


## Other Southeast Asias? Beyond and Within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations



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[ *Abstract* ]

The debates continue on the conceptualization of Southeast Asia and the ways in which those of us who are concerned to attempt scholarly interventions in the region define, conceive, understand and engage with it. But, in an important sense, the region has now been defined for us by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and whatever academic researchers might wish to impose on Southeast Asia in regard to their priorities and interests, it may make little difference. Given the politically-derived, nation-state definition of Southeast Asia, are all our problems of regional definition resolved? In some respects, they have been. ASEAN has constructed and institutionalized a regional organization and an associated regional culture. But in certain fields of research we still require academic flexibility. We cannot always be confined by an ASEAN-derived regional definition. The paper will explore other configurations of 'region' and its sub-divisions and propose, that in the spirit of academic freedom, we can continue to

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generate imaginative depictions of Southeast Asia and its constituents both within and beyond the region.

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## I . Introduction

This was my view of various of the matters which I discuss in this paper which was presented in 2014, and it has not changed much since then.

“I have been unable to identify a particular methodology or set of methodologies which have been generated within the general field of area studies or specifically in the study of Southeast Asia. Alternatively, there is nothing distinctive that I have discerned in the practices of knowledge generation in Southeast Asian studies that has not already been developed within discipline-based research; epistemologically and ontologically, we are in known and well-trodden territory which has already been traversed by those who have undertaken research using disciplinary perspectives and methods. Or, to put it another way: the multidisciplinary field of Southeast Asian studies, which in any case is not a unitary or homogeneous field of studies, as Szanton (2004: 3) has already indicated, has not produced, in my view, a set of specific practices which we might follow in order to go about formulating research questions..... and developing or choosing concepts or theories to make sense of, give some kind of logical and coherent form to, and draw conclusions from the data collected” (King 2014: 44).

I find it increasingly difficult to distance and perhaps entirely remove myself from the personal involvement in a debate which I entered in a determined way almost thirty years ago (King 1990). At that time my frame of mind was primarily Western-centred but it was attempting to find a sociological perspective that I had been working on since the early 1980s which would help generate an intellectual construction of Southeast Asia (King 1981). At that time

it had not yet been attempted, and the major contributions to Southeast Asian sociology were Western-derived and not devoted specifically to regional definitions. In other words, it appeared that those sociologists working in and on Southeast Asia did not see it as a clearly defined region in sociological terms.

Likewise in examining the anthropological literature on Southeast Asia in the 1980s, there seemed little prospect of discovering or devising an anthropological vision of a Southeast Asian region unless we tried to make something of the early work of such scholars as Robbins Burling, which, in regional terms, was deficient in many respects (1965 [1992]). The anthropological enterprise was far too localized and parochial, and, if it was not preoccupied with small-scale communities and particular ethnic groups (usually minority groups), anthropology confined its scholarly efforts to one Southeast Asian nation-state, or a sub-region (Highland Burma, northern Luzon, Borneo, Sumatra), or a little more ambitiously to mainland or island Southeast Asia (rarely to both). Burling, for example, whose work was used as a vehicle for defining a Southeast Asian socio-cultural area on the basis of social organization (for example, relative gender equality) or cultural values (arising from animist beliefs and practices) or of different socio-cultural and ecological forms (hill and plains people), based his work on mainland Southeast Asia and not the whole region. And there are significant differences between human and geographical configurations between island and mainland Southeast Asia.

In my own case, having been appointed to a Professorship in Southeast Asian Studies in the United Kingdom in 1988, when area studies, having languished for a while, was given a new lease of life, it was incumbent on me to contribute to the construction and consolidation of the region which had given its name to the title of the Chair. I duly set about this task, as many others had done before me. In political terms and with reference to ASEAN,

Southeast Asia was still not a clearly defined region, though in scholarly and diplomatic circles it was reasonably well established. Brunei Darussalam had only joined the “original ASEAN five of 1967” in 1984. After my appointment it was another seven years before Vietnam joined the Association and then, in the second half of the 1990s, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia. In the United Kingdom there were also still lingering doubts about the credentials of the Philippines, even in the 1980s, which stemmed from D.G.E. Hall’s legacy and his monumental history of Southeast Asia, when he initially excluded this important Southeast Asian nation-state, from his conception of the region (1955). In Western European perspectives, not only in the United Kingdom, but in continental Europe as well, in the immediate post-war period, the Philippines was thought of as part of a trans-Pacific Ocean theatre which did not participate in the major cultural and historical trajectories of Southeast Asia. It was also, in scholarly terms, the domain of American researchers. Very few Europeans undertook research in the Philippines. And, in fairness to Hall, it is very doubtful that a major contribution to the post-war construction of Southeast Asia as a region in the 1950s and 1960s would have emerged from the Philippine academy, either American or local Filipino.

