Southeast Asianist in the Digital Age

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[*Abstract*]

The paper provides an appreciation and critical commentary on Stephen Keck's fictional product, the SEABOT. It examines the problems of regional definition, given Southeast Asia's diversity, and provides a positive gloss on this diversity. It also considers certain conceptual and methodological issues raised by SEABOT, and the advantages and disadvantages of this online platform.

Keywords: Digital age, SEABOT, diversity, regional definition, concepts, methods, Southeast Asia

Ⅰ. Introductory remarks

I often ask myself what it means to be a "Southeast Asianist". For me I trace this question back to the year 2005 when I told my Korean family and friends of my decision to study Southeast Asian history and politics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Southeast Asia was still an unfamiliar, exotic, and underdeveloped

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region for many South Koreans by then, thus studying Southeast Asia or generally speaking "a different Asia" was seen to be more adventurous than practical, as if I did not care about my future career. Indeed, from the very first semester in Wisconsin, I found that studying Southeast Asia was far too challenging. Not only that I had never learned about the region and its history, it was simply too diverse for a Korean history student who was born and raised in a region where common regional identity markers like the Chinese writing system, Confucianism and Mahayana Buddhism were instilled since childhood. By contrast the list of identity markers for the Southeast Asians is not exhaustive or perhaps, non-existent. I learned in my first semester that what I knew about Asia was simply a fraction of knowledge and

I could not claim that I knew Asia because I am Asian. I had to start everything from scratch. I took Thai language classes and started memorizing names of places, peoples and events in various Southeast Asian languages translated into English. I also had to make myself familiar with several religious and cultural terms like Theravada, sangha, pancasila, and datu. I jotted down terms and acronyms during lectures, carried a pocket dictionary and searched through journal databases using those Southeast Asian terms. This was a decade ago.

Perhaps for the students and scholars of Southeast Asia, including myself, quite overwhelmed by this geographically, culturally, politically and historically varied region, the dramatic evolution of information and communication technologies in the recent decades should have been welcomed as a blessing because it has increased accessibility to, as well as legibility of the general Southeast Asian Studies. While I cannot help feeling some sort of guilt when I download digitized archival documents and published research papers, I also cannot help speaking to myself how easy it has become to be an area studies specialist. Thanks to the "digital humanities," one of the fast-rising fields of study in the US now, it has become far easier to access archival sources online. I do not need to travel to Thailand or Indonesia just to get "documents" like before. The rise of academic social networking websites and applications on the other hand helped researchers be updated and

alerted about recent trends and interests in their fields of interests. Moving beyond "digitization" of documents and photographs for preservation and wider utilization, the availability of digitized academic information and data has affected methodologies of academic research in recent decades, calling for an attention to more innovative ways of controlling the regimes of information and data in relation to the transformation of human lives as well as historical analysis. This is where Stephen Keck's imaginary SEABOT —a "fictional product", comes in.

Keck's paper brings our attention to the ways in which Southeast Asian Studies should deal with the digital age. In brief, the paper focuses on two issues: first, how to study Southeast Asia by overcoming extant barriers like languages and cultural, political, social and economic diversities? The second issue is the changes that SEABOT would bring to the future of Southeast Asian Studies. In terms of studying Southeast Asia, Keck stresses we need to be aware of two barriers: one is the regional diversity and complexity and the other is extant negative receptions on utilizing technology in humanities research. The second issue is the changes that SEABOT would bring to Southeast Asian Studies. Keck mentions three benefits. The first is that it would help build a professional network and provide a platform for collaborative ventures among policymakers, business leaders, researchers and educators. In addition, it would help improve the quality of research by utilizing data-analytics technology like Research-Bots and Artificial Neural Networks. This information technology would also contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the region and various sub-fields of Southeast Asian Studies. Finally, SEABOT would help improve the transparency of research, predictability of current and future trends and the scholars' ability to cope with the changes and challenges in the field. Expected outcomes of using SEABOT will be the strengthening of data-driven research methodologies, an increased volume of scholarly productions and a collaborative search for regional commonality and identity.

