



# Rethinking the Field: Locality and Connectivity in Southeast Asian Studies



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## [ *Abstract* ]

The paper comments on the contribution of Oscar Salemink on his personal intellectual journal from Vietnam to Europe and back again. This then leads to the contemplation of the construction of Southeast Asia as a “place” or “locality”, early preoccupations within the region of the national dimension. And more recent developments in universities in Singapore, examining the continuing perceptions of Southeast Asia as a region and Singapore as its “gateway”, and the increasing interest in “connectivities” and transnational relations between the region and other parts of Asia and the wider world.

**Keywords:** Locality, Connectivity, East-West, Transnational relations, Southeast Asia

## I . Introduction

Oscar Salemink's contribution to this special issue provides critical insight into how we might think about Southeast Asia as a unit of

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analysis, the region as a field of study, and the potential of comparative Asian Studies. In his article, "Southeast Asia as a Theoretical Laboratory of the World" Salemink reflects upon his distinguished career as a way of thinking about how scholars of Southeast Asia in Europe coped with fundamental shifts in the way academic knowledge was conceptualized, funded, and produced. The article traces his scholarly career from his early years as a researcher focused deeply on Vietnamese language and culture, his contributions as a consultant to national/international heritage organizations in Vietnam, and finally to his current "incarnation" as a scholar focusing on the epistemological construction of Europe. His narrative is particularly instructive for what it tells us about how a research agenda is formulated in certain contexts and settings; how territorial conceptions of space/place shape and define our intellectual affiliations; and how Southeast Asia might serve as a "method" towards rethinking the scope and scale of intellectual fields beyond the region.

In many respects, Salemink's intellectual journey from Vietnam to Europe parallels how Southeast Asia was socially constructed by external scholars as both a field of study and as "a place". His early work on highland communities in Vietnam brought previously ignored landscapes and cultures into sharper focus, enabling English-language readers to consider the range of ecologies and experiences that might be called "Southeast Asian". His introduction of concepts into Vietnamese intellectual discourses helped shape internal discussions about Vietnamese heritage, ritual, and space. Whereas an earlier generation focused on establishing key centers, broad unities, and the dominant core cultures of the region, Salemink's work on highland/minority life-ways was foundational in that it refined the internal, conceptual pillars of Southeast Asia as a distinct region (usually in reference to India and China) while at the same time contributed to how we understood "Vietnam" and the range of communities who were included within that spatial entity.

Salemink's early work on the languages and cultures of highland peoples in the broader Vietnamese zone exemplified the type of critical research that sought to complete (and correct) the knowledge left behind by colonial administrators and domestic

"nationalist" scholars. The call to depict a Southeast Asia that privileged local perspectives and world-views was an important objective for scholars over the generations who were concerned with legitimizing the region as a serious field of study. Much of this vision emerged as an attempt to address well-documented imbalances within colonial scholarship that operated within an East-West binary framing. This genre of Europe-Asia comparison was at the root of the models, periodization, and categories that contributed to the obfuscating of the "local". Recovering the hidden, obscure, or deeply embedded elements of the region resulted in generations of scholars joining the quest to rescue indigenous Southeast Asia from more global knowledge structures that would otherwise blur those local traditions and experiences from immediate view. Saleminck's work on highland communities and lowland minority groups intersected with this broader commitment to pursue the local as a way of delineating the region's distinctiveness.

## **II . Southeast Asian Locality**

The emergence of Vietnam as both a "field" of research and as an intellectual community was also based on a shared commitment to rediscover, preserve, and understand Southeast Asia's defining features for its own sake and within its own terms. The rise of Southeast Asian Studies in Europe, North America, Australia, and eventually Japan was the result of an international project that was meant to identify, insulate and legitimate what was regarded as the local. Scholarship highlighted instances of "local initiative", "local genius", and "localization" in order to recognize the agency of the peoples living in the region and the persistence of a regional character. Much of this initiative was driven by foreign scholars, local interlocutors, administrators, and research assistants were involved in this endeavor at the ground level. In broad terms, this project was mainly (with notable exceptions) external to the region. Through the combined efforts of local scholars, students, and research associates, foreign scholars gained the capacity to engage in fieldwork, create focus groups, and decipher local sources in

Southeast Asian languages. The result was a field of analysis supported by a vast infrastructure of funding bodies, university degree programs, professional associations, journals, books series, library collections, and language programs designed to produce understandings of local experiences in Southeast Asia.