Therefore, looking back some 30 years ago, we still seemed to be faced with substantial uncertainties surrounding the definition of the Southeast Asian region. If one wanted to embark on the writing of general books on Southeast Asia, then what would you include and exclude? And what was the rationale for that inclusion and exclusion? For me, the basic principle on which I operated was dependent on the particular disciplinary approach adopted, the research project and questions which were being pursued, and the appropriate methodologies chosen. Therefore, for me, in intellectual terms, Southeast Asia was a shifting field of study. I could traverse it as I wished, with little concern for political, strategic or diplomatic

definitions, though my approaches were still somewhat Orientalist or at least Western-centric, which are not necessarily the same object of analysis (Said 1978).

But here is the compromise. When you are writing a general book on Southeast Asia can you afford to indulge yourself in this ad hoc world of scholarship, distant from the concerns of politicians and academic publishers? When I look back on what decisions I made about the parameters of the books I would write on Southeast Asia I was already into the period when ASEAN was finally consolidated in its present form. I started writing and editing general volumes on the region in the late 1990s and I simply adopted the ASEAN definition of Southeast Asia, a definition, with some qualifications, which had been established in the colonial period during the 1930s and 1940s (King 1999, 2008 [2011]; King and Wilder 2003 [2006]). It also conveniently fed into the academic infrastructure which had been established by the West and then adopted by various institutions in Asia: what we had to recognize was the institutionalization of Southeast Asian Studies, and long after it may have created doubts and uncertainties as a coherent academic project in the minds of some of those studying Southeast Asia (because academic support, interest and funding increasingly came under threat) Southeast Asian degrees and programmes of study, departments, institutes and schools, journals, publication series, scholarly associations, named posts, and regular scholarly gatherings were nationally and internationally embedded. They may have had to experience an inevitable decline in particular nation-states but, importantly, institutions in Southeast Asia/Asia took over the terrains from which the West had withdrawn. Southeast Asian Studies (separately or within wider Asian Studies programmes) as a field of study continued and took on a life of its own, and an increasingly Asian-based life, outside the anxieties and desperation of those (primarily in the West) who had devoted their academic

lives to area studies and had endured the suffering which resulted from the erosion of their life-support systems.

## **II. Is there a way forward?**

We have a surfeit of ways forward which have been adopted in recent years to address the problematical issue of Southeast Asia as a region, and attempts to give it form, substance and a rationale. In the following very brief overview, there is no point going endlessly over old ground. I have already detailed the toings-and-froings of debates on Southeast Asia as a region and the multidisciplinary field of studies designed to study it (King 2014, 2015a, 2016a). We have moved from definitions based on distinctive social and cultural content; an indigenous genius; distinctive historical moments and processes; scholarly styles, traditions and methodologies; a locus of theoretical innovation; a particular geographical environment; alternative, locally-constructed paradigms; a multi-sensory arena; a negatively defined region in relation to China and India; and a unity-in-diversity model which postulates paradoxically that differences (core-periphery, majorities-minorities, lowland-upland) bring a certain coherence. For me, these are no longer ways forward. They have all been criticized and they should be assigned to the graveyards of human endeavour; they provide partial pictures, but they are not sustainable in academic terms. Furthermore, these concerns have been much more prominent in those academic disciplines which have a greater preoccupation with location, contextualization, concreteness, and the need for grounded and detailed understanding. History, archaeology and pre-history, geography, and linguistics immediately come to mind; whereas regional definition is not such a preoccupation for such universalizing academic disciplines as economics, political science and international relations and sociology. Anthropology has tended to be

the odd-one-out in the regional ball-game - grounded but not especially interested in regional definition, and though comparative in its interests not a universalizing discipline in regard to Southeast Asia.

