



# The Western Lineage in Southeast “Asianography”\*



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## I . Introduction

The West has had a clear intellectual monopoly over the theoretical, methodological, and in many cases, empirical scholarship regarding the field of Asian Studies. As a field, it is a Western creation and enterprise that serves, and has served mainly Western professionals and their interests: academic for sure, but also political, military, and economic. Within this much larger, Western-dominated galaxy of Asian Studies is the small planet of Southeast Asian studies of which Busan University of Foreign Studies (BUFS) is striving to be a part. My keynote today is a challenge to the members of that small moon and to Area Studies as well.

But first a few words of clarification. The term “lineage” as a reference to a field of study is not new; it means here that the

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scholarship that has gone into the making of Southeast Asian studies along with its socio-political and historical contexts. "Southeast Asianography," however, is my own term, and I regard it as similar in meaning to words such as "historiography," "oceanography," "palaeology," and the other "-ographies." It refers to the corpus of production of knowledge in the academic field of Southeast Asian studies.

Second, I do not want to fuss over the word "Western" as being too monolithic to be considered a legitimate category of analysis. Neither do I want to debate whether, or how many, exceptions to that general term will vitiate it. We all know, by and large, that the United States, Great Britain, France, Holland, Germany, the ex-Soviet Union, and Australia have been the major players in the creation and development of Asian Studies; the last country is included in the "West" more for its academic heritage than its geographic location. And within these countries, there were certain institutions and people, mostly Western, who were the paramount actors in the making of Southeast Asian Studies, as so well described by Victor King in his essay in this volume.

## II. The Western Lineage

So, let's start with the larger entity Asian Studies and its Western lineage and then move to Southeast Asian Studies. As a field of scholarship, Asian Studies is a Western creation and enterprise. Westerners, the Western intellectual world, Western academic institutions, Western museums and libraries, Western think tanks, tier-1 journals in the West, and Western research funding, have dominated and continues to dominate Asian Studies in ways whose *reverse* with regard to European and American studies cannot even be imagined.

But let's try anyway. Can you imagine the following scenario? European and American studies is dominated by Asia and Asians. Most scholars and students studying Western civilization have been trained in Asia to be sent back to take positions at Harvard, Yale, Cambridge, Oxford, Michigan. The bulk of the most

prestigious journals about Western Civilization are published in Asia by Asian organizations and universities. Most of the premier libraries and archives holding sources about the West are located in Asia. Close to 93 per cent of the West’s leading academics on Western civilization are Asian. Most of the classes that teach obscure Western languages are found only in Asian Universities. The topics, methodologies, theoretical frameworks considered important and “cutting edge” in the field, are the product of, and selected by Asians or Westerners trained in Asia. And the experts the world press and governments seek for insights and opinions concerning the West, are Asian.

In such a scenario, students and scholars would attend Peking University to study the American Revolution, to Kyoto University to study Medieval Europe, to Chulalongkorn University to study Tudor England, to Mandalay University to study Old English, to the Ateneo to study the Protestant Reformation, and Gaja Madha University to study Shakespeare. The entire structure of Western studies would largely be the product of Asian institutions and Asia-trained scholars. Can you imagine such an academic world? I cannot. Yet, that is precisely the case, *in reverse*, of Asian Studies and the West today.

The largest and most esteemed professional organizations, the most prestigious journals, and the most numerous jobs for its clones (our students) in the field of Asian Studies are still found mainly in America and the West. Consider this: only seven per cent of the members of the Association for Asian Studies are from Asia. (As noted above, I include Australia in the term “West” for its cultural-intellectual hegemony is more at issue here than its geographic location.) One needs only to glance at the references in the standard histories of Asia published in English, the bulk of their citations - particularly those of a theoretical and methodological nature that shape the field - to see that they are by Westerners or Western trained Asians, most of them published by university presses located in the West and considered the most prominent. The “benchmarks” used by Asian Universities for what it considers “excellence” for tenure and promotion, are Western scholars, presses, journals, universities, and ideas.

