

POST-GRADUATE RESEARCH IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES: AN OPEN AGENDA

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In 1983 I spent nine months as a Fulbright Visiting Researcher at Cornell university. It was a most rewarding period of intense reflection and many exchanges with some of the specialist American scholars who individually have promoted Southeast Asian Studies in the United States of America. Many a young Southeast Asian citizen has studied in these hallowed halls of learning. The collective effort of teachers and students has, over many decades since World War II, defined a body of knowledge on Southeast Asian Studies.

At Cornell University, two seminars left an impression that over the last decade continues to haunt my thinking on research and post-graduate studies in Southeast Asia. The first was a paper presented by Ben Anderson at the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) conference in Washington that created a stir. This was the Ben Anderson who had just authored his now much-celebrated *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. He had set out to review the state of Southeast Asian Studies at that Conference. As many of us at Cornell had not travelled to the conference, we requested him to re-state the paper at the weekly Thursday brown-bag lunch session at the much revered 102 West Avenue. On a Thursday in the spring of 1984 Ben Anderson single-handedly and virtually demolished the huge corpus of research literature on Southeast Asian Studies in American universities. He identified only three books on Southeast Asia written by western scholars that he would re-read and would recommend a friend to read. The rest were reduced to a pile of rubble. The classics were J. C. Scott's *The Moral Economy of the Peasants* and John L. S. Girling's *Thailand: Society and Politics*. The third work was B. Kerkvliet's *The Huk Rebellion*.¹ The point made is that in over 30 years of American scholarship and area specialists only three books measured scholarship that endured. There was nobody in the esteemed audience that challenged his pronouncement. In the intense discussions that continued in small groups much later, the burning issue was what happened to scholarship. There were vague references to international funding agencies, the role of state agencies for international cooperation, and the security-sponsored studies that permeated much of the Cold War to save the Free World.

The second disclosure was made by the author of *Deadly Deceits: My 25 Years in the CIA* by Ralph W. McGehee.² In a compelling address he disclosed

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covert operations and, more frighteningly, he offered to identify scholars in the room who had helped in the recruitment processes of talented post-graduate students in Southeast Asian Studies for CIA operatives. The silence in the room was deafening as he carefully revealed the mechanism of recruitment. Furthermore, he explained and elaborated his field experiences in northeast Thailand and in Vietnam in trying to distinguish what was propaganda and what was real. It was a confession that was made with the greatest of humility and compellingly told. There was only a handful from the audience that purchased his book and asked him to autograph the copy.

In the next 10 years I spent many hours teaching undergraduates, training post-graduates, researching the field of Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia, and advocating regionalism. The only short break I had was another nine-month sabbatical leave at the Center of Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University in 1990. In the splendour of old Kyoto, many more questions emerged on the field of Southeast Asian Studies. The Center of Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University had its origins from American funding but it was certainly not Cornell University. It had grown as an integral part of the Ministry of Education and had successfully integrated the physical sciences with the social sciences. The made-in-Japan Southeast Asian Studies with its own agenda and own funding and own markets contrasted the academic factories of American, British, and Australian academic structures. The buzzword in Japan was the question, 'who are the peoples and the cultures that make up Southeast Asia?' A question with which we in the region are increasingly faced and will collectively answer as we cast our horizons outside our national boundaries and find that there is a part of Southeast Asia in all of Southeast Asia.

In the last ten years, a group of committed individuals in the region advocated the development of Southeast Asian Studies at various conferences in the region. In early 1994, they all came together at the *International Conference Toward the Promotion of Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia* organized by the Program of Southeast Asian Studies, Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI).³ Professor Emeritus O. W. Wolters of Cornell University in his keynote address entitled 'Southeast Asia as a Southeast Asian Field of Study' explained the origins of the field:

The Field, and area studies in general, emerged in the United States in 1948 with the explicit purpose of teaching Americans, many of whom were returning from Southeast Asia to civilian life, what they should know about a region of new nations whose affairs were beginning to impinge on their own at a time, when the Cold War was getting underway.

