



## **Alternative Approaches in Southeast Asian Studies: Compounding Area Studies and Cultural Studies**



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### **I . Context**

The papers in this special issue were presented at a conference organized by the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies at Busan University of Foreign Studies (ISEAS-BUFS) on 10-12 May, 2018. The conference theme “Alternative Approaches” is included in the title of this introduction. It marks the beginning of the third stage of a 10-year research program which commenced in 2009 at ISEAS-BUFS, funded by the National Research Foundation of Korea. The overall focus of the program is the “Recognition and Construction of Southeast Asia as a Holon: Building Southeast Asian Studies on Compounding Area Studies and Cultural Studies”. The third stage (September 2015 to August 2019) is entitled “Revisiting and Reinterpreting Southeast Asian Characteristics and Methodological Quests for Southeast Asian Studies”.

The rationale for the conference was posted on the website’s “Call for Papers” as follows in this edited paragraph: “Area studies had been regarded as a practical research field of study and conducted by scholars from various disciplines [see Salemink’s

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paper for a discussion of the spatialized and analytical dimensions of the concept “field”]. It was one reason why area studies has not been established as an academic discipline furnished with its own unique research methodologies. Today, area studies is experiencing quantitative recession due to decreasing strategic interests and also an identity crisis in its lack of a unique academic profile. Such a state of affairs urges us to redirect the conventional approaches of area studies as a practical research endeavour to one which is based on studies of culture and identity. Furthermore, in order to establish area studies as an academic discipline, in-depth discussions for developing unique research methodologies should be followed. Given this background, this Conference aims to explore new approaches in area studies, specifically for Southeast Asian Studies, by compounding area studies and cultural studies. The concept of ‘culture’ here covers not only arts and humanities but also the general intellectual transmissions that influenced politics, economy and society”.

Even with these central themes it was to be expected that several of the papers presented did not fit very comfortably within the main preoccupations of the conference. However, in reading the abstracts and listening to many of the presentations, I thought that there might be sufficient synergy between some of the papers to construct a reasonably coherent special issue. This special issue contains the two keynote addresses (Thongchai Winichakul and Victor T. King), three papers delivered in Session 1 entitled “Methodological Quests for Southeast Asian Studies” (Stephen Keck, Oscar Salemink and Janus Isaac V. Nolasco), and a departure from the normal practice of the journal, the inclusion of the discussants’ observations on the three presentations in that session (Sinae Hyun on Keck, Maitrii Aung-Thwin on Salemink, and Maria Serena Diokno on Nolasco). We then decided to include a final paper delivered by Rommel A. Curaming in Session 5 on “From Southeast Asia to ASEAN” which fitted well with some of the debates examined in this special issue.

## **II . Other Southeast Asias: “Insiders” and “Outsiders” and the Construction of a Region**

Several of the papers continue to engage with the enduring problem of defining, delimiting and conceptualizing Southeast Asia as a region. The difficulties we face in this endeavor are considerable. In my paper in this special issue, I emphasize the diversity of approaches and perspectives, based on a range of elements and criteria which have been deployed in an attempt to define the region. I state: “We have moved from definitions based on distinctive social and cultural content; an indigenous genius; distinctive historical moments and processes; scholarly styles, traditions and methodologies; a locus of theoretical innovation; a particular geographical environment; alternative, locally-constructed paradigms; a multi-sensory arena; a negatively defined region in relation to China and India; and a unity-in-diversity model which postulates paradoxically that differences (core-periphery, majorities-minorities, lowland-upland) bring a certain coherence”. All these attempts remain unsatisfactory in one way or another and I have been especially critical of approaches which seek to establish distinctive scholarly styles, traditions and methodologies and alternative, locally-constructed paradigms (King 2001, 2014; and see Goh Beng Lan 2010).

