

Southeast Asian studies as a form of power¹



In the 1980s, the massive economic growth of Southeast Asian states made ASEAN the subject of interest for foreign governments seeking to duplicate or take advantage of opportunities arising from the region's economic miracle. This was especially true in the USA, UK, and Australia. The flip side of this came in the latter half of the 1990s. When the economic miracle of Southeast Asia vanished so did interest in Southeast Asian studies, apart from studies of the crisis itself, which tended to be non-region specific.

The study of Southeast Asia in the West has since generally been on the decline. After 11 September 2001, there has been some interest in the USA, although nowhere near previous levels. On the other hand, within Southeast Asia, governments have been pumping more and more money into the field, such that within Southeast Asia, Southeast Asian studies is generally more buoyant and well-supported in the region (as well as in Japan) than it has even been.¹¹

Trends and patterns

Southeast Asian studies, as part of the academic mainstream, has been subject to nearly all the major paradigm shifts of area studies. This includes the 'crisis' of area studies, amidst arguments that Southeast Asia is an externally imposed construct; the focus on national studies shifting to supra-national and multi-national foci; and the various postmodernist fields, including post-colonial studies, cultural studies, global studies, and so on. The roster of disciplines that comprise Southeast Asian studies, and the structure of the disciplines themselves, have also evolved and changed according to prevailing academic thinking.

At the same time, because Southeast Asian studies for a long time lacked its own academic hinterland, it is hypersensitive to the changes which have influenced academia. Its dependency on external funding from governments and funding bodies has forced it to constantly adapt and refashion itself to appeal to prevailing trends. Arguably, this insecurity is one of the major reasons why Southeast Asian studies has undergone such exhaustive soul searching – far and beyond the crisis in area studies – over the last 10 to 15 years.

Much of this soul searching was sparked off by Ariel Heryanto's 2002 essay, entitled "Can there be Southeast Asians in Southeast Asian studies?"¹² Heryanto argued that because Southeast Asian studies, as a field, was invented and remains rooted in Western academia to a great degree, its rules and conventions remain Western in their conception. Its conditions for membership do not reflect the reality of Southeast Asian identity, it imposes on the region models which do not reflect the lived realities of the region, and distorts the priorities and directions of Southeast Asian scholarship. It is thus a very alien place to Southeast Asians, and excludes Southeast Asians from the study of their own homelands. Heryanto did expect that there would be a gradual expansion of home-grown Southeast Asian scholars working on Southeast Asia, and indeed that has been happening, although certainly the best Southeast Asian scholars still seek training in the West.

Much of the subsequent debate within the field focused on proving or disproving Heryanto's thesis, as well as focusing on questions surrounding the definition and conceptualisation of 'Southeast Asia' and 'Southeast Asian studies' and associated questions about the nature, composition, boundaries, construction, methodology, and perspectives of the field.

However, much of the debate has also missed a more important theme of Southeast Asian studies. I believe the main characteristic of Southeast Asian studies is that it has been defined by purposeful agendas and self-interest. From the colonial powers before World War II, to American, British, Japanese, and Australian interests after the War, and to the national governments of ASEAN from the 1970s onwards, the defining characteristic of Southeast Asian studies is that it has always served a concatenation of forces who have funded it in order to push forward their agendas, promote their values, and investigate the questions they regarded as being the most pressing. Likewise, when it did not serve their needs, they dropped the programme. These forces are best described as a loose agglomeration of governmental, industrial, military, and commercial interests.

To a certain extent, this is true of academia in general, as it is true of the world in general. However, the one major trend or characteristic of western academia that has bypassed Southeast Asian studies is the role of knowledge producers speaking truth to power, especially with regards to the promotion of values indigenous to Southeast Asia that are representative of the lived realities of the vast majority of Southeast Asians. Southeast Asia lacks the equivalent of an academic tradition that allows academics to produce

The origins of Southeast Asian studies as a field are exogenous to Southeast Asia. It remains deeply embedded within Western academia and has been influenced by all the dominant trends that have shaped Western knowledge production. Its defining trait is that it is determined to a very significant extent by the funding priorities of establishment interests (both internal and external to Southeast Asia) and has no significant independent tradition of critical knowledge production. Where then does this leave Southeast Asian studies? How can the field become relevant to the people of Southeast Asia?

