Thai Perceptions of the ASEAN Region: Southeast Asia as *Prathet Phuean Ban*

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Nearly everywhere, people have learned to think of the world in terms of a nation-state system. The nation, however difficult it may be to pin down analytically, has become a primary category of thought and mode of identity – perhaps the primary mode of political identity for most people around the world (cf. Reynolds, 2002). One effect of nationalism and thinking of the world in terms of "countries" (the colloquial English word for "nation-state") is to create a world of borders that not only signify the extent and limits of sovereignty, but frame the cultural consciousness and self-awareness of nation-state subjects. History, society and identity are all captured within national frames of reference (cf. Kratoska, 2003). But as a conceptual domain, "countries" also facilitate a transnational imagination of regional and global geographies. Visual and narrative representations – maps, flags, news reports, school lessons and the like – cultivate an orientation toward the world and its people, politics and geography that can be comprehended in terms of nation-state entities (cf. Anderson, 1991; 2004).

  Knowledge of nation-states as an extensive domain of "countries" is relational. In this sense, countries do not stand alone, but derive their identities in relation and contrast to other countries (i.e. What kind of country is this? How is it to be understood? How should we feel about it?). Association and relationship between countries (in a cognitive, rather than a *realpolitik* sense) constitutes a field of cultural knowledge. Based on research at Chulalongkorn University, we examine the organisation of that field of knowledge among a cohort of young generation Thais and what it tells us about their perceptions of Southeast Asia and the world. The bulk of writing on the subject of Southeast Asia

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as a regional concept consists of scholarly arguments for or against the "regionness" of Southeast Asia (e.g. Reid, 1999) or commentary on such constructs of scholars (e.g. Cribb, 2003; Emmerson, 1984; Glassman, 2005; Rajah, 1999; van Schendel, 2005). Our objective is to contribute to recent work on the ways in which people (non-academics and non-specialists) who live in Southeast Asia understand and conceptualise the region (e.g. Kratoska et al., 2005).

Among these contributions, Thongchai Winichakul (2005) has written on Thai perceptions of Southeast Asia. Building on Charnvit Kasetsiri's extensive, critical bibliography of scholarship on Southeast Asia in Thailand, Thongchai characterises the dominant paradigm of Thai understandings of Southeast Asia as "imperial knowledge" (2005, pp. 122–24). By imperial knowledge, he refers simultaneously to knowledge that takes the court in Bangkok as its focal point and knowledge constructed through the efforts of the Thai court in its largely successful endeavours to maintain independence and sovereignty and modernise internally during the era of European colonial expansion in the region. Nationalist governments subsequently adopted this mode of "imperial knowledge", which, as Thongchai argues, fits well into the nation-building projects of Thailand's nationalist constitutional monarchy after the 1930s as well as into Cold War ideologies. Like most recent contributions that seek to better understand regional perceptions of Southeast Asia from within the region, the argument is based primarily on textual analysis (i.e. drawing on Charnvit's bibliography) and perceptions gleaned through general exposure to media, education and other modes of discourse.

The title of Thongchai's recent essay describes the Thai view of Southeast Asia as "from the navel"; signalling both the centrality of Thailand within Southeast Asia, and the extent to which Thai perceptions of the region are inward looking ("navel gazing") and nationalistic in character. A positive sense of nationalism is strong among Thai university students and, as Thongchai suggests, there is a Thai-centric perspective in their knowledge of the nation-state domain in general as well as in their perceptions of Southeast Asia. However, they also have a strong sense of Southeast Asia as a coherent region of associated countries. This concept of Southeast Asia is both distinct from and nested in a strong perception of affinity among "Asian" countries as distinct from the "West". Southeast Asia is perceived through the lens of "*prathet phuean ban*", literally "countries (that are) friends (from) home", a phrase that circulates in textbooks and other media and has become part of Thai university students' consciousness.[1]

Although ASEAN has developed into an increasingly robust supra-national frame of reference (cf. Thongchai, 2003, p. 19; Vatikiotis, 1999), scholars and others cast Southeast Asia and particularly ASEAN as an elite project and primarily a framework for diplomatic exchange, interstate relations and regional security. Although some such as Amitav Acharya have argued that the development of Southeast Asian regionalism has been a "quest for identity", this refers mainly to identity of and among regional elites (Acharya, 1999a; 1999b; Nischalke, 2002). There is no denying that ASEAN regionalism is in the first instance an elite, diplomatic project; but in many senses, so are nation-states. It is a mistake to assume no connection or influence between the initiatives to imagine a regional entity at a political and diplomatic level and how citizens of various ASEAN members conceptualise Southeast Asia and their place within it. ASEAN has developed as more than merely a diplomatic forum. The leaders and institutions of ASEAN have undertaken various efforts, such as educational curriculum initiatives and news media collaborations in order to promote the idea of ASEAN as a social, cultural and political

entity (cf. Jones, 2004). The results of our survey of Thai students provide some measure of this generalised spread of thinking of ASEAN as a regional entity.