The related question in the attempts at regional definition is to consider critically which voices are heard in these debates and discussions. Should the dominant voices in this arena of contention, disagreement and diversity of opinion and interest be increasingly those of local scholars, who primarily live and study within the region as “insiders” or will there be a continuing dominance, sometimes referred to in more stark terms as a “hegemony”, of Euro-American “outsiders” following in the footsteps of Benedict Anderson, Clifford Geertz, James Scott, Anthony Reid and W.F. (Wim) Wertheim, among many others? The issue of Orientalism and the external construction of a region, a culture, a people, on the one hand and the need to develop and support a locally-generated Southeast Asian Studies on the other, is complex and will probably never be fully resolved (King 2016). The theme of binaries such as

local-external, “insider”-“outsider”, East-West frequently resurfaces in this special issue.

It is extraordinarily problematical to divide scholarship into “camps” (inside-outside, Southeast Asian-Euro-American) in that since Southeast Asia emerged as a recognized and accepted field of study in the immediate post-Second World War period the boundaries (if that is the right word?) between local and non-local have been blurred, and have become increasingly difficult to disentangle. There are all kinds of combinations of academic background, location, ethnic identity, training, methodologies, collaborations and research activities within and beyond Southeast Asia combined with the mobilities and interactions between “those within” and “those without” which render binaries of very little analytical utility. In this connection the view that the concept of Southeast Asia (leaving aside what terms have been used to designate it) is primarily an external, American, strategically- and politically-generated post-war construction has to be heavily qualified, though it has continued to comprise an important part of the historical consciousness of many scholars working on the region (Park and King 2013; King 2013).

It is an inaccurate perception and one which Anthony Reid, among others, has dispelled in his investigation of the roots of Southeast Asia as a concept in, for example, Austro-German scholarship at the turn of the twentieth century (1999). We can go back further to the mid-nineteenth century to detect an emerging sense of a Southeast region in some of the research (of George Windsor Earl, John Crawfurd and J.H. Moor, among others) that was published in Singapore in *The Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia*, edited by James Richardson Logan, and which appeared in 12 volumes between 1847 and 1862. These Singapore-based perceptions, though expatriate, came from within the region not outside it (King 2013b).

It is no coincidence that a formative influence on the development of a concept of region (and the field of Southeast Asian Studies which was established to study it) was the University of Malaya founded in Singapore in 1949, and then extended to

Kuala Lumpur in 1959. Both universities after independence went on to establish Southeast Asian Studies programs. Singapore and Malay(sia), occupying sites at the Straits of Malacca, the fulcrum of Southeast Asia, perceived Southeast Asia in a different way from the mainland Southeast Asian states, large parts of Indonesia and the Philippines. Those who claim post-war American dominance in this field should recognize the scholarly activity that was taking place within the region, particularly in Singapore and Malaya, in the early post-war years; admittedly, initially it was largely a colonial enterprise (Ernest H.G. Dobby is an appropriate representative of this period), but local scholars at the university soon emerged (among them Wang Gungwu and Syed Hussein Alatas). The local dimension, though, again, expatriate, was rather diverse; the University of Rangoon had a part to play in the interwar years with DGE Hall and others studying and teaching there; as well as colonial administrators (Oliver Wolters comes to mind) and those who served in the military during the Second World War (Charles A. Fisher is prominent among them). These scholars promoted Southeast Asia as a “holon”, the theme of Busan’s research program, and did not focus only on particular Southeast Asian nation-states.

The USA was also fortunate in receiving an infusion of European scholarship in the study of Southeast Asia at crucial times in its post-war development. The Austro-German connection was obvious: at the New York Southeast Asia Institute, Robert Baron von Heine-Geldern; at Yale, Southeast Asian Studies, Karl J. Pelzer, followed by Bernard Dahm and Hans-Dieter Evers; Harry J. (Jindrich) Benda from Czechoslovakia also arrived there in the 1950s; at Cornell, Benedict Anderson and Oliver Wolters; DGE Hall, after his retirement from London, also spent time in Southeast Asian Studies at Cornell. Via the University of Malaya such distinguished scholars as Anthony Reid and Paul Wheatley also subsequently worked at Berkeley, California. Interestingly, Jan Otto Marius (J.O.M.) Broek had been there in the 1930s.

