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Introduction to the Special Issue

Debating Southeast Asia

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The papers in this special issue were presented at the 2019 ISEAS-BUFS International Conference organized by the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies at Busan University of Foreign Studies on 23-25 May 2019. The theme of the conference focused on "The Recognition and Construction of Southeast Asia as a Whole" and the eight papers in this current collection were drawn from three of the panels on the basis of the view that there was a degree of coherence and interconnection between them. The panels were "Methodological Quest: Creative Approaches to Southeast Asian Studies" (Henley, King, Curaming and Ferguson); "Centrality of Southeast Asia in Global Issues" (Khoo); and "Recognizing and Constructing Southeast Asian Cultural Identity – History" (Keck, Ooi and Iqbal). In their different ways the papers explored the issues arising from defining and constructing Southeast Asia as a region in the era of globalization, which addressed considerations of whether or not the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) might extend its membership to include such countries as Timor-Leste and Australia (and New Zealand), the contribution of Southeast Asian Studies as

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a “grounded”, multidisciplinary enterprise in understanding Southeast Asian cultures, histories and identities, and more general issues raised by area studies and its place in academic activity in such arenas of debate as climate change and environmental crises.

Some of the contributors took a more positive view of Southeast Asia as a reality or at least reaffirmed the importance of local knowledge and contextualization; some drew attention to the neglect of Southeast Asia in international or global history in spite of the region’s historical, cultural, political and economic importance; whilst others took a somewhat sceptical, questioning view of the “reality” of Southeast Asia.

Strong support for the “reality” of Southeast Asia was provided by David Henley in his examination of the perspectives and views of those who live in Southeast Asia, based on opinion poll material, organized primarily at NUS, Singapore, and the increasing role of ASEAN and other pan-Southeast Asian institutions in developing a consciousness of regional identity. He is expressing the views of those who live and work in Southeast Asia (though the surveys tend to focus on the educated segment of ASEAN, with the addition of data from a newspaper poll). Nevertheless, he has marshalled criticisms of an academic view of Southeast Asia, expressed in formidable terms in the work of Willem van Schendel, and then he counterposes van Schendel‘s view against the perspectives expressed in “local voices”. Arguing against the skepticism of a significant number of Southeast Asianists about the “existence” of the region and those who argue for a fluid and ill-defined concept of the region, he proposes that increasing numbers of Southeast Asians accept it as a cultural, geographical and institutional “reality” and identify with it. He joins others in addressing the importance of ASEAN, since its foundation in 1967 and its subsequent expansion in the 1990s in promoting Southeast Asia as a defined region comprising ten nation-states and securing its recognition both within and beyond its now-defined ASEAN boundaries. Clearly, the relationship between ASEAN and a Southeast Asian cultural area that does not precisely coincide with a nation-state definition of Southeast Asia will continue to be debated, as will the status of the geographically, culturally and historically complex borderlands of

mainland Southeast Asia. But there is no doubt that ASEAN has served to give the region a "concreteness" which it would not otherwise have had.

The doubts about Southeast Asia as a region in its own right are raised by Stephen Keck and Ooi Keat Gin in their exploration of major studies in international, transnational or global history and their relative or absolute neglect of the importance of Southeast Asia in the interpretation of trajectories and developments in world history. Southeast Asia is largely "unseen", "silent" and "unarticulated", says Keck. The global historians are listed then criticized, or at least commented on: John Morris Roberts, Chris (C.A.) Bayly, Jurgen Osterhammel, Ian Robert Tyrrell, Sebastian Conrad, among others. The "autonomous voices" of Southeast Asia have not been sufficiently heard. Indeed, to counter this neglect or "silence" in historical narratives Stephen Keck draws attention to the important contributions of such writers as John Furnivall, Clifford Geertz, Benedict Anderson and James Scott in demonstrating that studies in the culture, history and politics of Southeast Asia have significance far beyond the boundaries of the region, just as there have been crucial historical events and social processes in the region which have resonance and importance in other parts of the world.

Ooi Keat Gin, on the other hand, draws attention to the fact that historians of Southeast Asia, with few exceptions, have not presented the region in a global context. He then takes us through a whole range of Southeast Asian contributions to world history as a "pivotal crossroads" and its interconnectedness with other regions of the world: cultural, economic, political. Both Keck and Ooi also consider global historical narratives as constructions to serve the particular objectives and interests of historians and they ponder what a global or international history might look like from a Southeast Asian perspective. Keck then presents ways in which the "visibility", "audibility" or "augmentation" of Southeast Asia might be enhanced through such devices as "visual augmented reality" and "soft power" (tertiary education, tourism, heritage, shared histories) to those who live outside the region or have very little knowledge of it. Ooi, on the other hand, examines the reasons for this lack of locally-based attention to the region in international history, and he

points to motivations, inclinations and training within scholarly circles in the Southeast Asian academy as a possible explanation. Core-periphery relations, Southeast Asian parochialism and a failure to engage with an English-language-based international publication regime seem to provide plausible reasons for a Southeast Asian historical impasse in international terms. Ooi directs his attention to the Malaysian academy in this regard.

