




Approaches to Southeast Asian Studies: Beyond the “Comfort Zone”



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[*Abstract*]

Over the last decade, the field of Southeast Asian Studies has been inundated with issues of its “territory” (or the definition of what comprises Southeast Asia), relevance and future. The methodology of approaching Southeast Asian Studies has also come under constant scrutiny providing much fodder for debate. One significant suggestion was that the field of Southeast Asian Studies should “break out of the comfort zone” (Van Schendel, *Bijdragen*, 2012:168(4)). This paper will explore some of the ways of approaching Southeast Asian Studies beyond that comfort zone by examining other/alternative units of studying Southeast Asia in place of the traditional (or statist) perspectives that tend to confine the field within the scope of the national/nation-state boundaries. The paper will also provide some personal observations of the author on the current state and limitations to teaching and researching Southeast Asian Studies in the region.

Keywords: Southeast Asian Studies, methodology, units of analysis, relevance, limitations

I . Is Southeast Asian Studies relevant?

At a Roundtable Discussion on the Future and Shape of Southeast Asian Studies organized by the Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange Program (SEASREP) in Bangkok in June 2013, Indonesian scholars Muhadi Sugiano and Bambang Purwanto argued that Southeast Asian Studies was a “baggage of colonial construct while ASEAN Studies was more locally engineered.” The following discussions at that meeting referred to the decreasing relevance of the field of Southeast Asian Studies to and in the region, especially under the present scenario of universities undergoing restructuring and/or facing reduced budgets. Some of the often cited reasons contributing to this notion include, (1) the exogenous nature of the origins of Southeast Asian Studies ; (2) that most of the early centers of teaching Southeast Asian Studies were located in Europe, the US and Australia; and (3) that most of the scholars teaching and researching Southeast Asian Studies are “outsiders” (i.e. non-native Southeast Asians) or resident scholars (non-natives residing in Asia). The increasing numbers of centers devoted to teaching ASEAN Studies in Southeast Asia may partly counter points (1) and (2) above. It may also reflect a growing trend, as in the case of Thailand where “there seems to be a shift from Southeast Asian Studies to what we call a ‘trendy’ ASEAN Studies, a kind of brand change” (Kasetsiri 2013: 15).

The third point above was discussed at length by Ariel Heryanto, a “native” Southeast Asian who was then teaching and researching on SEA in the region. Heryanto’s essay, “Can there be Southeast Asians in Southeast Asian Studies?” (2002) put Southeast Asian Studies on the spot and sparked numerous academic debates over the teaching and learning of Southeast Asian Studies, exposing the challenges and weaknesses in the field. There were numerous other papers, conferences, and collected essays that attempted to “locate Southeast Asia” (Kratoska et al, 2005), “know Southeast Asia” (Sears 2007), “decentre Southeast

Asian Studies” (Goh 2011) as well as many other suggestions to rethink, revisit, and reorient Southeast Asian Studies and area studies more generally. Added to this long list was Willem van Schendel’s *zomia*—the essay that triggered a “think outside the box” vis-à-vis the Southeast-Asian space/territory and to a lesser extent, the politics of Southeast Asian Studies. *Zomia* clearly underscored the reality of territorial boundaries being in a state of flux, extending this to a robust debate on the methodologies involved in the teaching and practice of Southeast Asian Studies.

The very fact that there has been so much attention and debate over the area called Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian Studies as a part of Area Studies is testimony to its relevance, to say the least. While interest in Southeast Asian Studies in the West vanished after the fall of the economic miracle of Southeast Asia (Thum 2012: 12), in the Southeast Asian region—home to Southeast Asian Studies—there has been a significant growth in the subject/area. Immediately after the economic bubble burst, there was much soul-searching at both the national and regional levels. There was a need to unpack, understand, and “de-myth” Asian Values and the process of decolonization. The wave of democratization and decentralization processes, the security concerns post 9/11, the rise of China and India as economic powers, the numerous bilateral issues amongst ASEAN countries, and the increasing role and presence of Plus 3 (China, Japan, Korea) dialogue partners in ASEAN Summits, served to enhance the relevance of Southeast Asian Studies or conversely, tended to overshadow or subsume Southeast Asian Studies under ASEAN Studies. However, Southeast Asian Studies should not be confused with ASEAN Studies, although there are overlaps between the two.