Another way to acknowledge this is to ask the following question: is there an Asian Clifford Geertz or Ben Anderson? Don't get me wrong; we can point to eminent Asian scholars in their own right, such as Wang Gung Wu and Hong Lysa. But both are very much also part of the Western lineage. Rather, my question about an Asian Clifford Geertz and Ben Anderson asks about those *not* part of the Western lineage, yet who have influenced the entire field world-wide in the way the above two scholars have done. (I have found none.) Admittedly, I am giving agency to the kinds of concerns raised by the above scholars and not to those that have inspired "traditional" scholars of Asia and their scholarship prior to the encounter with Western influences. But the modern field of "Southeast Asianography" *is* my topic after all, regardless of how important the latter concerns of traditional scholars might have been.

Indeed, a natural reaction by Asian institutions and scholars to this Western dominance might have been to find an alternative, or other "anti-colonial" responses to it, especially since Asian Studies was very much a product of the colonial experience. But unlike other by-products of colonialism whereby the Western norms that have shaped the making of (say) modern criminal law, the establishment of egalitarian principles for civil society, or the development of representative forms of governance—have resulted in substantive change or outright rejection seen as necessary or desirable to fit or benefit post-colonial society—in the case of Asian Studies, however, such change or desire for it, with a few exceptions, clearly have not. In other words, although part of the colonial experience as well, Asian Studies has emerged (in hindsight) as one of colonialism's more lasting and positive legacies.

That is not to say, of course, that there were no "Orientalist" perspectives in this Western lineage scholarship. There were plenty, as Edward Said has demonstrated. Yet, and in contrast, there were also what John Smail has immortalized as "autonomous," those perspectives and "angles of vision" that represented the indigenous, a position that began at least with Van Leur who found it seriously flawed to understand Indonesia from

the deck of a Dutch ship. Or when Clifford Geertz suggested that "pomp was for power, not power pomp," he could not have been more Balinese and non-Western, in the same way Ben Anderson insisted on understanding the Javanese, rather than Western concept of power. Despite Said's argument of a "consolidated vision" of "Orientalism" then, the above kinds of "dissent" were also very much part of that Western Lineage.

And because of those efforts by scholars to know Southeast Asia from the inside-out—from the perspective of the farmer in the padi fields, the spice shop of the Muslim merchant, the courts of the Malay Sultan or Burmese king, the headman or headwoman of villages, the convent and monastery of the Buddhist nun and monk, the mosque of the *ulama* and his worshippers, the parish of the Catholic priest, and the ordinary men and women of the local bazaars—which essentially puts them in the foreground rather than the background, the desire or need to create an alternative Asian lineage by putative "anti-colonial" forces as counter measure to the Western lineage did not materialize, nor, in my opinion, would it have succeeded. And all this happened well before the term "Orientalism" and its discontents became fashionable and mainstream.

The sensitivity of scholars (and even some colonial administrators) to perspectives held by the indigenous can be found rather early and nearly everywhere in Southeast Asia. In British Burma, despite "Orientalist" views and treatment of history in their works, Phayre, Harvey, Hall, Luce, and Furnivall nonetheless often espoused views that represented those of the colonized; indeed, Furnivall unabashedly and sophisticatedly advocated these sentiments better than any nationalist scholar could have done, or did. And to provide some teeth to these sentiments, scholarly journals in the Western tradition were created, such as the Siam Society Journal and the Journal of the Burma Research Society, trends found elsewhere in Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia, as Victor King's essay in this volume demonstrates.