Following the theme of locally-emerging constructions of region and their interrelationships with external perceptions, keeping in mind that these are rough-and-ready discriminations, we begin the special issue with a paper by Rommel Curaming on “From

Southeast Asian Studies to ASEAN Studies: What's in a Name Change?". He investigates in some detail, based on a survey of university MA programs in the region, the viability and utility of the division between area studies, covered in this case by the term "Southeast Asian Studies", and institutional/organizational studies embraced by the term "ASEAN Studies". He concludes that it is possible for area studies programs to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate components which focus on ASEAN as a regional organization, and, therefore, in academic terms, the separate study of ASEAN is unnecessary. Yet the term "ASEAN" is being used increasingly as an alternative to the term "Southeast Asia" and also as a replacement for it, and ASEAN Studies programs are flourishing.

Curaming then contextualizes these changes in terms of arenas of knowledge production and organization (in this case, the construction of a region) and the power relations which are implicated in these processes, in that the ways in which knowledge is generated, framed and deployed serves to express power relations, empowering some and excluding or marginalizing others. What he detects is the increasing popularity of the term ASEAN as a means of identity formation among an increasing number of Southeast Asians, encouraged by the frequency and intensity of interactions across the region, the promotion of the term ASEAN in the media, electronic communication, and commercial life, and its increasing use in politics, international relations and regional diplomacy. He suggests that this might mark "a new stage in the evolution of regional identity" in that it is a means, or an agency for more and more citizens of the region to feel part of a wider locally-meaningful entity rather than an abstraction ("Southeast Asia") which was largely externally-derived. He recognizes the potential advantages and disadvantages in political terms of these developments. But it would seem, on the basis of his analysis, that the process of "ASEANization" will continue apace.

Curaming's paper fits neatly with that of Victor King's "Other Southeast Asias? Beyond and Within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations", but for different reasons. I argue that the configuration and content of Southeast Asia, at least in nation-state

terms, has been defined for us by ASEAN, though this configuration was already determined before the five-country ASEAN was formed in 1967. I approach the issue as an outsider, though someone who has spent a considerable period of time undertaking research and teaching in different parts of the region. When writing general books on Southeast Asia my motivation for using the ASEAN-defined Southeast Asia (based on a collection of ten nation-states [and, on occasion, Timor Leste]) is that it is a convenient regional construct understood and accepted by academic publishers, and which feeds straightforwardly into the academic infrastructure of most Southeast Asian Studies programs around the world. Furthermore, although Curaming indicates that ASEAN is primarily an institutional-organizational construct, in my recent research into the regional development of tourism, it became clear that ASEAN is also developing a social and cultural identity through region-wide initiatives which involve collaboration, interaction and exchange; regional planning has symbolic and cultural resonance.

I go further in the paper and suggest that, in spite of ASEAN's utility in conveniently defining the region, as academics, we should retain flexibility in that there are always research problems which require us to both step into and step out of ASEAN. In this respect Heather Sutherland's concept of regional definitions as a "contingent device" (2005) enables us to construct, in Ruth McVey's terms, "other Southeast Asias" (1995). I then suggest tentatively that the twin concepts of culture and identity (again using the concept of a "holon") might provide us with the means to address contingency and multiple regional (and sub-regional) identities. In recognizing the different scales, levels and kinds of identity in operation, their shifting and fluid character, and both their objective and subjective dimensions, we can conceptualize different culturally defined populations at the territorial margins of ASEAN extending and intruding into, spilling over and interacting and engaging with populations residing in areas which are now defined as "Indian" and "Chinese". This seems to be a more satisfactory way of addressing the issue rather than, in negative terms, counterposing Southeast Asia to India and China.

### **III. Southeast Asia, Constituent Nation-states and New Transnational Developments**

Many scholars (perhaps the majority) in Southeast Asian Studies programs usually focus on one country in the region. Given the region's cultural and linguistic diversity it is difficult to become a "Southeast Asianist" in the true sense of the word. The American tradition in Southeast Asian Studies has been overwhelmingly to focus on nation-states. In the early days of Cornell, for example, from its foundation in 1950, the central axes of the mandala were Lauriston Sharp's Thailand Project and George Kahin's Indonesia Project. When Frank Golay joined the Cornell Southeast Asia program, a Philippine wing was added (Seap, Cornell 2018). Maitrii Aung-Thwin, in his comments on Oscar Salemink's paper (see below), also draws attention to the preoccupation with the nation-state within Southeast Asia in the period 1950 to 1990.

