

Some reflections on Southeast Asia and its position in academia

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Abstract

This study aims to define and understand the concept of “Southeast Asia” from an interdisciplinary perspective. It examines what countries such as Cambodia, the Philippines, East Timor and Myanmar have in common besides their geographical contiguity. In our search for commonalities between the culturally and linguistically diverse inhabitants of this vast region, we stumble upon a prolonged but now-discredited tradition of academic neglect towards the “pre-civilised” elements of Southeast Asia. In the spirit of colonial hierarchic thinking, attention traditionally went to the civilisational powerhouses of China and India. Southeast Asia was often regarded as a cultural dependence of the latter, rendering the entire region as “Greater” or “Further India”. Eventually, the geopolitical developments of the Second World War and thereafter gave “Southeast Asia” its conceptual validity, while its analytical functionality remained poorly appreciated. Thereupon, this study puts forward arguments in support of the cultural interconnectedness of this region. It is argued that contact with outsiders – first Indians, later Europeans and others – triggered the conceptualisation of such notions as ethnicity and “Southeast Asianness”. Indeed, non-Southeast Asians have played – and continue to play – key roles in the history of Southeast Asia; imperialistic rivalries and internal fragmentation have shaped the region into what it is now. Bearing this in mind, “Southeast Asia” remains a useful discursive tool for analysing both historical and contemporary issues in and beyond the region.

INTRODUCTION

As all Southeast Asians residing abroad will have experienced, people often get their identity wrong. While Thai people would have surprisingly little problems picking a Lao or Khmer person out of a line-up, Malaysians recognise a Singapore accent at once and Indonesians can

OPENING PANEL

determine the regional origins of their compatriots simply by inspecting their physical and linguistic features, such distinctions play no role outside their own local setting. Southeast Asians living in western countries, the Middle East or East Asia may have mixed feelings about being mistaken for one of their “neighbours”, especially in light of negative stereotypes attached to certain Southeast Asian nationalities (“mail order brides”, “domestic workers”, “terrorists”, “lady boys”, etc.). Yet, after moving to a completely different part of the world, Southeast Asian students, professionals and migrants realise that they are compartmentalised into a category previously deemed irrelevant. They have, voluntarily or not, become part of a wider identity. With these issues in mind, this paper examines the history and usefulness of “Southeast Asia” as an analytical tool. Although the term has been attested in the English language since the mid-19th century (Emmerson, 1984:5), it is argued that the conventional perception of this region as a political, cultural or historical entity is of relatively young age.

A geographical area home to more than 600 million people and 1400 languages, one may well argue that Southeast Asia’s academic substantiality is significantly mitigated by its internal diversity. Is it even useful to talk about Southeast Asia? Some recent controversies illustrate just how divided this region is in terms of history and culture. In Thailand, historically sensitive movies such as *Bang Rajan* (2000) and *Thao Suranaree* (planned in 2001 but never materialised) have alienated their neighbours to the east and to the west. Meanwhile, “heritage theft” issues about the origins of the *batik* technique, the spicy meat dish known as *rendang* and the song *Rasa Sayang* augmented ongoing tensions between Indonesia and Malaysia. Cases like these illustrate how Southeast Asians have predominantly created their identities along the lines of post-colonial nation states, rather than cultural continuities and discontinuities. Pan-regionalism, on a scale comparable to Europe, the Middle East or sub-Saharan Africa, remains relatively exceptional. On the other hand, Southeast Asian leaders have frequently called attention to “Asian values”, notoriously in reply to western critiques on human rights violations. This does imply a certain sense of otherness, albeit in a hitherto rather ill-defined sense. This paper, thereupon, attempts to give shape to the exogenous character of Southeast Asia as a cultural region.

