


## Introduction

# **Southeast Asian Studies: Area, Method and Comparison**



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The four papers in this special issue of the journal emerged from the International Conference of ISEAS/BUFS on 24 April 2015, hosted by the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies. The two major themes addressed were the 'Regional Characteristics of Southeast Asia and its Comparison with Others' and 'Approaches to Southeast Asian Studies: Methodological Quests'. The relationships between the academic programmes pursued by area studies specialists, the methods they employ to gather and analyze data and the comparisons which they endeavour to make between regions, nation-states, ethnic groups, and communities are undoubtedly complex and disputed.

This special issue is of considerable interest because it comprises the thoughts of four researchers with different backgrounds, interests and agendas: we have views from Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan and the United Kingdom, and all four countries have developed the study of the region from different traditions and have organized and undertaken research on Southeast Asia in different ways and with different emphases.

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We would like to express special thanks to Professor Victor T. King for generously accepting to write this introduction even on a cruise journey to Alaska.

Victor King in his paper 'Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian Studies: Issues in Multidisciplinary Studies and Methodology' takes a more disciplinary-based view of the study of Southeast Asia whilst recognizing that multidisciplinary research has made a positive contribution to our understanding of the region; the influence of the American model of Southeast Asian Studies and the strength of disciplinary approaches and nation-state-based foci are clear, though early on some prominent British scholars like DGE Hall, JS Furnivall and Charles Fisher had a strong sense of the integrity of Southeast Asia as a region. King casts doubt on whether area studies (as a multidisciplinary, context-driven, and conceptually grounded academic enterprise, and one which is often concerned with policy and practice) has contributed to the development of distinctive methodologies separate from disciplinary-generated modes of data gathering and analysis.

Shintaro Fukutake in his contribution, 'A Historical Review of Japanese Studies and the Emergence of Global Studies' points to the different traditions of the USA and Japan in the development of area studies and the relationship to foreign policy interests (in the case of the USA the relationship has been a close one, whilst in contrast in Japan it has been distant), and the important contribution which Japanese area studies specialists have made to the emergence and shaping of global studies in such universities as Sophia, Doshisha and Tokyo; in this regard he refers to the harmonious development of 'area-based global studies'.

Cahyo Pamungkas in 'Approaches to Southeast Asian Studies: Developing Some Post-colonial Theories in Area Studies' with reference to the study of the Southeast Asian region from an Indonesian perspective explores the possibility and promise of post-colonial theories and offers a critique of colonial discourse and Euro-American social science, and universalist approaches to the understanding of Southeast Asia and the relationship between power and knowledge.

Finally, Malo Rajo Sathian in her analysis entitled 'Approaches to Southeast Asian Studies: Beyond the "Comfort Zone"' pays particular attention, outside of a fixed concept of Southeast Asia,

to the possibilities of addressing cross-national themes by deploying other transnational and trans-border zones, comprising both sub-zones primarily within the region (southern Thailand-northern Peninsular Malaysia; the Southeast Asian massif [Zomia]; the Greater Mekong Sub-region; the Thai-Myanmar-China network; the 'Heart of Borneo'; the Islamic trade network between Muslim countries within and beyond the region] and outside in relation to the wider Asia and Asia-Pacific. Her paper reveals that there is still a tension between those who are content with a contingent, multiple and shifting Southeast Asia depending on the research objectives and interests pursued, and those who desire a much more defined and solid region (shaped by the objectives and requirements of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN]), which in ASEAN terms is increasingly realized, developed and sustained from within the region.

As one would expect there are different emphases between the four papers, but there is an overall agreement that the academic project of Southeast Asian Studies needs rethinking at the present time. This is the result of a range of issues which have come together over the past two decades: processes of globalization and the movement of people, goods, capital, information and ideas across territorial/regional boundaries; the problems of theory and methodology within area studies; the difficulties occasioned by the colonial-imperialist origins of the construction and study of Southeast Asia as a defined and delimited region; and the decline in government financial support and student interest in Southeast Asian Studies in some countries where in the past the study of the region enjoyed considerable popularity. What is clear is that the contributors to this journal issue, though they are all in agreement that Southeast Asian Studies as a currently established and defined academic and institutional set of programmes will continue (more energetically in some countries than others), argue that it has to change and has to move away from a preoccupation with nation-states as units of analysis. It has to engage with transnational issues embodying a range of material and immaterial mobilities, importantly the movement of ideas and information technology, as well as the

problems incurred by environmental change, and also to develop relations with wider programmes of study: Asian Studies, Global Studies, Border Studies, Diaspora Studies, among others (see the papers by Mala Rajo Sathian and Shintaro Fukutake).

Despite their differences and the different traditions they represent the four contributors are agreed on the positive character of area studies: its context sensitivity; the recognition of local knowledge, perspectives, interests and interpretations; the importance of grounded research concerned to understand Southeast Asia from the perspective of flux, process, cross-border relations, and hybridity; the need to focus on subaltern, marginal and territorially peripheral groups across the region; the increasing need for multi-site research using comparative perspectives (both within and beyond Southeast Asia); the interesting possibilities of inter-referencing within a regional frame of reference; the advantages of conceptual fluidity and the deployment of low-level concepts accessed in an eclectic and purpose-driven way; the importance of the relationship between research and policy and practice (as illustrated in Cahyo Pamungkas's examples of research on Indonesian forestry and human rights issues in Indonesian Papua); and the expansion of reciprocal, equal, open-ended and mutually enriching research partnerships between researchers within Southeast Asia and beyond.

However, what continues to be problematical is the role and position of local Southeast Asian scholars in the academic enterprise of Southeast Asian Studies. The importance of strengthening and developing the study of Southeast Asia within the region is accepted by all the contributors, but there continues to be concerns about the imbalance in role, position, status and impact between the research and publications of local scholars and of those from outside the region. Some of these concerns revolve around the constraints imposed by Southeast Asian governments and sponsors on local scholarship and the strong requirement to produce reports in response to the government need for practical- and policy-related research rather than to provide more conceptually and theoretically innovative and informed publications.

What the papers in this special issue also demonstrate are the problematical binaries between area and disciplinary studies; insiders and outsiders; Southeast Asian/Asian and Euro-American; practice/policy and theory; local and universal knowledge; and context and comparison. Nevertheless, there seems to me to be no contradiction between acknowledging a political reality (which comprises the constitution of a Southeast Asian presence and identity within global affairs constructed and deployed by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and developing and using research-directed, fluid and contingent perspectives on Southeast Asia.