Pingtjin Thum

A brief history of Southeast Asian studies

The field of Southeast Asian studies initially evolved out of a colonial interest to perpetuate their influence on Far Eastern cultures and societies.² Institutions of Oriental studies were set up to meet practical needs, and emphasised colonial vernacular language training. The Ecole des Langues Orientales Vivantes in Paris was founded in 1795. Leiden University's programme was established in 1864. In the UK, the establishment of School of Oriental Studies in 1917 was closely related to Britain's imperial interests in Asia and Africa. Though the "pre-Second World War period was relatively insignificant for the academic study of Southeast Asia" in Britain, it established the practical importance of Oriental studies, and initiated a more coherent scholarly approach.³

Southeast Asian studies further solidified after World War II. National interests and a general belief in the importance of area studies led governments and funding bodies to establish centres for Southeast Asian studies. The United States' growing global role, and particularly the Indochina wars, led to substantially increased government funding for Southeast Asian studies between the late 1950s and early 1970s, and a strategic network of programmes were established.⁴

In Britain, the Scarborough Report of 1947, the Hayter Report of 1961, and the Parker Report of 1986 shaped the development of Southeast Asian studies. These emphasised the importance of the study of non-Western peoples and cultures, and the dangers of British ethnocentrism and an overly Eurocentric view of the world. Also stressed was the practical application of area studies programmes, though these utilitarian considerations were subordinated to strong arguments for the importance of a base of scholarship in area studies.⁵ Following these reports, Centres for Southeast Asian studies were established at Hull in 1962, and Kent in 1978.

For geographical and political reasons, Australia too embarked on an ambitious plan of establishing centres of Southeast Asian studies. ANU set up the Research School

of Pacific and Asian studies and the Faculty of Asian studies in 1947 and 1950 respectively. A Centre for Southeast Asian studies was created at Monash in the mid-1960s.⁶

Despite all these energies and resources being poured into the field, the foundation was weak. From the mid 1960s to the mid 1970s, Southeast Asian studies was "not so much a place as a site of displacement."⁷ People chose the field not so much because of an interest in the region, as they did for the strong desire to expand freedom and justice. This was a time of decolonisation, revolution, and war in Southeast Asia. The Vietnam War years had an "enormously complex and contradictory impact upon the Southeast Asian field."⁸ The chaos of anti-war demonstrations that were often associated with staff and students of the field made university administrators wary of funding its study.⁹

At the same time, in Europe, the decolonisation of many of their colonies meant that the need to train colonial officers for the region evaporated. By the post war decade of 1975 to 1985, Western governments no longer saw the field as serving any immediate national need, and so the field sank into the doldrums in the Western world. The Americans simply wanted to forget Vietnam. Similarly in Britain, funding dropped dramatically and centres were closed.

Yet, precisely because of the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam in 1973 and communist victories throughout Indochina in 1975, other Southeast Asian governments needed to strengthen their own national foreign policies, nurture self-reliance, and promote regional cooperation. To achieve this, solid knowledge of the region was necessary. Therefore, in 1976, the decision was reached at the first ASEAN Summit Meeting to promote Southeast Asian studies in the region itself. Programmes and Centres were swiftly created. The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies was set up in Singapore in 1971. Malaysia started an interdisciplinary Southeast Asian studies programme in 1976. As a counterpoint to this, in 1973, an Institute of Southeast Asian Studies within the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences was set up in Hanoi.¹⁰

first-rate scholarship, based on meticulous research and judicious reasoning, that also makes clear interventions into contentious public debates. For example, America, just over the past year, has produced books like Lawrence Lessig's *Republic, Lost: How Money Corrupts Congress—and a Plan to Stop It*, Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein's *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided With the New Politics of Extremism*, and Corey Robin's *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin*. The authors of these books have all received praise (and criticism) from their peers in academia, while also making important and pointed contributions to debates of major public significance. These books targeted leaders, but also appealed to the general public to hold those leaders accountable. We do not have this equivalent academic tradition in Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asian studies and power

One possible counter-argument is that if Southeast Asian studies has been defined by values-laden, agenda driven scholarship, then perhaps the solution is disinterested scholarship. However, there is no such thing as disinterested scholarship. All work takes place in the context of powerful interests. The only difference is the degree of self-consciousness and self-awareness. Academia is also highly influenced by political power and corporate wealth. They motivate universities by providing the desirable prizes: bigger endowments, more buildings, more awards. Universities in turn offer incentives to their faculty—promotion, tenure, higher salaries, prestige—if they innovate in prescribed directions that will help win those prizes. The larger interests of power and wealth are thus internalised in the motivations of the scholar. There is no conspiracy. These are just the normal rules of power and wealth. While scholars undoubtedly act in good faith, believing themselves to be independent of interests and pursuing their own agenda, they are nevertheless subject to the academic environment they operate in.