The geographical demarcation of Southeast Asia is relatively straightforward; all the area east of the deltaic plains of the Ganges, south of the easternmost slopes of the Himalaya range and west of the Wallace line constitutes a single ecological unit. This region is characterised by a tropical monsoonal climate, lush, green vegetation and the predominance of water, be it in the form of great rivers such as the Irrawaddy, the Mekong and the Chao Phraya, or in the form of vast island chains and archipelagos. Upon this set of

OPENING PANEL

biogeographical observations, several scholars would remark that Southeast Asia is little more than a cartographic convenience. Like a “unicorn” or a “spaceship”, we tend to talk about “Southeast Asia” as if it has achieved conceptual reality (Emmerson, 1984:1; Waddell, 1972:3). Yet, by doing so, are we not guilty of inventing a new phenomenon rather than analysing an existing one? Are we dealing with what has been called a “contrived identity” (cf. Reynolds, 1995:439)? In the words of Donald K. Emmerson, director of the Southeast Asia Forum at Stanford University, the search for Southeast Asia is a search for the “non-existent cousin of the coelacanth” (cf. McVey, 2005).

Like area studies in general, the field of Southeast Asian studies and its somewhat nebulous academic value has triggered a great deal of scholarly debate. “Having helped create these Frankenstein monsters,” argues the Indian historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam (1999:296), “we are obliged to praise them for their beauty, rather than grudgingly acknowledge their limited functional utility”. On the other hand, the “field” of area studies conditions profound knowledge of local languages and cultures in a given region. Proficiency in national and regional languages, after all, is a key to understanding any region. The resultant, cross-cultural perspectives often trigger conceptual innovation and theoretical sophistication. Hence, various academic concepts that have revolutionised the social sciences, including the “bilateral or cognatic kinship system”, “plural society”, “loose structure”, “economic dualism”, “(agri)cultural involution”, “thick description”, “theatre state”, “imagined communities”, “galactic polity”, “geobody”, “weapons of the weak” and “moral economy”, have their roots in Southeast Asia studies (Chou, 2006:1; Schulte Nordholt, 2004:44). What, then, is the value of “Southeast Asia” as an analytical construct?

STUDYING SOUTHEAST ASIA

In an increasingly interdependent and globalised world, present-day Southeast Asia forms the stage of a myriad of transnational phenomena, ranging from large multinationals such as AirAsia and the CIMB Group to complex sociological and environmental issues. The ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) has endorsed and facilitated economic, political and cultural integration throughout the region. And, while national citizenship imposes few limitations to activities abroad for businesspeople and diplomats, in this part of the world we may just as well encounter migrant workers, pirates, illegal loggers and terrorists operating beyond political borders. Research on such region-specific phenomena

OPENING PANEL

would justify the presence of specialised Southeast Asia departments. However, as will be argued below, it is only recently that we have started seeing Southeast Asia as an interconnected region.

As the motto of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London tells us, “knowledge is power”. Soon after European imperialism gained a stronghold throughout Southeast Asia, government officials developed a keen interest in the cultures of their colonised societies, resulting, among others, in the standardisation of their languages and the documentation of traditional power structures among rural populations. Nevertheless, India had been Europe’s main attraction in the east ever since the expansive ambitions of Alexander the Great, while Southeast Asia was typically seen as an appendix to the former (Kulke, 1990:8). This attitude is clearly reflected in toponyms such as “*India extra Gangem*”, “Further India”, “the East Indies”, “the Indian archipelago”, “*Insulinde*” and, indeed, “Indonesia”. If not associated with India, the Southeast Asian mainland was occasionally situated within the influence sphere of Asia’s other great civilisation: China, yielding epithets such as “Cochin China”, “the Little Dragon”, or the hybrid form “Indochina”. As a result, Southeast Asia was always studied under the umbrella of the generic oriental institutes that were established in Great Britain, France and the Netherlands. Incidentally, this provided the advantage that most scholars were trained Indologists or Sinologists, facilitating the translation and promulgation of some of the earliest textual sources on Southeast Asia in Sanskrit and classical Chinese. This, in combination with temple excavations and other archaeological findings, greatly increased European – and local – knowledge on the elite civilisations of Southeast Asian antiquity. Much less was known about the lives of ordinary people.

