

The new ASEAN scholar

This is how a young Thai university lecturer in Bangkok spends her semester. She teaches six hours a week in two undergraduate classes and one graduate class. She advises a couple of PhD students. She works on two research projects. She serves as advisor to more than ten undergrad senior-year Thai students and about twenty students in the international program. She provides advice to any students who need it, whether or not they are assigned to her, and she writes reference letters for them when requested. Her workload extends beyond her own university. She serves as thesis advisor to grad students from other Thai and foreign universities. I suspect that all Thai lecturers have similar responsibilities, although the number of students that they assist may vary. Add to this workload the daily commute of two to three hours through the city's traffic gridlock and one wonders how Bangkok academics even find time to do research.

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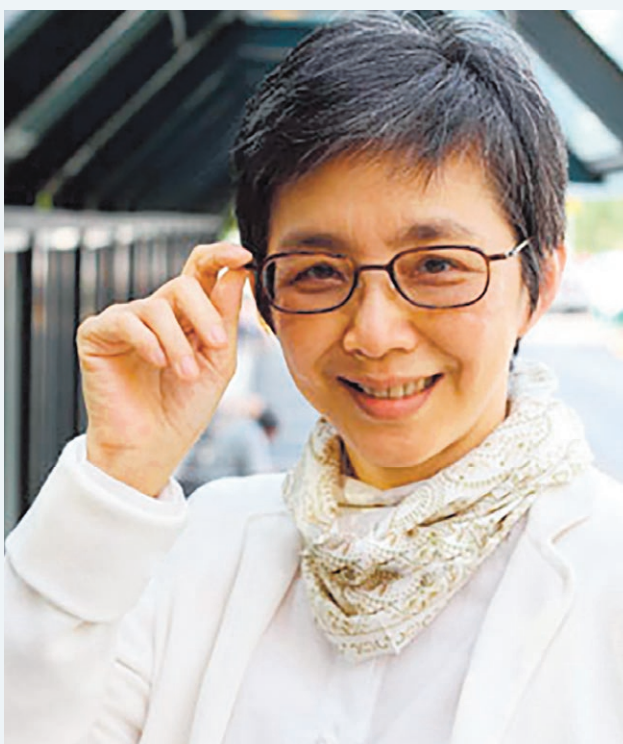
Burdens of writing and editing

But the Thai academy has been facing another challenge. After the Tomyam Kung economic crisis in 1997, the IMF advised the Thai government, as part of their rescue package, to downsize their civil workforce and to cut expenses. The result was the privatization of almost every state-owned university. In Thailand, being a civil-worker means 'security'. The state covers most of your essential expenses, including your children's school tuition and your parents' medical bills. Privatization takes away this privilege. It makes it tougher to get promoted. And in the old days, no civil servant was ever fired for underperforming. Now, academic instructors are hired on contract and risk losing their jobs if they don't perform according to expectations. The resulting instability will hopefully eventually disappear as administration and management adjust their policies and procedures, and academics get used to the new situation.

The academy in Thailand is undergoing a more critical change these days. Take one look at the member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and you see the rich ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. How well can these countries work across the cultural divides to provide support for their own scholars? Silkworm Books has experienced this issue firsthand. In 2006, we received funding from the Rockefeller Foundation to promote the work of regional scholars in the broader English-language community. This project was fraught with two general difficulties.

The first was administrative. Every national government has some sort of policy to support its academics. Translation and publication funds are provided, but the rules and regulations were set up years ago, likely by an administrator with no practical knowledge or experience of translation, copyediting, and publishing. The conditions and stipulations are dated and need revamping. Policymakers and top administrators need to understand that translating a local language into English is not a simple undertaking. It is time consuming and very costly. I have miscalculated the cost more than once due to underestimating the time needed for copyediting. In cases where the translations were arranged by the authors themselves, our copyediting was often further delayed because the authors could not easily respond to our editorial queries in English.

This brings me to the second difficulty. In a regional association like ASEAN the common language for working and publishing is inevitably English. How will scholars who don't speak English manage? It is onerous for non-native English speakers to produce works in English unless the writers grew up in an English-speaking country and were educated there. Not only do the unfamiliar English grammar



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and vocabulary cause problems. Structure and organization and flow are also huge hurdles. Even when a native English-speaker has been asked to check and correct the original work before submission, and even when the grammar appears to be fine at first glance, we have found that it may still need extensive copyediting or even rewriting. The rhetorical style may be back-to-front. The organization may not be coherent. The whole thing can be an editorial nightmare. As a matter of fact, we would have been hard-pressed to find a freelancer willing to copyedit this type of manuscript for us a second time.

