Introduction to the Issue

Revisiting and Reconstructing Southeast Asian Characteristics

Victor T. King*

The five papers included in this special issue emerged in revised form from the International Conference organized and hosted by the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Busan University of Foreign Studies (BUFS), last May 27, 2016. Often, one does not anticipate that papers will come together in a coherent presentation which says something about the theme of the conference. Contributors come with their own views, preoccupations and interests, and the result is often a disparate assemblage. However, in this collection, I have detected an immediate coherence. I was tasked with making some sense of what has been contributed, and, though it is my own comprehension of the papers and their interrelationships, I think there are synergies which contribute to the overall theme of the conference.

The central question and issue posed was: "What makes Southeast Asia?" In more academic terms, "Can we determine the characteristics, established and reconstructed, which can contribute to the definition of Southeast Asia as a region in its own right and provide a rationale for the multidisciplinary enterprise of Southeast

* Adjunct Professor, Center for Ethnic Studies and Development, Chiang Mai University, Thailand; Emeritus Professor, University of Leeds, UK / v.t.king@leeds.ac.uk

Asian Studies as a field of practice established in the post-war period?" The reader might anticipate that the answer to the question is complex and equivocal. But this issue of Suvannabhumi might help to provide a set of views on the region from scholars who come from a variety of backgrounds, interests and commitments.

The major theme for this issue examines a range of perspectives on Southeast Asia as a region and its defining characteristics. But we also have to address the diverse backgrounds and interests of those who are contributing to this issue and to investigate further the claims for an insider view of Southeast Asia, as against one which argues, in the terms of Edward Said's Orientalism and in post-structuralism, against perspectives from outside the region. My view remains that this is a false distinction, but it is one which we continue to use and which surfaces in this issue of Suvannabhumi. In examining the insider-outsider opposition, let us look at the contributors and their diverse credentials and experiences, and thereby assist in the evaluation of their perspectives on Southeast Asia. We also need to examine how Southeast Asia as a region has been constructed from within and without, and why researchers adopt particular positions and approaches.

The journal issue comprises contributions from Victor T. King, Rommel A. Curaming, Frank Dhont, Ioannis Gaitanidis, and Stephen Keck.

King, a senior researcher who identifies himself as a Western-trained outsider with a career primarily in the UK, and who regularly visits and works in Southeast Asia, has been involved in the study of Southeast Asia for over forty years, particularly focused on Malaysia and Indonesia. He still holds to the principle of a universal social science, one might say "a traditionalist" view of Southeast Asia, while recognizing the problem of academic hegemony, and the necessity for the modification and contextualization of this in terms of local experiences, interests and perspectives. What he argues are the following: that the distinction between insider and outsider views of the region needs to be questioned; that the two opposed categories are internally complex and differentiated; and

that they overlap. In other words, the opposition is not meaningful or conceptually useful. The issue is that this opposition has been posed by those who want to argue for "a Southeast Asia" which is locally produced and is mindful of local interests, agendas, and priorities. But the locally generated Southeast Asia is also highly problematic. It establishes territorial boundaries, as in the works of Syed Hussein Alatas and Syed Farid Alatas, in order to justify locally-generated knowledge production, alternative discourses, and the indigenization of concepts, methods and priorities; this in turn raises the highly contentious matter of what can be defined as "local" and "non-local".

What is argued is that the opposition between insiders and outsiders, which is what post-colonialists and post-structuralists have debated, might be resolved by the development of concepts of culture and identity which capture the fluidity, diversity, movement, cross-cultural encounters, hybridization, and hierarchies generated in a culturally complex region. In other words, it is not an issue of opposition but one of self-reflection and engagement, and one which recognizes partnerships and collaboration. It also builds on the work of John Clammer in locating the movement of culture in a political-economic context and Adrian Vickers, in his concepts of "representations", "civilisational forms" and "material manifestations". The major issue is to address the problem of identifying Southeast Asia extra-regionally (beyond ASEAN), regionally, nationally, and sub-nationally. The concepts of identity and culture attempt to engage with shifting identities and the crossing of artificially-created boundaries. Robert Winzeler's reference to the long-established distinctions between majorities/minorities, upland/lowland, local/immigrant, mainland/island, and world/local religions needs to be re-conceptualized in terms of the more flexible concepts of culture and identity. And Anthony Reid's recent distinction between Southeast Asia on the one hand and China and India on the other also needs to be recast in terms of a concept of identity which moves beyond the nation-state borders of ASEAN to embrace populations culturally and historically related to those within and beyond what is now referred to as Southeast Asia.

Curaming, a Filipino scholar working in Brunei, has been

trained in the Philippines, Singapore, and Australia. He is widely connected among indigenous scholars in Southeast Asia, and has championed, in post-structuralist mode, the need for the indigenization and the decolonization of research on Southeast Asia, responding to the dependence of local research on Western social science (the "coloniality" of knowledge), and his criticism of the claims of Western social science to universal relevance, objectivity, generic utility, and neutrality.

His paper provides an interesting and apposite counterpoint from the perspective of a local scholar and against Victor King, as an outsider. He argues, on the basis of two case studies taken from the Kaupapa Maori Research programme in New Zealand and the Sikolohiyang Pilipino indigenous psychology approach in the Philippines, that an indigenous methodology is possible. It appears to have been more robust and sustainable in New Zealand than in the Philippines, and overall, it is still marginal in terms of mainstream social science. However, he makes the interesting point that indigenization has been especially prominent in the Philippines, and that a multidisciplinary, context-sensitive area studies approach has many similarities with indigenous perspectives on Southeast Asian society and culture. However, I would still question whether the process of indigenization is sufficiently distinctive to warrant that it is moving towards an alternative set of paradigms, methodologies, and epistemology, based on local interests, priorities, and welfare, in that they draw on (though they are not exclusively dependent on) certain Western-generated critical theories in feminism, "decoloniality", and post-structuralism. But I accept that this is a possible way forward in developing local identities, consciousness, and self-determination, and in establishing a locally relevant and useful social science. It also, of course, depends on institutional and government support and the energies of local activists.

