

Old and new knowledge regimes and the public milieu

Notwithstanding reservations about generalising across regions, in this discussion I consider the notion of ‘new Asia scholars’ in connection with Southeast Asia. I look at two possible assumptions: either that new types of scholars have emerged that change the circumstances for knowledge production, or that new scholarship among Southeast Asian scholars may change or challenge the forms of knowledge produced about the region. I discuss both angles in relation to old and emerging regimes of knowledge production and their engagement with society.

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Received legacies for research and publication

Before we may speak of ‘new types of scholars’ or ‘new scholarship’, I wish to begin with a survey of two regimes that have been inherited. First, without discounting the heartfelt passion, devotion and intrinsic motivation of individual scholars for the pursuit of knowledge, one may note that the underlying motivations for the patronage of European scholarship on Asia in the preceding centuries lay in the utility of such knowledge for European imperialism and epistemological control. The ‘old regime’ in scholarship on Southeast Asia was generated by institutions founded to serve and augment the administration and management of various colonial territories. They remain vital today.

Scholarship was also generated through the exploration and record of peoples and languages for evangelism by various European and American religious groups. These centres of knowledge production and archiving, and their journals and publishers, continue to referee and shape scholarship on Southeast Asia. The *Siam Society* and its journal founded in 1904 under royal patronage in Bangkok is the notable exception, even though it was ultimately modelled after the antiquarian societies of European colonial powers and is in fact linked to Siam’s own imperial ambitions in the Southeast Asian mainland and its anxiety to demonstrate its parity with European imperial powers.

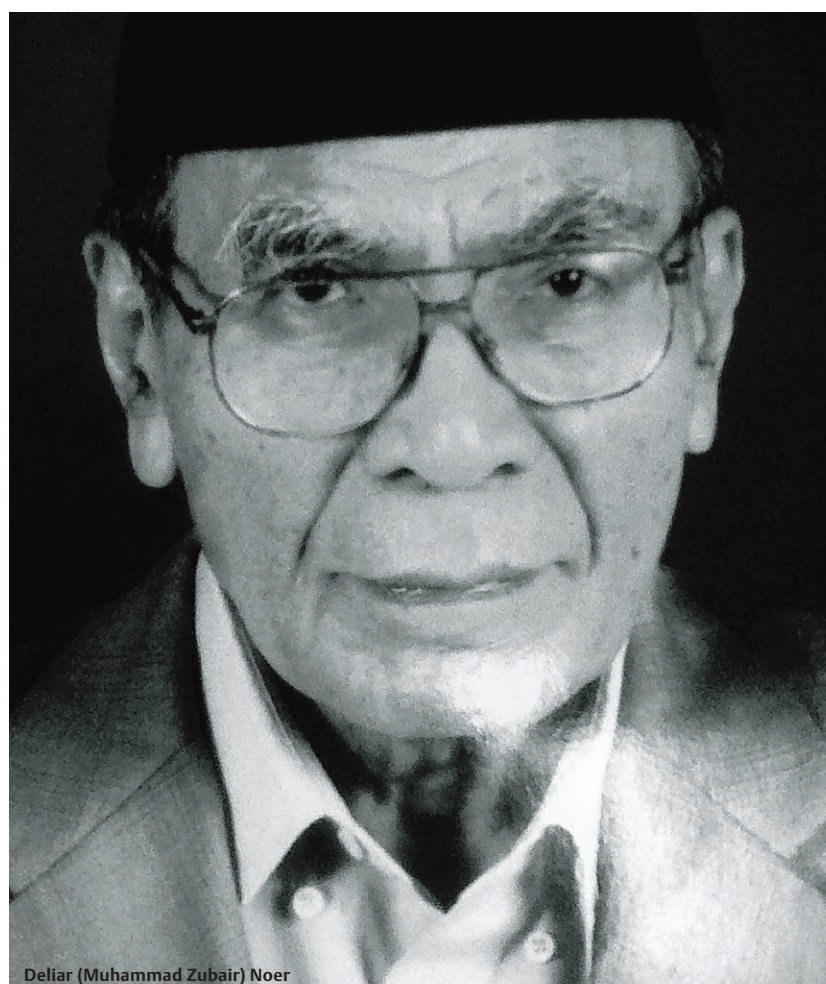
From the 1940s to the 1980s, a second regime emerged, with North American and Australian universities joining European ones in developing centres or programs on Southeast Asia connected to strategic foreign policy imperatives. Benedict Anderson observed acerbically the contrast between the ‘entrepreneurial’ North American university researcher and the ‘unhurried’ European colonial civil servant-scholar, both of whom were creatures of their respective ‘ecology’.¹ Significantly, Anderson does not discuss any other ‘ecology’ beyond these.