Most of the very recent attempts at discerning a distinctive methodological and conceptual contribution in Southeast Asian Studies is exemplified in the edited book by Huotari, Rüländ and Schlehe (2014, and Huotari 2014). There is much in it which demonstrates an imaginative, collaborative approach to research on the region; the involvement of locally-based scholars and those from outside the region in projects which enable free and equal interchange and exchange of personnel, ideas and findings; and it provides interesting insights into both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Yet, in my view these approaches do not constitute something distinctive which has emerged from area studies and multidisciplinary endeavours. Most of the proposals in the book stem from already established methods and approaches in the social sciences, particularly anthropology.

These efforts from our German colleagues continue in, for example the Southeast Asian Studies programme at Freiburg University: "Grounding Area Studies in Social Practice", and this may be something to do with German funding initiatives in area studies and the need to present a case and a rationale for their utility, viability and sustainability. A recent edited volume by Mielke and Hornidge (2017) demonstrates this continuing preoccupation (see King 2017a). This particular project is supported by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research of Germany in the development of interdisciplinary projects in what is termed the "Global South". It is an approach of which I continue to be sceptical in regard to the suggestion, in this recent volume, that area studies specialists should devote themselves to the development of "mid-range concepts", and "cross-cultural translation", which includes all those other elements

with which, we must remind ourselves, we have been engaged since the creation of area studies as a separate field of academic endeavour in the immediate post-Second World War period: these comprise linguistic competence; “grounded knowledge” with frequent references to the importance of historical and geographical contextualization; and inter- and multi-disciplinary engagement. The proposal that we develop mid-range concepts is especially vague: including that of the concept of “social order” (a complex concept in itself), and the attempt to connect “local realities” (derived from research in area studies) to “concepts and theorizing” and to something which one contributor to the volume refers to as “global ethnography”. We must also take into account the changing character of Southeast Asian Studies and its increasing domestication and localization, which, in turn, requires us to qualify and modify our perspectives on what defines area studies.

What exercises Mielke and Hornidge is the problem and process of increasing mobility in a globalizing world, and how regional constructions have to address the movement of people, commodities, capital, ideas, and images, and the increasing power of the internet, electronic communication and the global media. It also expresses an underlying anxiety among scholars and practitioners in area studies in their need to continue to justify what they do and what they have been doing for over 70 years since the American government and academy, among others, decided that area studies was worthy of scholarly attention. In the foreword to the volume James D. Sidaway suggests that area studies is “an enduring source of fascination” and that this book “marks a coming of age” (2017: v). I wonder whether this expression of confidence can be supported. Overall the volume does not, in conceptual terms, suggest to me that area studies can produce something that it is arresting and distinctive. The mid-range concepts proposed have already been generated within disciplines; they are not the product

of area studies.

### III. ASEAN: the way forward?

From this brief critical diversion into a recently published book on area studies (and there will be more published, undoubtedly, within the next few years) I have therefore committed myself to what seems to be an impossible position, in stating that much of what has gone before in the academic construction of Southeast Asia remains problematical. One way in which we can save debate is simply accept, for most purposes, the ASEAN-defined parameters of the region and its institutionalization in the academy and in international affairs and diplomacy. In my own case, when I write or edit a general book on Southeast Asia I focus on the ten member states of the Association, and possibly Timor Leste. In doing this, those reading the book will know what I am talking about. This is my dilemma in writing in general terms about Southeast Asia, in that I have to make decisions about the audiences which I wish to address. The quite simple and straightforward way out is to use the definition as defined by ASEAN. Southeast Asia, in general publication terms, is ASEAN, no more, no less. And why should it be otherwise? But there is a complication which I will introduce a little later in this paper. In any case, I do not think that we shall ever agree about what constitutes the region in any cross-disciplinary debate.

In consequence of this decision to accede to an ASEAN definition of region, I may have assigned myself to a conceptual and analytical cul-de-sac, and to the very margins of academic debate on what constitutes Southeast Asia. But forgive me for returning to a position, arrived at quite independently, in this ongoing debate about the definition of Southeast Asia, a position that has been presented by Heather Sutherland (2005: 20 - 59) and her depiction of regions as "contingent devices". In spite of the travails and

misdirections of academic debate on the construction and rationale of regions, I remain a faithful disciple of Sutherland, as providing the most appropriate way to conceptualize Southeast Asia in intellectual terms (also see McVey 2005: 308 - 19, 1995). Her solution links, in a quite fundamental way, the problem of defining Southeast Asia with the consideration of the appropriate disciplinary-based methodologies to engage with the Southeast Asian region; McVey, in similar vein, says, we should be prepared to deal with several Southeast Asias (1995; and see Kratoska, Raben and Nordholt 2005a, 2005b). In this respect, the nation-state-based definition provided by ASEAN constitutes one major definition but it requires complementary categorizations as well.

