Region, academic dynamics and promise of comparativism

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1996; Fox, James, ed. The Poetic Power of Place. Perspectives on Austronesian Ideas of Locality. Canberra: Australian National University, Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, 1997.
60. Van Schendel. Geographies of Knowing: 16.
64. Ibid.

3

REGION, ACADEMIC DYNAMICS, AND PROMISE OF COMPARITIVISM
Beyond Studying 'Southeast Asia'?

Robert Cribb

Why does Southeast Asian studies exist? Academics are very good at analysing other peoples' societies, but we have never been as competent at turning our analytical skills to the academic society we inhabit in our professional lives. Academic society is a strange world, or rather worlds, for most of us actually inhabit at least two relatively distinct worlds. On the one hand, we live in the institutional world of universities, where we deal with students, colleagues and administrators with varying degrees of effectiveness and pleasure. This is a life abundantly chronicled in novels, though it is much less subject to scholarly scrutiny.1 We may, if we are fortunate, have colleagues and students with whom we can develop intellectual relationships. For the most part, however, the best part of our intellectual life depends on being a part of another world, that global archipelago of scholars who in some way—difficult to define—constitute our peers and constitute the field in which we work. This is the world we inhabit briefly at conferences, and our best conversations are often those held on such occasions, as well as by e-mail and in books, book reviews and articles, with scholars from other institutions who share our interests and who challenge our assumptions.

Whatever our topics of research, we generally have a sense of belonging to a field, a collectivity of living scholars and published work which somehow
seems to be engaged in the same intellectual programme. Whereas fields may be more or less defined institutionally — bureaucrats can tell us precisely, for instance, where Asia stops and the Pacific starts — intellectually they are fuzzy and volatile. In practice most of us locate ourselves within several fields. Some of them exist in a series of intellectual concentric circles based on location (Jakarta, Java, Indonesia, Southeast Asia, Asia) or time period (1870–1900, being part of the nineteenth century, and then of the modern era), whereas others are defined by topic — violence, film, environment, diasporas, entrepreneurship, and so on — or by conventional discipline. Nonetheless, some fields seem to be especially enduring and to create a lasting, though certainly never unconditional, sense of academic and intellectual commitment. In such fields the sense of community is stronger than in looser areas of interest; so, too, is the sense of being part of a continuing debate. None of us knows everyone else in the field, of course, and none of us can read everything that is published, but it is likely that most of those, for instance, who conduct research on Southeast Asian history are separated from personal acquaintance with all of the other historians of Southeast Asia in the world by no more than two or three degrees of separation.2

The internal complexity and diversity of the Southeast Asian region, its multitude of connections to the rest of the world, and its volatile, uncertain boundaries would seem to make the field of Southeast Asian studies an improbable entity. Yet Southeast Asia has been strikingly "successful" as the next level of regional conceptualization above the nation in this particular part of the world. Although Heather Sutherland once famously described Southeast Asia as a "cold concept" (meaning that it was hard to feel any warmth for this metonymy collection of lands and seas), the success of the concept is striking when one considers the far greater intellectual, emotional, and institutional failure of other regional concepts such as Maphillindo (Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia), the "Malay World", mainland Southeast Asia and so on, despite the fact that each of them could reasonably claim to be more coherent than Southeast Asia in terms of cultural patterns and historical experience.

To understand the nature of Southeast Asian studies as a field, we need to note briefly and then take a step back from the debate over the region itself as a field of study. The study of Southeast Asia is marked, perhaps even marred, by continuing debate over the nature of the region. In one corner stand the realists, with Anthony Reid as their current chief aladin.4 Their position is that Southeast Asia is a coherent empirical reality and that the contours of Southeast Asian studies as a field are warranted by the objective existence of Southeast Asia as a historical and social fact. The realist view has grown in sophistication over the years. It now refers to an impressive range of cultural features spread widely across the region, encompassing architecture, the position of women, cuisine, music, political style, and much besides. It argues for a common regional historical experience in which economic integration, cultural exchange, and similarity of political forms span two thousand years to create a true coherence, despite differences of language and religion and despite the absence of political unity. The realist approach also seeks to anchor itself in the consciousness of the people of the region by asserting an ancient and enduring sense of Southeast Asian identity as a reality distinct from the Indian and Chinese identities of neighbouring regions to the east and north.