Most importantly, there is a growing awareness that the field of studies *should not be* determined by the agendas of funding agencies and national interests. Similarly, the field has been inundated with issues of its “territory” (or the definition of what comprises Southeast Asia and where is the “area” in area studies) and if the field should be explored beyond the geographic national-nation-state boundaries. Knowledge of the

region too should be disseminated through conferences and journals not necessarily confined to Southeast Asian Studies. Essentially the field needs to “break out of the comfort zone”, to quote Schendel (*Bijdragen* 2012: 503). While Southeast Asian Studies remains relevant albeit far more challenged than before, it is essential to ponder some other ways of approaching Southeast Asian Studies and attempts to break out of the traditional spatial realm that constitutes Southeast Asia.

II. Breaking out of the “comfort zone”: *Other ways (units) of approaching Southeast Asian Studies*

The focus on state spaces (mostly centered in the lowlands) and statist perspectives in the field of Southeast Asian Studies has been well noted. James Scott has argued persuasively for the large, “if not the largest” upland areas, otherwise also known as the *Southeast Asian massif* (or *zomia*- more recently) (Scott 2009: 13). This large territory that transcends territories of multiple nations from China, India, Bangladesh, Burma, Thailand, and the Greater Mekong Sub-region incorporating Laos and Vietnam, is argued as best studied as a “single object of study”. (Scott 2009: 14). The uplands non-state territory has since received much attention from scholars, giving rise to research and conferences devoted to these areas. The huge participation at the annual Asian Borderlands Conferences is a case in point.

Transborder or transnational zones located between states/nation-states and cultural-economic zones, for instance, the area between Northern Malaysia and Southern Thailand, can be studied as a single cultural area/zone. The transborder Malay world (Kahn 2006) located between Malaysia and Thailand or between the Malay-Thai world is indeed peculiar and distinct from the core areas of their respective countries. The transnational dynamics of this region presents the area as part of a cosmopolitan zone—with a developed economy/market place, established networks, distinct identity and multiethnic citizenry etc.—rather than the traditional view of the region as a backward periphery alienated

or remote from the core. For example a study on the economy and culture of the people of the Malay provinces of southern Thailand should ideally include and extend to cover the states of Kelantan and Upper Perak in the northern part of Malaysia because the social and economic networks operating in this region were both connected and belonged to a “center” that was neither Kuala Lumpur nor Bangkok. The southern Thailand-northern Malaysia region indeed belonged to a similar cultural-economic zone.

Similarly, the Thai-Burma-China economic/cultural zones and the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) all provide alternative and feasible units of study. Transborder trade zones are also intimately connected to migrant networks, and in the case of Southern Thailand-Northern Malaysia, includes also an Islamic trade network that incorporated areas from Malaysia, Thailand, Burma, and India to Pakistan. A study on Pathan (Pashtun) traders operating along the Thai-Malaysia border can be located beyond the area of Southeast Asia for the traders were constantly connected and engaged with people, cultures, and networks that extended to South Asia and beyond as far as Afghanistan (Sathian, forthcoming). Cribb (2012: 504) rightly points out that studies of Southeast Asian areas not strictly confined territorially, albeit “messy”, reveals new insights into the internal complexities of the region and its external connections. Some of these studies use a multi-site approach based on more than one discipline (e.g. history, anthropology, linguistics).

Some scholars have focused on the oceans or seas as units of study in approaching the study of Southeast Asia, for instance, the writings on the Sea of *Malayu* (Andaya 2014) and the Java Seas (Houben 1992). Some others have focused on networks such as the Hajj network, smuggling and secret trade networks (Tagliacozzo 2005) across the Indonesia-Malay world. Tim Barnard’s study on Malayness provided a huge contribution in terms of understanding Malay identity across Southeast Asia (Barnard, 2004).