An interesting departure is to consider what Southeast Asia might look like if it was expanded. Henley's argument is that ASEAN gives a robustness, an identity, a "reality" to the Southeast Asian region, but, as Keck points out, there have been discussions about whether or not Australia (or even New Zealand) might join, and indicates discussions that have taken place in Australia about its regional identity; some senior Australian politicians and decision-makers see their future and identity as a Southeast one. The problem of their non-Asian identity, however, looms large. Not so with Timor-Leste. Khoo Ying Hooi explores the recent problematical history of East Timor and its desire to join ASEAN, formally expressed in March 2011. It clearly has a strong case, given that it shares a border with Indonesia, was once incorporated forcibly within Indonesia, and culturally and historically it is certainly part of Southeast Asia. However, as she indicates, there has been a certain reluctance within influential quarters within ASEAN to facilitate Timor-Leste's succession, and problems within Timor-Leste itself about its identity as a young country within which nation-building is still ongoing and in which the development of regional identity is still being worked out. Moreover, among some elite circles in Timor-Leste its continuing connections with a Portuguese-speaking, Lusophone world is still valued. The struggle to find an identity – national and regional – in a young, recently independent country is a fascinating study of the uncertainties and anxieties of building a nation, but, at the same time, having to confront the issue of its place in the world.

We also have reference in this special issue to the possibilities of Papua New Guinea joining ASEAN, though this now seems unlikely. Then there is the intriguing case of Sri Lanka, which is "outside the geographical area" of ASEAN but, in an important

sense, through Lord Louis Mountbatten's South East Asia Command, headquartered there during the Pacific War, and its historical and cultural connections with the Theravada Buddhist polities in mainland Southeast Asia, it has a claim to membership.

Then, from well-worn debates, we enter another that, if not equally well-worn, is becoming so. This comprises the reconfiguration or the reconceptualization of region and area studies. The concept of "Zomia" presented to us originally by Willem van Schendel and then developed into James Scott's thesis of a "retreat from the state" and "a zone of refuge", is here given an interesting turn by Iftekhar Iqbal. We must also remind ourselves of Jean Michaud's contemplations on the concept of the Southeast Asian massif. Rather than an emphasis on minority/upland-lowland/state relations, we might examine, with profit, the interconnections between the region of Zomia, which embraces part of Southeast Asia, but which goes beyond it into South and East Asia. The riverine connections which Iftekhar Iqbal has investigated seem to give a coherence to a region constructed by social scientists. It is perhaps as "real" as the "reality" of ASEAN and its relation to a definition of Southeast Asia, though based on a different set of criteria. He examines the intricate interconnections, the "water-world", between the Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Salween, Mekong and Yangtze rivers, as he says "spread out like a necklace around Yunnan". These are "ecologically contiguous areas". In an important sense, he re-energizes the debate between those who search for Southeast Asia and its place in the world, and those who go beyond, to the possibilities of "a greater Southeast Asia" in interaction with Timor-Leste, Australia (and New Zealand), and in Iftekhar Iqbal's paper, the "conversations" that have taken place and continue to take place "between parts of the Southeast Asian massif through to the expansive plain land and the vast coastal rim of the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea". Interestingly he deploys the concept of a "holon", and its reference to a network of relationships, in this case a network of rivers and the unities which it provides and which transcends the artificial boundaries of nation-states and regions.

Another contribution to the debate on Southeast Asia, which returns to an old theme in the construction of Southeast Asia and

the apparent genesis of Southeast Asian Studies, is that of American dominance in this enterprise and their role in giving shape and content to the region wedged between China and India. Instead King's paper explores critically and historically some of the popular academic views concerning the development of the study of Southeast Asia through the lens of the contributions of particular scholars and institutions. He questions American dominance, and proposes that much of what came to be Southeast Asian Studies was generated within the region itself and was not an external construct. He then suggests that the bipolar (and misleading) divisions between outsiders and insiders, local and foreign, Euro-American and Southeast Asian, in framing the debates about the study of the region, need to be rethought.

The scholars who created Southeast Asia had their roots in the 1920s and the 1930s in Southeast Asia, and the main players in this academic genesis were both insiders and outsiders working in higher education institutions and government departments in Southeast Asia, not in the USA. There was an earlier Austro-German (and Japanese) input as well. Moreover, some of the early scholars in the creation of Southeast Asia as a region gave fuel, energy and expertise to American efforts to create Southeast Asian Studies (O.W. Wolters, Benedict Anderson, Karl Pelzer, Harry Benda, Paul Mus, Robert (Baron) von Heine-Geldern, DGE Hall, Paul Wheatley, Jan Otto Marius Broek, John S. Furnivall). Claims that seek to establish the genesis of particular kinds of academic study are problematical when we accept that scholarly activity is global and is unconstrained by specific locations. King also proposes a qualification of Anthony Reid's "saucer model" in the conceptualization of Southeast Asia as a region. The conclusion in his trawl through the early literature on Southeast Asia is that the US provided an institutional basis for Southeast Asian Studies, but in an important intellectual sense they did not create it.