Dhont is another Westerner and outsider, a historian of Indonesia. His current post in Brunei led to a research interest in the Malay world, particularly Borneo. He is fluent in the Indonesian language, and submitted a Master's thesis to Gadjah Mada University. He was also trained in Sweden and in the USA.

He presents the interesting, though still to be developed thesis that the Japanese, the colonial power of Southeast Asia between 1942 to 1945, needs to be brought into our frame of reference in considering the development and construction of a Southeast Asian identity. As he demonstrates, appreciation of the Japanese position clearly led to decolonization, but in that process was the realization of shared experiences; cultural Japanization did not achieve much in the brief period of imperial administration in the region, but, despite displacing earlier colonialisms and the exploitation of resources (oil, rubber, minerals, timber, rice, and labour), it did provide a sense of local identities, and of the possibility of self-determination. Locals were trained, and brought into administration and the military. The Japanese, unlike the Western colonial powers, in their conception of a "Southern Resources Area" ripe for Japanese intervention and exploitation within the concept of a "Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere", did have a sense of the unity of Southeast Asia, which the Western colonial powers, at that time, did not entertain.

Gaitanidis, a Greek scholar trained in the UK, is fluent in Japanese and currently teaches in Chiba University in Tokyo. He has recently extended his research interests to the images, perspectives, and engagements of Japan in its construction of Southeast Asia.

He argues that the Japanese, in rather different mode from Frank Dhont's examination of Japan's intervention in Southeast Asia, with its concentration on political-military domination and resource exploitation during the Pacific War and the Japanese concept of the "Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere" (though as always, with an attempt to incorporate the local populations into a dominant culture through education and language training), have reinvented Southeast Asia. Current Japanese perceptions of the region have been replaced, in the era of globalization, "liquid modernity", and the movement away from non-institutional religions, by a "culturalized" image of the regions to the South. In the context of the emergence of personalized, "New Age" spiritualism in Japan, Southeast Asia has become a spiritually traditional, exotic, "untouched" region where the Japanese are able to re-energize themselves, and visit "power spots" (especially in Thailand and Bali, Indonesia when it comes to healing, therapy, and alternative meditative lifestyles, all-important

in this process of rediscovering "Asian-ness"). Interestingly, the Japanese construction of Southeast Asia is different from the West, although, in its classification, it reifies the East-West divide, with Japan as an ambiguous, yet possible bridge between East and West. Gaitanidis, using Stephen Tanaka's concept, refers to Japan as an "outlier", a place economically advanced yet "Asian". Japanese spiritual tourists utilize the discourse and image of an outlier to realize their spirituality, and their "spiritual destination" in Southeast Asia. Of course, as tourists, the Japanese have other touristic pursuits in Southeast Asia, but there appears to be a trend showing their search for an Asian "otherness", of a lost Asian spiritual identity which they seek to recover in Thai massage, spiritual tours, and development-oriented enterprise such as the one in Cambodia to translate "spiritual therapy" into practice.

This speaks volumes about Japanese identity as it does about Southeast Asian identity, and it demonstrates a selective appropriation of elements of Southeast Asian religions to both characterize Southeast Asia and enable the Japanese to address their past, and their former relations with the dominated, colonialized, yet culturally unrealized region to the South of Japan. What this paper does is question the construction of a region from outside and the ways in which "authenticity" in religious/cultural terms is constructed and negotiated, and that which is "fake" and "real". But it poses the question of how identities are constructed in interaction with a region. And does Japanese identity (in part at least) depend on its historical, cultural, and perceptual relationship with Southeast Asia? The papers of Dhont and Gaitanidis alert us about our neglect of the Japanese dimension in the construction and definition of Southeast Asia.

Keck is an American historian of the British Empire who works on the intellectual history of Southeast Asia and who spent a substantial part of his career in the National University of Singapore. He is now in the United Arab Emirates.

His paper, which is enormously important, reminds us of the ways in which an area of knowledge production is constructed and confirmed. In my view, there is no scholar who can compete with

the comparative analyses of J.S. Furnivall, whose work Keck examines in detail. Aside from Charles Fisher, D.G.E. Hall, George Coedès, and Robert Baron von Heine-Geldern who, in my view, were the prime-movers in creating Southeast Asia as a defined and delimited area of scholarly contemplation and focus, Furnivall recognized common experiences under colonialism which brought these disparate territories together, in his comparison of British Burma (Myanmar) and the Netherlands East Indies (Indonesia). Though he is, in Curaming's terms, a colonialist and immersed in a colonial mode of thinking, Furnivall's bold comparative work on Burma and Indonesia, in particular on the political economy of two different colonies in the region, captured and helped construct Southeast Asia.

I leave you with a final thought. Given the diverse backgrounds of the contributors to this volume that demonstrates in ample detail the processes of globalization in higher education, as well as the difficulty of assigning scholars to particular categories of academic endeavour which cannot be sorted into those of insider-outsider, what do the several papers in this issue convey? In my view, the debate about local, indigenized scholarship should be rethought. I agree that it has its merits and that local perspectives should be supported by local institutions and by interested political constituencies. My considered view is that this is probably not going to happen and Western hegemony in social science will pervade, however critical we are of its dominance. I hope I am proved wrong, but I also hope that this journal's issue exposes us to the diversity of perspectives on what Southeast Asia is and what it might become.