In the opposing corner stand the constructivists, who regard "Southeast Asia" as an artefact. The constructivists, located principally in the United States, emphasize the origins of Southeast Asian studies, and of the conception of Southeast Asia as a region of study, in the strategic interests of the United States following World War II. They see Southeast Asia as having coherence primarily as a proving ground for a succession of particular kinds of American hegemonic strategies, by turns and in various combinations anti-colonial, clandestine, growth-oriented, authoritarian, culturalist, and so on. In this view, the issues that seemed to give Southeast Asia a regional coherence were coherent because they were U.S. interests, not because they reflected some distinctive regional character. The very formulation of a term such as "Southeast Asia" was, in this view, a feature of the American geo-political belief that the world could be neatly divided into zones defined by their external strategic importance, rather than by internal characteristics.5 To talk of "Southeast Asia" before Americans employed the term during and after World War II, is, in this view, anachronistic: it is to project an unhistorical image onto a space that had no such existence. The constructivists do not deny that the term "Southeast Asia" has a pedigree in pre-war European, especially German, scholarship,” but they see this scholarship as relatively insignificant in global scholarship on the region6 and, more important, as not having contributed intellectually to what came afterwards.7

The debate between these two positions is anchored in deeper philosophical and political issues, all of them savagely double-edged. To assert that Southeast Asia is a reality is also to claim some kind of autonomy for its people (and by implication for all peoples), the right to be judged by their own standards. It also feeds a sense of the separateness of Southeast Asians from Westerners, a cultural relativism which can easily come into conflict with notions of universal human values. To assert that Southeast Asia is a constructed concept is both to recognize the power of political systems to shape knowledge and to affirm
a universality of human nature which goes beyond principle and extends deep into analysis. Yet, as we have seen so often, assertions of human universalism tend to be assertions of the doctrines of the hegemonic power. The constructivists, who resist what they see as mystification and the validation of irrational identities, find it difficult not to write as if Western values are the objective norm for all humankind.

Given the magnitude of the intellectual issues at stake, it is perhaps surprising that the debate has remained both scrupulously polite and analytically sober in print. Only occasionally in seminars and conference papers is the debate marked by a certain degree of intellectual sharp practice at the margins. The realists routinely appeal to the importance of Southeast Asians having a major say in writing about the region. This is a proposition which is embarrassing to dispute, because it is tied up on the one hand with moral approval of the process of decolonization and self-determination and on the other with the impeccable proposition that the points of view of people who are being studied ought to have a significant place in such study. Amongst Indonesiasts, it is reflected sometimes in a curiously pretentious refusal to attempt grammatical correctness in Dutch, as if respect for the rules of grammar and spelling of the colonial language might somehow carry the taint of a broader respect for the colonial project. The more important sharp practice arises, however, from the implication of credentialism, the suggestion that Southeast Asians (and perhaps also scholars resident in or relatively close to Southeast Asia) are ipso facto better qualified to pronounce upon the region than are outsiders. Of course, credentialism takes many forms, and we should not excoriate a credentialism which privileges Southeast Asians any more or less than we excoriate the credentialism which privileges the views of scholars from Leiden, Utrecht or Canberra over those of researchers from less prominent centres. Nonetheless there is something dangerous in the approach which reserves the right to study any social category (women, indigenous peoples, working classes, etc.) to scholars claiming membership of that group, or even simply privileges their voices in the discussion. The sharp practice lies in a failure to examine rigorously just why, to quote Anthony Reid, Southeast Asia should be "studded first and best in the region itself".

The sharp practice of the constructivists, by contrast, lies in their tendency to deny the objective existence of "Southeast Asia" by implying that the realists have ignored the internal diversity of Southeast Asia or its lack of sharp and incontestable boundaries. This tendency gives their objections at times an air of petty quibbling, rather than serious intellectual engagement. The sharp practice here lies in the post-modernist genre of questioning the assumptions of others without offering a clear alternative basis for investigation. At its simplest, the constructivist view treats Southeast Asia as a residual category - not India, nor China, nor Oceania, a convenient basket for a disparate collection of societies, most of them too small to warrant individual attention.

Nonetheless, there is something not entirely satisfactory about this debate. By focusing on the question of whether Southeast Asia was constituted as a region by Southeast Asians themselves or by United States strategic policymakers, by the hegemony of reality or the crude influence of funding and employment opportunities, the realist-constructivist debate neglects to draw attention to the way in which the field is constructed by the professional dynamics of the scholarly community that studies it. To understand why Southeast Asian studies exists as a field, we need to go beyond simply examining its intellectual basis or the crude material forces that drive it and to consider as well the profession-social imperatives that shape the existence of fields in academic life in general and of Southeast Asian studies as a field in particular.

