



## **Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian Studies: Issues in Multidisciplinary Studies and Methodology\***



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### **[ Abstract ]**

The paper brings together several strands of debate and deliberation in which I have been involved since the early 2000s on the definition of Southeast Asia and the rationale of Southeast Asian Studies. I refer to the relationship between area studies and methodologies as a conundrum (or puzzle), though I should state from the outset that I think it is much more of a conundrum for others than for me. I have not felt the need to pose the question of whether or not area studies generates a distinctive method or set of methods and research practices, because I operate from a disciplinary perspective; though that it is not to say that the question should not be posed. Indeed, as I have earned a reputation for “revisionism” and championing disciplinary approaches rather than regional ones, it might be anticipated already the position that I take in an examination of the relationships

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between methodologies and the practice of “area studies” (and in this case Southeast Asian [or Asian] Studies). Nevertheless, given the recent resurgence of interest in the possibilities provided by the adoption of regional perspectives and the grounding of data gathering and analysis within specified locations in the context of globalization, the issues raised for researchers working in Southeast Asia and within the field of Southeast Asian Studies require revisiting.

**Keywords:** Region, Southeast Asian Studies, Disciplines, Methodology, Conundrum

## **I . Setting the scene: area studies, anthropology and other disciplines**

I do not claim any originality for what I am about to say on Southeast Asian Studies, definitional issues, and the practices of area studies. Indeed, as I have earned a reputation for “revisionism” and questioning the concept of a Southeast Asian region (see, for example, Goh 2011a:7-8), then the position that I take in this excursion into the relationships between methodology, research practices and area studies might be anticipated. However, given the recent substantial interest in the possibilities and problems of regional definition, of the resurgence of the case for multidisciplinary area studies and for the pedagogical advantages of an area studies approach, then the questions and issues of what defines Southeast Asia and whether regional perspectives have generated particular methods of knowledge gathering, processing and production require further scrutiny.

Perhaps a brief reminiscence might be in order at the outset in order to orient our thoughts? Some 40 years ago, when I was a junior lecturer, research sponsors in the United Kingdom and those professional associations representing area studies constituencies were debating what constituted this field of studies, its rationale and “the hard core” of what it did. The underlying reason for this was to determine whether or not area studies offered something to the academic and wider world which was thought to be worth

funding. As I recall two particular conclusions were reached. First, it was proposed that the value of area studies resided in its emphasis on working in the vernacular and in its commitment to understanding what was happening “on the ground”. For an expatriate researcher this also entailed the attempt, insofar as this is ever possible, of developing an understanding and perspective “from the inside” (and see Simandjuntak and Haug 2014).

In this endeavour, the relationships between area studies and anthropology in cross-cultural research are clear. The emphasis on learning and working in another language had the consequence, at least in the UK of excluding American Studies and other Anglophone studies from the area studies fraternity. Secondly, it was proposed that in area studies there resided the possibility of multidisciplinary approaches, and of overcoming some of the blinkers and parochialism of academic disciplines. In this respect, there was some disagreement about whether or not this would lead to genuine interdisciplinary endeavour, and through “intermarriage”, the breaking down of disciplinary boundaries and the forging of new fruitful unions. Recent calls for a re-energizing of area studies coupled with a desire to de-colonize this field of studies have similarly drawn attention to the need to dismantle disciplinary barriers and practices (see, for example, Goh 2011a, 2011b, 2014). These barriers seem especially resilient when one thinks that the call for interdisciplinary studies goes back a long way. Yet a few years ago, Hans Kuijper asserted provocatively that “[a]t their very best, area studies are no more than multidisciplinary in character. Consisting of juxtaposed, not yet integrated partial studies, they are essentially disjointed. Providing the reader with a Humpty-Dumpty broken into bits, they are not *compositions*” (2008: 205).

In this introductory contemplation, I think it is also useful for me to address some of the issues raised at the international conference held at the University of Freiburg in May 2012 on the theme of “Methodology in Southeast Asian Studies: Grounding Research-Mixing Methods” from which the book already referred to above emerged (Huotari, Rüländ and Schlehe 2014). Several of the papers have been published in revised form, but it might be

useful to summarize what was presented in the original papers.

I should make my position clear from the start. I am sceptical of claims that a particular methodology or set of methodologies and practices have emerged from the multidisciplinary field of area studies, in our case specifically Southeast Asian Studies; or alternatively I have been unable to discern something methodologically distinctive in the practices of knowledge gathering, processing and generation in Southeast Asian Studies or area studies more generally; epistemologically and ontologically we are in shared, known and well-trodden territory. For me there is no obvious conundrum; for others I think there is. Or to put it yet another way the multidisciplinary field of Southeast Asian Studies, which in any case is not a unitary or homogeneous field of studies, as Szanton has already indicated (2004a:3), has not produced, in my view, a set of specific practices which we as Southeast Asianists (if we can reach any agreement on what a Southeast Asianist is, see below) might adopt or follow in the ways in which we go about formulating research issues or questions; making decisions on how we might address the subject, question, problem or theme before us; deciding upon how we might then identify what kinds of evidence or information we require to address the research task which we have set for ourselves; deciding upon the most appropriate ways in which we gather and select the data; evaluating the robustness, utility and validity of the evidence we have mustered; sifting and choosing the evidence which we shall then use to make our case; and developing or choosing concepts or theories to make sense of, give some kind of logical and coherent form to, and hopefully draw some conclusions from the data collected.

Nor do I think that we have needed to develop and agree upon a separate ethical code to cover our practices; in my case I follow those of the Association of Social Anthropologists and the British Sociological Association (and see Caplan 2003). In this regard the study of Southeast Asia has not, *contra* John Bowen's position from an American perspective (1995, 2000, 2004) and that of Mary Steedly (1999), produced a distinctive or dominant style, perspective, approach or tradition of research or scholarship (see King 2001), though this American-derived proposal seems to

be especially resilient (see, for example, Hirschman and Edwards on Clifford Geertz, 2007: 4377). Rather the major part of the knowledge which has been produced on Southeast Asia has not required a program of Southeast Asian Studies within which to produce it, nor, if we were to be honest, has it depended on a multidisciplinary framework of study and analysis to make it possible. Having said this Southeast Asia, in a variety of ways, has been constructed and reconstructed, primarily through different disciplinary interests, approaches and perspectives. I shall return to consider its realization as a region by those who live there in a while, as well as suggesting that working in a multidisciplinary environment might generate a certain attitude and approach to research (though the approach and practices are derived primarily from disciplinary training).

## **II. A view of the 2012 Freiburg conference**

In a subsequent unpublished paper I provided an overview of the 2012 conference; here I present a brief summary of the conference. First, some papers adopted methods, practices and techniques which are standard ones in the major disciplines involved in Southeast Asian Studies (political science, economics, sociology-anthropology), though there is also frequent reference in the papers to the problem of the distinction and the relationships between “area” and “discipline”. I also use this distinction in the current paper, but only as a convenient short-hand and not in any precise or easily definable way; this is an issue to which I shall return later (and see Szanton 2004b). I think, the argument that the field of area studies encourages “mixed methodologies”, with the implication, I suppose, that disciplinary approaches do not, needs much more careful qualification. One only has to look back at research handbooks in anthropology and ethnographic research for example, in a field which was often castigated by the hard social sciences like economics for its lack of a robust, scientific and testable methodology, to admire the sophistication of methodological thinking and debate and the wide range of

methods and techniques which were already being deployed (see as a case in point, Ellen 1984).