Engaging in "thick description" of local communities, texts, and rituals was the mantra of the day; a calling if you will, to privilege and preserve the perceived distinctiveness of a region that had withstood "the thin and flaking" influences of West Asia, South Asia, East Asia, and Europe over the centuries. The rise of Southeast Asian Studies in its various incarnations across the globe was also part of a broader effort to differentiate it from other regions in Asia ("Indian" and "Chinese" civilizations). Cold War priorities aside, scholars set out to detect and decode a regional "grammar" that they envisioned to be imbedded in its languages, texts, material cultures, and histories; a system of knowledge that had interacted with the cosmopolitan influences of Indic, Sinic, Islamic, Christian, and secular civilizations, yet managed to retain local meanings, structures, and ways of life. Scholars from this generation pursued projects that aimed to uncover the essence of a region through the local. To study "autonomous" Southeast Asia (or an autonomous Vietnam in Saleminck's case) was for many generations of scholars an invitation to assert the region's very existence.

While Saleminck's early work contributed to our understanding of the region's definitive shape, it also challenged our understanding of Southeast Asian culture as fixed via ethno-historical research. One of his seminal articles "The Return of the Python God: Multiple Interpretations of a Millenarian Movement in Vietnam", made the important case that our understanding of social movements in colonial Southeast Asia were not necessarily constrained to or even defined by political or millenarian aims of highland peoples to restore a previously displaced order or jump-start a prophesied Golden Age in response to colonialism. Rather, this article demonstrated how French scholar-officials, domestic scholars, and later area-studies scholars constructed particular interpretations of resistance movements that reflected their position within particular historical and intellectual contexts--in other words, the "Python

God" movement and its portrayal as a millenarian movement was less an illustration of Vietnamese highland belief-systems as it was an expression of colonial, nationalist, and area-studies writers who sought to interpret these movements for different reasons. This type of intervention was extremely important for it began to question the very categories and concepts with a "European pedigree" that scholars had used to construct Southeast Asia. For Saleminck (and for scholars such as myself who followed his work) questioning "how do we know what we know?" would lead to new lines of inquiry about Southeast Asian distinctiveness, how our knowledge about the region was constructed, and how the region (as a unit of analysis) was (and continues to be) produced in a variety of settings. Questioning how we understand "the" field of Southeast Asian Studies and its role in producing meaning about the region was an important element in Saleminck's research that paralleled intellectual turns by other Southeast Asian scholars of that era.

In order to address often-cited shortcomings of both area studies and the disciplines for their alleged theoretical deficiencies, Saleminck describes how new funding regimes and institutional contexts in Europe compelled him to rethink not only his ethnographic work in Vietnam, but whether the use of Vietnam as a spatial framework of analysis would be a viable and effective way to push the scope of his research beyond Vietnam. By recalibrating his intellectual gaze away from spatially defined fields of study "Vietnam" and/or "Southeast Asia" to more analytical categories that might be used across area studies fields, Saleminck was able to redirect findings he accumulated from decades of research in Vietnam to develop new ways of understanding Europe. Saleminck's career shifted from preserving Vietnamese culture as a way of reaffirming the distinctiveness of Vietnam (and Southeast Asia more generally) to connecting Vietnam's heritage practices to projects and settings around the world. By incorporating a "return" loop into the often linear trajectory of knowledge transfer, Saleminck suggests that his research on heritage in Vietnam offers new ways of critiquing and understanding heritage in Europe, connecting the epistemological construction of Vietnam to the epistemological construction of Europe. In many ways, Saleminck's insights anticipate the growth of

Southeast Asian Studies within Southeast Asia and the current effort to connect local cultures and histories to the wider world.

### **III. Southeast Asian Connectivity**

The emergence of Southeast Asian Studies within Southeast Asia intersects with the development of the field as it took shape in Europe, America, Australia, and Japan. While the earliest programs in Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia emerged in tandem with Cold War priorities and national interests, the growth of Southeast Asian Studies was a more uneven development. Most regional tertiary institutions and research institutes between 1950s and 1990s were focused on developing national educational curricula and establishing knowledge about the nation, especially given the often fractious socio-political situations that followed the end of World War II. The rise of the nation-state in the context of post-World War II devastation, civil war, ethnic separation, and identity politics required an emphasis on the making of the nation. Post-World War II educational/research efforts were overwhelmingly more oriented towards sustaining and substantiating the nation-state.