My comments will focus on examining the conceptual and methodological quests that Keck's paper raises: the former on the search for regional commonality and identity and the latter on the

urge for embracing the force of digitalization and broadly, globalization. My discussion on the conceptual quests will briefly overview major debates in the development of Southeast Asian Studies in the twentieth century. The discussion of the methodological quests will focus on the divergent nature of the digital age's demands that the twentieth-first century Southeast Asian Studies should consider beyond the quest of digitalization.

Ⅱ. Conceptual Quests: Diversity, an Obstacle or an Opportunity?

Since the beginning of "Southeast Asian Studies" as a separate field of scholarly inquiry - around 1940s when the region gained a politico-military designation called "Southeast Asia" - many scholars have been challenged by the diversity of the region's histories and peoples. At the same time, they have had to face somewhat emotionally-charged discussions on the enduring legacies of colonialism as well as the overpowering influence of the global Cold War that had heavily affected the writing of regional and national histories on Southeast Asia. Inspired by three influential historians - J.C. van Leur, John R. W. Smail, and Harry J. Benda, the immediate post-colonial Southeast Asianists attempted to "decolonize" area studies from the dominance of Euro-American perspectives. Against the historical backdrop of the dissolution of the European imperial system that had once dominated and constrained the region, van Leur, Smail and Benda's reflections on the domination of Euro-American-centric views accentuated the vast gap between colonial and local perspectives and the heavy political connotations in Southeast Asian Studies derived not only from colonial/neo-colonial political interests but also from the reliance on the colonial archives by researchers (Andaya and Andaya 1995: 94). As such their works reflected the legacies of the decolonization period (roughly 1945-1962) in Southeast Asia that had been expedited by the Second World War (Goscha and Ostermann 2009; Kratoska 2003).

A number of nation-states emerged in the ensuing Cold War

period. Donald Emmerson remarked then that "[B]y attracting world attention and creating a need to talk about the region, political disunity [the rise of separate nations] bolstered the semantic unity of "Southeast Asia" (1984: 10). Although Emmerson concluded that "[W]hat 'Southeast Asia' denotes is no longer truly controversial," students and scholars of Southeast Asian Studies continued to struggle to find the region's commonality and identity (Emmerson 1984: 16). In fact, it has been further complicated by the additional debates around the sustainability of Southeast Asia as a region. Notably, the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* devoted a special issue "Perspectives on Southeast Asian Studies" in the mid-1990s that included sixteen articles by Southeast Asianists from various academic backgrounds (1995). Broadly speaking, Emmerson and the contributors to the special issue witnessed the end of the Cold War system. During this same historical period numerous individual countries and regions began claiming their autonomy and independence as well as their own place within the growing international community. Therefore, these scholars focused on how the policy-oriented research enterprise boosted political science and anthropology during the Cold War, while delaying the promotion of writing autonomous histories of the region revealing "colonial oppression and the stirrings of national political consciousness" as well as "transnational cultural zones or interactions" (McVey 1995: 5; Emmerson 1984: 13).

In the post-Cold War period, two edited volumes by Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Liok Ee (2003a) and Paul H. Kratoska, Remco Raben and Henk Schulte Nordholt (2005a) devoted their discussions on the concept and identity of the Southeast Asian studies, implying that the task that *In Search of Southeast Asia* (Steinberg 1969) had initiated in the late 1960s amid heightening tension during the global Cold War has not completed yet. The two books also focused on the post-Cold War period coinciding with the age of globalization. This recognition of transnationalism as well as the benefits of comparative research, leads us to the question of whether Southeast Asian Studies could have dealt better with the legacies of the colonial and Cold War eras – such as archive-focused, policy-oriented, western-centered methodologies in

theory production and more importantly the exclusion of local scholarship (Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Liok Ee 2003b: ix-xxv; Thongchai Winichakul 2003: 3-29).