Therefore, some conference papers traversed rather familiar methodological terrain in examining the use and the value (or otherwise) of in-depth interviews (and issues arising from cross-cultural interviews); case-studies and comparisons; comparison at different levels and scales and across different units; questionnaire surveys (with random or defined selection of those to be questioned); public opinion research; cross-sectional correlations; bivariate regression plots; gini coefficients; the use of quantitative data-sets, censuses and other demographic data usually in a time series; the selection of variables and the analysis and interpretation of their interconnections; laboratory-style experimentation; content analysis; qualitative-historical research; participant observation or “observant participation”; and the need to insert the gender dimension into research where necessary. Where there might be a degree of methodological novelty is in the cross-national, trans-cultural, reciprocal, tandem, complementary, role-reversal, “reversed gaze”, interactive kinds of joint, collaborative research described by Judith Schlele between German and Indonesian researchers working within the Freiburg Southeast Asia program. It does take account of the importance of conducting an equal “dialogue”, a “productive conversation” and “self-reflexivity” in the context of the coming together of different academic cultures and different ways of knowledge production, and the blurring of the distinction between “outsider” and “insider” anthropology (and see Schlele and Sita Hidayah 2014). Yet again, this is a development of methodology within the discipline of anthropology rather than area studies; it comprises novel ways of “doing ethnography”. Finally, some of the papers raised the long-standing issue of quantitative as against qualitative approaches, their respective advantages and disadvantages and the possibility or desirability of their combination.

Secondly, there was some consideration of the differences between disciplines, particularly in the social sciences, though we should keep in mind Ladislav Holy’s view, to which I largely subscribe, that “because all social sciences investigate basically

the same phenomena and share the same ideas about their constitution, the boundaries drawn between them are often blurred and at times questionable” (1984: 14). Holy does, however, point out that the main distinguishing feature of anthropology within the social sciences is “the unique method of yielding data through long-term “participant observation”” (ibid). In this connection, and leaving aside participant observation for a moment, I think we would be hard-pressed to argue for any significant difference between sociology and anthropology. With regard to anthropology and other disciplines there still seems to be a view that anthropology is concerned primarily with the local and particular (and therefore by implication is more focused on defined spaces and contexts) and that political science, economics and sociology tend to operate on a larger scale and undertake comparative work across cases, countries and regions. I would want to qualify these kinds of observations in that we should at least acknowledge an early view of anthropology as “comparative sociology” and the fact that there are significant areas of anthropology that are by no means so location- and context-bound.

Thirdly, there were papers that continued the attempt to draw distinctions between area studies and disciplines and that discussed the methods which area studies practitioners deploy to address their preoccupation with region (which are both its strengths and weaknesses): context-sensitivity; the distinctiveness of a case, community, process; and in-depth field research in the vernacular. It was argued that one of the major issues for the disciplinary specialist is that of comparison across the region (and beyond), and the problem of the comparability of units of analysis is particularly acute with regard to those units which have emerged from intensive, contextual field research. The distinction between area studies and disciplines also raises the issue of how area studies programs are organized in relation to disciplinary and language training and to the encouragement of multidisciplinary perspectives and approaches. Finally, a question posed by some contributors was whether or not Southeast Asia as a defined region is sufficiently distinctive to merit a context-sensitive area studies approach and specific methods of research

devised to capture something assumed to be different from other cases or regions.

Fourthly, there were those contributors who continued to contemplate issues of intellectual hegemony, the power relations in knowledge production, and the question of the “indigenization” or “decolonization” of Southeast Asian Studies. Who asks the questions and why? Who sets the research agenda? Who determines the priorities and interests? What values underlie what they do? What are the possibilities for de-centring and diversifying Southeast Asian Studies and developing and recognizing “local” or “within-region” perspectives, interests and priorities? These questions bring us back to debates about the relations and encounters, at times even the opposition between foreign/local, exogenous/endogenous (indigenous), outsider/insider, and Euro- American/Southeast Asian, though I accept, as some conference participants had already observed, that these categories are rough-and-ready ones, the boundaries between them are fuzzy, and, in certain respects, they no longer have much relevance. If one does accept that there is some utility in debating issues in relation to this categorical fuzziness, then its replacement by some form of negotiated settlement seems to me to be desirable. Yet, there is a point when we have to cease blaming colonialism and imperialism for all our woes: I think local Southeast Asian Studies has come of sufficient age and robustness to answer for itself, though the point was raised in the conference that we should beware of essentializing ‘the indigenous’, just as we have retreated from positions that tend to stereotype and essentialize Euro-American ethnocentrism.

Overall I detect a tendency across several of the papers for the construction of unitary or homogeneous categories, distinguished from each other and sometimes opposed, which seem to me to require constant qualification. Some contributors question these but others leave them largely intact. They include “Southeast Asia”, “Southeast Asian Studies”, “area studies”, “disciplines (and within these political science, economics, sociology-anthropology and so on)”, “insider (local)”, “outsider (foreign)”, “Euro-American” and “Southeast Asian”, “theory” and “practice”, “context” and “comparison”. I shall return to some of these matters below.



### III. Areas, disciplines and my involvement in the debates

#### 3.1 *Southeast Asian Studies: shifting grounds and areas*

We should not get too preoccupied with the distinctions between area studies and disciplines. As I have already emphasized, and Szanton before me (2004a:3), area studies is a heterogeneous mix. There are important national differences in history, organization, theoretical interests, and approaches between Southeast Asian Studies as it developed in the United States, the United Kingdom, continental Europe (France, Germany, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries), Australia, Southeast Asia itself (and among countries within the region), China, Japan and the Republic of Korea (see Park and King 2013). Broadly there have been different theoretical orientations, sub-regional concentrations, and disciplinary specializations and mixes, and different ways of organizing the delivery of Southeast Asian language training, teaching and research between disciplines and multidisciplinary regional programs. Southeast East Asian Studies as a separately identifiable academic field of study has also fared much better in some countries than in others. In recognizing this heterogeneity and, for some, a failure or a “maladjustment” on the part of area studies to respond satisfactorily to such processes as globalization, there have also been calls for “the strategic defragmentation of area studies into comparative studies of global problems” (Schäfer 2010:2).

If we take the situation in the United Kingdom as an example, the overwhelming majority of the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Studies in the UK would not see themselves as area specialists or Southeast Asianists *per se* (see King 2011; and Szanton 2004b). They are located in departments of political science and international relations, economics, geography, anthropology, sociology, archaeology and history, as well as in multidisciplinary fields of study such as gender, development, management, tourism and environment, or in museums, libraries and other research institutions. Most of them would claim to

have a primary interest in one or at the most two countries in the region, and some work on countries and issues beyond Southeast Asia as well. Some do not work in the vernacular and instead focus on European language materials (mainly English) and archives. Even those in Southeast Asian programs would probably hesitate over whether they see themselves as area specialists; and those in language teaching, I am sure, would respond that they are teaching, for example, Indonesian language and are specialists in Indonesian literature, culture or history, and similarly for teachers of Thai, Burmese, Khmer, Malay-Indonesian, Tagalog and Vietnamese.

A close colleague of mine in a Southeast Asian Studies program and whose background is geography but who would see himself as a development studies specialist has taught a wide-ranging postgraduate course on methodology to a very mixed bag of students who come with different academic and training backgrounds. He has worked in the vernacular in Thailand, but has also undertaken field research in Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam. Insofar as I recall conversations with him about these matters he would claim, in certain contexts, that he is a scholar of Southeast Asia, but this would only be a part of his identity. His methodology course, though including such matters as cross-cultural communication, field research, language training and context sensitivity, would not be out of place in any mainstream social science training program.