Apart from the seas, the forests, for example, The Heart of

Borneo, incorporating Kalimantan, Sabah, Sarawak, and Brunei can also be viewed as a useful unit of analysis in studying the region. More recently, studies on diaspora including Cham, Chinese, Indian Muslims, and Hadramaut Arabs have provided much insight into the dynamics of the lived realities of diaspora communities in Southeast Asia transcending nation-state boundaries. A study on the Cham diaspora for instance can extend over the territories of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Malaysia. Therefore, studies that locate the region beyond the scope of the respective nation-state or post-colonial geographical area might be more representative of the region. According to van Schendel (2012: 502),

New transnational and trans-area connections are shaping today's world. For area specialists everywhere this means that there is an urgent task ahead: to develop a firm practice of jointly employing their knowledge beyond their area, if only to work out what can actually be considered to be truly particular to each region.

Meanwhile, research on ASEAN and the ASEAN Community has also served to strengthen "connectedness" among countries in the region. Scholarship on ASEAN will hopefully "rescue" Southeast Asian Studies from national governments and locate it in a more inclusive multilateral dimension. There has also been a shift towards "non-country specific themes" in the departments teaching Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia.

In the early years of Southeast Asian Studies in the University of Malaya (UM), themes such as modernization, anti-colonialism, and nationalist movements were popular. Most of the research was historical in approach, using colonial office documents. There was also a country focus, largely on Malaysia and Singapore. Few of the early department members read any other Southeast Asian language apart from Bahasa Melayu, so there was a strong reliance on teaching and research materials in Bahasa Melayu and English. A country focus approach limited the sense of Southeast Asia as a larger community, and in many ways, Southeast Asia was indeed a "cold concept" at this point (Sutherland 2001). The same could be said of Southeast Asian Studies in Thailand,

although the country focus here is on mainland Southeast Asian countries. Exchange students from Thammasat University studying at the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, the University of Malaya are quick to note that unlike their program, the program in the University of Malaya offers more case studies and references to the island world of Southeast Asia. Taking the example of Southeast Asian Studies in both the University of Malaya and Thammasat, one discovers the binaries are not merely insider-outsider but also island-mainland Southeast Asia. This could be related to what Diokno claims as familiarity with proximity, referring to students' preferences to study a locale closest to their home/place of origin.

III. The Language Conundrum: *Teaching Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia*

The early centers offering Southeast Asian Studies were all outside the region. This subsequently led to efforts to “decenter” Southeast Asian Studies from US/Europe, as well as to move the direction away from the North American models, such as that of Cornell University's, which pioneered Southeast Asian Studies in the 1960s (Jory 2010). The first school devoted to teaching Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia started at the University of Malaya in 1979, followed quickly by others in neighboring Singapore and Thailand. By 2000, Centers of Southeast Asian Studies had been established in almost all the Southeast Asian countries except Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and almost all were located in central capital cities, with the exception of Walailak University in Nakhorn Sithamarat, Thailand. However, these schools for Southeast Asian Studies in the region tended to adopt and adapt the North American model in the teaching curricula of the Southeast Asian Studies program. Compulsory vernacular language teaching was one of the crucial components of the western model adopted by Southeast Asian Studies programs in the region.

Although the study of other Southeast Asian languages was encouraged or institutionalized into Southeast Asian Studies

programs from the very beginning, scholarship from the region remained largely written in the national languages of respective countries, with the exception of Singapore and to a lesser extent, the Philippines.

Diokno, founding member of the Southeast Asian Studies Research and Exchange Program (SEASREP) rightly points out that most of the writings, especially at the MA and doctoral levels, produced in schools or Centers of Southeast Asian Studies in the region, are in local/national languages resulting in limited dissemination of the findings and knowledge. Even grantees under the SEASREP who learned the language of their neighbors and used/read materials written in that local language, wrote their dissertations/essays either in English or their respective national languages (*Thai, B. Melayu, Viet*). With the exception of works from Singapore and the Philippines, few of the works from other Southeast Asian countries get noticed or cited, both globally and regionally. Diokno laments that “indigenous scholarship is hardly disseminated within the region, given the multiplicity of languages” (Diokno 2010: 5).

Given this limitation, the alternative to reading about the region was mainly through works written in English and to a lesser extent those produced in the local languages. Goh claims that there is a flip side to writings in English compared to local/national languages, the chances of the writings in English to engage with theories from the West is higher (Goh 2011). Amidst the attempts to decenter and diversify, the debate over language continues to divide Southeast Asian Studies.