Thinking about Southeast Asia was not a priority—it was a luxury—especially at a time when competition for resources, influence and power dominated domestic contexts throughout the region. Writing about the coherency of the region was not as pressing for domestic scholars between 1950-1990 when the very coherency of the nation was (and in some cases is still) in question. For domestic scholars, exploring the common dynamics and patterns that linked the region were not as important in the days of the Cold War as constructing the bonds that might link the nation. For the minority of scholars that travelled to Europe, America, Australia, and Japan for their doctoral training, Southeast Asia was certainly a reality to be pursued via research. However, for the vast majority of teachers, local scholars, and university administrators, the idea of Southeast Asian Studies was perhaps as distant a vision as ASEAN Studies is today.

To be sure, there were important initiatives that attempted to

compliment/counter the focus on the nation, evidence that the current interest in the "transnational" is not as new to the region as some might expect. The establishment of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) in 1965 and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore in 1968 were more exceptions than the norm, and it would be nearly thirty years later for the Southeast Asian Regional Exchange Program (SEASREP) was founded in 1994 in Manila. The establishment of the *Journal of Southeast Asian History* in 1960 (that was later changed to the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*) was as much a product of local Singaporean initiatives as much as it was tied to knowledge production in the area-studies programs in North America, the United Kingdom, and Australia. These important institutions and "knowledge infrastructure" were part of the production of Southeast Asia in the region, not entirely home-grown, but certainly more than a product of Cold War funding streams. Suffice it to say that Southeast Asian Studies, until very recently, was not a feature of most universities within the region. Celebrating the "national" in many Southeast Asian contexts meant celebrating the local as a way to cope with the legacy of colonialism and its knowledge production.

More recently, it might be observed that Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore might be going through a transformative moment given its exposure to new initiatives favoring more inter-Asian approaches and trans-regional perspectives. Drawn from scholarly discussions in primarily North America but with complimentary streams stemming from Europe, Taiwan, and Australia, a somewhat renewed emphasis on exploring the flows that cross boundaries and transcend regional borders is now challenging the relevancy and fixity of area-studies regions and the boundaries that demarcate it. While scholars of Southeast Asia had always emphasized such perspectives especially on research concerning topics such as Indianization, Sinicization, and colonialism, this collection of interdisciplinary approaches explores the circulation of peoples, ideas, technology, goods and languages across the traditional area-studies regions. At its core, this interpretive stream seeks to promote research that examines connections across regional and national boundaries; shifting attention away from the nation as

a unit of analysis to the circuits and networks that link and define communities.

This approach to studying Southeast Asia has a fair number of advocates. It places emphasis on flows across time and space and in doing so recognizes the transnational/trans-regional nature of movement and its effects on community formation. It establishes and provides a more inclusive platform for studying borderland zones, peripheral areas, and the interaction of social groups that move across such boundaries, disrupting their association or non-recognition with the nation-state. Further, it challenges the spatial constructs that influence and constrain our definitions of what we identify as a "Southeast Asian" experience. Under this framework, the interaction between monasteries in historical Sri Lanka and classical Bagan (Myanmar), might be compared with the parallel circulation of monks travelling southward from "China" through the Straits of Malacca to regional ports that are connected via this religious network across maritime Asia. No longer constrained by area-studies borders, this type of project emphasizes the connections and circuits that define the Buddhist world while drawing our attention to the circulation of Buddhist ideas across South, Southeast, and East Asia. By distilling these experiences from the exclusive histories of Sri Lankan, Burmese, or Chinese Buddhism, conceptual constraints that might be associated with the boundaries of area-studies regions are eased. Like Salemin's connecting of Vietnam heritage practices to European experiences, this approach privileges a comparative perspective that promotes multiple points of reference defined by the flows under examination, not the fixed boundaries of nations or regions.