In my own case, I started my academic career as a geographer, moved into sociology and anthropology, followed a course in Indonesian Studies, was appointed to a position in an area studies program, though with the responsibility to teach sociology, then moved into a Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, and subsequently into a multidisciplinary Southeast Asia program (which comprised a collection of individuals who had their roots in departments, and teaching and other responsibilities in those departments), and finally to a program in East Asian Studies focusing primarily on China and Japan. I have written general books on Southeast Asia but I would be hard-pressed to claim a consistent and unequivocal identity as a Southeast Asianist. If

asked, I would argue for a position in sociological and anthropological research, but during the past twenty years I would also claim a position and identity in development studies, environmental studies, ethnic studies, tourism studies and most recently in cultural and heritage studies. If someone was to ask me about my expertise in regional terms, then I suppose I could claim a Southeast Asian scholarly profile, but I would probably be more comfortable at the sub-regional level as a specialist on Borneo, first-and-foremost, and then on the Malay-Indonesian world (comprising Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei, but not the Philippines).

This discussion has a bearing on methodological issues. If I and my colleague, for example, both relatively long-serving members of Southeast Asian Studies programs, only see ourselves as Southeast Asianists in certain contexts and at certain times, why would the relationship between methodology and area studies be of special and urgent moment for us? We are as much if not more rooted in other scholarly fields from which we have invariably drawn our methodological training. I grant that this might also be in part because of the strength of disciplines in the UK; and, in planning and developing area studies centers in the 1960s, the UK turned to the American model of Area Studies Centers (Cornell, Yale and California among others). In other words in my career and experience an area center or program provided a convenient locational and organizational umbrella in order to bring together academics from different disciplines and subject areas; but the training in methods, techniques, conceptualization and analysis came from the disciplines not from the area. This is presumably the reason why Goh Beng Lan refers to me as a disciplinary revisionist and also suggests that for me, as a revisionist, Southeast Asia simply serves as a specified place, a locale for data gathering, analysis and experimentation rather than a clearly defined, delimited, identifiable and substantial region with a character, persona and genius of its own (2011a: 7-8).

Nevertheless, I would have to at least counter this with a reference to what I believe I have drawn from my encounters in area studies. The positive elements are: a recognition of the importance of working in local languages; cultural sensitivity and

the avoidance of stereotyping; the value of engaging across disciplinary boundaries and across the political boundaries of the nation-state; the recognition of the importance of local knowledge and perspective; and the need to ground one's research, particularly in the era of globalization, in definable and graspable social, cultural, economic, political, historical and geographical contexts. I am content to subscribe to Szanton's mission for area studies which is 'to deparochialize US- and Euro-centric visions of the world in the core social science and humanities disciplines, among policy makers, and in the public at large' (2004a: 2). However, this is where it gets complicated again; much of what I have said here could also have been said of anthropological approaches and perspectives (Szanton refers to area studies as "an act of translation" [ibid: 1] which is what anthropologists usually engage in). Harris' comments on the impact of globalization on anthropology could also have been said of area studies in that it challenges anthropology "to rethink its founding categories and redefine its projects" (1996: 1).

### ***3.2 Disciplines: beware essentialization***

Just as we can and should deconstruct the scholarly enterprise of Southeast Asian Studies and area studies, we should also beware of reifying and talking about disciplines as if they were unified and definable academic phenomena. In some respects we use them for convenience, but one only has to consider the history of the development of anthropology for example (which I have just referred to as if it was in some way a homogeneous and definable field of study) to realize just how problematical the construct "anthropology" is as well. In his examination of the development of European anthropology, Schippers refers to the field as "a patchwork of disciplines, scientific interests, methods of investigation and theoretical schools..." (1995: 234). In this history of the subject, we have to acknowledge the separation, but in some European institutions the continuing relationship between physical-biological and social-cultural anthropology, and the separation, though again with continuing connections in some countries and institutions, of the study, usually through field

research, of non-Western societies (firmly within “anthropology” in such countries as the UK, France and the Netherlands which had large colonial empires) and research on European, mainly “national rural societies” which usually came under the umbrella of “ethnology” or “folklore studies”, or sometimes “ethnography” and which had close relationships with such fields as geography, philology and statistics (in such countries, without substantial colonial empires, as Germany, Austria, the Scandinavian countries, and Russia) (ibid: 235-40).

Of course, the delimitation of anthropology as a discrete field of study with its own theories, concepts and methodologies becomes even more problematical when one considers the broad separation between American cultural anthropology and Anglo-French-Dutch social and structural anthropology; the subdivision of anthropology into particular specialisms which then entered into dialogue with other social sciences, thus blurring the disciplinary boundaries: economic anthropology, political anthropology, the anthropology of religion, the anthropology of complex societies, applied anthropology, and so on); and the most recent post-modern fragmentation of parts of what used to come under the umbrella of anthropology but are now found in such fields as cultural studies, media studies, the performing arts, museum studies and gender studies. Yet there are a range of methods, techniques and practices which have been developed to identify, access, gather and process social and cultural knowledge within anthropology and sociology which are deployed in area studies.

### **3.3 *A personal engagement***

At this juncture and as an introduction to the resurgence of interest in area studies during the past decade or so, I should refer to my engagement with these matters in order to establish my view on the development of thinking on Southeast Asian Studies and area studies more generally. Perhaps it is also of interest to track some of the pathways of the debates as they emerged and developed from the year 2000, though there was a good deal of activity in the 1990s as well (see, for example,

Ananda Rajah 1999; Andaya 1997; Anderson 1992; Hirschman 1992; Keyes 1992; Lieberman 1993, 1995; Lombard 1995; McVey 1995, 1998; Milner 1999; Reid 1988/1993, 1994, 1999; Reynolds 1995; Shamsul 1994; Wolters 1999). I had already entered the fray well before this more recent twenty-first-century upsurge (see, for example, King 1990, and others before me; see, for example Fifield [1976, 1983]), but it all restarted for me when I chanced to read John Bowen's paper in the then newly-launched French journal *Moussons* (2000) to which I have already referred, which sought to discover a dominant scholarly style in the study of Southeast Asia. I am not very often moved to write a response to a colleague's work, but, in this case, I felt the urgent need to qualify what I considered to be a primarily American view of the state of play, heavily influenced by Geertzian cultural anthropology, Weberian sociology, and field research in Indonesia. I presented in a paper in *Moussons* what I considered to be a European response (though I do not claim any particular expertise in Dutch, French, German and Scandinavian area studies) indicating that there were (and are) significant differences between American and European perspectives on and approaches to the study of Southeast Asia; there are also important differences within Europe itself, which in turn have methodological implications (King 2001).

Coincidentally I was then invited as a discussant to a panel which featured a paper by the American anthropologist Mary Steedly entitled "From the Interpretation of Cultures to the Banality of Power: Anthropology in the Postcolony" delivered at a conference organized by the International Institute for Asian Studies at the University of Amsterdam in March 2001. Steedly's position which, in part, also echoed Bowen's proposals suggested again an American, Geertzian and Indonesian-centric view of Southeast Asia. The conference served to celebrate Professor Heather Sutherland's contribution to the study of Southeast Asian history. Her position in the field of studies was acknowledged with the appearance at the conference of Anthony Reid, Wang Gungwu, Ruth McVey, Thongchai Winichakul and many others. Out of this conference came the edited book *Locating Southeast Asia* (2005), of which I subsequently wrote a review (King 2006a:

16-19).