This reality of Southeast Asia's Western lineage is not only

the way it was and is, but I think also part of the foreseeable future. The reasons are plentiful: historically, colonialism provided the broad context for shaping the intellectual, methodological, conceptualization, and institutionalization of Asian Studies (as “Orientalism”). As an academic field, therefore, the West has been in the business for much longer than has Asia. More recently, there has been, and is, much more funding in the West for the study of Asia than one finds in Asia, which in turn has virtually determined its direction of growth, the way in which Asian Studies as a field is conceived and categorized, and the intellectual subjects in the field considered important (including debates about the field itself). Moreover, most of the best students in Asia do not opt for a career in Asian Studies but in better paying, technologically oriented occupations or in civil service. And to reiterate, the number of Asianists who are Western far out-number those who are Asian. The Western lineage is here to stay.

Is having such a dominant Western lineage necessarily not good for Southeast Asian Studies? No, indeed! “Westernness” – especially its abundant human and material resources; the age, longevity, and general academic superiority of most of its institutions of higher learning; the well-trained faculty with some of the world’s highest standards; some of the most modern technologically; the size and scope of, and relatively easy access to most of its libraries; the many fellowships available; the academic freedom and general atmosphere of give and take, and the emphasis on critical thinking – all have benefited the entire field of Southeast Asian studies enormously, not only in the United States but elsewhere. As most of the prominent scholars of Southeast Asia are products of Western academia, the same or similar standards and attitudes and methods of teaching, continue to shape the field world-wide in a positive way.

### **III. Newness and Smallness**

Two other factors in the field of Southeast Asian studies have enhanced our Western lineage: “newness” and “smallness.” While

“Westernness” made many of us more “autonomous” and quite anti-“Orientalist” (and well before it was fashionable to be so), and “newness” made us more current, efficient and effective, “smallness” made us more cohesive, interdisciplinary, and comparative. All three factors—“Westernness,” “newness,” and “smallness”—have become important and perhaps can even be considered distinguishing features of “Southeast Asianography.”

#### IV. Newness

In terms of “**newness**,” don’t get me wrong; as stated above, studies of Southeast Asia by Southeast Asians themselves have existed for centuries, while individual “country” studies have been written well before the West entered the region. But in terms of a modern discipline or field, with its own professional organizations, corpus of theoretical literature, peer-reviewed journals, and so on, the field of Southeast Asian studies is new, having emerged approximately around World War Two. It is certainly newer than the fields of European and American, as well as South and East Asian studies. And this has been to our advantage.

Being a relatively new field means it does not have to “reinvent the wheel” every time an issue arises. There is no need to re-hash problems that have been addressed rather well in other, older areas such as European, South, and East Asian studies. For example, the issue of whether Japan during the Nara period was a mirror image of T’ang China, or England, that of the Continent (old topics), has its counterpart in Southeast Asian studies in the issue of “Indianization”—to what extent was Southeast Asia a mirror image of India? The expected response to exogenous influences with the notion of “indigenization” (or “localization” and “autonomy,” the preferred terms in Southeast Asian studies) is also found throughout the areas mentioned, not just Southeast Asia. We have benefited from that debate that has occurred much earlier in East Asian and European studies, allowing us to skip certain less productive aspects of it while leap-frogging to more productive ones simply because our field is new.

The “Encounter with the West” is another topic that has been addressed elsewhere much more thoroughly and for a much longer period of time than it has been in Southeast Asian studies. In fact, the “trends” in Southeast Asian studies of issues and problems raised in Post-Colonial and Subaltern studies initially comes from South, not Southeast Asian studies. The same can be said of Gender studies: it is a new import to the field of Southeast Asian studies, even within institutions in the West. Here as well, scholars dealing with gender issues in the field of Southeast Asian studies have benefited from the latter’s newness. The decades needed to build up a constituency, train scholars, formulate a corpus of theoretical literature, create successful journals, make mistakes – all these, by and large, Southeast Asia scholars working in gender studies did not have to undergo in any major way. In other words, it did not have to start from scratch. Thus, for example, when Barbara Andaya “entered” the sub-field of Southeast Asian gender studies, she was already an established historian of Southeast Asia, so that her experience was brought to bear on the newer gender studies field.