Research in Southeast Asian Studies is also generally focused in core areas namely, the centers of power and economies and the seats/institutions of administration, the so-called “hot spots in research (Schendel 2012: 499). Peripheries for instance, tend to be neglected. In Malaysia, works on Sabah and Sarawak are far less compared to Peninsular Malaysia. Despite increasing decentralization in Indonesia and the significance of regions such as *paknua/tai/Isan* (northern, southern, and northeast regions) in Thailand, the center/*khlang* remains largely the focus of most

studies. Construction of Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian Studies from the vernacular point of view is lacking, at present, and is still more state centric and less community centric.

IV. Limitations in Southeast Asian Studies in the region¹⁾

Laws that threaten academic freedom and the general “fear” of the state in some countries in the region serve to restrain scholars from challenging the status quo. It took Duncan McCargo, a scholar and observer of Thai politics to write on *network monarchy*, underscoring the political challenges facing Thailand (McCargo 2005) and the revelation of the cooptation of *Imams* (religious teachers/leaders in southern Thailand) (McCargo 2008) to prompt a series of other similar writings and spark a debate on these subjects. While McCargo is nevertheless a Southeast Asianist, the fact that he is “non-native” may have been an advantage. With draconian laws in some Southeast Asian countries, scholars from the region are indeed wary of challenging the status-quo. There are also instances where the Thai government banned books and non-native authors examining the role of monarchy in Thai politics from entering the country. Academic activists have become persona non grata in Sarawak, Malaysia for their critical writings of the state government. Some scholars have been reprimanded or given “counselling” by the state for the kind of research they produce. However, when there are no laws, what is inhibiting native scholars from “challenging” the *master narrative*/nation-state narrative, to quote Thongchai Winichakul.

The above situation may be partly a result of limited exposure and a general reluctance of students to engage in theoretical issues because these are largely seen as “Western in origin” and serving no practical purpose in the context of the region. Most of the research outputs at the undergraduate and MA levels are often narrative studies of micro topics that have detailed

1) Mostly, my personal observation as a researcher and teacher of Southeast Asian Studies in Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore for the last 15 years.

information but somehow are less appealing to the reader because they do not contextualize within the larger debates/concerns, as they also lack elements of comparison. In contrast, the study by a Thai Davisakd Puaksom (2007) on Javanese *Panji* compared with a similar genre in Thailand, written in English and submitted to the National University of Singapore, used Malay and Thai sources is very well received and was extensively referred to and cited. This work has both details and elements of comparison. The multidisciplinary element in Southeast Asian Studies should be reflected not just by the case study but also through contextualization, and engagement with other disciplines and other forms of knowledge that would make a particular study more meaningful.

In addition to inhibiting state laws, I note that there is a prevailing *krengjai* (Thai) or *hutangbudi* (Malay) culture among researchers that may be a limitation to scholarship on Southeast Asia by scholars from the region. Researchers are reluctant to upset or implicate the funding/donor agency supporting the study (private or government). This may be entrenched in the *krengjai* or *hutangbudi* culture i.e. to be grateful to the hand that “feeds”. Indeed the dilemma in writing research projects that serve the state or/and the community can be a double-edged sword.

Finally, I am of the opinion that compulsory vernacular language training in Southeast Asian Studies programs should be reviewed. One of the reasons for the declining numbers of students over the years at the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, the University of Malaya, where I teach is the compulsory Southeast Asian language module, a requirement for the Degree in Southeast Asian Studies. In a cursory survey with students, I was rather disturbed at this revelation, when in most instances, knowledge of an extra language is always viewed as an advantage. Compared to Mandarin, Japanese, and German students do not see the “economic importance” of languages such as Burmese, Thai, and Vietnamese. In fact the most popular language in my department is Filipino, particularly favored by students from Sabah who among other things mentioned that they could easily understand Filipino often spoken and heard in many parts of

Sabah. Of no less importance was that the ability to understand Filipino allowed them to enjoy watching Filipino teleseries. How do we make learning a Southeast Asian language “economically’ attractive”?