One of the most important contributions for me of the Amsterdam conference was Heather Sutherland's paper on "contingent devices"; with great eloquence it captured for me what I had long thought was the most appropriate way to conceptualize Southeast Asia (or more appropriately "several Southeast Asias") (Sutherland 2005: 20-59; and see McVey 2005: 308-319). Here then is the nub of the problem. How do we define Southeast Asia? And this seems to me to be a crucial question in any consideration of appropriate methodologies.

The story continues with Ariel Heryanto's justified response to Bowen's and my papers with the title "Can there be Southeast Asians in Southeast Asian Studies?" (2002, 2007). Bowen and I had been preoccupied with the Euro-American contributions to the study of Southeast Asia and Heryanto made the case for a locally inspired and directed area studies. Although I accepted the main thrust of what Heryanto had argued, I disagreed with his interpretation of the more recent configuration of relations between Euro-American and Southeast Asian research on the region; this was set within the context of the demise of Southeast Asian Studies in the UK and in other parts of the Western world and its vibrant development in Asia.

Among other matters this disagreement was expressed in my keynote address at the International Institute for Asian Studies, Amsterdam, entitled 'Southeast Asia: Personal Reflections on a Region', in November 2004 to mark the launch of Ooi Keat Gin's three-volume *Southeast Asia: A Historical Encyclopedia* (2004). It so happened that Vincent Houben was in the audience and invited me to write a chapter for his forthcoming edited book *Southeast Asian Studies: Debates and New Directions* (co-edited with Cynthia Chou) (2006a, see below); I duly obliged and the paper, with substantial revisions, was published under the same title as the Amsterdam keynote address (King 2006). In the meantime, a version of the paper which emphasized the crisis in Southeast Asian Studies in the UK was delivered at the Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies at the University of Lund

and appeared in the Centre's Working Paper Series as *Defining Southeast Asia and the Crisis in Area Studies* (2005). Among other issues, what this work emphasized was precisely the importance of the study of Southeast Asia from within the region. There lies the future in my opinion, and if we are concerned about methodology, we must wish to argue that there lies the future for methodological development.

For me there was then something of a lull in engagement in international debate. The Centre for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Hull was finally closed in 2005 and I moved to the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Leeds. The withering of Southeast Asian Studies in the American-inspired form which it had taken in the UK from the 1960s was almost complete, but the study of China and Japan in Leeds was vibrant, as it was in our partner university, Sheffield. During this time my chairmanship of the Asian Studies Panel in the national Research Assessment Exercise in the UK, which commenced its work in 2005 and was completed in 2008, brought it home to me just how much research on the Asian region was undertaken outside the area studies constituency.

In writing a report on the submissions to our panel which came from only ten British universities we could give only a partial picture of the national state-of-play in Asian Studies because much of the work had been conducted through disciplinary departments and other fields of study and submitted to disciplinary panels. I then had the opportunity to take stock of where the study of Southeast Asia had taken us when I wrote a history of the Association of Southeast Asian Studies in the UK to celebrate its fortieth anniversary (1969-2009) (King 2009a). The crisis, as I perceived it, was primarily in multidisciplinary centers where languages were also taught; development, growth and energy lay elsewhere. The study of Southeast Asia had become institutionally disparate; it was spread widely across the UK and was being conducted in departments, non-area studies multidisciplinary programs, and other institutions. This too has implications for methodologies; these too are likely to be disparate and to be situated and developed within disciplines and other subject fields and not in



## Southeast Asian Studies.

My focus on the demise of ‘the old’ Southeast Asian Studies, in Heryanto’s terms (2002, 2007), continued with an invitation to participate in a conference organized by the Sogang Institute of East Asian Studies at Sogang University in Seoul in March 2010. The conference provided the ideal opportunity to learn much more about Southeast Asia from an East Asian perspective and the different ways in which Southeast Asia has been conceptualized within Asia (see Park and King 2013). I also presented a paper entitled “*The Development of Southeast Asian Studies in the UK: the Making of a Region*” (2010) which charted the rise and demise of Southeast Asian Studies in my own country. Subsequently the study was extended to include continental Europe and to make some comparisons between the development of this field of studies in the UK and in France, Germany and the Netherlands in particular; in this regard it is clear that different traditions have been developed and that yet again we are unable to discern a unitary Southeast Asian Studies project and trajectory (King 2011; and see King 2013).

My story continues with the invitation to write a review essay on three edited books on area studies, Asian Studies and Southeast Asian Studies which have appeared relatively recently (Terence Wesley-Smith and Jon Goss [2010]; Jacob Edmond, Henry Johnson and Jacqueline Leckie [2010]; and Goh Beng Lan [2011b]). What struck me about these volumes, among many other things, in their efforts to “remake”, “recenter”, “decenter” and “diversify” the study of Southeast Asia, Asia and Asia Pacific, was the relative absence of any consideration of “where some boundaries, zones, frontiers, locations, and sites end and others begin, nor how the designated units or areas remain useful to academic theory and practice” (King 2012a: 316). And finally in 2012 through to 2014 the opportunity to examine the relationship between area studies/Southeast Asian Studies and methodology has enabled a further expansion of our thinking about Southeast Asia and how it has been and is being constructed (King 2014).

#### **IV. A resurgence of interest in 'area'**

##### ***4.1 Handling the perceived crisis: attack is the best form of defence***

Having said all of this in what I suppose can only be characterized as “a sceptical mode” let me now turn to and summarize what seem to be the main issues which have surfaced or rather resurfaced during the past decade or so. One of the main concerns, it seems to me, is for those scholars who desire to give some agreed shape and substance to Southeast Asia as a region in order to argue for the value of Southeast Asian Studies specifically and area studies more generally, and, in some cases to propose that something conceived of as the “old” approaches to the study and understanding of Southeast Asia should be replaced by “something new”; and that this “something new” should increasingly be a locally generated and conceived project. There are also those who wish to draw attention to recent developments in the teaching and learning environment of area studies and innovations in the way in which knowledge of an area is conveyed. These considerations have real moment if we wish to suggest that there is a methodology or set of methodologies appropriate to Southeast Asian Studies and area studies. Indeed, some of this will turn on whether or not we can agree what Southeast Asia comprises, and it is clear that the disagreements about the definition of Southeast Asia as a region often relate to different disciplinary and research subject perspectives.

During the last decade we have been inundated with a spate of edited books on Southeast Asian Studies and area studies more generally. This merely continues with greater intensity the outpouring of debates on “What is Southeast Asia?” in the 1990s. If we thought that the field of area studies was in its last throes, it is obviously not going quietly. During the last decade there has been on average a book a year debating the issues which I have introduced in this chapter. This does not take account of the numerous journal articles which have appeared (see, for example, Evans 2002; Jackson 2003a, 2003b; Burgess 2004; Kuijper 2008; Schäfer 2010). It is also interesting to note that the

Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and the National University of Singapore have played a significant role in this profile-raising industry. This is not surprising when one takes into account its stake in Southeast Asian Studies and area studies more generally and that it lies, along with Malaysia, at the “low centre” of Anthony Reid’s “saucer model” of Southeast Asian identity (1999).