Janus Nolasco, in his paper "Between Philippine Studies and Filipino-American Studies: "Transpacific" as Area and the Transformation of Area Studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century", considers the case of the Philippines in Southeast Asia, and notes, more generally in the region, that there are increasing numbers of local or indigenous scholars engaged in Southeast Asian Studies. He also draws our attention to an interesting development: that the demise of Southeast Asian Studies in some parts of the Western academy is being replaced by such new fields as Asian-American Studies and the contribution to this field of diasporic indigenous Southeast Asian scholars such as Filipino-Americans who live and study in the USA (and see Rafael 1994). Nolasco, posing the question is there a "second life" for area studies? - then examines the dialogue between scholars in Filipino-American Studies who have focused predictably on such topics as US imperialism and US-Philippine relations, migration, diaspora, racism, identity and assimilation and those Philippine scholars working "back home" in Philippine Studies. Here the inadequacies of the "insider-outsider" dichotomy are clearly demonstrated. Nolasco argues that Filipino-American scholarship, which has increased in profile considerably during the past two decades in the American academy has important implications for



area studies; in particular, these scholars have examined in some detail the issues of US imperialism in the Philippines, a neglected subject in American historiography, as well as the marginalization of Filipinos in American history. These concerns have in turn been paralleled by an increasing interest in the USA in America beyond its territorial borders in transnational American Studies, and particularly in the study of transpacific histories, relations and processes.

These intellectual impulses within the USA, both from Filipino-American and American scholars, have intertwined with the field of area studies, re-energized it, and taken it in different directions, just as ASEAN Studies has done within the region. Area studies (Southeast Asian Studies, Philippine Studies) has emerged in new guises in Asian-American Studies programs and in those fields of study concerned with culture, ethnicity and identity. These developments have not been without their tensions expressed in opposition from area studies purists, and anxieties about the possibility of a new American-centric epistemic hegemony which runs counter to the main thrust of Philippine Studies, seen to be based on local priorities, perspectives and interests within the nation-state of the Philippines. In spite of these concerns Nolasco points to overlaps, common ground and synergies between Filipino-American research and that undertaken in the Philippines by Filipinos and the value of these externally-generated scholarly activities to the area studies project. He suggests that transnational/transpacific studies might be a way of bridging the gap or division between American-based and Philippine-based research, effecting a hybridization, whilst recognizing the differences between these two fields of inquiry; he favours a dialogue, and, in breaking down boundaries and barriers between them, he sees opportunities rather than disadvantages. Furthermore, he points to the fact that nation-state-based studies within Southeast Asia can exist side-by-side with Southeast Asian Studies with each feeding off the other.

In her comments on Nolasco's paper in her "Transnational Studies and Attempts at Inclusivity", Maria Serena Diokno draws attention to the diversity of historicities and contexts in Filipino diasporic experiences in the USA, and therefore the diversity of

Filipino-American scholarship; the same applies to Philippine Studies. Her paper highlights, yet again, the problems of binary thinking, and the presentation of categories as relatively homogeneous. She also explores the nature and antecedents of transnational histories which seek inclusivity and a deeper understanding of humanity and everyday life, “the uncomfortable parts of history, the silenced voices and those forgotten or ignored”. She suggests that the recent move towards transnational historiography gives assurance to “the place of Filipino-American studies within a transnational or transpacific strand of American studies regardless of whether Southeast Asian studies, within which Philippine studies are positioned, wither away or survive in the near future”.

In regard to the issue of who possesses the authority to speak for the Filipinos and the Philippines she draws attention to the increasingly aggressive stance of Filipino-Americans to ensure that their place and roles in American history are fully recognized and included in the historical narrative.