Meanwhile, a keen interest in Southeast Asia developed outside the western world. China, with its diasporic communities and economic interests in Southeast Asia (*Nányáng*; 南洋), was home to the world’s first Southeast Asia centre that opened in 1928 (Kratoska et al., 2005:8; McVey, 2005:310). Japan, too, conceived Southeast Asia (*Nanyō*; 南洋 or *Tōnan Ajiya*; 東南アジア) as a cohesive region before this idea developed in the west (Hajime, 2005:85; Hayami, 2006:66). Ironically, the Second World War destroyed the colonial distinctions between different Southeast Asian territories and made the region visible, legitimate and politically significant (Emmerson, 1984:7-9; Hayami, 2006:66). During this period, policy-makers, journalists and academics began referring to the region as Southeast Asia (e.g. Panikkar, 1943). The ensuing Cold War and the widespread fear for a communist block from Vietnam to Indonesia sparked a renewed interest in the region throughout the

OPENING PANEL

western world, prompting the establishment of several Southeast Asia departments in especially the US (Aung-Thwin, 1995:7; Chou, 2006:4-6). Initially, the boundaries of Southeast Asia were somewhat unclear. Southern China and eastern India were excluded for political, rather than cultural or historical, reasons. Interestingly, some of the separatist groups in India's easternmost "Frontier States" still utilise their cultural and historical bonds with Southeast Asia to justify their anti-Delhi sentiments. On the other hand, the status of Hongkong, Taiwan and Sri Lanka into the analytical construct of Southeast Asia and its political reality remained a matter of debate throughout the 1950s. In addition, the inclusion of Vietnam and the Philippines was, and continues to be, subject to ambiguity. To some extent, Vietnam's long history of Chinese occupation and the relative isolation of the Philippines from pan-Southeast Asian historical developments make these two countries stand apart from the rest. East Timor, too, provides a unique case, being the only Southeast Asian country that is not (yet) a member of the ASEAN.

The establishment of the ASEAN in 1967 and the Singapore-based ISEAS (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) in 1968 greatly increased and facilitated regional awareness among Southeast Asian countries. Meanwhile, interest in the region also grew in the Soviet Union, China, Japan and South Korea. The west, on the other hand, experienced a decline of Southeast Asia departments, partly because of the American episode in Vietnam and partly a result of the academic recessions of the 1970s (Chou, 2006:7-9). The question of whether Southeast Asia studies, often regarded as a post-colonial project of western scholars, still deserve a place in academia has spooked the discipline ever since (King, 2006:25; Reynolds, 1995:437). By this time, the academic community was, as the title of a well-known volume suggests, "in search of Southeast Asia" (Steinberg et al., 1971). In this search, the myopically nationalistic and simplified Southeast Asian historiographies (notably those of Myanmar, Indonesia and Thailand) and attempts at nation-building proved to be of little help. Having inherited and embraced their national borders from their colonial predecessors, the newly independent Southeast Asian nations were preoccupied with a completely different sort of justification: that of their territorial integrity. In their attempts at post-independent self-definition, decolonising states such as Indonesia and Cambodia gratefully exploited European knowledge – in particular temple excavations conducted under colonial archaeology departments – for the purposes of nation-building and tourism, revamping previously forgotten monuments such as the Borobudur and Angkor Wat into hallmarks of national pride.

The Southeast Asian academic community has hitherto not been able to formulate and push forward its own research agenda and remains, in many ways, subordinate to their

western counterparts (Aung-Thwin, 1995; Heryanto, 2002; Schulte Nordholt, 2004:49). Singapore, however, is clearly the exception that proves the rule, although its “academic pretensions have distinct colonial residues” (Reynolds, 1995:437). On the other hand, in this time and age Southeast Asia appears to be one of the few regions where Southeast Asia studies are not underfunded and constantly under threat. As a result, we may envision that the centre of gravity will gradually move “homewards”. Southeast Asians, after all, “have every right and potential to be legitimate analysts of themselves” (Heryanto, 2002:5). Hopefully, a greater participation of Southeast Asians in Southeast Asia studies will contribute to the diversity of the discipline. In light of their residential advantages in understanding the region, Southeast Asian scholars may very well choose to focus on politico-economic and national identity based topics, whereas the west, especially Europe, will most likely retain its status as a centre for archival studies.