I may well have missed some publications but those which have impressed themselves on my consciousness are: *Southeast Asian Studies: Pacific Perspectives* (Anthony Reid 2003a); *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines* (David Szanton 2004); *Locating Southeast Asia: Geographies of Knowledge and Politics of Space* (Paul Kratoska, Remco Raben and Henk Schulte Nordholt 2005a); *Southeast Asian Studies: Debates and New Directions* (Cynthia Chou and Vincent Houben 2006a); *Knowing Southeast Asian Subjects* (Laurie J. Sears 2007); *Southeast Asian Studies in China* (Saw Swee-Hock and John Wong 2007); *Remaking Area Studies: Teaching and Learning across Asia and the Pacific* (Terence Wesley-Smith and Jon Goss 2010); *Recentering Asia; Histories, Encounters, Identities* (Jacob Edmond, Henry Johnson and Jacqueline Leckie 2011a); and *Decentring and Diversifying Southeast Asian Studies; Perspectives from the Region* (Goh Beng Lan 2011b).

It all begins to have a feverish quality about it; specialists in area studies, Asian Studies and Southeast Asian Studies seem to be running a high temperature.

I recognize that those who have specialized in the study of Southeast Asia, and particularly those scholars located in Southeast Asian Studies centers, institutes and programs, have frequently been engaged in debates and disagreements about what defines their region and what is distinctive about it; and this preoccupation has usually been much more intense when compared with the concerns of regional specialists in other parts of the world. In other words, Southeast Asianists have sought persistently for a rationale for what they do and, in order to serve their students and those they train, to provide an academic basis for considering the collection of countries and peoples which they are trying to

understand as a viable and meaningful unit of analysis and scholarly speculation. The debates have been much more intense in certain academic disciplines which have a greater sense of place (history, archaeology and pre-history, geography, anthropology and linguistics come to mind). But the contagion seems to have spread to the wider Southeast Asian and area studies constituency, arising from a perceived crisis in this field of studies.

Some of the editors in the books referred to above make dramatic and explicit reference to this crisis. Terence Wesley-Smith and Jon Goss introduce the issue in no uncertain terms: "It is widely acknowledged that area studies, the dominant academic institution in the United States for research and teaching on America's overseas "others" is in the thralls of a fiscal and epistemological crisis" (Goss and Wesley-Smith 2010: ix). They identify the roots of the crisis in "[t]he dramatic shifts in the global political landscape of the late 1980s [which] revealed the intellectual and economic vulnerability of the area studies establishment" (ibid: xiii). Goh Beng Lan then widens the unease: "[t]he attack on area studies has spread across the globe... [and]... the spread of this critique has led to a common view that area studies is in a state of "crisis"" (2011b:1). We are reminded of the two-decade-long crisis, though briefly, by Mikko Huotari in the recent volume on area studies and methodology (2014: 1).

Several of the edited books referred to above attempt to address different dimensions of this perceived crisis, but it has to be emphasized that the difficulties have been experienced much more in some, but not all Western countries, and it has been much less of an issue in the region we refer to as "Asia" or "Asia Pacific", or its constituent parts (East, Southeast, South, Central). Moreover, the crisis has not been one which has progressively deepened, nor has it been felt equally in the study of all regions which come within the purview of "area studies"; the overall picture is a decidedly patchy and uneven one, and in the European academy for example, and for obvious reasons, the study of East Asia (China, Japan and Korea), the Middle East and Eastern Europe (including Russia) have fared much better than Southeast Asian Studies and studies of the Indian subcontinent.

## 4.2 *Rejuvenation*

It is difficult to do justice to such a range of scholarship, but in their efforts to revivify, rejuvenate, refresh and redirect the study of Southeast Asia (and in certain cases Asia and Asia Pacific) and to inject energy and purpose into the enterprise of area studies, most of these edited volumes put a positive gloss on what has been achieved and what the future holds. Reid's book, for example, draws attention to the significant impact of immigrant Southeast Asian populations in the United States after the 1970s, many from the mainland countries but also from the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia (Reid 2003b: 1-23). According to Reid, this migration of people from the region itself, many of whom have settled on the Pacific coast of the United States, has served to give Southeast Asian Studies in the US a new lease of life; rather than decline there is "rebirth". He further argues that the proximity of Australia and Japan to Southeast Asia will also ensure the continuing health of Southeast Asian Studies in those countries; and the region itself has witnessed a surge of interest in the study of ASEAN, not least in such places as Singapore (*ibid.*).

Chou and Houben are also positive about the contribution, value and future viability of Southeast Asian Studies, arguing that this field of studies has been "an epicentre for theoretical knowledge production" (2006b: 1). Like Reid, they draw attention to the expansion of studies of Southeast Asia in the region itself, whilst noting the difficulties which it is experiencing elsewhere, especially in Europe (*ibid.*: 2). Furthermore, they propose that, in a world in which there is the need to engage with other countries and regions from a position of strength, then a Southeast Asian regional identity through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in particular is "becoming more and more self-evident" (*ibid.*: 11).

Overall Chou and Houben are upbeat and optimistic and "although in some places [mainly Europe] there is reason for gloom, Southeast Asian studies as [a] whole is in the process of being reconfigured to become more of a central concern in our

current world” (ibid: 20). I would not wish to challenge this view and I too would maintain that Southeast Asia as a region, concept and scholarly field of enquiry (though not a region that is necessarily fixed and unchanging and its boundaries agreed upon) will continue to have resonance and relevance. This is in spite of the arguments frequently presented by globalization theorists and disciplinary specialists in particular that regions are rapidly losing their validity and viability in a world in which borders and boundaries are constantly traversed and trans-national and cross-cultural encounters and hybridization have become increasingly apparent.

Finally, in their co-edited book, Jacob Edmond, Henry Johnson and Jacqueline Leckie direct their efforts to “recentering” Asia by asserting its “centrality” and rethinking both the concept of “centre” as a zone of “[trans-national] encounter, exchange and contestation” as well as the very notion (or notions) of Asia itself (2011b: 1). Yet the concepts of “center” and “Asia” seem to be rather difficult to pin down. In disciplinary terms the focus of this volume is in the arts and humanities (literature, language, cultural studies, history, and ethnomusicology) with a sprinkling of interest in the social sciences (mainly anthropology). Issues to do with identities and ethnicity and their transformations are also to the fore. In broad regional terms the weight of attention is given to East Asia (Japan, China and Korea) with a few excursions into Southeast Asia, the South Pacific and South Asia, though it has to be said that the emphasis in the volume on diaspora and migration blurs regional definitions.

### ***4.3 Decentering and diversification: local voices***

Another significant trend in writing and thinking about area studies and specifically Southeast Asian Studies is to argue for its decentering and diversification and the need to take account of “local dimensions”, “local”, “native” or “indigenous voices”, based not on the priorities and interests of those outside the region, but on “local priorities” (Goh 2011a: 1). Harking back to Ariel Heryanto’s plea in 2002, Goh Beng Lan’s edited book (2011b)

serves to enhance the significance of Southeast Asia, with convincing arguments presented for the vitality of scholarship within the region and the contribution of local scholars to understanding their own *habitus*. She also emphasizes the importance of situating knowledge production in a Southeast Asian context, and addresses the distinctions and mutually enriching interactions between locally generated (“insider”) and Euro-American-derived (“outsider”) perspectives on Southeast Asia. Her book attempts to provide us with “afterlives” in Asian Studies (in Miyoshi’s and Harootunian’s terms) which identify “regionally generated scholarships as alternative sites from which Euro-American-centric visions could be denaturalized” (2011a: 1-4). Therefore, for Goh, it is vital in the continuing enterprise of Southeast Asian Studies to consider the experiences, practices and views of local scholars, which also requires us to take account of “the alternative, albeit emergent, models of area studies in the region” (ibid: 15) and “alternative perceptions of Southeast Asia” (ibid: 44).