In another paper which focuses on a particular nation-state in Southeast Asia, in this case Vietnam, Oscar Salemink, in his “Southeast Asia as a Theoretical Laboratory of the World”, presents us with an intriguing personal intellectual journey from Vietnam to Europe and back again where, through force of circumstance in his professorial post in Denmark, he had imaginatively to bring together his in-depth cultural, linguistic and historical (“ethnographic”) knowledge of Vietnam with European constructions and concerns about cultural heritage, heritagization, and contemporary arts and museums which also generated comparative studies that traversed Japan, China, India, South Africa, Brazil and Europe. Vital dimensions in this endeavor are his skills and willingness to deploy an area studies-type enterprise with the development of conceptual frameworks which address European issues and those of a wider world beyond Europe and Southeast Asia; and then subsequently to return to Vietnam and translate these experiences, in the context of his research on “cultural production”, in a meaningful way to the country and culture from whence his journey began.

He also demonstrates the problematical nature of the “insider-outsider” or “local-universal” binary but also the ways in which in-depth knowledge of a particular country, culture and history can feed into debates which are European-focused; local knowledge of another place, in this case Vietnam, can act to transform those debates but can also lead to theoretical innovation and empirical findings which can then be translated back to the country and culture in question. He commences his discussion by pointing out the enduring dilemma of area studies; the multidisciplinary study of specific localities is usually “empirically rich” but “theoretically poor”. The field of area studies struggles when it comes up against the “universalizing” predilections of such “hard” disciplines as sociology, economics and politics. For the “soft disciplines” like history, anthropology, and cultural studies there is the problem of generalizing from a particular case or site, and Saleminck suggests that, in this arena, area studies “is increasingly fought out by resorting to philosophical concepts which usually have a Eurocentric pedigree”.

Quite rightly, Saleminck also argues that these so-called universalizing concepts are themselves an expression of Euro-American parochialism (such concepts as religion and the secular, culture, heritage [cultural heritage], arts, and identity), and they do not address the crucial issue that these trans-local frameworks are then adopted, adapted, changed in “meanings and connotations”, localized, translated and incorporated into vernacularized discourses in other places. In other words, their claim to universality can be challenged by the knowledge accumulated from non-Euro-American experiences. We must keep in mind, in reading Saleminck’s contribution, that he is an anthropologist and historian, and that anthropology, more than any other discipline provides the closest fit with the rationale for area studies in its emphasis on the command of the local language(s), in-depth knowledge of a particular field-site developed through a long encounter with it, empathy with local concerns, interests and perspectives, and a sense of place (a geographically-defined field) and history. He styles himself “a relative outsider”, but he is clearly someone who can and does move “inside”.

In his objective to bridge area studies and disciplinary-based

work in the context of Vietnam/Southeast Asia and to “overcome the limitations of both area studies and Eurocentric disciplines”, he is involved in a similar exercise to that of Nolasco, who, in the Philippines case, wishes to transcend the limitations of area studies and Filipino scholarship through the medium or agency of transnational/transpacific studies. Nolasco too is moving from a spatialized field (the Philippines/Southeast Asia) to an analytical field (in transnational studies).

In his response to Salemink, Mairii Aung-Thwin, in “Rethinking the Field: Locality and Connectivity in Southeast Asian Studies”, draws attention to the parallels between Salemink’s scholarly journey from the “thick description” of Vietnam (and Southeast Asian culture and history) to the conceptualization and analysis of European culture and the wider world with what is happening to the study of Southeast Asia within the region. He notes that Salemink, among other matters, is interested in understanding Vietnam, as far as is possible, from within but also within “global knowledge structures”, and, in comparative mode, to analyse such matters as European heritage in relationship to Vietnamese experiences and vice versa. Like others in this volume, this also brings Aung-Thwin into contemplating the “East-West binary”; the external understandings of Southeast Asia as against the search for local genius, essence, agency and initiative which can give expression to the distinctiveness of Southeast Asia as a region, and reveal “local meanings, structures and ways of life” while questioning Euro-American perspectives and constructions.