Both European colonial and Cold War North American scholarship regimes involve Western scholars producing research with utility for Western knowledge consumers, at times within their national contexts. Yet, both legacies for research and publication shape contemporary scholarship in powerful and fundamental ways. Recent trends in promotion and tenure assessment for Asian universities based on American modes of knowledge validation through academic journal publication have renewed the power of both regimes of knowledge production.

It is these traditions, in English (and to a limited extent, other European languages) and refereed by Euro-American institutions, which form the received modes of scholarly enquiry, academic validation, career advancement, and financial viability for many Asian scholars. Alternative discursive domains and traditions of scholarship remain very limited even today – and language medium and milieu play fundamental roles in their dissemination. We need only recall that while J.C. van Leur’s dissertation of 1934, with its well-known observations, destabilised not merely the epistemological assumptions but the very ontological bases of knowledge about Southeast Asia, its fundamental revision gained wider recognition only after an English translation of his thesis had been published in 1955.² His critique was then supplemented by those from Anglophone scholars such as John Smail calling for ‘autonomous histories’ in 1966.³ Likewise, influential critiques by Asian scholars such as Arjun Appadurai and Lila Abu-Lughod of tropes and lenses inherited from colonial scholarship in anthropology were written in English. English-language Asian scholarship has largely remained the preserve of groups that have not only mastered and appropriated the language – notably those from former British colonies such as India and the Straits Settlements at Penang, Malacca and Singapore – but also have particularly sought to question inherited



Koentjaraningrat



Deliar (Muhammad Zubair) Noer

ways of seeing and discussing Asia or the ‘Orient’ and, further, explored new ontological terrains that expose the limitations of categories or terms in existing scholarship.

The lack of any sustained scholarship in English among former colonies of France and the Netherlands in Southeast Asia should be considered against the rupture from inherited colonial educational legacies. These former colonial languages – French and Dutch – have a much-reduced utility as mediums of scholarly communication in the relevant former Southeast Asian colonies today. It is revealing too that the *Bijdragen* has opted to use English since 1948.⁴ One may contrast Indonesia with the Philippines in this respect. Their former colonial languages, Dutch and American English respectively (notwithstanding the Philippines’ earlier Hispanicisation), enjoy vastly different fates in international academia today. While *Asian Studies*, issued by Manila’s Asian Centre at the University of the Philippines Diliman, has enjoyed continuous publication in English since 1963, the University of Indonesia’s *Wacana*, begun in 1999 as a bilingual journal for the humanities in Bahasa Indonesia and English, chose in 2010 to use English exclusively. Gajah Mada University Press stands out in this regard – beginning in the 1950s, and particularly from the 1970s, it has published a number of English-language books despite belonging to a non-English-speaking milieu.

Pioneering ‘new scholars’ – PhD holders in the early post-independence milieu

Asian intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century were internationally-mobile individuals well-aware of their shared colonial predicament and attuned to the socio-political developments elsewhere⁵ – and they were mainly autodidacts. Subsequently, a different type of scholar in Asian society emerged, who underwent further formal education in Western universities leading to higher degrees. A parallel transition took place among European scholars; Oliver Wolters conducted his doctoral research at SOAS in 1961, under the supervision of D.G.E. Hall, who had an MA in English History. Hall’s entry into Southeast Asian scholarship began when the British government despatched him to assume the Chair of History for a newly-created University of Rangoon (Yangon) in 1921; his departure upon Burma’s independence led him to eventually become the first chair of the History of South East Asia at SOAS in 1949.

The pioneer generation of Southeast Asian doctoral degree-holders who taught locally did not yet belong to the ‘publish or perish’ milieu of today. Though they continued to publish academic works, there was no real impetus either for sustained academic publication in English for an international audience, or to engage Euro-American or Australian scholarship that was then being produced about Southeast Asia for Western foreign policy. Instead, much of their intellectual energy was directed towards serving their respective countries, especially through institution-building or diplomacy, and more importantly in public service and advocacy.