In sum, what these reflections and concerns over Southeast Asian Studies in the second half of the twentieth century largely represent is "dissension" against the dominant powers – be they colonialist, neo-imperialist, or national governments in Southeast Asia – and their narratives that had concentrated on searching for the region's narrowly-defined "utility" for their cause. In terms of the conceptual quest for regional commonality and identity, the most visible difference between these volumes and Keck's paper is whereas the former delve into what kind of knowledge has been, or should have been produced in Southeast Asian Studies during and after the Cold War, Keck focuses on how to improve both the quantity and quality of knowledge production in the post-Cold War period by embracing the digital revolution. Simply put, while this earlier work had been finding missing puzzles, Keck is starting a whole new puzzle.

Keck suggests that the utilization of data-analytics technology to enhance the accessibility and availability of data for both the Southeast Asianist and non-area specialists can support a long-delayed search for regional identity and the "basis for region building". While agreeing with the intention and initiative that Keck has provided with the introduction of SEABOT, I believe we still need to resolve one critical issue before fully embracing the methodological quests of this digital age: Is Southeast Asian's common characteristics a prerequisite for region-building? Why has the region's diversity in culture, identity and historical experiences been viewed as an obstacle to the study of Southeast Asia as a whole?

We need to begin with a critical scrutiny of the reason why commonality and diversity are somewhat opposing concepts in Keck's paper. In my understanding, common characteristics like the Chinese writing system, Confucianism and Mahayana Buddhism in East Asia enhances the legibility of a region, enabling non-area specialists or non-local people to grasp key cultural and political

traits more easily and quickly. In this vein, Southeast Asian diversity has been viewed as an obstacle to understanding or framing the region for many purposes, including that of setting general foreign policy goals by non-Southeast Asian governments as well as regional organizations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

In reflecting on the history of Southeast Asian Studies, the continuous quest from policy-makers for enhancing the legibility of the region has been the most direct factor that has established and expanded this study of area. In 1943 the South-East Asian Command (SEAC) that had given currency to the name "Southeast Asia" was created under the leadership of Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten to meet the aggression of Japanese imperial forces. The sheer necessity of opposing the Japanese imperial military forces and of addressing Southeast Asian anti-colonial nationalist movements accelerated the process of defining the region's boundaries and identity. Immediately after the end of the war, the Cold War brought not only substantial American funding but also trained researchers - not colonial administrators - and eager students who wanted to contribute their energies to liberating and modernizing the victims of European high colonialism (McVey 1995: 1). The editors of the volume *Locating Southeast Asia* thus remark: "[T]he concept of Southeast Asia evolved from the need of Europe, America and Japan to deal collectively with a set of territories and peoples that felt no particular identification with one another (Kratoska, Raben and Nordhold 2005b: 11)".

However, as James Scott elaborated in his book *Seeing Like a State*, legibility was a central problem in modern statecraft, because it involved simplification of the region's multifaceted characteristics by narrowing its diversity and replacing it with a relatively legible commonness which could easily lead to overgeneralization and even manipulation by certain interest groups (1998: 2). In this respect, Emmerson's caution is noteworthy: "The destructive side of this region-forming process should not be forgotten. What had once been considered a culturally derivative periphery, vaguely east of India and south of China, was structured by colonialism and nationalism into a mosaic of specific states" (1984: 10). The region's

numerous languages, ethnicities, cultures, religions, and geographies that defy simple generalization been an open-invitation to multinational, multicultural and multiracial scholars and interest groups. Although we are talking about Southeast Asian Studies in the twenty-first century, we should not forget that the same region in the twentieth century had a mixed, intricate experience of high colonialism, decolonization and the Cold War. As such, the region served as a destination for modern seaborne empires, Japanese imperial armies, and the American foreign service officers and volunteers. In the post-Cold War era, Southeast Asia has become a platform for scholars from all over the world who are interested in colonialism, imperialism, global trade, nationalism, world religions, separatism, the Cold War and globalization. In short, regional diversity has been an opportunity to test-drive newer approaches and methodologies, even further diversifying the fields of Southeast Asian Studies. The question is from whose views has the region's diversity been considered as an obstacle.