**DOMAINS OF POWER**

The insights of Foucault and others sometimes lead observers to describe the academic world in terms of hegemonic texts and paradigms, in terms of policing disciplinary boundaries and in terms of hierarchies of privileged knowledge. Within a hierarchical institution such as a university department, these insights are frighteningly apposite, and most of us have either experienced or heard stories of the baleful influence that powerful scholars can wield over the career prospects of their subordinates. Willem van Schendel has argued that fields in academic life are terrains for the exercise of power and authority. That is, they are constructed by institutions - universities, departments, academic programmes, associations, funding bodies - and are preserved because they constitute domains within which powerful figures can exercise hegemony. Van Schendel's argument is important in explaining the place of areas in the national academic politics of those countries where research is conducted on a significant scale, but it says much less about the global field to which we also belong, and where the sense of Southeast Asia as a region is at least as strong as within national institutional frameworks. In intellectual fields more broadly, the reality is one of fluidity and volatility. However powerful a professor may be within his or her institution, that power always attenuates when it is projected into a national archipelago of scholars. And whatever institutional power a scholar may hold within a national academic community, it counts for little in the global archipelago that most of us
belong to today. It is true that access to particular journals and even access to research funds can be hampered by individuals who are locally powerful. For the most part, however, the institutional power of individuals plays only a small role in the power politics of an academic field. To understand this global construction of fields, we need to turn from institutional politics to the sociology of ideas.

CIRCLES OF ESTEEM

The first, and perhaps most important reason for the existence of academic fields is that they create communities within which it is possible to construct "circles of esteem". Aside from employment, of course, esteem (and its dark converse, contempt) is the most important fuel of academic life. In most Western countries we receive reasonable salaries and we get pleasure from the intellectual aspect of our work, but an essential and underlying reward of academic work is the way in which it confer respect. If our work commands the respect of our colleagues, we are rewarded by being acknowledged, cited, mentioned in texts or seminars, invited as a discussant, presenter or keynote speaker, presented with prizes, elected to learned academies and, in the end, given a decent obituary in one of the professional journals, rather than a single line in the grim list of "deceased Asians" in the Association for Asian studies’ Newsletter. We cherish all these signs of respect most dearly (except the last, of course, which comes too late to be properly appreciated) because we tend to respect our intellectual peers in our fields rather more than we respect our institutional colleagues. By contrast the signs of respect we get from our own institution tend to get their value from their material worth: Study leave, increased salary, the dubious rewards of administrative power and so on.

Respect, then, is a crucial reward in academic life, but it is not won simply by writing and publishing. I have argued elsewhere that circles of esteem play a crucial role in generating academic respect, albeit normally on the basis of solid scholarly work. A scholar’s circle of esteem is a group of academic colleagues who talk and write favourably about that scholar’s work and push both his or her ideas and his or her reputation into the academic marketplace.19

The underlying importance of circles of esteem lies in two facts. First, we inhabit an academic world where quality and intellectual impact are seriously difficult to judge. Of course there are crude indicators of quality—number of publications, number of awards, number of citations—but we all know that our field stands somewhere between business and politics on the one hand, where nothing counts except the numbers, and the creative arts on the other where the judgment of quality leaves a huge margin of subjectivity. The decision that we take whether to regard the work of another scholar with deference, respect, condescension or contempt is often influenced by the opinions we hear from others. It is not that we accept the judgement of others willy-nilly, rather, the way in which others frame the reception of a new work often has a powerful influence on the way we frame our own view of that work. Judging a work good or bad is always a risky business—if we are too much out of step with the judgement of our peers, applauding the works that they think are uninteresting or excoriating the works they consider to be inspired, we run the risk that our own judgments will be considered suspect. And from there it is only a short step to doubt about the quality of our research.

Second, the volume of research produced in a field that is large enough to generate a circle of esteem is more than most scholars can manage to read properly, especially in view of today’s routine burdens of teaching, administration, and answering e-mails. For this reason, we rely to a considerable extent on the judgements of others, even as we realize that those others depend on our judgements. A sense of the value of each scholar, of the esteem (or sometimes contempt) that he or she merits arises in this way from a complex division of labour, in which different members of the broader scholarly community effectively hawk the intellectual ideas of their colleagues into the broader academic world. This process takes place both formally, by means of book reviews and citations, and informally through gossip at conferences.

The most important social feature of circles of esteem, apart from their fluidity and volatility, is that they are not hierarchical. Nor are they dependent on institutional power or support, especially in these days of e-mail communication. They form and re-form at every social level in the broader academic world and they provide powerful moral and intellectual support to groups which are sometimes disadvantaged in formal hierarchies—women, minorities, the younger generation—and so on. For this reason, it seems likely that academic fields must be relatively large if they are to generate circles of esteem. There must be enough young scholars, there must be enough radical voices, and so on, to form circles. If the number of researchers is too few, it is likely that the field will be either hierarchical or fractious. That is to say, a single powerful scholar may control the field and determine both what constitutes quality and which younger scholars are to be favoured with glowing references and admission to the best (or only) journals. Or the scholars of a small field may be deeply divided amongst themselves. Unable
to generate a circle of esteem from such a small constituency, they may turn instead on each other or, preferably, withdraw to larger fields so that circles of esteem become possible.