Countries as a Semantic Domain

In cognitive anthropology a semantic domain is "an organized set of words, concepts, or sentences, all at the same level of contrast, that jointly refer to a single conceptual sphere" (Weller and Romney, 1988, p. 9; see also Spradley, 1979, pp. 100–05). As a semantic domain, "countries" allow us to structure our knowledge of the world. While scholars writing in English prefer the term "nation-state" to describe this domain, the more common colloquial English term is "country" (thus our preference for the term). The Thai term "*prathet*" maps onto the English term "country", and is derived at a general level from the same historical forces that have brought "country" to mean the sort of territorially sovereign nation-state that we think of today. "*Prathet*", in the sense of "nation-state", came into use in the early twentieth century (Thongchai, 1994, pp. 48–49). The antecedent concept "*muang*" signified a very different sort of entity, famously described by Wolters (1999) as a "mandala" polity. In Thai, the nation-state known as Thailand in English can be referred to either as *Prathet Thai* or *Muang Thai*. In fact, the latter is more common colloquially and more affectively evocative. But as a generalised domain, *muang* is a vague cover term. It might signify historical mandala states such as Sukhothai or Ayuthaya, or it might refer to major international cities such as New York or London. *Prathet*, on the other hand, very specifically brings to mind modern nation-states.

The domain of *prathet*, as with any semantic domain, produces meanings through contrast and association within the domain. The constituent items (e.g. Thailand, Laos, America, China) of the domain of *prathet* are meaningfully understood and gain their unique identities in relation to one another. Our research seeks to show the normative pattern of these relationships – especially in regard to how the pattern indicates a sense of Southeast Asian regional identity. We collected responses from students using a series of well established methods developed in cognitive anthropology, which allow us to analyse their knowledge and organisation of the semantic domain of *prathet* or countries (cf. Weller and Romney, 1988). The data was collected in stages between December 2003 and September 2004.

First, we collected free list data, in which students ($n = 191$) listed as many countries as they could in two minutes. Free list data allows us to determine which items (in this case, countries) are most salient to our respondents, and to compare relative salience across groups of respondents (Thompson and Zhang, 2006). Second, we collected responses to a questionnaire that focused on judged similarities and differences between countries using three different sets of countries: a "world-wide" set of 15 countries; an "East Asian" set of 15 countries, including the ASEAN countries and five Northeast Asian countries; and one set including only the ASEAN member countries ($n = 60$; $n = 68$; and $n = 61$ respectively).

The questionnaire used a triad design, in which respondents were given a series of sets of three items (triads), such as:

<div align="center">Singapore   Indonesia   Malaysia</div>

The respondents' task was to circle the country they considered to be most different from the other two. Each possible pair of countries is matched several times over, from which we can derive an overall pattern of similarities and differences. The responses give us a

very large set of data. We used standard correspondence analysis in order to reduce the data to interpretable, spatial representations that we refer to as "cognitive maps" of the domain.[2]

Figures 1–3 are based on the results of correspondence analysis of the data collected from questionnaires using sets of world-wide, East Asian and Southeast Asian countries respectively. The simplest interpretation of these figures is that countries appearing close to one another are those that respondents judged to be most similar, and those farthest apart were judged to be most different. From the location of the countries, we can infer which countries are most strongly associated with each other and the primary criteria that respondents (as a group) use to make their judgments (these inferences appear in the labels of the axes of the figures and will be discussed further below).