For those who are still feel that there is much more to be accomplished through area-studies regions, there has been some pushback. Some scholars are wary about the implicit emphasis on breadth at the expense of depth that was the hallmark of area-studies research. Mastery of languages and literatures are still illusive for new scholars coming into the field while funding cuts to language study continue to hamper research into the different linguistic worlds of the region. There is still much to be done on the literary, material, and performances cultures within many nations



(let alone the region). Others hesitate to endorse this initiative due to the geo-political baggage of such an approach: just as the region begins to integrate through the auspices of ASEAN and other regional channels, foreign academics begin to promote an approach that fundamentally challenges the area-studies model and its legitimacy as a geo-body. Critics of area-studies and the regional idea often point to the Cold War origins of Southeast Asia as a way of highlighting its flawed nature; it has not been missed that current geo-political priorities of world powers today are not necessarily aligned with the existing currency of national and regional sovereignty within Southeast Asia. For some detractors, the transnational turn threatens the intellectual and political position of Southeast Asia as a field and ASEAN as a political unit.

At the same time Singapore's position in Southeast Asian Studies is both a node in a larger global network and a gateway to the region. In its capacity as a node, its universities feature strong support for these new intellectual trends that may transform how we think about Southeast Asian Studies. A key member of an inter-Asian Studies network of institutions throughout the Asia region, the National University of Singapore (and specifically the Asia Research Institute) has hosted conferences and produced numerous publications that have established itself as a promoter of this trans-Asian initiative. In its role as a gateway to the region however, a more traditional understanding of Southeast Asian Studies is also promoted in Singapore. Shifting its gaze inward towards regional universities and research institutions, Southeast Asian Studies had for some time served as a platform to promote regional education and research. The ISEAS-Yusuf Ishak Institute continues to lead a more classically-defined regional research agenda while promoting ASEAN studies. Thus, Singapore represents at least two scalar positions when it comes to its place in Southeast Asian Studies: on the one hand it is connected to a much more global network of intellectual currents that promote transnational and transregional approaches that efface, in some ways the regional contours of Southeast Asia. On the other hand, Singapore is a Southeast Asian hub, a gateway to the network of universities that today are in the midst of reifying and developing nascent Southeast

Asia programs.

Despite these different intellectual trajectories, the discussion about establishing new Southeast Asian Studies programs is beginning to gain traction in countries that up until recently were more concerned with national studies. Recent discussions about developing a diploma program on Southeast Asian Studies at Yangon University (Myanmar), for instance, is very much the result of recent changing domestic educational, economic, and political interests. Local scholars are keen to engage Southeast Asian Studies scholarship that have been developed in Asia, Europe, Australia, and America. Whereas the promotion of local perspectives and attitudes had always been an important mantra of domestic scholars in Myanmar, the emergence of an interest in Southeast Asian Studies reveals a different dynamic that may well fuel the growth of the field in other settings as well. Within the context of the region, the growth of Southeast Asian Studies in regional institutions may represent an interest in projecting their languages, histories, and cultures beyond the boundaries of their local or national framework, perhaps an internal version of Saleminck's "theoretical laboratory". Yangon University scholars are eager to link Myanmar Studies (in Myanmar) to regional and global networks, suggesting that the initiative to make these connections will come from the inside as well as from innovative scholars such as Saleminck. In other words, initiatives to start Southeast Asian Studies seems to be driven by the internal recognition that one needs to connect beyond the local. Southeast Asian Studies is becoming associated with connection and interaction with the global as opposed to a calling to preserve traditions from the global.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

At the heart of our earliest constructions of Southeast Asia was the quest to think about how can we "know" this place that we are imagining as a region; how do we start to think about these culture, these peoples, these languages, or these histories? What sort of references, models, or categories will best represent what we sense,

what we experience, what we comprehend about this place we call Southeast Asia? Our starting points for thinking about region (depending on who "we" are, as Vincente L. Rafael queried decades ago) depend on our encounters, our interaction with "the field" and our lived experiences within and without Southeast Asia. For many who consider themselves Southeast Asian-ists or scholars who see themselves as part of a community drawn together by the bonds of research, education, and teaching about the region, these entry points have been facilitated (at least intellectually) by educational training, professional appointments, funding streams and a range of other convictions (religious, political, cultural personal, etc.). As these interpretive communities that make up Southeast Asian Studies have emerged from a range of intellectual, educational, and cultural settings, it is no wonder that one's entry into this conversation can have a range of trajectories. Oscar Salemink's essay is one such journey of a luminary in the field.

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