Southeast Asian studies exists, in other words, partly because it is about the right size in terms of scholarly community. We are numerous enough to find amongst our colleagues a circle of similarly minded peers with whom we can exchange gossip, citations, and scholarly advice and who will ultimately be the most important advocates of our ideas and our names. We Southeast Asianists are numerous enough to generate a regular range of interesting conferences within our field and numerous enough that we can hope to find a serendipitous cohort of colleagues within larger conferences such as the International Convention of Asia Scholars or the annual meeting of the Association for Asian studies. But we are not so numerous that we get lost or so numerous that that voice of a single scholar can never be heard.

**STRENGTH IN NUMBERS**

Scale also matters in another way. Southeast Asia as an academic field is a stage on which specialists on Brunei, Laos, Arakan, Panay, and even Indonesia can stand shoulder to shoulder, as it were (and sometimes head-to-head), with specialists on China, India, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and so on. Whatever our own narrower individual fields of research, we stand as Southeast Asianists for half a billion people, for some of the world's most dynamic economies and for a truly impressive body of scholarship which has generated a host of ideas which have been influential outside our region: Theatre state, imagined communities, shared poverty, and so on. We might not quite be on first name terms with, or have ever met, "Wim", "Bernhard", "Ben", "Ruth", "Denys", "Cliff", "Jim" or "Tony", but to the outside world they can be considered part of our broader circle. Perhaps fortunately, we do not suffer in any comparable way from the occasional appearance of charlatans in our field, and indeed we commonly feel frustrated that those whose scholarship we do not respect are also taken seriously from a distance.

Even if our own individual fields of research are narrow, moreover, we draw academic strength and status from the importance of the region within which those fields are located. Our main research field might be the salt industry in nineteenth century Java, but in the broader academic community and beyond, we carry some of the allure of Borobudur and Bali, of trade in cloves, sandalwood and birds-of-paradise, of Lee Kuan Yew and Subarno, depending on the susceptibilities of the audience. In the same way, it is hard not to believe that the new practice of referring to Madagascar, Mauritius, and the Comoro Islands as "Insular Southwest Asia" (made popular by the Newsletter of the International Institute of Asian Studies in Leiden) does not have something to do with a desire to detach those regions from the apparently bleak prospects of Africa and to lasso them to the glittering chariot of Asia.

**ACADEMIC GLOBALIZATION AND INTELLECTUAL TARIFF BARRIERS**

We can also learn something of the meaning of areas and regions in the academic world by considering some of the parallels between the intellectual debate over area studies and the wider debate over economic policy, especially in developing countries. Southeast Asian studies emerged as a distinctive field during the three decades following the outbreak of World War II. Although precursors of this new field can be identified in the 1930s and even earlier, the Southeast Asian studies enterprise was novel in several respects. Greater numbers of scholars than ever before were involved in research on the region, and they were committed, in a way that most colonial-era scholars were not, to setting their national and local studies within a broader regional perspective.

They flourished within the so-called area studies model, in which disciplinary boundaries were considered of minor importance and historians spoke comfortably to economists, political scientists, anthropologists, and so on. They made extensive use of culture as an analytical tool. And, most important, they were committed for the most part to viewing Southeast Asian history from the point of view of its indigenous inhabitants, though paradoxically only a tiny handful of them were actually Southeast Asian.

Especially from the 1980s on, this area studies approach to Southeast Asia came in for strong criticism. The essence of this criticism was that, isolated by a preoccupation with language and culture, area specialists had failed to develop or maintain sufficient disciplinary rigour and had become lost in an academic culture of simple (even if painstaken) empiricism. So little do we communicate on a systematic basis with area specialists outside our immediate region, Asia, that it is hard to say whether any single region was targeted more than any other. In the aftermath of the World Trade Centre attacks of 2001, American specialists on the Middle East found themselves under attack because their efforts to explain the forces driving anti-Americanism in their region and their occasional criticism of what they saw as misguided or counter-productive United States policies, led to them being portrayed as disloyal. This special circumstance, however, does not seem to have been significant in the earlier, general attack on area studies.
Rather, the critique of area studies was strikingly parallel to the arguments for economic liberalization which were growing in strength at the same time. Whereas the economic liberalizers argued that tariff barriers protected inefficient industries, the intellectual liberalizers argued that the barriers created by insistence on language competence and local experience constituted similar barriers protecting sloppy and sub-standard research. In both cases, the liberalizers promised that the competition, which tearing down these barriers would permit, would ultimately generate a higher standard of product.