LEGITIMISING SOUTHEAST ASIA

While the Cold War, the decolonisation of Asia, the north-south divide and other global developments vindicate the use of Southeast Asia as a contemporary geopolitical concept, its cultural-historical legitimacy remains controversial. Lacking a common religion, language and culture, the Southeast Asian countries, upon first sight, appear to share little else than their internal fragmentation and the similar ways in which they have recontextualised external elements, in particular non-indigenous religions (cf. Aung-Thwin, 1995:13; Schulte Nordholt, 2004:45). Still, as any one-time visitor can confirm, Southeast Asia boasts a markedly different vibe from India and China. The historian Anthony Reid (1993:3) phrases it as follows:

“Physically marked by its warm climate, high and dependable rainfall, and ubiquitous waterways, Southeast Asia developed lifestyles dominated by the forest, the rice-growing river valleys, and fishing. Its people grew the same crops by the same methods, ate the same food in the same manner, and lived in similar houses elevated on poles against the perils of flood or forest animals. Its geography militated against unified empires arising from great rivers or vast plains. It generated instead a multiplicity of political forms interlinked by the ease of waterborne transport.”

David Henley (2005:153), another historian of the region, contributes the following elaboration to our search for Southeast Asia:

“Actually the whole business of ‘problematizing’ Southeast Asia as a region often has a dubious ring of sophistry about it. The truth is that if you travel through Southeast Asia it is obvious that this is one region: similar-looking people, landscapes, plants and animals, villages, markets, urban neighbourhoods, and means of transport, not to mention similar manners and similar food. Nor is it only visitors from other parts of the world who notice these similarities. Southeast Asians themselves also tend to appreciate them, and have been made more aware of them by travel, the media, and the success of ASEAN as a regional political organization. At a time when the field of Southeast Asian studies is under methodological and financial attack, it is a little sad that not all Southeast Asianists share that awareness.”

The final statement still holds true to date. Not infrequently, the British, French and Dutch remain preoccupied with their former colonies, whereas American institutes tend to focus more on Vietnam and the Philippines. In general, Indonesia and Thailand are relatively well represented in the academic agenda of both regions, while the more peripheral regions, such as East Timor, Laos and Brunei Darussalam, often continue to be deprived of sufficient quantities of scholarly attention, not to mention the farthest and least accessible fringes of the Southeast Asian cultural sphere: the outlying subranges of the Great Himalayas and the insular worlds of New Guinea and Madagascar. Germans and Austrians, on the other hand, never had colonies in the region and nothing stood in their way of inventing the unbiased academic concept of “*Südostasien*”. In a long monograph so entitled, the influential Viennese scholar Robert Heine Geldern (1923) was the first to highlight and examine pan-Southeast Asian cultural and linguistic similarities.

Indeed, we have become increasingly aware of the elements shared by most, if not all, pre-modern Southeast Asian societies. Examples that directly come to our mind include, but are not restricted to, an aquatic lifestyle, ancestor worship, animism and mythologies entrenched therein, dualism between upstream and downstream populations, the prominent status of women, patron-client based socio-political organisations (hierarchical reciprocity), small-scale settlements and polities, and a similar material culture, including agricultural tools, musical instruments and burial practices. In addition, the outward orientation and geographic proximity of the area people would later call “Southeast Asia” had facilitated long-time interethnic contacts and economical integration of its diverse societies. Many of the

resultant trans-regional networks, however, did not survive European imperialism and its colonial hegemony across Asia, from which only Japan was able to successfully insulate itself (Reid, 1993:3).