But what does Sutherland mean by “contingency”? We are in a realm, I think, which I have occupied for most of my career in an area studies environment. We are not constructing coherent theoretical approaches to a set of research problems; we are not generating distinctive paradigms, even middle range concepts, or distinctive methods which have emerged exclusively from a multidisciplinary area studies programme of work, least of all from interdisciplinary endeavours; instead what we are doing is defining our chosen area in terms of shifting concerns and interests; we adopt ideas and geographical/locational boundaries according to the research problem defined; and we do this with no planned future agenda; and whatever comes our way in terms of a promising research project, often opportunistically, unexpectedly and randomly, we prepare as best we can to engage with what is presented to us; and we then do so imaginatively, using whatever research tools and concepts are available; and we operate with low-level concepts which are sufficient for our purposes and which do not comprise a coherent, integrated set of ideas (King 2009: 15-40; 2017b: 511-532). Nevertheless, here I return to my earlier argument; we can only do this within our disciplinary training, not with something which some

area studies specialists expect and hope will emerge by some spontaneous experience in a multidisciplinary environment.

But I would add a qualification to Sutherland's eloquent disquisition. Contingency is also something which is increasingly difficult to realize in personal academic decision-making and discussion about the issues and questions to be pursued. Researchers, especially, although not exclusively, locally-based researchers in the Southeast Asian region, no longer have complete discretion over what they define as a research problem and what they do to address it; indeed, much of what we now do, is defined by others: by university senior management; by an ethical, health and safety secretariat; by research funding bodies; by governments; by academic publishing conglomerates; by the policies of academic journals and their senior editors and editorial boards; and by a virtual world of political correctness, which involves a whole complex of NGOs, pressure groups, lobbies and government agencies.

#### **IV. ASEAN institutionalization: tourism as a case**

Like the European Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations has situated and embedded itself in its constituent member states. This is its mission; it is creating a regional culture, developing an ASEAN way of doing things, and implementing a bewildering range of policy and practical initiatives to integrate its members into a regionally coherent body. Member states have to surrender certain of their decision-making powers and their capacities to decide on behalf of their citizens to a greater supra-national organization. Some regional organizations have gone further than others in this adventure to stake a greater claim to a voice in the global community at the expense of the individual decision-making capacities of their member nation-states.

As an informative case-study, when I embarked on a project examining the administration of tourism development in ASEAN, I was particularly interested in how far the Association had developed a regional agenda (see, for details of ASEAN activities, King 2015b, 2018). The findings, at least in terms of meetings, committees and policies are impressive. And tourism is but one example of regional cultural construction; ASEAN is active in so many other fields (the building of a socio-cultural community; the rights of women and children; gender issues; education development, cooperation and exchange; sports; youth; museums; cultural and natural heritage; management of the arts; health; environment and conservation; rural development and poverty eradication; social welfare and development; working conditions and labour, and so on). It has also spawned a whole host of other regional initiatives, simply because the member states are part of a regional organization, whose mission is to promote regional integration and its associated bureaucratization. Create a bureaucracy and it usually takes on a life of its own. What would it do otherwise? However, I fully recognize that some member states in a regional body have greater degrees of leverage and manoeuvre than others; a regional organization is never a partnership of equals.

In the case of Southeast Asia, regional committees and organizations in tourism development abound. Some have been created by ASEAN itself; others have been formed by private interests and companies, or in joint ventures with public bodies. For example, following the 46<sup>th</sup> meeting of the ASEAN Tourism Ministers and the National Tourism Organizations in January 2017 a set of committees were created: the Tourism Competitiveness Committee; Sustainable and Inclusive Tourism Development Committee; Tourism Resourcing and Monitoring Committee; and the Tourism Professional Monitoring Committee.