Like economic liberalizers, the academic liberalizers tended to regard the truth of their proposition as so self-evident as not to need extensive elaboration. The opponents of liberalization, on the other hand, being on the defensive, have needed to be more creative in developing arguments in response. Three relatively distinct arguments have been presented against academic liberalization. The first argument is also strikingly parallel to those of the opponents of economic liberalization. Both refer to the loss of local autonomy, of the ability to set the local economic or intellectual agenda according to local needs rather than the presuppositions of economic and intellectual great powers. The defenders of area studies point out that for all that Anglo-American scholarship claims to be universal by virtue of its disciplinary clarity, in practice it is heavily oriented towards the West. Whatever its promises of a universalist discourse, global scholarship tends to be anchored in the parochial concerns of Euro-America, and treats the rest of the world as offering little more than occasional incidental cases to elaborate points developed in the global heartland. Journals in English, controlled by Euro-American editors, Western university presses, citation indices located in the West are theделFileVersion 1.0

determining effects of the global economy. In the face of the complicity of marginalizing scholarship in, from, and about other parts of the world. The consequence is an alienation of scholarship from the peoples to whom it should belong and a tragic reduction in the diversity of academic cultures.

The second set of arguments focuses on specific difficulties faced by scholarship in the non-Western world. The area studies approach does indeed provide some protection from competition for those whose education includes years of language study as well as standard disciplinary training and who are therefore at a disadvantage in comparison with those who only ever work with English language materials. It is a protective sphere for those whose fieldwork locations are distant and alien, for local scholars who lack the financial resources to network in the conference circuits of the North.

Many area studies scholars have also retreated to a crudely utilitarian defence, arguing that their knowledge is strategically important – valuable to business in times of prosperity and economic growth and valuable to the military in times of war and conflict. Important though these arguments may be outside the academy, they have tended to be at best a double-edged sword within the academic world: Most academics in the humanities and social sciences have a deep instinctive resistance to the notion that their work should be justified by its direct utility to business and government, and Southeast Asian specialists who present such arguments to the non-academic world can never entirely escape the accusation that they have sold out on fundamental scholarly values.

None of these arguments, however, cuts much ice with the liberalizers, because they see the sacrifices that others have to make as relatively minor "structural adjustment" in comparison with the expected global benefit. Southeast Asianists, therefore, like their colleagues working in other regions of the world, may need to develop an alternative strategy. In this respect, we need first to identify why our universalist colleagues cannot afford to ignore us.

INTELLECTUAL DIVERSITY AND THE COMPARATIVIST COUNTER-ATTACK

The principal defence of tariff barriers today is that they offer a breathing space for local industries to develop to the point where they can compete fairly on a level playing field. This argument would be attractive but for the fact that it simply implies that the disappearance of area studies ought to take place later rather than sooner. Instead I prefer an ecological analogy that identifies area studies, including Southeast Asian studies, as a reserve of intellectual diversity in the same way that tropical rainforests constitute a reserve of bio-diversity. To understand the importance of such reserves, we need to consider the way in which knowledge progresses in the humanities and social sciences.

Most academics probably have a view of academic work that corresponds more or less to that outlined by Thomas Kuhn in his *Structures of Scientific Revolutions.* Kuhn famously argues that most science works within established and widely shared analytical paradigms. Most research – "normal science", as he calls it – does no more than explicate the paradigm, is case study after case study. The picture of the world that emerges from such research becomes richer and more complex, but it does not change in any fundamental way. Only occasionally does a scientific revolution take place, a shift in paradigm that requires the research community to look at all that has been investigated in the past according to a new framework. Celebrated examples are the shift from Ptolemaic to Copernican astronomy and from creationism to evolution
in biology. Kuhn’s framework suggests that an important dynamic in the emergence of a revolutionary paradigm is the accumulation of awkward problems under the old analytical regime, but he implies that a major role can be played by sheer brilliance by an individual researcher who can identify a new idea and who has the understanding of the field to know just how far the new idea can be carried. Just as every soldier is said to carry a field marshall’s baton in his knapsack, every scientist nurtures, at least at the start of his or her career, the hope that he or she will manage to be if not another Newton, Darwin or Einstein, then at least a Mendel, a Pasteur, a Florey, or a Hawking. Figures of this kind have eminence in the sciences because they change the terrain by obliging all except the occasional stubborn holdout to abandon unproductive paradigms such as Ptolemaic astronomy and creationism, unless there is some intrusion by unscientific pressure from outside the academic world.