As mentioned before, Southeast Asia was not perceived as a civilised part of the world, at least not on equal standing with India or China. Academic interest in the region had suffered substantially from the prevalent stigma of being little else than an obscure outlier of the great Indian civilisation. Hence, as late as the 1860s, we can find a French scholar making the following remark in a book review: “[...] with the exception of the Burmese, the other countries hardly deserve historical attention and it is by excessive compunction that the author has allowed them in his investigations” (Saint-Hilaire, 1861:458-459).¹ After the conquest of “*Indochine*”, however, the French attitudes towards the societies of present-day Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam had changed for the better, resulting eventually in the establishment of the famous *École française d'Extrême-Orient*. This highly prolific institute soon became, in the words of the German historian and Indologist Hermann Kulke (1990:8-9), “the greatest achievement of France in the East”.

While still hopelessly embedded in Indocentric and colonial hierarchical thought, the theories of French scholars, in particular those of Sylvain Lévi and George Cœdès, left room for scenarios in which Indian civilisation was deliberately spread and adopted across Southeast Asia as a result of interethnic contact. This offered a welcome reprieve from the British depictions of Indians as “dreaming, other-worldly mystics” (Bayly, 2004:719), not to mention the former’s preoccupation with the elite culture of the so-called “Indo-Aryans”, who had proved so instrumental in governing the Raj. Members of the Bengal based “Greater India Society” found in the works of French scholars a confirmation of their beliefs that India itself, and especially the Bengal, had been a colonising power in the bygone days of antiquity (Aung-Thwin, 1995:11; Bayly, 2004:706). This view was perhaps most concisely paraphrased by Ramesh Chandra Majumdar (1940:21), one of the best known exponents of the Greater India movement: “The Hindu colonists brought with them the whole framework of their culture and civilisation and this was transplanted in its entirety among the people who had not yet emerged from their primitive barbarism”.

At a time when both European colonial and Indian nationalistic scholarship produced colourful elaborations on the alleged Indian cultural superiority, a small group of historians focused on the active indigenous, Southeast Asian elements in these cultural exchanges. This line of thought was introduced by Jacob Cornelis van Leur (1934) and reaffirmed by Oliver

¹ My translation of: “[...] à l’exception du Birman, les autres pays méritent à peine les regards de l’histoire, et c’est par un excès de scrupule que l’auteur les a admis dans ses investigations.”

OPENING PANEL

William Wolters (1967). Thus, from “Greater India”, the discursive paradigm gradually shifted towards “Indianisation”, until that concept, too, became untenable. Starting with an influential publication by Wilhelm G. Solheim (1968), a new generation of archaeologists revealed a Southeast Asian metallurgical tradition predating contact with India. This, in combination with Southeast Asia’s home-grown traditions in rice cultivation and sophisticated ship-building technology, has done much to restore the cultural imbalance between South and Southeast Asia. Benefiting from the impressive developments in the fields of archaeology and molecular genetics, the time has now come to bring together data from various disciplines so as to increase our understanding of the dispersal of (agri)cultural elements in the opposite direction, in other words, the Southeast Asian influence across the Bay of Bengal (Hoogervorst, forthcoming).

That said, I would argue that Indian influence did bring about some far reaching changes in the ways Southeast Asians classified and categorised themselves and others. Illustratively, we see that the Sanskrit term *vamśa* (वंश), denoting a line of a pedigree or genealogy, has been borrowed into Khmer as *pvəŋsaʔ* (វង្សា), Thai *wonysǎa* (วงศ์), Lao *pʰónsǎ:* (ພ່ອງສ່າ), Burmese *wũθa* (वंသ), Malay *bangsa* and Tagalog *bansa*, all referring to notions of belonging to a single ethnicity, nation or lineage. Along similar lines, the concept of the “city-state” in Southeast Asia was an Indic introduction, as is demonstrated by the adoption of Sanskrit *nagara* (नगर) into Khmer as *nəkəw* (នគរ), Thai *nakʰəwŋ* (นคร), Lao *nākʰó:n* (ນະຄອນ), Burmese *nəgò* (နဂါး) and Malay *negara*. In addition, generic terms for the Southeast Asian mainland (*Suvarṇabhūmī*) and insular Southeast Asia (*Nūsāntara*) are derived from Indian nomenclature, as are the names of historical Southeast Asian dynasties such as Sriwijaya (*Śrī Vijaya*), Dvaravati (*Dvāravatī*), Ayutthaya (*Ayodhyā*) and Cambodia (*Kamboja*). Obviously, Southeast Asians would have reinterpreted these borrowed concepts (but also, for example, “slavery” or “piracy”) and incorporated them into local paradigms. The above linguistic excursus, nevertheless, strongly suggests that Southeast Asians have a long pre-colonial history of conceptualising otherness so as to realise their own internal similarities, reconsider notions of connectedness and, perhaps, take the first steps towards developing a shared identity.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