The crucial need is “to create a platform to speak about Southeast Asian perspectives” so that those who come from and live in the region and share “the same convictions” can debate issues which “may not be of concern to those outside of the region”, and, in addition, “explicate lived realities and understandings of normative social science concepts within the region, rather than taking wider social theories emanating from the West/outside as the formulae for defining the region” (ibid: 15; and see Goh 2014: 28-29). I wholeheartedly agree with the spirit and intent of this volume and Goh’s arguments, just as I supported Heryanto in his call for localization; it is obvious that through the development of regional connections and institutions there is vibrancy in academic studies on Southeast Asia from within the region. Nevertheless, to my mind there is a danger in drawing too sharp a distinction between “insider” and “outsider” perspectives and interests, which Goh recognizes (2014: 29), and a problem in determining what the alternative, emergent models of area studies from within the region comprise and whether or not they are sufficiently different from the kinds of models and concepts that have been developed from outside Southeast Asia.

Be that as it may Goh's volume gives us much food for thought in revealing the intellectual biographies of a number of prominent local scholars who have been active in developing our understanding of Southeast Asian history, culture and identities. In this regard the collection is dominated by the reflections of senior local scholars (Wang Gungwu, Taufik Abdullah and Reynaldo Ileto) and those of the middle generation (Wong Soak Koon, Yunita Winarto, Melani Budianta, Paritta Chalermpow Koanantakol, Patricio Abinales and Goh Beng Lan herself) with two younger scholars (Abidin Kusno and Fadjar Thufail) following up the rear with their thoughts and experiences. Shared themes which cut across the individual concerns of the senior scholars comprised their experience of colonialism, war and conflict; their engagement with the state in their production and exchange of knowledge; and their identification of the broader interrelationships between the construction and acquisition of knowledge on the one hand and relations of power and domination in post-colonial societies on the other.

Yet we might have anticipated more attention in Goh's volume to the influence of national citizenship, ethnic identity and social class membership on the scholarly trajectories of the contributors. Furthermore, my reading of these autobiographies suggests that the influence of Euro-American perspectives (in concepts, methods, and subject matter) has been greater than what one might expect from a volume which seeks to make a case for "local priorities"; the influence of the founders of Western social science and philosophy on the thought and direction of local voices in this volume, and that of outsiders who have made major contributions to our understanding of Southeast Asian realities (among them Benedict Anderson, Don Emerson, Maurice Freedman, John Furnivall, Clifford Geertz, D.G.E. Hall, J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong, George Kahin, Edmund Leach, Rodney Needham, Jacob van Leur, Victor Purcell, Lucien Pye, Anthony Reid, G.J. Resink, Bertram Schrieke, James Siegel, William Skinner, John Smail, Wim Wertheim, and Oliver Wolters) is plain to see. But in saying this I am not disputing the value of Goh's compilation of local intellectual biographies; they are full of



interest, particularly in the way in which the contributors discuss their approaches to disciplines, their involvement with state governments, and their activism in using their knowledge for practical, policy, and social reform purposes.

The call to arms on behalf of local scholarship, keeping in mind the problematical notion of “the local”, is also evident in other volumes published in the last decade or so. Laurie Sears’ *Knowing Southeast Asian Subjects* (2007) has a similar purpose. In the introductory chapter Bonura and Sears argue strongly for the importance and urgency of dissolving the “universalizing tendencies” of Western scholarship and producing knowledge outside of what they refer to as the “Euro-American hegemony” (2007: 15-19). Again I am with them in spirit, but slightly nervous about the vehemence with which scholarship in the West is targeted and whether there is a need to pose the question and issue in such stark terms. In this connection, Korff and Schröter, in their review of trends in anthropological and sociological research, also draw attention to a range of problems both from the perspectives of European scholarship on the one hand and local scholarship on the other, and the need for more dialogue between them (2006: 63-72). What they indicate, among other issues, are the pressures and incentives on local scholars, to undertake politically relevant research and to focus on local issues within a nation-state framework; it suggests that the emergence of alternative ways of thinking about regionalism may be more difficult than we suppose in an environment which directs local research to policy and practical matters (ibid: 65-66).

There is also a much more technical, hands-on contribution. To advance this localization approach, Wesley-Smith’s and Goss’ volume on *Remaking Area Studies* is an attempt to create “more empowering forms of area studies” (2010: x). This task of “remaking” was in fact undertaken in an American outlier in the School of Hawaiian, Asian, and Pacific Studies at the University of Hawai’i, Manoa, though with important outreach, dialogic and student-centered teaching and learning programs in partnership with institutions in New Zealand, Fiji, the Philippines, Singapore and Japan. The program which operated over two phases from

as long ago as 1997 to 2002 and comprised collaborative research and an interactive learning program was in turn part of the Ford Foundation's general program *Crossing Borders: Revitalizing Area Studies*. This volume advocates the development of innovative and collaborative pedagogical practices across countries and cultures in the Asia Pacific region in order "to bring area studies to the areas studied" through the use in the classroom of interactive technologies (e-mails, websites, video-conferencing) (ibid: xviii). It appears to be a counterpart to the kind of collaborative program of research undertaken in the Freiburg-Gadjah Mada partnership, though with less personal face-to-face contact (Schlehe and Sita Hidayah 2014).

#### **4.4 A sceptical note**

The only volume out of the recent flood of publications to adopt a rather more sceptical tone on the value of defining a bounded Southeast Asian region and the utility of attempting to understand it in terms of a multidisciplinary area studies approach is that edited by Paul Kratoska, Remco Raben and Henk Schulte Nordholt entitled *Locating Southeast Asia: Geographies of Knowledge and Politics of Space* (2005a). They tend towards the generally accepted view that Southeast Asia emerged as a regional concept primarily as a result of external involvement and interest (from the US, Europe and Japan) so that these foreign powers could "deal collectively with a set of territories and peoples that felt no particular identification with one another" (2005b: 11). The editors conclude that attempts to define Southeast Asia have been "inconclusive" and that the term "Southeast Asia" continues to be used "as little more than a way to identify a certain portion of the earth's surface", and that the question of whether or not the concept of Southeast Asia as a defined region "will acquire greater coherence in the future, or become increasingly irrelevant,....cannot be answered" (ibid: 14). I think that I am closer to this position than one which accepts the region in some substantial and bounded way. Kratoska *et al's* volume focuses rather more on regional constructs and concepts as, in Heather Sutherland's terms, "contingent devices" and not "fixed categories" (2005: 20-59);

the emphasis is much more on the contestation of space, the movement of populations, capital, cultures and ideas, and the importance of networks and brokerage; linkages, flows or movements (of people, goods, ideas), flux and process, mediation, shifting or transient borders and borderlands, unboundedness and openness, hybridity, marginal populations, and conceptual fluidity. (Kratoska, Raben, and Nordholt 2005b: 12-15).

McVey echoes this in her observation that “we may need to think in terms of not one but many Southeast Asias” (2005: 315). This perspective is most consummately explored and evaluated in Howard Dick’s contribution to the volume in his consideration of Southeast Asia as “an open system” (2005: 250-74). I firmly recognize the value of conceptualizing Southeast Asia as “a contingent device” and one which will shift its boundaries and character depending on scholarly objects of enquiry and academic disciplinary interests and inclinations. But in my opinion, there is no contradiction between acknowledging the continuing importance of Southeast Asia as a region and the field of studies devoted to it on the one hand, and proposing that the region, as a concept and as a focus of scholarly investigation and analysis, can mean different things to different people.