In the humanities and social sciences, by contrast, paradigms tend to be both more durable and more volatile. On the one hand, they are more durable because many of them are rooted in conclusions about human nature that are fundamentally difficult or impossible to test convincingly and which have been offered in one form or another since the dawn of human civilization in the formulations of the great religions and philosophies. On the other hand they are more volatile because basic paradigms in the humanities and social sciences control our eventual conclusions much less closely than they do in the natural sciences. The author of a paper on, say, the taxonomy of trematode parasites is likely to be able to explain easily how it relates to basic evolutionary principles. The author of a paper on the fall of Subhato would generally find it more difficult to express its conclusions in terms of their place in the basic philosophical debate over Cartesian dualism. The academic landscape of the humanities is therefore dominated by a vast multitude of lower-level paradigms — we might call them simply interpretations or perhaps theses — whose intellectual ancestry is not immediately apparent. The proponents of these bastard theories contend with each other for dominance over a much smaller terrain than do the great paradigms of natural science, and they never wholly prevail in times of pre-eminence, never wholly disappear in times of intellectual retreat. Culture as a tool for explaining political behaviour, for instance, has been driven from the centre of the academic battlefield with hoots of derision, but its proponents continue to see it as expressing important truths, and they await only a more felicitous formulation of their arguments and a few intellectual missteps on the part of their opponents to return to the fray. Fukuyama’s End of History thesis, suggesting that the fall of communism had marked the final victory of a single capitalist individualistic view of humankind and of the path to the ideal society, showed an egregious ignorance of the power of intellectual guerrilla warfare to sup even the most dominant academic paradigms.

The struggle between paradigms is carried on with a variety of weapons. Sheer logical argument is important in some circumstances, as is new empirical data. One of the most important influences on the success of a paradigm is the changing contemporary context, which continually forces us to ask new questions of the past. At its simplest level, the emergence of a new political leader demands some attention to biography; at more complex levels, for instance, the emergence of money politics in Malaysia and Thailand or the sudden prominence of mass violence in Indonesia oblige us to interrogate the past in ways different from those we used when these phenomena were not so intrusive. We can see that the same process has been at work in the past. Each of the major political changes in Southeast Asia since World War II has generated powerful new insights into Southeast Asian societies, not because scholars have been specially perspicacious but because events grabbed us by the ears and forced us to explain aspects of society which we had previously neglected. In Indonesian history writing, for instance, the end of colonialism, the failure of parliamentary democracy, the collapse of Sukarnoist leftism, and the imposition of military-dominated developmentalism all forced historians to look at the historical roots of social forces which had previously been neglected.

The availability of new sources and the loss of old ones — most sharply felt in fields relying on oral history but also the product of changing visa requirements, warfare, insect attack, and so on — alters the sheer practicability of different kinds of research. So, too, does the availability of research funds and research time: for most academics, the demands of university life are more voracious now than at any time since World War II. The conventions of family life have changed, too, so that spouse and children are often less portable than was once the case. Although researchers on Western societies have shown remarkable ingenuity in inventing research topics where it would once have been supposed that none could possibly exist, the vast, under-researched experience of non-Western societies ought to give the Western-centric academic world powerful reason to pay attention.

A third powerful weapon in paradigmatic contestation, however, is intellectual novelty. An eavesdropper from a different academic planet attending a conference, listening in on a selection or grants committee or even sitting at the back of a research seminar would probably be struck by our preoccupation with novelty. In contrast with scholars of different times who admired the perfection of skills that had been pioneered by others, we have
little interest as modern researchers in simply doing well what has been done before. Comments like "derivative" and "there's nothing new in that" are amongst the most serious of academic put-downs. Grant bodies and conference organizers routinely pepper their instructions with exhortations to be "border-crossing", "path-breaking", "novel", and "innovative", and these expressions duly reappear in the blurbs of the books that eventually appear as a result. Indeed, this search for novelty is one of the most powerful driving forces of modern academic intellectual life. It has been an intimate part of the project of modernism and the idea of progress which pervaded the Western intellectual world for centuries until it was challenged, though by no means overturned, in the twentieth century by a quartet of grim horsemen: total war, holocaust, ecological crisis, and post-modern relativism.

Because even post-modernism has not overturned the academic celebration of novelty, we need to recognize that the dispersed character of the humanities and social science, including the existence of strong area studies, is actually an enormous intellectual strength. Whereas a "theory of everything" remains the ultimate goal in physics,22 belief in such a possibility in the humanities is rare and even in the social sciences it tends to be the preserve of economists and rational choice theorists whose lack of curiosity about the diversity of the world remains perplexing to most scholars.