At the end of the day, the question is simple: can we afford to promote the work of a Southeast Asian writer? How many editors and how many hours will we need to make it readable? Our local or regional academics may have brilliant ideas and brilliant writing styles in their native languages, but the quality of their English writing, or of their translators', is, sadly, not up to standard.

Self-censorship

When all is said and done, there is a final, far more serious issue for academics in Southeast Asia: the lack of freedom of expression. In Thailand, Article 112 aka Lese Majeste, along with libel law, strongly affect the way people think and write. Since 1935, Thailand has had nineteen coup d'états. Only during short periods in our recent history has the country been ruled by elected governments. We have become quite used to self-censorship, to sealing our lips. Since the 2014 coup, there has been less and less public debate and discussion. Some accusations have gone beyond reason, for example, when the military filed a complaint against someone who verbally criticized a sixteenth-century king. The sentences handed down by the military court for violating Article 112 have been extreme.

Indeed, other countries in the region are facing the same issue. Our various laws may have different names, but the control they exert is essentially the same. They only vary in severity. How can academics produce quality and respectable work under these conditions? I hope that by 2017, when ICAS 10 takes place in Chiang Mai, the situation will have improved and we will be able to discuss any subject openly and constructively.

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Am I an applied linguist researching Asia (specifically China) or an Asia scholar researching language issues? My dissertation explored the changing use and status of English in China from the 17th century to the present; the growing importance of the Chinese language in the world; and the policy challenges posed by providing English language education to China's ethnic minorities. In more recent times, I have also become interested in the ways in which the Chinese government promotes Chinese language learning abroad, and the use of English for conveying information about China's environmental policies and projecting environmentally friendly images of China. Brumfit's (1997) definition of applied linguistics as "the theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue" (93), has resonated strongly with me. This differs from how language is often seen in Asian studies. Reid (1999), for example, says Asia scholars have in common "a commitment to the serious enterprise of understanding a culture and tradition other than our own, through a variety of disciplinary techniques which usually include language" (p. 144). Language for the Asia scholar is therefore a technique or tool for studying something else, such as the history, politics or economics of Asia, rather than the central focus of research.

I have found it necessary to draw on the work of many Asia scholars when conducting my research because, as Grabe (2010) points out, 'few practical language issues can be addressed through the knowledge resources of any single discipline' (p. 43). Understanding the use and status of English in China, for example, requires knowledge of China's domestic political situation and its relations with the rest of the world, while the promotion of Chinese language learning abroad cannot be fully understood without considering China's reemergence as a great power. I have also used my language skills to access Chinese academic sources in my areas of interest and to conduct fieldwork activities such as interviews.

I think there remains an important distinction regarding the way language is approached – as the central focus of research or as a tool for researching something else – by applied linguists and Asia scholars. This is why I consider myself an applied linguist, rather than an Asia scholar. I hope this brief personal reflection will spark further discussion of what it means to be an applied linguist researching Asia.

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IS 'ASIA' DYING? A rather hyperbolic question, however, having spent the last decade living and working in Seoul, the more I look around the country the less I see of what it once was. Gone are the hanboks (traditional dress) and the hanoks (traditional houses). They are becoming relics or forms of exhibition; things that are presented at cultural exhibitions. Whilst Koreans have always prided themselves on hyo (filial piety) and other Confucian concepts of discipline and obedience, these too are slowly becoming items associated with previous generations, with a time long gone. Churches have replaced temples; baseball caps have replaced top-knots; independence has replaced dependence. This has led to wonderful developments in academic results, social movement, democracy, literacy, and freer journalism and for that Koreans are appreciative. Does it mean that Asian Studies may soon become something more akin to history than social sciences or culture.

So, is Asia dying? Well, it's certainly showing remarkable developments in its global achievements (from both a financial and cultural perspective) but are these really their achievements or are they the achievements of the Westernization that has swept this part of the world and replaced the tea houses with green-tinted chain coffee shops on every corner? Again, it may sound a little hyperbolic but I do wonder what the future will hold for this particular field and whether the 'Asian Scholar' will soon become more of a historian than a cultural analyst.

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IN CONTEMPORARY post-modern 'Asian Studies' more importance should be given to overcoming the colonial influence and western attitude.

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