Other developments comprise the ASEAN Tourism Forum,

which commenced its meetings from 1981 in Kuala Lumpur; the Forum comprises suppliers and buyers; meetings were held as follows during the last seven years: 2012, Indonesia, Manado; 2013, Lao PDR, Vientiane; 2014, Malaysia, Kuching; 2015 Myanmar, Nay Pyi Taw; 2016, Philippines, Manila; 2017, Singapore; (with the theme 'Shaping our Tourism Journey Together'); 2018, Thailand, Chiang Mai (with the current preoccupation expressed in the title of the programme of work 'ASEAN Sustainable Connectivity, Boundless Prosperity'); then there is the ASEAN Tourism Ministers Meeting dating from 1996 in Surabaya; the ASEAN National Tourism Organisations Meeting, with its 46th meeting in Vinh Phuc Province, Vietnam; the ASEAN Tourism Association, founded in 1971; and, as a clear expression of regional institutionalization, the ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan 2011-2015; and the current plan for 2016-2025; the ASEAN Tourism Marketing Strategy, 2012-2015, and with the recently introduced Strategy for 2017-2020; and finally, the Visit ASEAN Year from 1992 and the ASEAN Tourism Campaign 2002.

ASEAN has also made major statements about the identification and conservation of its cultural and natural heritage, and the relationships of these concerns to tourism development, as well as the recognition of the increasing availability of leisure time of growing numbers of ASEAN citizens to learn about and enjoy that heritage without threatening its sustainability for future generations. In the cultural field there have been numerous statements, policies and declarations, among them (1) The Strategic Plan on Culture and Arts, 2016-2025 promulgated by the relevant ASEAN Ministers, senior officials, and the ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information; (2) the Vientiane Declaration on Reinforcing Cultural Heritage Cooperation in ASEAN formulated by the ASEAN Heads of State in 2016; (3) the Declaration on Culture and Arts to Promote ASEAN's Identity Towards a Dynamic and Harmonious ASEAN

Community, pronounced following a meeting in Bandar Seri Begawan in 2016; (4) the Declaration on Culture for ASEAN Community's Sustainable Development, following the Hue meeting in 2014; (5) the ASEAN Declaration on Cultural Heritage issued by the ASEAN Foreign Ministers in 2013; (6) the Declaration on ASEAN Unity in Cultural Diversity in Bali in 2011; and (7) the ASEAN Declaration on Cultural Heritage issued in Bangkok in 2000, which marked the emerging significance of cultural heritage in ASEAN policy-making circles.

In regard to natural heritage ASEAN has also made substantial progress. At the meeting of the ASEAN Ministers responsible for the environment in 2003 it was decided to implement the ASEAN Heritage Parks programme; the ASEAN Centre of Biodiversity served as the secretariat of this initiative. To date 38 parks have been inscribed with all ASEAN countries represented (with Myanmar at 8 parks down to the Lao PDR and Brunei Darussalam with one each). The programme is designed to promote and organize the conservation and protection of biodiversity and exceptionally unique environments. What is more seven of these parks are also UNESCO World Heritage Sites, out of the 38 sites which UNESCO currently oversees and monitors.

Whether or not some of these policies and planning are realized in practice, in promoting regional tourism development across borders and in a cooperative spirit, I would suggest that this is not the primary object of the exercise. The decision-makers in ASEAN realize that there are major players in the tourism industry in the region, and that the nation-states which monopolize tourism in ASEAN will not surrender their advantages to other emerging tourism markets lightly; but they will cooperate with other member-states, if it is of advantage to them, in developing cross-national tourism packages and regional tourist hubs. But we have to accept that this is also an exercise in the tourism field which

has symbolic and cultural resonance. It is not just about on-the-ground results; it is about disseminating statements that ASEAN is a region which promotes a regional tourism strategy and a set of plans, whatever the practical results of those statements. I am not entirely sceptical about ASEAN's approach; I think it will have positive results, but these will not be at the expense of the major nation-states in the tourism industry.

My view overall is that tourism development is important for the Association because it enable several development and inter-regional co-operation initiatives which are usually less contentious modes of engagement; it is easier to organize cross-border package arrangements; it continues to permit the development of national tourism agendas as well as allowing the complementary development of cross-national packages; although, the industry is constantly upgrading skill levels, expertise and language abilities, it still depends on a low level of skills, and remuneration in the industry for many workers is still relatively low. But it does promote regional development in areas where there are few developmental alternatives. Finally, the purpose of this excursion into the field of tourism which has preoccupied me for some 30 years is that it confirms my view that if you want to write generally about Southeast Asia, then it is much more easy do so within the parameters set by ASEAN (see Hitchcock, King and Parnwell 1993, 2009, 2010). It also enables comparisons to be made between the different nation-states in the Southeast Asian region in terms of their achievements in the development of tourism and in their planned trajectories for the future.