Yet, we in Southeast Asian studies have not made particularly good use of our intellectual resources in this broader academic world. The most persistent political impulse amongst historians of Southeast Asian history in the last four decades has been to give voice to the voiceless in the region's history. This impulse goes back to the Dutch historian J.C. van Leer, writing in the 1930s, who pointed out that indigenous voices should be heard despite the arrival of Europeans in Southeast Asia.23 It was reinforced by John Smail's celebrated arguments for writing "autonomous" histories of the region.24 In more recent times, this impulse has been translated into a determination to hear from the poor, from the marginalized, and from those categorized by society as "deviant". This impulse is fundamentally anti-authoritarian. It asserts that rulers do not speak for their people, and that people from every level of life have a right to the dignity which comes from being listened to and taken seriously. It has given us research on women, on the urban poor, on workers in the colonial era and under the New Order, on peasants, on isolated indigenous peoples, on East Timorese, Acehnese and Papuans, on regional aristocracies, on homosexuals, political dissidents, and on criminals. Southeast Asian historians were actively "rescuing history from the nation" well before Prasenjit Duara coined that memorable expression.25

This commitment to the voiceless has also coincided neatly with the search for novelty, because each marginalized group represents a new topic for research. The search for novelty, however, has taken researchers in at least two other directions. One, which I will not discuss at any length, is that of post-modernism which in the Southeast Asian context has most commonly been expressed in a meticulous examination of the symbolic meaning of objects and practices. The other is an attempt to generate new insights by identifying new regions, or rather regions that are not the standard political-geographical regions of conventional textbooks. This kind of region-formation can be considered as the academic equivalent of establishing growth triangles – it brings together regions that are divided (or at least not united) by political boundaries and attempts to generate new insights from the exercise. The simplest of these regions have involved grouping countries with similar religious and cultural heritages, thus the Malay-Islamic World and the Theravada Buddhist World. More imaginative have been attempts to use water rather than land to constitute a region – the idea of the Java Sea as a basin, or Lombard's idea of a Southeast Asian Mediterranea à la Braudel.25

The problem with each of these concepts, as indeed with the concept of Southeast Asia itself, is that the scale of analysis which happens to be represented by the current boundaries of ASEAN lends itself to only a limited range of perspectives. In recent years we have seen what is probably the beginning of an attempt to extend Southeast Asia northwards into what is now China, not simply by treating China's southern and southwestern "minorities" as Southeast Asian, but by identifying elements in what was once thought of as "Chinese" culture as being instead fundamentally Southeast Asian and by treating the maritime fringes of China as part of Southeast Asia.26 This is an audacious initiative, given the complacent and deeply rooted assumption of China-scholars that China seldom acquired anything of value from "barbarians", but its implications are probably more serious for China studies than for Southeast Asia.

Despite its admirable moral intention, too, there are signs that the effort to give voice to the voiceless has also begun to run out of innovative steam. Probably the most important topic remaining to be explored is the experience of children. As we are aware from the West, there is a deep tension between the rights of the state and the rights of parents over children, between the value attached to living with natural parents and the value attached to material welfare, emotional stability and physical security, between the uncountable benefits of having children and the all-too-countable costs, over the issues of adoption, abortion and inheritance. All these tensions arise from the ambiguous human status of children, their complex ways in which they
serve and are served by society. Here, if nowhere else, lies a fertile field for further research.

For the rest, however, the problem with giving voice to the voiceless is not its morality but rather its implicit rejection of perspectives generated outside the region. The assumption that each group of people is the best at analyzing its own history is in the end fundamentally narrow and obscuring. It ignores such human weaknesses as self-justification and selective blindness and ultimately fragments the academic world into those who have the credentials to speak on behalf of the voiceless and those who lack those credentials.

The concept of Southeast Asia as a region, however, has stood in the way of innovation in a more subtle way. The concept has stood for a view summed up by the Indonesian national motto, usually translated as "Unity in diversity". Virtually every general work on the region mentions the range of religions, the variety of political forms, the enormous range of language and ethnic groups, and the hugely diverse historical experience of different parts of Southeast Asia. Awareness of this diversity, however, along with a determination not to be drawn into the historical worlds of China and India as a peripheral zone, has tended to seduce us into thinking that Southeast Asia is a world in its own right and that we have little or nothing to learn from the historical experiences of other parts of the world. Worse, it has let us think that we have nothing to give to them. It is precisely the value of Southeast Asian studies to the rest of the world that we should now be affirming and demonstrating.

If there is a strategy to be followed in the twenty-first century, it should be to relegate "Southeast Asia" to the status of a convenient academic-administrative framework and to pursue instead an aggressive campaign of historical comparison (and equivalent comparisons in other disciplines) in which we use the history of Southeast Asia to illuminate events in the rest of the world.

The pioneer in this approach has been Ben Anderson, whose account of the nature of nationalism in *Imagined Communities* clearly reflects thinking about the paradox that such a thing as Indonesian nationalism could emerge without being rooted in a primordial sense of ethnic identity and without the markers of industrial modernity which shaped nineteenth century European nationalism.