Many scholars have unconsciously responded to this situation by producing work which does not challenge the status quo. As a result, the work produced fails to ask important questions about issues like poverty, class, race, repression, or imprisonment. This plays right into the hands of those with power, who are only too happy to see knowledge produced that will advance their universities while guaranteeing that the knowledge will not challenge them in any meaningful way.

Those who command the obvious forms of power (i.e., political control and wealth) in Southeast Asia have also long used their power to commandeer knowledge. Industry entices the most agile minds with wealth. Government lures others with the promise of patriotism, and access to influence. The best minds are offered government scholarships and are thereby bonded, thus ensuring the control over, and if necessary the suppression of, the fruits of their mental labour. In many Southeast Asian states academics are rewarded for producing knowledge that safely perpetuates the status quo.

For a long time, ASEAN governments have justified their control of knowledge production by arguing that they were solving the problem of poverty and development. Academic discipline under the control of the state, they argued, enabled the maximisation of limited resources of knowledge production toward solving this problem.

But a look around the region today makes clear that nothing has changed in relative terms. It has been 50 years or more since Southeast Asian states became independent, and power and wealth throughout Southeast Asia remain in the hands of a selected elite. Southeast Asia's rich countries are also tremendously disproportionate. The instruments that enabled growth are not equipped to redistribute it equitably. If hard work really led to success, every mother in Southeast Asia would be a millionaire. Instead, women are the most exploited and oppressed group in our region.

For Southeast Asia to prosper in the 21st century and beyond, we need a revolution in social thought and policy. However, we have no knowledge of how to make such a revolution, or what its final form should be. These revolutions are unprecedented anywhere in the world. At the same time, power and wealth are highly concentrated in government, corporations, and the military, while the rest is highly fragmented. Many of Southeast Asians do not have votes or even voices, let alone the means to turn either domestic or foreign policy in new directions.

That is why academics, scholars, and knowledge producers are so important. Knowledge is a form of power; and, in a liberalising Southeast Asia, it is growing ever more powerful. Southeast Asian governments have begun to realise the inefficiency of using violence, and in many places its everyday use has been discredited as an option. Instead, everyday

control is better exercised by manufacturing a set of rules, a fabric of values that can be justified through appeals to essentialist claims and internalised by the people. In such a scenario, the population censors and monitors itself. Sukarno's *Pancasila* and Singapore's 'Shared Values' are examples of attempts to propagate this. Governments have recognised that the rise of democracy means that force is replaced by deception, via education and the control of information, as one of the chief methods of maintaining the status quo. Thus, knowledge can either reinforce or counteract deceptions that make the government's force legitimate. And the knowledge industry thus becomes a vital and sensitive locus of power. That power can be used to maintain the status quo, or to change it.

Values

What then should the future shape of Southeast Asian studies be? Or to put it another way, who is Southeast Asian studies for? Which interests should the Southeast Asian scholar serve? It is inevitable that Southeast Asian studies will continue to be shaped by values and agenda. It should be. But the difference should be diversity and freedom of choice. The values that a work promotes should be up to the individual scholar. There is always room for beauty for beauty's sake. We need people who will produce both the answers to questions today as well as visions that inspire us and make us aspire to better, greater, more beautiful tomorrows. To achieve this, we need to have the self-awareness to ask ourselves what the subconscious influences on us are, and we need the courage to resist influences which pull us away from the values we wish to promote.

I personally believe the scholar should serve fundamental humanistic interests, above any nation, ethnic group, cultural group, class, or ideology. I believe a scholar should serve broader goals of eliminating poverty, war, racism, and restrictions on individual freedom. Other scholars may feel differently, and I strongly urge them to create work that exemplifies their own values. All I suggest is that they are self-aware and understand what values they are working for.