## V. Culture and identity

Having declared that I am being ruthlessly pragmatic in the way in which I approach my definition of Southeast Asia in ASEAN terms

(in response primarily to the global publication regime and its permutations: see Cohen, Cohen and King 2017), Southeast Asia for me, in other respects, is intellectually, a fluid, open-ended, ever-changing concept (see, for example, King 2015a, 2016a). This is in stark contrast with my desire some 30 years ago to find a non-ASEAN way of arriving at a satisfying and defensible definition within a sociological and anthropological framework. Leaving aside the ASEAN definition, the region can be divided and extended for academic purposes, depending on our research interests. We can operate within and beyond its parameters.

I may now seem to be in an impasse, rather like the impasse that development studies experienced (interestingly another field of multidisciplinary studies which came to a dead-end in the 1990s, see Booth [1994]). I must add that I see gender studies going the same way in the era of globalization. Let me set out my thinking on this cultural direction. But keep in mind that this is a difficult transition for me as a British-trained social scientist who has to engage with the American-dominated field of cultural anthropology and a rather conservative sociology. I suppose my defense is that there was some multidisciplinary interest in the concept of culture and in cultural studies in the British academy (in such places as the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham from the 1960s led by Richard Hoggatt and Stuart Hall) even in the overwhelming environment of British studies of social structure and organization, political economy, structuralism, underdevelopment and dependency, and Marxist sociology; but also in the inspiring environment of Professor Wim Wertheim's Non-Western Sociology in Amsterdam and the work that emerged from it by Professor Syed Hussein Alatas in Malaysia and Singapore and carried forward by Professor Syed Farid Alatas in the current generation of scholars. Although these were my main influences, I was also attracted to the possibilities of cultural studies through my

growing interest in ethnicity and identity in the 1990s.

The cultural turn in social science emerged much more decisively during the 1980s with the increasing interest in post-modernism, post-structuralism, and post-colonialism and the multidisciplinary enterprise of cultural studies, focusing on the expanding impact of the global media, and communication and information technology on developing societies, as well as the increasing mobility of people and objects (Jenks 1993: 136-158). In Southeast Asia these cultural interests have flourished in the concerns among social scientists with “ethnicity” and “identity” (Brown 1994; Kahn 1998; King and Wilder 1982, 2003 [2006]). Goh Beng Lan has said appositely “What appears to characterize late twentieth century modernity - whether Southeast Asian or Western - is the concern with the issue of cultural identity and difference” (Goh 2002: 21). Moreover, the centrality of culture in Southeast Asia has encouraged some social scientists to pursue these cultural expressions in order to develop a particular way of understanding and defining the region (Bowen 1995, 2000; Steedly 1999; and see King 2001, 2005, 2006).

I have already explored the concept of culture and its relationship to ethnicity in some detail in other publications in regard to Southeast Asian identities and regional definition, and there is little point in rehearsing the arguments here (2015a, 2016a, 2016b, 2017c). What does require further elaboration are the ways in which culture and identity enable us to expand and contract our analytical categories both within and outside an ASEAN-defined Southeast Asia, without becoming too obsessed with formulating an exclusive definition of the region.

## **VI. Contraction, expansion, borders and boundaries**

A focus on ethnic identities, and on processes of cultural differentiation

and convergence enables us to examine categories of analysis at different scales or levels of magnitude and contrast (Hitchcock and King 1997). The colonial carving out and the cartographic fixing of boundaries and demarcated territories which were bequeathed ASEAN and its constituent nation-states required a “filling in” of these spaces with identified political units carrying constructed national identities. However, by its very nature “the definition and domain of nationhood are not given... [rather they are] ... always unfixed, ambiguous, self-contradictory, too restricted, yet too extensive” (Thongchai 1994: 173). In all cases identities, ethnicities, nations and regions are constructed (or “imagined” or “invented”; Anderson 2006; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), and as constructions, they are subject to debate, disagreement and transformation. Certain identities, particularly national ones are usually more resistant to change than others, such as minority ethnic identities, at the sub-national level. Nevertheless, these ethnic identities frequently cut across political boundaries, both within the ASEAN-defined region and beyond it, and it is in these circumstances that we can expand and contract our definitions of region, or more particularly the analytical categories which inform our research.