V. ‘Failure’ to develop a distinct methodology

Southeast Asian Studies is alleged to be “aping from the West/Euro-centric approaches”. Heryanto claims the field has not been able to translate the lived realities of the people or prioritize local concerns because it is “locked” in Western scholarly traditions and does not treat the area of study as one unit of study. The focus has been rather on individual countries. Victor King defends the country approach claiming that the region offers the place for anthropologists, sociologists, historians and so on to test their hypotheses or to gain empirical evidence to support their case study.

Unlike East Asian Studies and South Asian Studies, Southeast Asian Studies too is seen as a field where the method is determined by the scholar/researcher and guided by his basic training (history/archival, anthropology/ethnography, geography, economics, cultural studies and so on). As pointed out by numerous other scholars, the entry point to studying Southeast Asian Studies is really the self (Diokno 2010; Crib 2012)—both the disciplinary training of the researcher and the place of origin are significant factors that determine the methodology in one’s research.

This has often led to either a particular discipline-based approach or mixed approaches from the social sciences employed in conducting research on Southeast Asian Studies. Not having a distinct methodology but a combination of methods based on the appropriateness of the case/subject of study, as well as availability of resources in my opinion is indeed an advantage. It allows for the entry of many disciplines and experts, making knowledge production truly multi-disciplinary. This may also reflect an ongoing

methodological quest, a constant exercise in the field of Area Studies.²⁾

VI. Sustaining Southeast Asian Studies

Networking and cooperation among centers offering Southeast Asian Studies may be an avenue for sustaining the field. For instance, CSEAS Kyoto has set up a Consortium of Southeast Asian Studies for schools and institutions to share information/database, conferences, and special publications. Knowledge on Southeast Asian Studies should also be shared or highlighted in conferences outside the region and not confined to the field of Southeast Asian Studies. Regular conferences on Southeast Asia held in the region such as the bi-annual International Conference on Southeast Asia (ICONSEA) by the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, the University of Malaya, can be a platform for the exchange and dissemination of research and knowledge about the region among scholars from within and outside the region.

Outsourcing the teaching of languages to partly address the lack of “market value” for Southeast Asian languages may be an alternative. The experience of learning these languages in the country where the language is spoken (Thai in Thailand, Burmese in Burma etc.), might add experiential value to the students, in terms of exposure to the society and cultures of that country. This will provide lived experiences in the study of that specific country, one that will trigger further interest to embark in graduate studies or in writing final year long essays on the countries being studied.

I would also propose outsourcing courses/modules to other departments/visiting lecturers. For instance, a visiting Professor in Cultural Studies might be invited to teach/or partly teach a course on Communities and Cultures in Southeast Asia—giving his insights from a different field. Alternatively students in

2) The many books and articles published on the subject of methodology in Area Studies reveal this scenario.

Southeast Asian Studies can be encouraged to take a module in Media Studies or East Asian/South Asian Studies. This will “kick start” cross-disciplinary knowledge and methods, in the process enriching Southeast Asian Studies.

VII. Conclusion: *Rebranding Southeast Asian Studies*

With most universities in the region going through restructuring, downsizing, and mergers it is difficult to foresee departments teaching specifically Southeast Asian Studies to remain without any changes. This is the crisis facing most Southeast Asian Studies programs (not only in the US and Europe, where the field is critically determined by funding and policy interests). Its lack of origins in a discipline is a convenient excuse to close down or merge these departments and rebrand these as Asian Studies or in the case of Japan as Global Studies (Fukutake 2015). Declining student numbers hasten the process.

The Departments/Schools/Programs of Southeast Asian Studies might be restructured. I see research clusters (incorporating researchers working on a wide array of topics under an umbrella school such as Humanities and Social Sciences Cluster) as a way out to retain the element of Southeast Asian Studies but under a larger rubric. Specific research clusters, for instance Border Studies, and Diaspora Studies can also be a way for new generations of Southeast Asian scholars to operate and continue to contribute knowledge in the field.

I close with a quote from Pingtjin Thum:

“Southeast Asian Studies for a long time lacked its own academic hinterland”.

It might not be inappropriate to ask, at this juncture, where is the heartland of Southeast Asian Studies?

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