Ⅲ. Methodological Quests: Forces of Globalization that Forces the Digital Age

Keck's introduction of SEABOT that "would draw upon artificial neural networks to mine the region's 'Big Data', while synthesizing the information" is indeed innovative and proactive in embracing the latest technology for enhancing transparency, predictability and connectivity in Southeast Asian Studies. At the same time, because of the very nature of the digital age, Keck's proposal of using Artificial Intelligence (AI) in research makes me question for whom this new method would serve. Will this new method allow the larger public, both Southeast Asians and non-locals to freely explore the massive range of diversity and opportunity in the region that has been ignored for many decades? Although Keck's paper addresses how to "make the study of Southeast Asia both broader and more comprehensive" through the utilization of the AI and Artificial Neural Networks in research designing, information collecting and final writing, it seems to speak directly to the needs and demands of the policy-planners and -makers, both at the Southeast Asian

national and international levels, who are interested in discovering ways of controlling the rapidly changing global system and its impacts on nation-states.

In the end, it was the age of globalization that incorporated transnational, transregional and interdisciplinary researchers across the world as "the unprecedented development of horizontal networks of interactive communication that connected the local and global" brought together "different and widely spaced people and social connections" (Steger 2013: 35). The same age also brought about another change: the decline in government funding and support for area studies in the Euro-American academy (Andaya and Andaya 1995: 98). Keck mentioned that his search for a new tool stemmed from the context that area studies has "proved to be a less attractive frame of reference for burgeoning scholarly trends." Even before the digital revolution became an everyday reality, several Southeast Asianists noted that the center of Southeast Asian Studies would shift to Asia sooner or later. McVey stated in 1995 that "[A]fter all, it is in Southeast Asian countries that the requisite language and local knowledge are concentrated; and as official interest in funding area studies continue to decline abroad we can expect the old foreign centres of regional analysis to lose their intellectual grab (1995: 9)." Thongchai Winichakul has also confirmed in his paper in this special issue that "[A] country's experts of other Asian and SEAsian [Southeast Asian] Others [have] grow[n] in number and quality in the past few decades faster than during the entire colonial and Cold War eras."

One readily available example can be found in the rise of Southeast Asian Studies in South Korea. The opening of South Korean diplomatic relations and trade with the Asian communist countries commenced with the dissolution of the Cold War system in the 1990s. Under military dictatorship, South Koreans were not allowed to travel abroad without special permission until 1989. The 1988 Seoul Olympics loosened the military government's grip on the South Korean citizen's freedom of travel and exchange. After the fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the South Korean government also normalized its diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China in August 1992. With the PRC's

large-scale privatization policy launched by the time of Deng Xiaping's death in the late 1990s, economic exchange and trade between the two countries increased dramatically. Likewise, South Korea and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam normalized their diplomatic relations in 1992, which has contributed to the increase of trade and South Korean manufacturing expansion to Vietnam from the new millennium.

Normalization of diplomatic relations with the communist countries and subsequent enlargement in business directly contributed to the rise of "Other Asian Studies" in Korea. When I was preparing for the college entrance exam in 1998, China was the land of new opportunity for my generation. By the time I was preparing for a preliminary examination in my doctoral degree program in 2008, Southeast Asia had replaced that land of new opportunity for many Koreans. The desire for searching for niche markets in Southeast Asia has grown within the Korean business and trade sectors as a number of small, medium and large companies have moved their factories to Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Myanmar in recent years. Similarly, a number of Korean trading companies are now targeting Southeast Asian consumers thanks to the widespread Korean wave or, Hanryu, and many Korean people began seeking new markets and professional careers in the region. Simply put, South Korea currently has an increasing stake in Southeast Asia and in the years to come. Overall, the search for the "Other Asia" by the Asians with the dissolution of the bipolar world system in the early 1990s opened up a new market for Asian Studies specialists.