It has long been established that the several criteria for delineating identities rarely coincide; they overlap and cross-cut in complex ways (Moerman 1965). Individuals and groups can also embrace more than one identity according to context and discourse (Leach 1954). The acceptance of these simple facts which focus on the construction, expression, representation, imaging and transformation of identity can therefore include populations beyond the ASEAN-defined entity which are culturally related to those within the region, as well as giving us the capacity to examine ASEAN as a segment of the global system which can also be defined in terms of culture and identity.

In recognizing that Southeast Asia is not a unitary and fixed

region, other than in the increasingly concretized, essentialized and culturalized body of ASEAN, we can then move on to disaggregate the populations and territories of our variegated and diverse Southeast Asia. We can do this by addressing the constituent nation-states of ASEAN as entities obviously defined by political criteria but also demarcated and expressed by a constructed cultural identity, and as units continuously engaged in the process of imagining and creating those identities. Then at the sub-national level we have to engage with constituent ethnic groups, some of which are contained within nation-state boundaries, and others which cross boundaries. Indeed in addressing the issue of boundary-crossing and the fact that ethnic groups are distributed across territorially demarcated states within and beyond the ASEAN-defined Southeast Asia, the interrelated concepts of culture and identity can comfortably handle these circumstances, specifically by having the capacity to engage with units of analysis at various levels and scales (extra-regional, regional and sub-regional).

Examples are numerous: within Southeast Asia and at the sub-national level there are assemblages or congeries of populations or ethnic groups which can be productively analyzed together: northern Luzon, central Borneo, Highland Burma, the hill areas of Thailand, interior Sumatra, and so on (see King and Wilder 2003 [2006] for examples). Ethnicities, majorities and minorities within nation-states and the interaction between nation-building policies and practices and the responses of ethnic minorities can also be profitably addressed at the sub-regional level. More ambitiously, mainland Southeast Asia or the Malay-Indonesian archipelago as major sub-divisions of the region might be examined, not as coherent and integrated entities, but as sites and populations which are serially connected in terms of what Rodney Needeham has explored in the concept of “polythetic classification” (1975).

Within and beyond the region, the immediate construction which comes to mind, which requires an approach bringing together the twin perspectives of culture and identity, is that of Zomia, a cultural and geographical concept originally formulated by van Schendel (2002), which embraces a large part of the highlands of mainland Southeast Asia and adjacent uplands beyond, and the adaptation of Zomia by Scott (2009), which has been referred to alternatively as the Southeast Asian Massif (Michaud 2016).

## **VII. The return to the “old” Southeast Asia**

These shifting frames of reference seem to me to offer more analytical promise than approaches which attempt a definitive regional demarcation. Some recent volumes will suffice. The introductory history volume by Osborne, now in its 12<sup>th</sup> edition (2016), does not develop the arguments that have been forwarded during the past 15 to 20 years about the problematical character of Southeast Asia (see, for example, Kratoska et al. 2005a). The author chooses to dwell on established propositions: there is unity and similarity in the social (kinship, family, gender), religious (court rituals and so on), political-international (a regional pattern of international relations), and linguistic fields (this latter is very dubious). But he then addresses the considerable diversity found in the region which seems to overwhelm his consistent argument for similarity (2016: 4-17). Osborne’s Southeast Asia is based on the standard nation-state-ASEAN definition. Similarly Neher’s book, in its second edition, rehearses the established arguments about unity and diversity, and also opts for the nation-state-based region (including Timor Leste) (2010). As does Rush’s very recent introduction, which again provides us with diversity and yet talks vaguely about “shared traditions”, but also the very old argument about the strategic and geo-political position of Southeast Asia wedged between India and China (2018).