Aung-Thwin suggests that between 1950 and 1990 celebrating “the local” within Southeast Asia meant, with a few exceptions, celebrating “the national”. Subsequently, however, and with the further development of such regional organisations as ASEAN and with the globalization of scholarship, ideas, and information, the study of Southeast Asia from within, is increasingly addressing the processes and consequences of boundary-crossing, regionalization and the transcending of regional borders. In the case of the work of Singapore universities, he notes two trends; one in which Singapore serves as a gateway to the region and pursues the development of regional perspectives and the study of ASEAN and other regional

initiatives and activities, and the other which challenges the relevance, fixity and boundary obsessions of area studies, and looks beyond Southeast Asia to connectivities with other parts of Asia and the wider world. In this regard it acknowledges that there are “multiple points of reference”, as Saleminck has done, in his criticisms of Eurocentrism and the universalizing impulses of European social science, and in his globe-trotting approach to cultural heritage, museums and the arts.

#### **IV. The Futures of Area Studies and Southeast Asian Studies**

The final section ponders our current dilemmas and what the future holds in store for us. Thongchai Winichakul in his “Southeast Asian Studies in the Age of STEM Education and Hyper-utilitarianism” locates the dilemma of area studies in two major developments: the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a technology-driven transformation of global society and economy; more particularly a digital revolution (computer coding, artificial intelligence, robotics and nanotechnology and so on) which intrudes into all aspects of our everyday lives. Global transformations far from leading to greater homogeneity are generating cultural and ethnic diversities, socio-cultural fragmentation and increased opportunities for mobility and cross-cultural encounters and relationships, but, Thongchai argues, the emphasis on [S]cience, [T]echnology, [E]ngineering and [M]athematics and “hyper-utilitarianism” at the expense of cultural, linguistic and area studies knowledge, is not equipping future generations to navigate this increasingly complex world in what has been referred to as the “Disruption Era”.

Faced with these challenges Thongchai proposes that Southeast Asian Studies and Asian Studies more widely must re-examine their “values and relevance” in the context of the world’s changing higher education systems. After providing a brief history of the study of Asia/Southeast Asia which he divides into the colonial era of Orientalism with its demand for knowledge of ancient civilizations, deploying “classical” scholarly expertise, and the Cold War era with its strategic needs for modern social science knowledge in addressing

the political economies of developing countries, Thongchai then explores the ramifications of the post-Cold War digital era. The preceding eras were primarily generated by the interests and requirements of the West, and resulted in the construction of “Oriental Others”. In local anti-colonial responses and in the urgent need for post-independence nation-building, Southeast Asians began to construct their own notions of “Self” which tended to be, in their first stage, “nationalistic” and preoccupied with policy-oriented and practical social science research deployed with the aim to modernize and develop societies and economies within a defined and bounded national space.

In this current advanced technological era the value of the arts and humanities is in question and “[s]cience, rational choice, big data moved in at the expense of area studies in many social scientific disciplines”. As Thongchai indicates, these developments have resulted in the demise in certain Western countries of some higher education programs such as Southeast Asian Studies, though in certain disciplines and subject areas in the humanities (and in area studies) there have been exciting and positive responses. “Intellectual interests in geopolitics or the economy are declining, but have become stronger in critical studies in, for instance, popular culture, media studies, and religious studies”. This, coupled with economic growth and increasing prosperity in Southeast Asia and the wider Asia and a concomitant expansion of higher education have resulted in a strong interest in the “knowledge economy” and in locally-generated Asian and Southeast Asian Studies programs to ensure that one’s citizens have improved knowledge of their neighbors and more effective and informed interaction with them, economically, politically and culturally.