Southeast Asian Studies was an artificial construct created strictly for utilitarian self-interests. However, in the early 1950s it rapidly was shaped to serve security interests. Southeast Asia was decolonizing rapidly and the

former European colonial powers in the region preoccupied themselves with the reconstruction of Europe. America stepped in to fill the economic, political, and social space left by retreating Europe and with that shift came the rooting of Southeast Asian Studies in American centers of excellence and the eventual re-export of the field.

In the recently declassified documents of the Public Records Office (Colonial Office, Series 1022, Volumes 349 and 350) is deposited the hidden agenda of Southeast Asian Studies. The promotion of Southeast Asian Studies in Asia and Southeast Asia was kept under strict confidentiality as secret letters of correspondence were transmitted between Johns Hopkins University, Cornell University, Oxford University, Cambridge University, Hong Kong University, University of Malaya in Singapore, other universities in China, Korea, and Japan, and the British Foreign Office.

The carefully hidden transcript, now revealed, empowers students of the recent past to understand the creation of Southeast Asian Studies. The victory of Chairman Mao in 1949, the Korean War, the historic defeat of France in a major land-battle in 1954, the celebrated Afro-Asian Conference at Bandung in 1955 - all threatened the World Order that was emerging under American domination. Southeast Asian Studies was a weapon for security in an extremely geo-politically important region. The 'Age of Asia for Asia' was advocated by Asians, but others saw ideological fires in the spirit of nationalism and humanity.

The hidden hand that crafted Southeast Asian Studies again revealed itself in the CIA files on Southeast Asia that were recently declassified. Reading these materials (available on micro-film) in four days is like cramming 40 years of the development Southeast Asian Studies on high-speed visual camera.⁴ The growth, direction, speed, and shape of Southeast Asian Studies reintertwined with the twin themes of regional security and the expansion of production capitalism in the second half of the twentieth century. International agencies controlling research, finance, technology, and expertise combined with universities and state institutions to orchestrate the rapid expansion of the field of Southeast Asian Studies. The CIA files decoded in the context of the development of the field revealed the contours of the body of knowledge in Southeast Asia.

In the 1960s the commissioned work of W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, became the *kitab* for modernization theories. It is disconcerting to find that CIA letters and reports from the region were addressed directly to him. This decade was the period of Land Reforms. In all of Southeast Asia the cure for economic growth was untangling the tradition-bound village small plots of Southeast Asia, chronically infected by absentee landlordism, indebtedness, unproductiveness, and poverty into rationally organized production units capable of producing agricultural surpluses for the market economy. Private property based on land titles was

enforced throughout the region. It was something that the colonial rule had failed to accomplish in the countryside. This was the period of 'Land to the Tiller' in the Philippines and 'New Villages and RIDA (Rural and Industrial Development Authority)' in Malaya. Research funds, scholarships, post-graduate training, and publications followed these concerns.

In the late 1960s the focus turned more to agricultural productivity. This was a decade in which there was a flurry of activities in the great agrarian rice-bowls of Southeast Asia. It was a period of irrigation schemes, dams, increasing rice yields, agricultural diversification, development of agricultural research institutions and so on and so forth for rural development. The foundations of the catchword 'Green Revolution' of the late 1960s were established. This was the period in which the World Bank, IMF, FAO, and other similar institutions swung into action in the rural countryside. In the universities training and research focused on rural economics, rural development, public administration, agricultural sociology, and other applied disciplines all searching for the take-off point in economic development.

In the 1970s new problems and challenges appeared on the agenda. This was the population nightmare. The baby-boom of post-war Southeast Asia sent shivers of swarming Asians all around the world. Again funds, research, post-graduate training, and international agencies participated in population studies. Trans-migration and family planning were advocated as cures for economic backwardness and often enforced on the peoples of Southeast Asia who were reduced to faceless statistical numbers.

At the end of the decade yet another theme loomed on the agenda. The clarion call from the West was for more democratic rights to women and children, environment, non-smokers, and finally human rights. The new decade was that of open markets, and just as Southeast goods were in a position to penetrate Western markets, their production capacity was held ransom by the demand of buyers to the sellers to put their house in order. This is the age when Asia wants to regionalize but others insist that permission must be sought. It is the age of 'regional blocks' elsewhere but Asia must wait; even more ironically, the very definition of Asia is questioned by experts, consultants, specialists, and any other name-tag that adds undisputed authority to the bearer. The Asian Age at the brink of birth is forcefully forewarned by S. Huntington of an impending 'Clash of Civilizations'. The new agenda of ethnic and religious violence has been set and the debates go on as they did in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s but the files remain closed.