In an intriguing paper which contemplates the ways in which area studies specialists and historians might address environmental crises and climate change, generated by human activities, in what has come to be referred to as "the Anthropocene", Rommel Curaming argues for the continued relevance of area studies expertise in this

debate. He engages critically with Dipesh Chakrabarty's work on the Anthropocene, specifically Chakrabarty's position in regard to historical understandings of what some scholars argue might be a prelude to the "end of history" (indeed the end of humankind), in the disruption between our consciousness of the connections between past, present and future and in our inabilities (or unwillingness) to understand an uncertain future. In his exploration of the various "facets" of history, Curaming also addresses, with some skepticism, the perspectives which historians might adopt in the context of Chakrabarty's call for a non-human-centric history, and those which are expressed in post-humanist historical understandings. Against a conception of region and area studies which focuses on a collectivity of nation-states, Curaming proposes nevertheless, that, in coming to terms with such global phenomena as environmental change, the sensitivities, sensibilities and commitments which area specialists embrace (outside of politico-territorial definitions of region) are important in understanding local and regional contexts, variations and adaptations to environmental processes, as well as the indigenous knowledge which has been developed in pursuing livelihoods within different ecologies. In other words, "provincializing", recognizing and understanding the localization of human agency in the Anthropocene might be a way forward. We are invited to locate the local, and emplace it, in the global.

The final paper by Jane Ferguson takes us on a connected route to area studies, one which is truly global. She asks "Can area studies take to the air?" Area studies locates itself in places, as Curaming proposes in his paper; it is "emplaced", but with international air travel we enter a different world, just as rivers in Zomia take us beyond fixed places. Ferguson takes us on a journey, with the armoury of a regional expert, and ethnographer, a Thai specialist, who has worked in Thailand and speaks Thai, and who undertook research amongst airline customer service workers, and ground and cabin crews in Thailand and Myanmar. Let us forget Zomia for a moment and Southeast Asia and, follow Ferguson in examining the airline cabin as a field for ethnographic study, and a location for political and cultural processes. Using her knowledge of Southeast Asian cabin crews, she examines the 1990 hijack of Thai

Airways TG 305 from an emplaced cultural perspective. It is an extraordinary event, but one which is embedded in a cultural and historical matrix. These are not non-places; they are sites of socio-cultural encounters which, as Ferguson explains, are part of the political histories of Myanmar and Thailand and the culture of flight attendants. What is more, the actors are agents, particularly the cabin crew working out their own rationalizations and actions in relation to their position within Thai Airways and its corporate ethos (which is concerned to present an image of crew unity), and the wider world of Thai identity. It is further complicated by an engagement with Burmese politics and identity and the ways in which a Thai cabin crew attempt to address this crisis and its context.

What do we conclude from this excursion into a further debate on Southeast Asia? It is difficult to reconcile the approaches in some of the papers; this is the stuff of debate. There still seems to be a difference between those who do discern a Southeast Asian entity and identity and those who are still doubtful. But, in my view, the work of ASEAN in building a regional identity has contributed to a strengthening of the position that Southeast Asia is becoming "embodied". As an anthropologist, I would still wish to retain a degree of flexibility in defining Southeast Asia, in that an ASEAN-based definition, though well-delimited in terms of nation-state boundaries with clear rules about membership and the criteria required to join, still excludes populations which I would consider culturally (linguistically) and historically to be "Southeast Asian". It would also present difficulties in entering the terrain of global climatic change; the flow of people, goods and ideas along rivers; and our experiences of international air travel. There is also the view from a global or international history perspective that Southeast Asia has been of little account in these narratives, which again suggests in terms of regional identity and a voice in the world, that it is found wanting. This might help provide us with one of the reasons in explaining the sense of threat and crisis that Southeast Asianists experience.

The issue of the expansion of ASEAN is an interesting one. On what basis might Timor-Leste and then Australia (and even New

Zealand) be admitted? Is the main consideration in ASEAN to maintain a cultural integrity, and a spirit of Asianness (though different from South Asia and East Asia), and one which is in some way historically grounded. If that is the case then only Timor-Leste might eventually be given permission to join. Sri Lanka and Papua New Guinea are equally problematic.

We then have to continue to scrutinize and critically evaluate the continuing mantra that Southeast Asia is an external construction of the Western powers, particularly the USA during and immediately after the Second World War and that Southeast Asian Studies was primarily an American project. Moreover, the continuing and now tedious debate about the academic credentials of area studies and, in this case, Southeast Asian Studies needs to be put to rest, though I suspect that it will not go quietly. There is little more to say. Yet a grounded area studies perspective, as demonstrated in this special issue, can be sufficiently versatile to capture the need to "take to the air", to help address and adapt to climate change, and to journey the interconnected rivers of the mainland, and not be necessarily emplaced within what is defined as Southeast Asia in ASEAN terms. Nevertheless, it must be accepted that ASEAN will continue to embody one definition of what Southeast Asia is and what it might become.

Whatever we have said here about debating Southeast Asia, undoubtedly the debate will continue. In a world in which, as academics, we publish or perish, contention and the "rivalries for intellectual capital" will intensify. This special issue is but a small part of these debates and rivalries.

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