The stories of five pioneer Indonesian doctoral-degree intellectuals demonstrate this pattern. Sumitro Djojohadikusumo (PhD Netherlands School of Economics 1943) returned to Indonesia to fulfil several ministerial roles in the newly-independent country before becoming the second dean of the Faculty of Economics at University of Indonesia (UI) in 1951. His students, known as the so-called ‘Berkeley mafia’, received doctorates or masters in economics in the US by the late early 1960s, under a cooperative agreement with UC Berkeley facilitated by the Ford Foundation, and served Indonesia through public office or civil service. Strikingly, in this early post-independence period, academic programs in the US attracted, sponsored or courted the key Indonesian scholars. Koentjaraningrat, independent Indonesia’s pioneer anthropologist, was a Fulbright scholar who studied at Yale before returning to Indonesia for his PhD at UI in 1958; in 1974 Utrecht University bestowed upon him an honoris causa doctorate. He founded the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) in 1964, while his students headed Departments in various universities across Indonesia.

Deliar (Muhammad Zubair) Noer (PhD Cornell 1963) taught in Jakarta for seven years before being sacked in 1974 just before delivering a lecture on ‘Participation in Development’, which the Suharto regime deemed seditious, and thereafter taught at ANU and Griffiths University before co-founding a think-tank, LIPPM. Sartono Kartodirdjo (MA Yale 1964; PhD Amsterdam University 1966) returned to head Gajah Mada University’s History Department from 1968, was general editor of the 6-volume set of Indonesian history textbooks published in 1975, and was conferred the first Harry J. Benda Prize in 1977. Finally, in Soedjatmoko we see a very different kind of intellectual – a statesman who was accorded several honoris causa doctorate degrees by US tertiary-level educational institutions. As a journalist he was critical of the Suharto regime; he served in various Indonesian think tanks and, when it was no longer safe to remain in New Order Indonesia, was guest lecturer at Cornell, and at the end of his career served as Rector at the United Nations University from 1980 to 1987.

Indonesian scholars also founded the important think-tank LP3ES in 1971, which continues to produce academic publications and journals today. Meanwhile, the Singapore Planning and Urban Research (SPUR) Group was founded in 1965, but was disbanded by the state in 1975. Both academic think-tanks saw a mission in critiquing state planning schemes and in contributing alternative visions to policy. Both also achieved a number of fruitful outcomes.

K.S. Jomo, an economist from Malaysia (MPA and PhD Harvard, 1974, 1982) represents the following generation of Southeast Asian PhD-holders who taught, engaged in social activism, and founded a think-tank for social analysis (INSAN) in his homeland before later assuming a role in the UN. His very name Jomo Kwame was fashioned by his father, who was likewise an activist, after the anti-colonial first presidents of Kenya and Ghana. Between his Masters and PhD, Jomo taught at USM Penang and also Yale and Harvard, before teaching in the University of Malaya from 1984 to 2004, during which time he also assumed visiting positions in Cambridge, Cornell, and Asia Research Institute (ARI) in NUS. Since 2005 he has served the UN in various capacities. As befits his generation, Jomo maintains his own website: www.jomo.ws.

New scholarship and post-bureaucratic frameworks?

The early post-independence milieu was concerned with the application of intellectual capacities to the tasks of institution-building. Today scholarship in the US mould is concerned with what Benedict Anderson has cynically called “the rush to theory” that is driven by “two American peculiarities”, namely the “theory market in the academic marketplace” and “the link of theory to public policy”.⁶

Scholarship with a concern for social engagement must now operate beyond and in spite of the contemporary shift of Asian universities towards this American ‘academic marketplace’ model. A new scholarship for Asia would also utilise not only the colonial written archives but also the living archive in its midst, through a dialectical relationship between researcher and community – with the latter as source of information and feedback, and the former performing the duty to inform and serving as a source of informed critique. To generate critical and socially-engaged scholarship, new avenues must be paved for forums involving the general public and institutions so that research may reflect concerns rooted in the locality studied; and for debates that engage Western scholarship and local circles of knowledge. These ideas can radically change the ontological basis for knowledge production, and have informed my public engagements since 2011. They align with the idea of the open university, and simultaneously involve direct encounters with, and field documentation of, foundational, embodied knowledge that cannot be accessed via written archives, may not fit received conceptual frameworks,