We can say similar things for disciplines such as archaeology and epigraphy, where new, scientific discoveries, methods and techniques – such as dating of fired clay material more accurately by studying the moisture content of fired bricks (rehydroxylation), and the “restoring” of worn and illegible writing [X-ray fluorescence (XRF)] – leap-frogged over projects that would have taken, and used to take, decades to conduct. What took Groslier nearly thirty years of painstaking, manual work on Angkor’s *barays*, was completed in about two hours with Light Detection and Ranging (LIDAR). There are many such similar examples of scientific development in cartography and geography as well. Newness, in this case, was, and is surely an advantage.

## V. Smallness

Southeast Asian studies as a field also has a relatively small constituency. Don’t get me wrong. Southeast Asia itself covers one



of the largest geographic and demographic areas of the world, with dozens of major languages and hundreds of dialects, eleven countries occupying an area as large as Europe and the Middle East put together, and a region where all the world religions are represented. But as a field of study, it is relatively small. This has always been the case since its inception compared to other areas and fields of study; it is not a new phenomenon, and its size certainly shouldn't be viewed as a reason to suggest a “crisis” in the field, as some have done recently.

But it *is* true that historians of Southeast Asia make up only about one-eighth of the number of historians in other areas of Asia. Indeed, even the larger field of Asian Studies (including all the disciplines and regions of Asia) probably has fewer scholars in it than just historians specializing in United States history alone. Even in the United States, only a handful of universities have Southeast Asia as an area studies component in their programs. Of these universities, approximately fewer than ten are officially recognized by the United States Department of Education as having “national” stature. And of all graduate students entering the whole field of Asian studies annually in the United States, the fewest number enroll in Southeast Asian studies. Are these reasons to marginalize or worse, “kill” Southeast Asian Studies—as some “globalists” and “universalists” are wont to do periodically and have been doing recently—and to give up on Southeast Asian Studies at BUFS? Not at all! In fact, smallness is an asset which can be also used to our advantage.

One of the most important of these is that the field of Southeast Asian studies has been shaped by numerous disciplines, with varying degrees of influence. The most prominent are History, Anthropology, and perhaps Political Science, along with Archaeology, Religion, Linguistics, Literature, and Art History. This reality, whereby many different disciplines contribute to what is the heart of the field, has made its scholars and scholarship steadfastly interdisciplinary, which I believe has enhanced the general quality of the scholarship of the field. Interdisciplinarity has also made our scholarship less parochial and more comparative. Thus, rather than being satisfied and secure in one's

disciplinary silos of isolation, Southeast Asianists have been, and have enjoyed being intellectually quite “global.” Consider the following examples.

There are not many scholars who have transcended their discipline and field in the way a handful of scholars have done from the small field of Southeast Asian Studies. The works of Ben Anderson, Clifford Geertz, and Jim Scott (to name three of the most prominent) have managed to transcend the borders of Southeast Asian studies in quite consequential ways. Most in the social sciences are familiar with, and have used phrases such as “Imagined Communities,” “Theatre State” and “Moral Economy,” all well-known to scholars outside the field, regardless of discipline and area of expertise. Apart from the intrinsic value of the scholarship itself, the reason for that “global” appeal is that their scholarship was interdisciplinary in nature. Perhaps as important, such scholarship has brought disproportionate attention (and value) to the field of Southeast Asia studies relative to its size.

The smallness of the field has also given those of us in it the wherewithal to be more familiar with most of the important theoretical issues produced by it better than if the field were larger, irrespective of discipline. I know of no Southeast Asianist who thinks his or her scholarship has not been enhanced because of the interdisciplinarity of the field. That familiarity with each other’s works, has made the field more intellectually cohesive than it might have been otherwise. Thus, modern historians of Southeast Asia are likely familiar with issues and problems raised by political scientists of Southeast Asia, while most early historians of Southeast Asia, with those found in anthropology, religion, archaeology, literature, and art history. Conversely, most political scientists and anthropologists of Southeast Asia probably know their Southeast Asian history as well.

