular, but not exclusively, the following fields of discussion: cultural studies, the arts, language and linguistics, history, archaeology and prehistory, anthropology, sociology, religion, literature, tourism, socio-economic issues, and politics.*

■ **Manuscripts should be submitted to this Journal Editor ([editor@iseas.kr](mailto:editor@iseas.kr)) with the following details:**

- ✓ The Author(s)'s curriculum vitae (less than 100 words);
- ✓ An abstract (150-200 words);
- ✓ Five key words; and
- ✓ Contact information in a separate file.

■ **In order to ensure a double-blind peer review, the Author(s) is advised to remove any identifying information from the manuscript.**

■ **There is no submission charge or Article Processing Charge (APC).**

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