Surprisingly there also seems to be a tendency to take for granted definitions of Asia, Asia Pacific and Southeast Asia in various instances of these books, with only a few of the contributors debating what these terms denote and how we might profit in our research and teaching by continuing to use them. With regard to regional definition the volume which manages to say very little about what constitutes Asia is that by Edmond *et al*, which has the ambition to “recenter” the region or aspects of it. Asia appears to be in one sense something concrete and graspable. Asian places, histories, and cultures, we are told, “increasingly resonate around the globe and affect the lives of many far removed from its regional geographies’ in a ‘new Asian century” (Edmond, Johnson and Leckie 2010b: 1). We can guess from the contributions what Asia might comprise, but we remain unsure about what are the elements of Asianness that are being recentered (other than that they derive from places,

peoples and cultures usually associated with Asia [China, Japan, India, the Malay-Indonesian world, and those of mobile Anglo-Indians, Okinawans and Japanese who carry with them something rooted in Asian history, culture, and geography]).

At one point Asia in broad terms is conceived of as a center (or centers) in the context of a “historical recentring of Asia through movements of people and changing conceptions of space and heritage” (ibid:3); here we have a sense of location and definition, though one which is subject to change. But then the editors shift their ground and recentring appears merely to be the process of highlighting some areas of Asian history, cultures and politics which have been “overlooked” (ibid:1) which in turn involves a shift in emphasis to other disciplines or fields of study beyond ‘the narrow framing of Asia around geopolitical or economic interests’ (ibid: 2-3). The discovery of “new”, “overlooked”, “unexpected” or “alternative” Asian centers in the context of newly emphasized fields of scholarly enquiry (historical, literary and cultural studies, sociological and anthropological approaches) seems not to be particularly “new”, and the notion of center (in terms of shifting subjects, disciplines, zones [places], populations, cultures, histories) becomes exceedingly slippery and difficult to pin down.

We also come away from Goh Beng Lan’s book, with its very welcome locally-grounded intellectual biographies of Southeast Asian scholars, with only the haziest notion of what the major defining characteristics of Southeast Asia as a region are from local perspectives, what the local emergent models and alternative perceptions and visions of area studies generated by these biographies might look like, and whether or not Southeast Asian Studies as a language-based multi- or interdisciplinary field of scholarly endeavor focused on a socio-culturally, symbolically, historically, geographically or politically defined region of the globe is a useful and viable mode of enquiry to help address the issues which the contributors to the volume raise.

In her editorial introduction, Goh appears to reject undue emphasis on the nation-state as a unit of analysis and on “the possibility of any bounded geographical and identity conceptions”

(2011a: 2). Yet, insofar as I can detect any analytical and definitional boundaries which are drawn in this volume, we still appear to be operating with the nation-state-based, ASEAN-defined Southeast Asia and the intra-regional networks which sustain “the lived reality of [constructed] regional identity and geography” (ibid: 39). It would seem that the Western construction of Southeast Asia is being embraced, filled in, elaborated and developed by local scholars but with the hope that this endeavor can be founded on local perspectives and priorities. What is clear is that most of the contributors, other than the editor, do not really address to any extent, the issue of regional identity or identities, cross-national and trans-ethnic comparative studies, and the crucial features of area studies programs designed to understand Southeast Asia as a region. Indeed most of the personal reflections focus on a particular nation-state and specific issues within that territorially bounded unit, though I do accept that where the collection does have a special importance for area studies perspectives is in the willingness of the contributors to engage with research problems across disciplinary boundaries.

Let me now return to the *Remaking Area Studies* volume which presents even more problems in defining regions because it wishes to conjoin Asia with the Pacific, an enterprise which I have always felt to be fraught with difficulties. Teresia Teaiwa in her chapter “For or *Before* an Asia Pacific Studies Agenda” seems to be equally concerned, and she could be talking about Southeast Asian Studies in some respects. She identifies precisely some of the major issues which have been debated in area studies more generally, which seem to take on a rather more extreme form in Pacific [Island] Studies: the region “is conceived of and practiced rather loosely”; “[it] is not consistently defined by practitioners”; “[m]uch work published and presented under the rubric of Pacific Studies has a single national or ethnic focus, does little to extend the possibilities for comparative analysis within the region, and tends to rely on theoretical sources from outside the region as a point of reference. As for disciplinary or methodological consistency, there is none...” (2010: 111). If we accept her assessment of the problems, then how or why would we want to

bring the disparate field of Pacific Studies into the equally disparate field of Asian Studies and within that as well Southeast Asian Studies?

In summary then, in this attempt to capture some of the issues of the last decade, I accept most fulsomely that regions do have a cognitive existence and, with regard to *Decentring and Diversifying Southeast Asian Studies* and Goh Beng Lan's apparent embracing of the ASEAN-nation-state definition of Southeast Asia, I am prepared to recognize that for certain political and academic purposes this delineation of the region is "a lived reality". Yet, along with Heather Sutherland I continue to conceive of Southeast Asia as a "contingent device" and, in that regard, there are other ways of seeing Southeast Asia from different disciplinary perspectives, particularly anthropological and archaeological ones, and these need not be locally generated; in other words there are several possible "Southeast Asias", as Ruth McVey has proposed.

Therefore, if we adopt the position that Southeast Asia can be defined in a number of ways according to different disciplinary and research interests then the methodologies will vary depending on the task in hand, the research problem formulated, the breadth and depth of the study contemplated. Neither will it be so preoccupied with what now seems to me to be a fruitless debate about the respective contribution of insiders and outsiders, or the continuing anxieties about exogenous hegemony. The definition of Southeast Asia and how to study it will shift, depending on whether the research undertaken focuses on archaeology, prehistory, comparative anthropology, sociology, geography and demography, language and linguistics, economic development, international economics, political science, strategic studies and international relations, or history.

My Southeast Asia as an anthropologist is not the Southeast Asia of the political scientist focusing on the development and sustainability of the nation-state; nor is the Southeast Asia of the archaeologist, prehistorian or linguist the Southeast Asia of the economist. And now having set out my stall what do I have to say about methodology? I can only recommend what I have

found useful, and that utility comes not from a specific area studies perspective but from the need to secure groundedness and context. In this endeavor I am essentially adopting the methods and practices of anthropology. But, having said this, I have never confined myself to a small anthropological corner of Southeast Asia, anxious about moving into other researchers' territories beyond Borneo. When you gain confidence from delving into your bit of Southeast Asia then I think you can embark on rather more ambitious cross-regional research (which is what I have been doing during the past ten to fifteen years (see, for example, King 1999; 2008/2011; King and Wilder 2003/2006; Park and King 2013; King 2015).

#### **V. A methodology for area studies?**

I have adopted a particular approach to research and the analysis of research findings which I began to rationalize in the 1990s. It probably remained buried in my subconscious before then. But, in thinking about it more deeply and explicitly, I think I have come to some sort of understanding of what it is all about. I was given the opportunity to set this down in a keynote address to the Persatuan Sains Sosial Malaysia (Malaysian Social Science Association) in 2008 in Kuching, Sarawak which provided the opportunity to locate what I was saying in a Borneo context, but to move beyond it and to present more general thoughts about the ways in which many of us, perhaps somewhat unknowingly, conduct our research (King 2009).