This “interdisciplinary cohesiveness” has provided a sense of identity among Southeast Asianists, both on a concrete, personal level, and an academic and intellectual level. More precisely, the camaraderie derived from conducting research and living in a geographic area all Southeast Asianists consider “home” is quite

real, and it reinforces the intellectual camaraderie derived from being a member of the Southeast Asian Studies family. Whether historians or anthropologists, we tend to identify more with the area of Southeast Asia (hence, with Area Studies as an academic field) than with our own disciplines. We seem to be Southeast Asianists first, and historians or anthropologists, only second. Grounded upon an important, geo-political and cultural space, united in the interdisciplinarity of scholarship, while transcending both by “singing” on the “global” stage, is what gives Southeast Asian Studies its appeal and legitimacy.

Indeed, I would argue that the farther one gets from Area Studies, the more parochial one gets, not less. When I attend the American Historical Association’s annual meetings, it doesn’t take long to realize few have heard of, and care little about the most influential scholars of Asia and their work. But when I attend the Association for Asian Studies meetings, everyone knows about the most influential scholars and their scholarship regardless of their disciplines and areas of expertise. To reiterate, Area Studies scholarship and scholars tend to be less parochial and more “global” in their interests, methodologies and conceptualizations than those who rely solely or mainly on their disciplines.

In the current atmosphere where Area Studies in general and Southeast Asian Studies in particular are being bashed (once again!) in select, usually disciplinary academic quarters—although ironically not among funding organizations—being a Southeast Asianist in a small but cohesive group, with a secure academic identity based on a solid intellectual core, sound interdisciplinary methodology, and a location of research that is dear to the hearts of its scholars, may turn out to be crucial in preserving not only Southeast Asian studies as a field, but the larger field of Area Studies itself.

## VI. The Future

So, given the cards we are dealt with—Westernness, newness, and smallness—where does the future of Southeast Asian Studies lie,

especially in Asia, and a place like BUFS? In addition to the above three advantages, propinquity to wealth and geographic location become factors. Thus, one might think that part of the future of Southeast Asia Studies is essentially an issue of money, so that China is seen as a solution of sorts. As it becomes more than the economic giant than it is now, I can only imagine more money being poured into the study of Asian Studies in general, and Southeast Asian Studies in particular. Similarly, as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) gets richer, it is bound to pour more money into domestic higher education with a bigger commitment to the study, not only of its own countries, but to the region of Southeast Asia. Even though South Korea is not part of ASEAN, it is a friend and supporter, with influence and know-how, and thus can benefit.

Although throwing money at a problem will help, it comes with a price tag: China is not going to support the study of Southeast Asia for its own sake; it will be a tool, a means to an end, for economic and foreign policy—rather than an end in itself. That is probably true for South Korea and most Southeast Asian countries as well, so that Southeast Asian studies will remain an arm of national and international policy in these countries. Similarly, the United States government has earmarked large amount of funds for its “pivot to Asia” programs, financially supporting Southeast Asian Studies projects, but for political and/or economic reasons. None of this is necessarily or intrinsically bad for continuing to develop a genuinely academic field of Southeast Asian studies, but it means it will always remain a secondary priority. Unless BUFS is a Harvard with an endowment larger than Myanmar’s GDP at one time (in 2007), studying Southeast Asia for its own sake is a luxury few can afford. So, even if as individual scholars (or even organizations) we are committed to this—and I think most of us are—studying Southeast Asia as an end in-itself will not be a budgetary priority. BUFS will have to play the government funding game.