Thongchai points to a decentering and diversification of area studies programs and a positive development of scholarly capacity and expertise in Asia/Southeast Asia, as well as a greater interchange of personnel and knowledge between Asian and Euro-American/Australian universities on the basis of greater equality. Again the “insider-outsider” division becomes less relevant and viable in this context. With the increasing need for flexibility, decision-making, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, and language-based cross-cultural

sensitivities and knowledge, Thongchai argues that “training in critical thinking, skeptical questioning, and comparative and interpretive reasoning ..... is the realm of social studies and the humanities”. Furthermore, the “greater understanding of cultural differences and how to deal with them, as a society and as individuals, require education and scholarship provided in such fields as area studies”. Thongchai concludes by setting out an agenda for a new Asian and Southeast Asian Studies: to examine “the social and human dimension of technology-driven transformation”; to provide areas studies knowledge to encourage and support “competency in cultural diversity” which over time should become “a natural way of thinking”; to change the ways in which languages are taught making much more use of “ issues of interest or via popular culture, films...”; to encourage “[g]eographical flexibility [as] the methodology and the outcome of area studies knowledge to enhance our student’s ability to think, switch back and forth, among different spatial parameters in their dealings with the global, trans-national, border zones, and transcultural diversity”. In summary, he makes a strong case for the importance of the humanities and area studies in the digital age, but that scholars in these fields need to respond to these transformations positively and imaginatively.

Finally, there is Stephen Keck’s paper “Introducing SEABOT: Methodological Quests in Southeast Asian Studies”, which, like Thongchai in contemplating the problems which Southeast Asian Studies and area studies face in the digital age, takes us on a futuristic journey into the world of internet robots (“bots”), artificial intelligence and artificial neural networks, data analytics, big or “massive” data, brain-computer interfaces, and virtual and augmented reality. Unlike Thongchai who provides a discursive piece on the past, present and future of Southeast Asian Studies, but contemplates the possible future roles of the humanities in the context of area studies and the training and skills that are currently and will be increasingly required in a rapidly changing, mobile and diversifying world, Keck gives us a much more technical and institutional examination of the potential uses and advantages (and abuses) of

web robots (in this case his imagined robot for Southeast Asian Studies, SEABOT).

His investigation and projections and his search for new methodologies are rooted in a world of “infoscapes” in which there is an increasing “capacity to create, shape and interact with information” and “in which data are mined, harvested, traded, stolen, sold, resold and, most important, fiercely protected”. His premise is that “scholarship itself will change, possibly—if not probably—almost beyond our recognition”. In my view, certainly research and scholarship will be reconfigured. In regard to Southeast Asia, the accessibility of data and the ways in which we can use it will require us to reconceptualize “some of our frameworks”. In addition, his fictional SEABOT, given its properties as “an open source online platform which would serve all researchers throughout the world”, is then examined to determine how our practices and outputs might alter. Though it is for Keck a heuristic device at this moment, the technology currently available and that which is likely to be developed in the near future suggest that something like a web robot for Southeast Asia could be produced within the next decade. Keck also considers some of the potential problems which scholarship might face in a SEABOT environment.

Keck qualifies his argument by stating categorically that his intention is not to predict the future or to encourage changes in research agendas, but to begin a conversation about possible scenarios for Southeast Asian Studies in the next several years. He also sets out the possible institutional, legal and ethical dimensions of the SEABOT environments and the threats and disruptions that it poses for academic life (issues of privacy; control of research and the political uses made of it; intellectual property rights; academic inequalities, exploitation, selectivity and marginalization). However, his supposition is that SEABOT is “a platform which enables scholars who study SEA to communicate, share information, receive assessments of their work in real time, and connects them to both data bases and data analytics”. It can gather and store vast amounts of information and, as it is based on artificial intelligence, it is able to carry out mental operations and learn independently. The supposition is that researchers would undertake much of their



scholarly work within the SEABOT network in an interactive environment, and the platform could independently pursue research on specific topics on request. Most importantly, researchers, policy-makers and others interested in research findings would pose questions, infinitely variable, “so that SEABOT would know how to first focus on relevant topics, analyze them and then reply with information, suggestions and above all some kind of accessible data interpretation strategy”; it would also ensure their authenticity, gather data on the use of research and evaluate the research and its findings, identify dominant research trends, record citations, recommend publication of the research or not, identify suitable publication outlets, assess the productivity and quality of researchers comparatively and their future potential in the context of their particular research fields, provide guidance in the writing of papers and the appropriate references to use, promote team research, and so on. If SEABOT or something like it does make an appearance on the academic scene the prospects are both exciting and daunting.