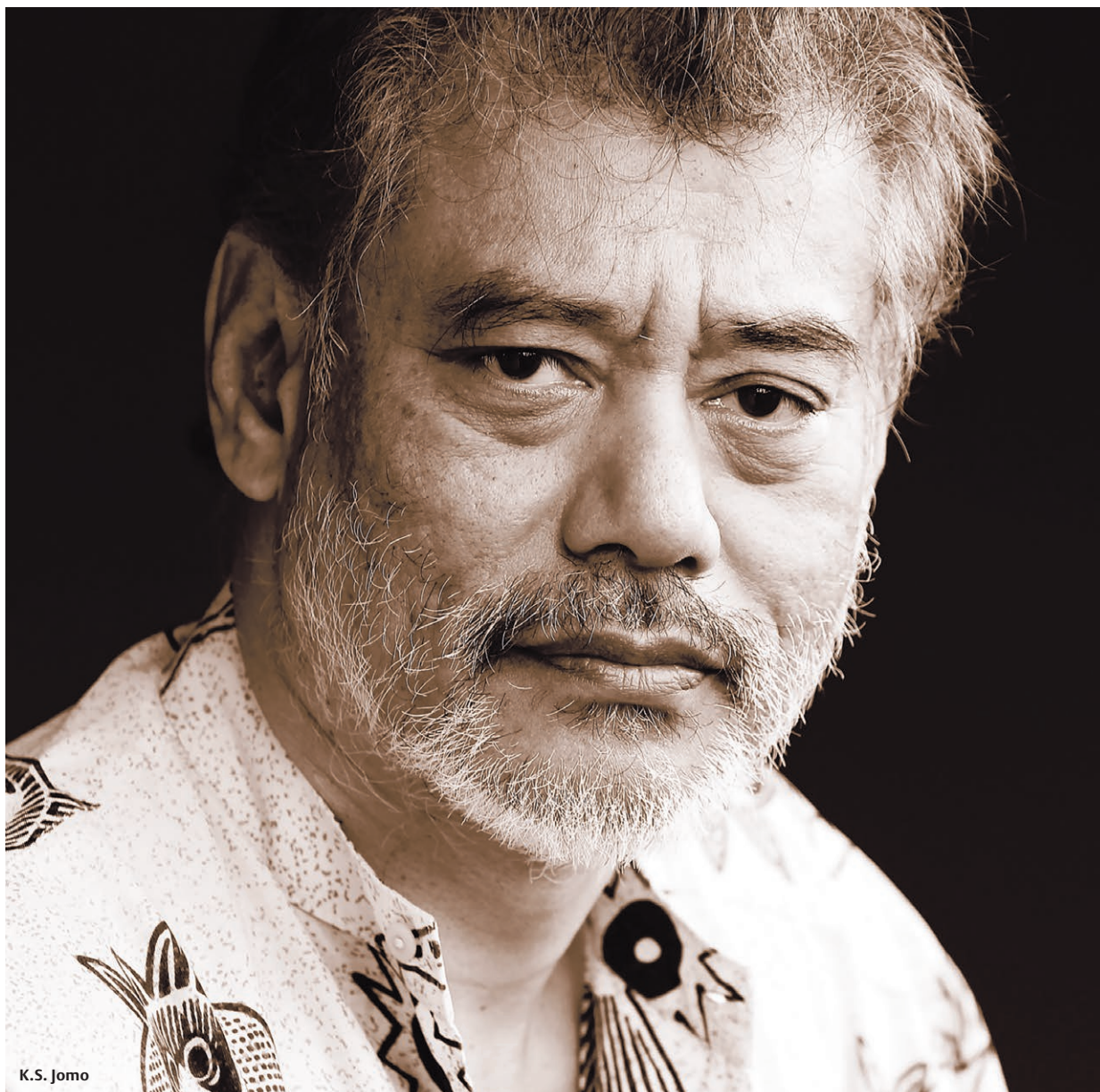
or defy immediate distillation into theoretical discussions. These ideas resonate with Dell Upton’s ‘cultural landscape’ approach to architecture and urban history⁷ and the notion of the ‘flipped academic’ where publication is delayed in favour of community engagement.⁸

This year I was named ‘Most Promising New Civil Society Advocate’ for my sustained effort at public engagement and fieldwork on Singapore urban heritage and place histories. But these efforts take time and energy from work that adds to the academic publications record. Asian universities, particularly in Singapore, are currently driven to align with the ‘academic marketplace’ mould for international ranking. There is presently no motivation for universities to consider alternative grounds for assessment. If scholars must pander to the quick-turnover, theory-driven requirements of the ‘academic marketplace’ regime, to the detriment of public engagement or long-term fieldwork, new scholarship and innovative teaching is thwarted – especially for areas of study that concern cultural landscapes connected with a living milieu, and that derive academic renewal precisely from sustained advocacy and painstaking, time-consuming foundational groundwork.