One should also be careful not to confuse this for a lack of accuracy. Accuracy means that one is academically honest and scrupulously careful about reporting correctly everything one observes. But accuracy is only a prerequisite. Howard Zinn suggests the analogy of a blacksmith. No matter what the blacksmith chooses to make, he must use reliable measuring instruments, high quality metal, and top-grade tools. But it is up to the blacksmith whether to make swords or ploughshares.¹³ Similarly, it is up to us as scholars to decide if we want to use our academic tools for war or for peace, to promote one set of values over another. As Zinn notes, "Too many scholars abjure a starting set of values, because they fail to make the proper distinction between an ultimate set of values and the instruments needed to obtain them. The values may be subjective (derived from human needs); but the instruments must be objective (accurate)."¹⁴ One must report what proves one wrong as well as what proves one right. Our values determine the questions we ask, but not the answers. By comparison, nobody questions why scientists or medical researchers do not start from a position of neutrality with regards to life and death. The tacit assumption behind their work is always to save lives, to extend control over the human environment for the benefit of humankind. Why not for the humanities and social sciences?

Conclusion

In conclusion, I urge all scholars of Southeast Asia to become aware of the environment in which they work and its influence on them. I believe we need to expend our time and energy to draw the attention of our fellow men and women to those facts that states seek to conceal, to the truths that people find inconvenient, to the universal values that are often denied to the people of Southeast Asia. We need to expose lies told by politicians, by the mass media, by religion, and by corporations. We have a responsibility to reveal the corruptions of power, its inconsistencies and double standards, and the intoxicating symbols and concepts (nationalism, ethnicity, religion) that are used to distract and divide people. We must bring to light the facts about rich and poor, about racial division and exclusion, about tyranny and oppression, and about exploitation and brutality that our societies rest upon. We need to do this so that our fellow citizens can make their own judgements on the realities beneath the political rhetoric. In short, we need to be critics of power, rather than its perpetuators and apologists.

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Notes

- 1 The author acknowledges a debt to the late historian Howard Zinn, whose writings on the responsibilities of the historian inspired this article.
- 2 Cynthia Chou and VJH Houben. 2006. 'Introduction', in Cynthia Chou and VJH Houben (eds.), *Southeast Asian studies: Debates and New Directions*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, p.4
- 3 Victor T. King. 1990. *Between West and East: Policy and Practice in South-East Asian studies in Britain*. Hull: Hull University Press, p.2
- 4 George Mct. Kahin. 1994. 'Lauriston Sharp (1907-93)', *Southeast Asia Program Bulletin*, (Fall 1994) 2-5, p.2-3.
- 5 King, *Between West and East: Policy and Practice in South-East Asian studies in Britain*, p.4.
- 6 Anthony Reid. 2004. 'Studying Southeast Asia in a Globalized World', *Taiwan Journal of Southeast Asian studies*, 1/2 (October 2004), 3-18, p.7
- 7 Vicente Rafael. 1999. 'Southeast Asian studies - Wherefrom?', in *Social Science Research Council* (ed.), *Weighing the Balance: Southeast Asian studies Ten Years After*. New York: Southeast Asia Program, Social Science Research Council, p.10
- 8 Alfred Mccoy, *ibid.*
- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 Reid, 'Studying Southeast Asia in a Globalized World', p.15.
- 11 For a longer history of Southeast Asian studies, see Chou and Houben, 'Introduction'. (see above, note 2)
- 12 Ariel Heryanto. 2002. 'Can there be Southeast Asians in Southeast Asian studies?', *Moussons*, 5, 3-30.
- 13 Howard Zinn. 2009. 'The Uses of Scholarship', *The Zinn Reader: Writings on Disobedience and Democracy*. New York: Seven Stories Press, p.6243 of 8663 [Kindle Edition].
- 14 *ibid.*, p.6247 of 8663 [Kindle Edition].

Moussons

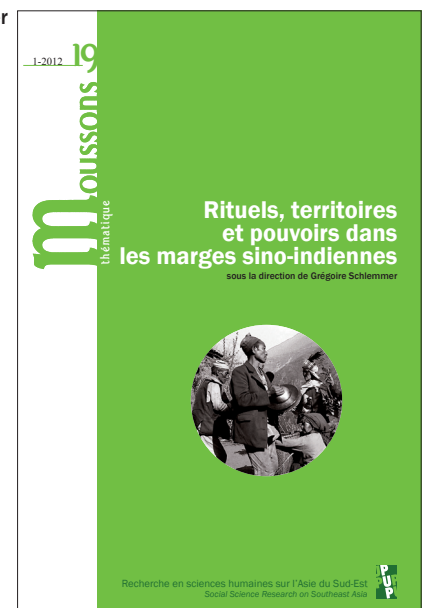
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