In her comments on Stephen Keck’s paper Sinae Hyun in “Southeast Asianists in the Digital Age” strikes a cautious note. She ponders the issues raised for a South Korean in choosing to become a “Southeast Asianist”. From the relative cultural homogeneity of her homeland she was confronted by bewildering ethnic diversity. In finding her way through the cultural and historical maze, she found encouraging support in the “digital humanities” platform, a more straightforward online vehicle than the SEABOT envisaged by Keck. But like Keck she notes the advantages of digital information in addressing Southeast Asia’s diversities, but also the problems occasioned by the increasing move towards digitized data in that it “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”.

Hyun focuses on certain conceptual and methodological issues raised by SEABOT. On the matter of concepts, Keck raises the issue and Hyun discusses the problems of definition and “commonality” in a situation of considerable political, economic, social, cultural, historical and geographical diversity in a Southeast Asian region

which has been open to a range of external influences over a very long period of time – from the Indian sub-continent, mainland China and the wider East Asia (particularly Japan), the Middle East, Europe and the Americas. Overall, she views diversity in a more positive light rather than seeing it as a negative characteristic of Southeast Asia.

In her consideration of methodological changes in the digital age, she poses the question of who would benefit from SEABOT and who would be able to access its databases? Her suspicion is that these big databanks might well be accessed by policy-makers (and those with political interests) to enhance their means of control. She also questions how SEABOT might contribute “to enhancing global, regional and national recognitions of Southeast Asia’s unique and authentic identity”, and how precisely would it evaluate the quality of research outputs and the potential political sensitivities that a research paper might engender. Hyun also emphasizes, as others have done in this special issue, the substantial increase in scholarly expertise in Asia in the study of the Southeast Asian region which has particular methodological consequences for area studies in terms of language use, cross-cultural encounters, and research priorities and approaches. With or without SEABOT methodologies and approaches are changing. She takes the example of her own country, South Korea, as an example of this expanding interest in “Other Asian Studies”.

## **V. Concluding Comments**

Several themes have been addressed in this special issue; a most pervasive one is the problematical nature of binaries or dual categorizations: “insider-outsider”, local-global/universal/external, Euro-American-Southeast Asian, Orientalism-local/alternative constructions. The increasing globalization of research and training and the mobility of academic staff suggests that the division between the inside and the outside is no longer tenable, if it ever was. However, in our deliberations on ASEAN as a means of thinking about the Southeast Asian region we are drawn into the possibilities of

defining the region in terms of an internally-generated concept. This in turn is linked with the increasing importance of scholarship within the region, which, given the problematical division between “insider-outsider”, is generated both by citizens of the region and expatriates living and working there, and researchers from outside the region collaborating with locally-based scholars. Local scholars also travel outside the region to institutions abroad for periods of time to engage in collaborative research projects and training directed to the Southeast Asian region or they are part of diasporas and have settled overseas as in the case of Filipino-Americans. There are now multiple “voices” speaking about and for Southeast Asia and “multiple points of reference”. Elements of Southeast Asian Studies also appear in other programs: Asian-American Studies, Transnational/Transpacific Studies, and Ethnic Studies. However, where they continue to have life Southeast Asian Studies programs must respond proactively and imaginatively to the opportunities presented to them in the digital age, but be fully aware of the threats and hazards as well.

There is also some attention to personal research trajectories and how force of circumstance sometimes directs us into unanticipated projects and the development of new approaches and new conceptual thinking, as demonstrated in Salemin’s paper. These unexpected happenings can influence the ways in which we perceive and think about Southeast Asia as a region and they can affect the ways in which we connect our field sites and findings in Southeast Asia to the wider world, to processes of change occurring elsewhere and to conceptual developments beyond our region. We have discussed some of these concepts (culture, identity, contingent devices, other Southeast Asias, heritagization, translocalities, field of cultural production and knowledge production, historical inclusivity, binaries) which may provide a way forward in our analysis of a diverse and rapidly changing region.

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