For millions of Indonesians belonging to the nation's more than 700 different ethno-linguistic groups, the national motto "Unity in Diversity" (*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*) has become an indisputable reality. Their Indonesian nationhood, albeit superimposed, is beyond questioning. Similar monolithic state philosophies – whether successfully implemented or not – exist in other multiethnic countries in the region, including Malaysia, East Timor and Laos. The post-independent national identities of Southeast Asia are arguably as contrived as the concept of Southeast Asia itself. Then again, geographical concepts such as "Asia", "Africa", "America" and "Australia" are all products of European expansionist thought, yet few would doubt their analytical functionality. In the case of Southeast Asia, it appears that a national or even regional sense of belonging is not necessarily conditioned by cultural unity. This is very different in Europe, where the historical threat of Islam constantly called for military cooperation and political alliances, shaping a strong, durable pan-regional identity. Consequently, definitions and demarcations of Europeanness continue to influence the political debate, as the ongoing controversy over Turkey's possible entry into the European Union clearly demonstrates. Southeast Asia, on the other hand, historically lacks a common enemy, although it has been observed that unproductive Indian attempts to control the ASEAN have bolstered the Southeast Asian cohesion and identity (cf. Bayly, 2004:738). The rise of China, too, may eventually force Southeast Asian countries to work together on a more intensive scale.

The presence of academic departments, books, journals and conferences dedicated to Southeast Asia attest to the fecundity of this region as an area of comparative research. Understanding this region on a macro-level, I would argue, commands moving beyond the narrow strictures, simplicities and self-identifications of colonial and nationalistic legacies while simultaneously recognising the mitigating effects of universalist epistemologies. A study on contemporary religion in East Timor might benefit from research on the Philippines, post-independent nation-building in Singapore cannot be seen in isolation from similar processes in Malaysia, and the Cold War genocides in Indonesia and Cambodia provide ample material for comparative studies. Southeast Asian studies, as the past has demonstrated, have occasioned a variety of theoretical approaches and perspectives befitting the diversity and hybridity of the region. Unfortunately, policy-makers generally remain unappreciative of the fact that such an atmosphere is most likely achieved in a centralised locus of academic interaction, i.e. a Southeast Asia department.

OPENING PANEL

Still, several positive developments are afoot. China, Japan, South Korea and an increasing number of Southeast Asian countries realise the importance of understanding the region as a whole, undeniably a corollary of the strong and rapid economic growth that takes place in this part of the world. Indeed, the burgeoning economic relationships between East and Southeast Asia urge contemporary analysts to take into account wider regional perspectives (cf. Chou, 2006:17; Schulte Nordholt, 2004:42). Meanwhile, Southeast Asia is gradually drifting away from the Indian influence sphere. Nevertheless, comparative scholarship between these two regions may prove fruitful not only to the anthropologist, archaeologist and linguist, but also for ancient, medieval and modern historical research. The study of Indian languages and cultures turns out to face many of the same problems and challenges as Southeast Asian departments. Both stand in stark contrast to the global éclat of academic departments focusing on China. Yet here, too, very interesting academic developments take place under the shadow of a constant existential threat, organisational restructuring and departmental downsizing. Recently, historians and archaeologists have started to focus on seas, rather than dry land, as settings of interethnic contact and exchange. The Bay of Bengal, for example, can be seen as a maritime interaction sphere, a “maritory”, connecting South and Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia, then, may be a geographical region, an analytical construct, a cultural entity and an economic block, but it should never be a limitation to theoretical sophistication and academic creativity.

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OPENING PANEL

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OPENING PANEL

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