Assuming that the South Korean Government continues to fund BUFS’ international program, what can it do with that funding to further enhance Southeast Asian Studies? One of the

strengths that native scholars of Southeast Asia have that is not as easily duplicated is fluency in the indigenous language. It’s an advantage those scholars born in Southeast Asia have had since primary school onward. It takes years for non-native speakers—in this case, Koreans are part of that category—to achieve the level of even native high school students in speaking, reading, and comprehension. What can BUFS do about developing this resource, located as it is in the region with the many and varied financial investments South Korea already has in the countries of Southeast Asia? Can BUFS establish, or support already established language institutes in Southeast Asia that use indigenous language teachers and methods to teach their languages, in which BUFS’ students can be intimately involved? Can the Koreans do this better than the Americans have done? Some of the stellar programs created by the latter include the Southeast Asia Studies Summer Institute (SEASSI) now located at the University of Wisconsin, Madison which hires native speakers of Southeast languages to teach Southeast Asian languages, along with once vibrant, in-country programs such as the Malang program in Indonesia. But these are summer programs whose funding has to be constantly negotiated to be viable. Perhaps the Koreans can emulate the structure of these kinds of programs, but with funding schemes that are more predictable and stable in the long-term, especially with their established diplomatic ties and economic investments in the region.

Located in the region and embedded in South Korea’s regional development strategies, BUFS has other advantages. Although it is true that air travel makes it relatively easy for anyone to get to the area quickly, it’s impracticable for those living far to go to Myanmar or Indonesia every weekend, take mini-sabbaticals or even long-term sabbaticals without a lot of hassle with housing, health insurance, banking and other financial matters. As BUFS is already part of South Korea’s infrastructural development in the region—financial, telecommunications, transportation, aid—its development of educational and cultural projects in Southeast Asia are that much easier to implement. Here too, there are certain intangible advantages of a comparative

nature of being in the region. The news media is one obvious example. There already exists a very extensive and varied regional news media whose focus is the region itself. Reports one gets here are seldom (or never) found in Western news media. BUFS can take advantage of that importantly comparative component found virtually in its own back yard, something not easily duplicated elsewhere.

Furthermore, an organization such as BUFS which is very much a part of the South Korean Government's diplomatic and economic footprint in Southeast Asia will surely do better than those not part of that infrastructure. This is especially important when it comes to the preservation of Southeast Asian source materials. BUFS can easier access and preserve indigenous resource material with a minimum of obstacles—much like Kagoshima University and the Japanese did in the early 1970s with microfilm—especially the many Southeast Asia language historical sources written on palm leaf and other perishable materials that have been languishing and deteriorating in musty and humid libraries in Southeast Asia. Can BUFS do a better job of data preservation of earlier decades by the Japanese, now with more sophisticated preservation methods not available earlier. In this endeavor, the Korean government—I would say most Asian governments— has an advantage. It has not conflated the internationalization of its academic programs with national self-identification ideologies, as some Western governments have done. Demanding no ideological conversion from host nations, Korea can more easily implement such joint projects, rather than being hampered by the kinds of crusades of (especially the current) American or UK governments. I seriously do not think Korea will go to Myanmar or any country in Southeast Asia to promote and demand acceptance of “Korean democracy” as a pre-requisite for getting infra-structural aid to develop (say) higher education.

Practical strategies aside for developing that small BUFS moon in the huge galaxy of Asian and Southeast Asian studies, and returning to academic issues, since I've already argued that “smallness,” “newness,” and geographical location can be to our

advantage, and are realities about which we cannot do much anyway, what can we say about the first issue: our Western lineage? I would argue that rather than countermanding it as a symbol of our independence, it is to our advantage to *continue* the trends that have been part of Southeast Asianography’s Western lineage now for the past hundred years and more. And in so doing, we must focus on celebrating aspects of that lineage that has the most appeal to us—namely, those Southeast Asian perspectives and values so well expressed by earlier scholars in the tradition of Van Leur and others. Instead of baking a new cake, then, we should add to and thereby enhance the Southeast Asian layer of the Western cake already baked.

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