Moving on, Winzeler's book which focuses on ethnography, ethnology and change among the peoples of Southeast Asia, accepts that the delimitation of Southeast Asia is problematical in that, in his view, it was "a creation of European colonialism, rather than a reflection of natural, geographical, cultural, or linguistic boundaries" (2011: 1). He is, at once, sceptical that Southeast Asia has socio-cultural and geographical substance and unity in that the political boundaries of nation-states cannot be tidily mapped onto the distribution of ethnic groups. Instead Winzeler chooses to address the character of Southeast Asia in a series of contrasts, acknowledging that the region is diverse rather than unified (2011: 6). Some of Winzeler's contrasts were explored early on in anthropology (see for example, Burling 1965 [1992]; Leach 1954). He draws attention to the differentiation between upland/highland and lowland populations, majorities and minorities, the local and the immigrant (overseas minority) communities, mainland and island cultures and languages, and world religions and local religions. However, these contrasts do not serve to define the region.

Finally, Anthony Reid, a distinguished historian of the region, who has been a strong advocate of a Southeast Asian identity, continues to argue strongly for its integrity, in his recent and impressively detailed general history (2015; and see King 2017d). However, we find that in defining the region it is constructed and envisioned as an entity defined in negative terms; 'Not China, not India' (2015: 26-29). This seems a little unfortunate in relation to Reid's commitment to the positive virtues, genius, shared history and social organization, and the character of Southeast Asia. In this juxtaposition and contrast we then must engage with the problem of defining what is "India" and "China". This is problematical. Indeed, Reid says "the region has its own distinct environment that produced many common features of material culture and social structure, and preserved political and cultural diversity by limiting

the extent to which foreign models could assimilate what had gone before” (2015: 26). But he acknowledges that the region received “most of its modern gene pool and language stocks from the north, in the Asian mainland now occupied by China, and its religions and written cultures (except the Viet) from the west” (ibid.). Up until the formation of ASEAN and the consolidation of a regional identity and the development of “a common front” against China in particular, I for one continue to struggle with claims for a Southeast Asian distinctiveness. Leaving aside Reid’s geographical focus, he acknowledges the region’s diversity: imperial divisions, linguistic complexities, religious-cultural pluralities, social and national inequalities, and the artificial nature of political boundaries between Southeast Asia and its neighbors. His other defining features of Southeast Asian regionalism are gender (“a ‘Southeast Asian’ pattern of relatively balanced roles and economic autonomy for women and men”, and “the complementarity of male and female principles”, 2015: 24), and the “softness” of Southeast Asia’s nation-states (2015: 421-422). I continue to entertain a degree of scepticism with these attempts to seek definitions of a Southeast Asian region distinct from China and India (which are in themselves relatively modern constructions), but, as Reid indicates, undoubtedly the region has gained a coherence and solidity with the development of ASEAN.

Reid argues, in the Preface to his book, that with reference to nation-states, “there is a seductive pressure to use these known contemporary boundaries to describe locations in an earlier period, thereby encouraging the inappropriate reading-back of national units into the past” (2015: xx). He prefers to deploy geographical features such as the “Irrawaddy”, “Chao Phraya”, “Mekong” and “Red Rivers”; and instead of “Malay Peninsula” he prefers to use “Southeast Asian Peninsula” or “the Peninsula”. However, the Mekong is given brief references in the index but the other rivers are not. Thus, for someone wishing to navigate the historical,

geographical, ethnic and political complexities which Reid addresses in such admirable detail, then they will not find their way using the index; invariably some of the main locations in the index are the nation-states of Southeast Asia and not the innovative geographical features which Reid wishes to draw to the reader's attention.

### VIII. Conclusions

In this paper I argue, as I have done elsewhere, that in terms of the concepts of culture and identity, it is possible to accommodate what we conceptualize as a Southeast Asian culture as spilling over, intruding into, and interacting and engaging with the areas which are now defined as "Indian" and "Chinese". In other words, we should not counterpose Southeast Asia negatively with these neighbouring Asian nation-states. We need to implicate them in the process of defining Southeast Asia. For certain purposes we should also continue to define Southeast Asia in ASEAN terms, and recognize that the Association is constructing a set of cultural practices and processes to promote regional identity. Therefore, the main purpose of the excursion into the seemingly never-ending debates on the question of "What is Southeast Asia?", is to propose that we engage more thoroughly with the twin concepts of culture and identity. They do not provide perfect solutions to the problem. But in the Southeast Asian case a concept of cultural identity which can be deployed to address different scales, levels and kinds of identity, and the shifting and fluid nature of how local communities identify themselves and how they are identified by others, might provide a potential route out of the difficulties with which the field of multidisciplinary area studies has been grappling for some considerable time.

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