In the mid-1980s, Mohamed Nasir Tamara, French-trained Indonesian scholar in the vein of F. Braudel's *longue duree*, penned an intriguing article on Indonesian Studies in America and the American Way of Thinking. He traced the origins of Southeast Asian Studies as a field coming out of the battlefields of the Southeast Asian Command of Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten. In the next three decades, the Indonesian component of Southeast Asian Studies

dominated several leading universities and had extensive connections with international funding and research institutions that trained and shaped the direction of Indonesian decision-makers in the Cabinet, military establishments, and universities. All points of reference led back to the 'American Way of Thinking'.⁵

The new agenda for Southeast Asian Studies by Southeast Asians must have an open agenda. It is open because it deals with our ancestral heritage and the life of those yet to be born. It is open because the region was always open before colonial partitions. It is open because peoples, cultures, capital, technology, and commodities have moved to markets in the region and beyond. The region has been and will always be geo-politically important in Asia. The first step in the thousand-mile journey is that of commitment by Southeast Asians. Resil B. Majores in his paper 'Redrawing boundaries: research cooperation in Southeast Asia' sets the tone:

WE PROCEED from certain more-or-less shared assumptions about scholarship on Southeast Asia. The most basic is the imperative for Southeast Asians to reclaim as their own a region that has for so long been constructed for them (as material and political reality as well as object of academic study) by others.⁶

The deconstruction of the field of Southeast Asian Studies and the construction of the open agenda will be a task for all Southeast Asians. International funding, research and training institutions must return to their drawing boards and plans with their hands on the table in collaboration with Southeast Asians who will spearhead the field.

In a recent meeting held on May 30-31, 1994, in Manila, a group drawn from government think-tanks and academia adopted and advocated the following vision for our region:

We believe that Southeast Asia should be a community. Collectively, this community should be a major political, economic, cultural, and moral entity on the world stage in the twenty-first century.

This inspiring document declared as one of its noble intentions the promotion of Southeast Asian studies in the region. The region's strategic thinkers have collectively recognized the significance of the field of study and the need to reappropriate it from its former leaders. Individually, academics in the region also have advocated the need to progress in that direction. It is now up to the individual ministries of education in each Southeast Asian country to recognize the urgency and commit funds and manpower for research on the region. The social, economic, political and historical realities of the region as an entity must be brought out of the confines of the construction of knowledge that is nation-state bound. The search for the Southeast Asian identity in each of our countries will forge the regionalism that is the reality of geo-political

strength.

The Manila Statement is an open document, an open agenda, and an open exchange. It sets the platforms for regional cooperation in the development of Southeast Asian Studies as a field of academic inquiry.

Notes:

1. See B. Anderson, 'Politics and Their Study in Southeast Asia', in Ronald A. Morse (ed.), *Southeast Asian Studies: Options for the Future*, Washington D.C., Asia Program-Wilson Center, 1984.
2. Ralph W. McGehee, *Deadly Deceits: My 25 Years in the CIA*, New York, Sheridan Square Publications, 1983.
3. The Conference papers were edited by Taufik Abdullah and Yekti Maunati, 'Toward the Promotion of Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia', Program of Southeast Asian Studies, Indonesian Institute of Sciences, Jakarta, 1994.
4. See 'CIA Research Reports: Vietnam and Southeast Asia, 1946-76'. (Microfilm copy)
5. Mohamad Nasir Tamara, 'Studi Indonesia di Amerika Serikat dan Pengaruh *American Way of Thinking*', *Archipel*, Vol.33, 1987, pp.17-56.
6. Resil B. Majores, 'Redrawing Boundaries: Research Cooperation in Southeast Asia', in Taufik Abdullah and Yekti Maunati (eds.), *op. cit.*, p.155.