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K.S. Jomo

AS ONE OF A RELATIVELY small handful of trained comparatists working in the field of Asian Studies from the disciplinary home of Comparative Literature, I find that some of the most exciting ‘new’ conversations in Asian Studies have begun to develop from conversations with Asian/American Studies. These two fields have traditionally defined themselves in opposition to one another, with the former focused on an area-studies, nationally and politically oriented approach, and the latter emphasizing epistemological categories, including ethnicity and citizenship, that drew mainly on the history of the United States. The past decade, however, has seen a series of rapprochements in which, for instance, categories ‘belonging’ to Asian American Studies (ethnicity, race, diaspora) have been applied with increasing success to studies of Asia. For example, Asian Studies has responded to the postnational turn in the humanities and social sciences by becoming increasingly open to rethinking its national and regional insularities, and to work that pushes, often literally, on the boundaries of Asia as both a place and a concept. At the same time, Asian American Studies has become increasingly aware of the ongoing importance of Asia to the Asian American experience, and thus more open to work that is transnational or multilingual, as well as to forms of scholarship that challenge the US-centrism of concepts governing the Asian diaspora.

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THE TERM ‘INDOLOGY’ may seem quite obsolete, but it still indicates a vast field of study beyond the study of Indian history, literature, philosophy, etc., to cover the cultural history of many other countries which have assimilated salient features of ancient Indian civilization, such as religions, statescraft, artistic traditions, writing, and sacred languages. The construction of many great and spectacular monuments of the world, known from the Himalaya countries down to the island of Sri Lanka, and others in mainland and insular Southeast Asia, had been inspired by Buddhism and Hinduism, imported from India, while Sanskrit functioned as the sacred and intellectual language of the royal courts and priestly preceptors in all these countries overseas. Local genius of the areas adopted the Indian ingredients, adapted these to the taste and requirements of the new environment and created magnificent phenomena in architecture, sculpture and painting with distinctive characteristics of their own. And yet, their relationship with the Indian roots remained undeniable.

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THE INCREASE in the number of Asianists hailing from Asian nations is a wonderful development which inevitably enriches the diversity and quality of work in the field, ultimately contributing to better [global] understanding.

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AS A SOMEWHAT naïve undergrad majoring in Chinese I was often reminded that I was not political enough. The time was the early 1970s and I was advised in no uncertain terms to deepen my knowledge of Marxism-Leninism and to adopt the department’s pro-Mao party line. So, I did as I was told and graduated successfully. Fast forward 15 years to the late 1980s and the advice I received was of the same order but in reverse ... The result was a confused graduate student caught up in the crossfire, not to mention a record of the way things once were in the field of modern Chinese studies and the personal price one pays in toeing the line.

The emergence of the field of twentieth century China studies was laudable and profoundly necessary; nonetheless, the straitjacket of narrowly defined ideas that surrounded it was stultifying. One might ask whether the prescribed set of paradigms differed only in kind from the orientalism that accompanied the earlier version of Chinese studies that focused exclusively on the text to the detriment of the culture that gave birth it?

Today, the expansion and openness of Chinese studies is like a breath of fresh air. The field has grown tremendously due to the proliferation of knowledge about China and the critical theories, such as post-colonialism, postmodernism, the spatial turn, cultural studies, border studies, indigenous studies and the host of other ideas that has taken Asian Studies by storm. The freedom to pick and choose any or all these paradigms and to apply them in ways that seem appropriate to the individual researcher stands in very stark contrast to the authoritative ways of the pre-liberalization days. The liberalization in modern and contemporary Chinese scholarship has brought deeper awareness about the nature of Chinese culture and society, which is surely the aim of the field in the first instance, and not to provide a platform for the bias or pre-conceived notions of the individual with a hidden agenda or axe to grind. It is commendable that the wider field of Asian studies has also taken a meaningful step forward to a future that is less constrained and authoritative. In short, as one of the members of the older generation I remain envious of the younger generation who enjoys greater autonomy to think, analyze and write. The result is a discipline that is more enjoyable, inclusive and open to different points-of-view and ways of thinking and being.

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