Let me preface this summary of my approach to research with reference to a chapter by Tim Quinlan on applied anthropological research in southern Africa in the 1990s. He was making a case for the need for South African anthropologists to focus on practical and applied research and on the building of a unitary state. He was countering what he saw as one of the major preoccupations of Euro-American social scientists with "theory". He says "Postmodernism seems to be a luxury affordable amongst North American academes and perhaps, along the

corridors of Cambridge”, but, for him, it is not affordable in southern Africa (1996: 74). I have great sympathy with this position and it squares with my own interests and preoccupations in grounded and applied research. It is characterized in the term which I first coined in the 1990s to refer to my research practices – “a jobbing social scientist” (King 1994) and then elaborated fifteen years later (2009).

Several meanings, some popular and some technical, have been attached to the term but I continue to see it in a positive sense; it is not an approach to academic endeavor which is in any way lacking in professionalism. It is a style of work, an approach, a method and a perspective which is wholly professional and rooted in scholarship. Coincidentally, Tony Barnett and Piers Blaikie also coined the term at the same time as me in their research in rural Uganda in the 1980s on the social and economic impact of the AIDS epidemic (1994). My suggestion is that working in a multidisciplinary area studies environment encourages, but does not monopolize this kind of research. It may draw eclectically on concepts and frameworks from more than one discipline; and in collaborative work and in the supervision of research one tends to get involved in several different topics of interest, often simultaneously, which may not have very direct or demonstrable connections with each other. Nevertheless, “jobbing” is a methodology which is not distinctive or unique or particular to area studies; it emerges from social science training.

Let me repeat what it comprises: in research we invariably formulate a set of specific questions; in order to answer these we (or perhaps I should say ‘I’ as an anthropologist) piece together the jigsaw from a range of materials garnered from field observations, interviews, surveys, casual conversations and encounters, and a mix of published and unpublished data (King 2009: 18). In attempting to understand this medley of materials I have usually drawn eclectically on certain concepts and analytical frameworks, which hopefully ,have provided me with, in Barnett’s and Blaikie’s words, “a “coherent” [empirical] account which in some way relates to the “problem” from which the journey originated”



(1994: 226). It should be a logical, coherent, internally consistent analytical narrative which, as its main objective, makes sense in relation to the original questions asked. Its main task is not to formulate theory but it might well feed into theoretical work. The concepts deployed are at a relatively low level of abstraction; they do not comprise a unified or coherent body of theory as such. This jobbing approach therefore draws on a range of concepts that happen to be at hand and pragmatically utilizes them to address the research questions posed (ibid: 1994: 247-248). The research approach lends itself to practical and policy-related work, and the *modus operandi* is to move to-and-fro with some ease between empirical work, practice and application, conceptual deployment and formulation, and analysis. In all of this work I have usually proceeded on a case-by-case basis recognizing that there are significant variations at the local level between the circumstances of different communities and populations. Even a low level conceptual framework might not enable us to capture the diversity of lived experiences, though it is still preferable to higher level theory. In my 2009 paper, I then made reference to a range of what I called “jobbing concepts”, which I need not repeat here (King 2009b: 18-20).

Most recently, in an extended book chapter, I have used this approach or mode of enquiry to consider the problems posed by globalization theory (which is a universalism) as it relates (or not) to research on the ground in Sarawak (2012b). I do not have the luxury of time or space to return in detail to that paper and so perhaps an extended quotation from it captures my position: ‘One of my tentative conclusions will be that the concept of globalization neither seems to offer those social scientists who prefer to work “on the ground” anything that is particularly useful, nor adds significantly to the intellectual armoury which we already have at our disposal. Have we been seduced by the globalization theorists? Have some of us been seduced by yet another general theory which purports to explain and analyze major trends and processes that are currently taking place in our “runaway world”, but which ultimately explains very little?’ (2012b: 117-118). In this regard I have enormous

admiration for Clive Kessler's contribution to the same volume "Globalization: Familiar Issues But a New-fangled Discourse – or "Déjà Vu All over Again?" (2012); I am in whole-hearted agreement with him.

## **VI. Concluding remarks**

Some brief comments on Huotari's recent thoughtful consideration of the relationship between area and method within a Southeast Asian Studies context provide an appropriate conclusion (2014: 1-24). He argues for a methodological dialogue, especially in attempting to go beyond the oversimplified binary distinction between "universal disciplinary knowledge and area-specific, interdisciplinary knowledge" (ibid: 1). The path he and other authors take in the Freiburg volume already referred to (Huotari, Rüländ and Schlehe 2014) is to focus on "context-sensitive" methods, practices and techniques deployed in knowledge production in area studies in an attempt to find a scholarly "middle ground" between disciplinary and area studies specialists. Huotari also recognizes the lack of "methodological coherence" in area studies but draws attention to 'methodological tolerance' (2014: 3).

I would also resist the universalizing impulse in much mainstream disciplinary research (see, for example, King 2012b), but other than some modest eclectic area studies contributions to research practice (among which I count my concept of "jobbing") I would maintain that area studies specialists still work within those approaches to knowledge production generated within disciplines. The contributions to the Freiburg book continue to initiate knowledge production from a disciplinary perspective (anthropology is prominent in the case material presented), and the contrast between what economists and anthropologists do is also a preoccupation in attempting to bring together disciplinary practices with the demands of local, context-sensitive research. Therefore, as examples, the innovative collaborative, reciprocal project organized between Freiburg and Gadjah Mada Universities

is a product of reflexive developments within anthropology, not within area studies (Schlehe and Sita Hidayah 2014), to which Huotari himself alludes (2014: 22). Kathryn's Robinson's consideration of the contribution of a gender studies approach to Southeast Asian Studies starts from anthropological, sociological and feminist dimensions of gender studies; it is not in any obvious sense derived from an area studies perspective, other than to point out that the role of women and their high status relative to other regions (neighboring and further afield) has been an important "theme" in the study of Southeast Asia (2014: 108-109, 125-126; and see Korff and Schröter 2006: 65-66). Finally Chua Beng Huat makes a case for much more inter-referencing within Asia, rather than continuing a preoccupation with Euro-Asian hierarchical comparisons (and more than this extending the concept of comparison to one of "affinities", and utilizing such notions as "points of reference", "citation", "evocation", "inspiration", "absence", "resonance", and "provenance") (2014: 273-288). Yet, as he notes, the method is derived much more from cultural studies, though it was also developed within an Asian (though not Southeast Asian) frame of reference (ibid: 287).

To repeat, my starting point in this debate: Southeast Asia for me is a shifting, variable, open-ended concept. Its configuration and content will vary depending on research perspectives, approaches and interests. The methods we use are almost always (in my case at least) derived from fields of study outside of area studies. It is also interesting that, for those, who are committed to and focused on the defence and indeed the remaking and re-energizing of area studies generally and Southeast Asian Studies, or Asian Studies or Asia Pacific Studies in particular there seems to be surprisingly little thought given to the definition and delimitation of the region(s) and the scope and competence of the field of studies designed to study the region(s) so identified. In this exercise of rethinking and rejuvenation we should also beware of the construction of categories and indeed oppositions, which, in some cases, are not very helpful and need to be heavily qualified. I must confess, in attempting to convey my message, I have also used some of these categories ("area studies" and "disciplines"

being the main ones), but I do so for convenience not with the conviction that they are, in some way, homogeneous, fixed and delineated. The dualisms “insider/outsider” or “Euro- American/ Southeast Asian” also need decidedly to be laid to rest. And finally I turn to “jobbing” – an approach, a lifestyle, and a vocation – and its capacity, in methodological terms, to question and deconstruct “universalizing tendencies”.

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