Southeast Asian, however, is replete with other cases in which the specific experience of part of the region highlights aspects of a more global phenomenon to which scholars of other regions have not paid sufficient attention. The massacre of half a million communists in Indonesia in 1965–66, for instance, intriguingly bridges the gap which international scholars of genocide have tended to draw between ethno-religious genocides and mass political killings. Because the communist victims of those massacres were in important respects treated as if they were an ethnic group, a different kind of Indonesian from the anti-communists, the Indonesian case challenges scholarship on other regions to examine the extent to which the ethnicity of the victims was a political construction. If the motives of the genocidaires are understood in terms of political motives rather than ethnic hatred, the dominant historical perspective on all major genocides has to be revised. And why not use the experience of East Timor to illuminate the relationship between Latvia and its former occupier, Russia? Why not consider Indonesia itself as prototype for the European Union? Why is there no serious comparison of the nature of national reunification in Vietnam, Yemen and Germany? Why not use Laos and its relationship with Thailand to help others understand Moldova in its complex relationship with Rumania?

Perhaps most important of all, aggregative comparativism is the area specialist's best answer to the sustained campaign against area studies launched in the last decade or two by the academic liberalizers. The deep-seated flaw of the liberalizers is that their vision leads to an academic environment rooted in the historical experience and theoretical assumptions of Western societies and civilizations. For all that they claim to include the whole of the world, the liberalizers have tended to be a remarkably effective tool for the marginalization of non-Western regions. Perhaps the most striking example is the comprehensive neglect of Japan — for decades the world's second largest economy — in almost all general Western writing on economics. This outcome in the social science discipline most heavily invaded by theory is thoroughly discouraging portent for the future if the opposition to area studies is permitted to prevail.

As the example of Japanese economics suggests, the intrinsic importance of any aspect of Asian studies is not enough to sell it to theorists or to specialists focused in other regions. Nor is it plausible to think of developing alternative theory on any kind of grand scale — contemporary theory is a product of decades, sometimes centuries, of intense intellectual work and is not easily overthrown. Theory based primarily on Asian cases, moreover, would run the risk of being as irrelevant to the West as some Western theory is to Asia.

The comparativism I advocate is not Theory, but rather a heuristic process in which a complex historical event or phenomenon in one part of the world is set against a somewhat similar event in another place. At its best, this
juxtaposition enriches the understanding of both events or phenomena. Explanations or elements that are obvious in one case may suggest unthought-of lines of explanation in the other case. Alternatively, the comparison may cast doubt on explanations that have previously seemed impregnable.

Of course, the final question has to be whether the social structures at work within the field of Southeast Asian studies would allow comparativism of the kind I suggest to become more than a marginal activity. Here I have to admit some pessimism. On the one hand, comparativism has the enormous advantage of novelty. On the other, however, it is not immediately conducive to the maintenance of durable communities based on shared skills and it does not particularly lend itself to the creation of political communities, with perhaps some exceptions. The path of comparativism may be difficult, but the alternative may be still more grim.

NOTES


2. The idea that all human beings are separated from each other by no more than six "degrees of separation", that is, by six consecutive sets of acquaintance with another person, was popularized by the playwright John Guare in his 1990 play "Six Degrees of Separation", but the idea was first raised in the 1920s.


6. The term geo-politics in this context refers to a school of thought originating with Halford John Mackinder, Rudolf Kjellen and Karl Haushofer in the early twentieth century, in which the world was portrayed as a kind of complex chessboard over which great powers competed for hegemony by mastering key regions with no regard for the interests or wishes of the inhabitants of those regions.
27. Anderson, Imagined Communities.

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**TOWARDS MULTI-LATERALITY IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES**

**Perspectives from Japan**

Yoko Hayami

In this chapter, I consider two issues related to changing trends in the global academic mapping of Southeast Asian studies, and issues relating to the academic practices of the late twentieth to the twenty-first century. What are the difficulties we are facing in Southeast Asian studies, and how can we as Southeast Asianist scholars, whether in Southeast Asia, or other parts of Asia, Europe, Australia, or the United States, re-position ourselves to the changing academic mapping, reflecting on each of our own position in the evolving "ecology" of the global academic endeavour? Each of our different academic traditions has evolved with respective historical positioning towards "Southeast Asia", its own "ecology of scholarship" (as meant by Anderson in his 1992 comparison of pre-war Southeast Asian scholarship of the Orientalist kind with the mostly Amerindian dominated post-war university-based scholarship), its own language of scholarship, and its special epistemological tendencies in the scholarly practices. We therefore stand in different positions in varied moments in our respective academic traditions. Yet, just as some of our difficulties and tendencies are shared, so should we be able to find points of convergence and exchange once we are more aware of where each of us stands.