The rise of Asian Studies in Asia has a broader implication for the changes and challenges that Southeast Asian Studies will have to meet in the coming years. Because of their felt distance and educational training, Asian scholars and students of Other Asian Studies would approach their research subjects differently from American and European scholars and students. Fortunately, because of the earlier-mentioned difficulties of generalizing the region's commonality in addition to the never-ending challenges placed upon the viability of the study of this not-easily-defined region and the endeavors of numerous Southeast Asianists to oppose the

narrowly-defined utility of their research, Southeast Asian Studies has given a birth to a number of innovative and widely-cited works by, among others, Benedict Anderson (1983) and James Scott (1998, 2009). With an attempt to enlarge the field of autonomous history after Van Leur, Smail and Benda, Sunait Chutintaranond and Chris Baker published an edited volume (2002), and Clive J. Christie's modern history book (1996) shares similar concerns about the imbalanced academic interests between the established nation-states and aspiring nations. Recent research trends in Southeast Asian Studies reflect these attempts to address the subject of minorities, identities, and resistance – overseas Chinese diaspora, Muslim nationalism and separatist movements, zomia and borderlands, and ethnic resistance, to name a few. In other words, the region's diversity as well as past endeavors for bringing autonomous and indigenous voices into the Euro-American-centered Southeast Asian Studies will provide a much wider range of opportunities for the newcomers in area studies from the Other Asia.

This last point is related to Keck's conclusion. Quoting Tim O'Reilly's words that we are "stuck in the past", Keck re-emphasized the necessity, or an imperative of proactively accepting the change that the digital age has brought about. I do not disagree with the imperatives of accepting changes by exploring and adapting innovative, cutting-edge technology and research methodologies. My question is in what ways the use of SEABOT can contribute to enhancing global, regional and national recognitions of Southeast Asia's unique and authentic identity; and more importantly to the promotion of originality and quality in the humanities research overall. This is particularly concerned about SEABOT's anticipated role in engaging and increasing the production of research in the field. What if the Research BOT, in its evaluation, decided that an article like John Smail's autonomous history would not meet the scholarly and professional demands and thus would not be publishable in prestigious academic journals? What if the Research BOT tells me that my research would meet opposition from the Thai and/or South Korean governments as it denounces their proclaimed governing philosophy and policies? Again, Keck's proposal of utilizing AI within the digital revolution for enhancing the quality

and quantity of research in Southeast Asian Studies is innovative in the sense that it attempts to proactively deal with the present dilemmas of extending the contribution of digitization of data in the humanities. Still the question remains: "For whom the bell tolls?"

Ⅳ. Challenges and Blessings of the Digital Age

Admittedly, my comments are rather conceptual and could be beyond the scope of Keck's paper. Keck's introduction of SEABOT is after all to search for the ways in which Southeast Asian Studies might redefine itself to ensure its sustainability against the pressures of globalization and the digital age. Nevertheless, I still believe the quest for change to meet future challenges will allow concerned scholars to reflect on what our past and present approaches to the understanding of Southeast Asia have been missing or ignoring. We should be reminded that the digital age offers not only the blessings of high-tech tools. It has also presented challenges for the present generation to cope with the world that has become "noticeably 'smaller' as distant lands are being linked ever more closely together" and at the same time, 'larger' because our horizons have never been so broad" (Osterhammel and Petersson 2005: 3). As with the end of the colonial and Cold War eras when Southeast Asianists were led to reflect on their position, this current age pushes us once again to come to terms with our past and present so that the future challenges can be met naturally and even unconsciously.

In retrospect, my Korean friends were right. I was indeed looking for an adventure when I chose to become a Southeast Asianist in 2005. Now in 2018, Southeast Asia is still a region that defies easy generalization and prediction. And, I still ask myself to what extent my own research can contribute to renovating Southeast Asian Studies in the age of globalization and digitization. So far, the best answer to this question that I have found is from Ruth McVey in 1995: "To this extent, the present lack of a path is liberating. It is in periods of intellectual uncertainty and unease, of a lack of orientation, that scholarship is likely to be most creative, for its own internalized restrictions are far more deadening to thought than

censorship imposed from outside" (1995: 9).

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