Third, we conducted pile-sorting exercises and interviews (n = 80), in which we gave respondents a larger set of 24 countries on cards and asked them to sort the countries into piles based on which countries they felt were most similar to each other. In Table 1, we list all groupings made by three or more students. In the context of both triad questionnaires and pile-sorting interviews, we collected additional information in the form of open-ended questions. We asked respondents to provide descriptions of countries (as a list of words associated with each country in the triad questionnaires and in more narrative, descriptive format in the pile-sorting interviews). We also held several sessions with students in the form of seminars and focus groups, in which we asked them to help us interpret the data. We use the qualitative, descriptive data as a basis for interpreting the "cognitive maps" derived from our quantitative judged-similarity data; and we use the two forms of data – qualitative and quantitative – in conjunction to form our arguments about the overall perceptions of these members of the young Thai generation toward Southeast Asia and the world.
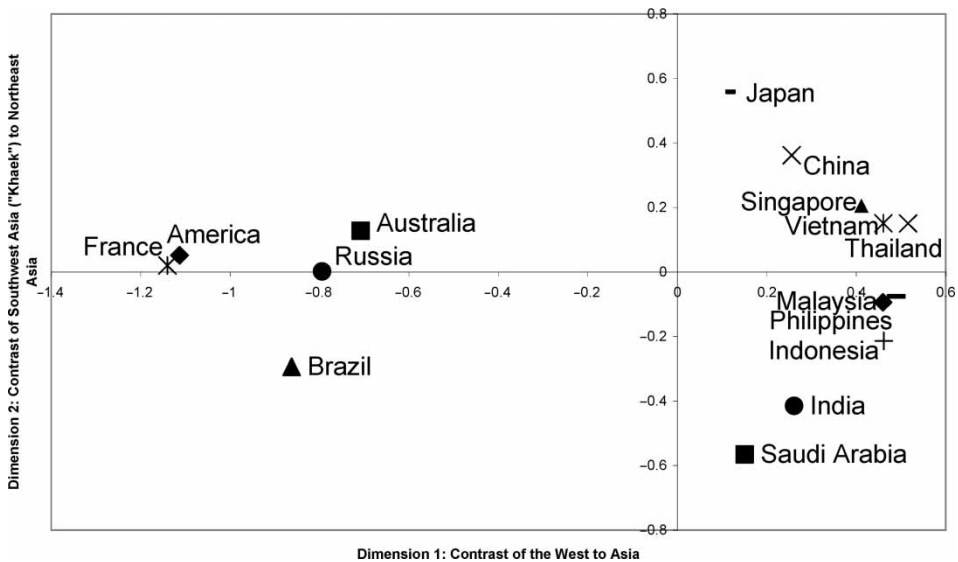
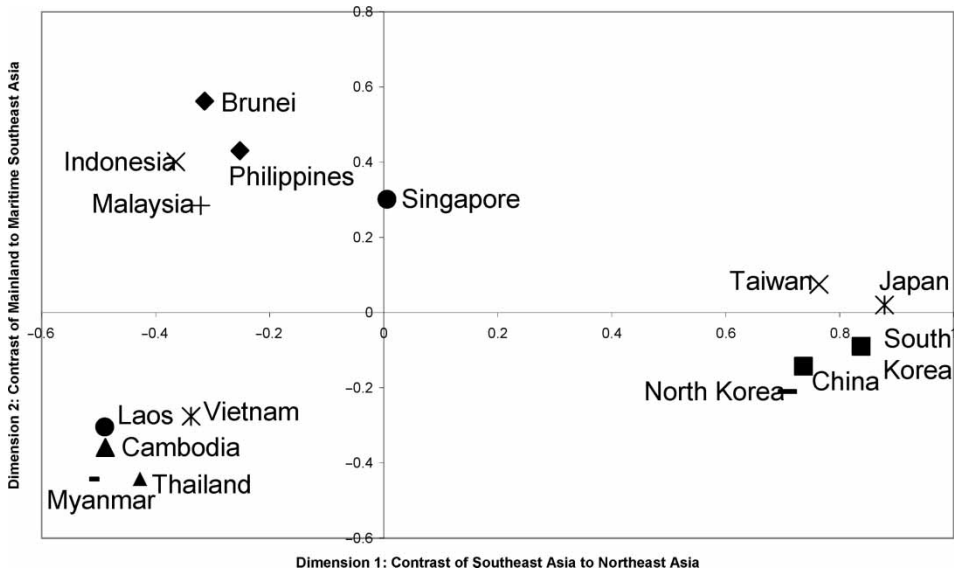**Figure 1.** Thai Cognitive Map of Countries Worldwide

Figure 2. Thai Cognitive Map of East Asia

Salience of Countries and Cognitive Maps

ASEAN countries are highly salient for our Thai respondents, as measured by the free listing exercise. All ASEAN countries were listed by more than 60 per cent of students, with the exceptions of the Philippines (46 per cent) and Brunei (37 per cent). All ten ASEAN countries were among the 30 most salient of all countries listed. Membership in ASEAN had an unmistakable impact on our respondents' cognizance of countries.
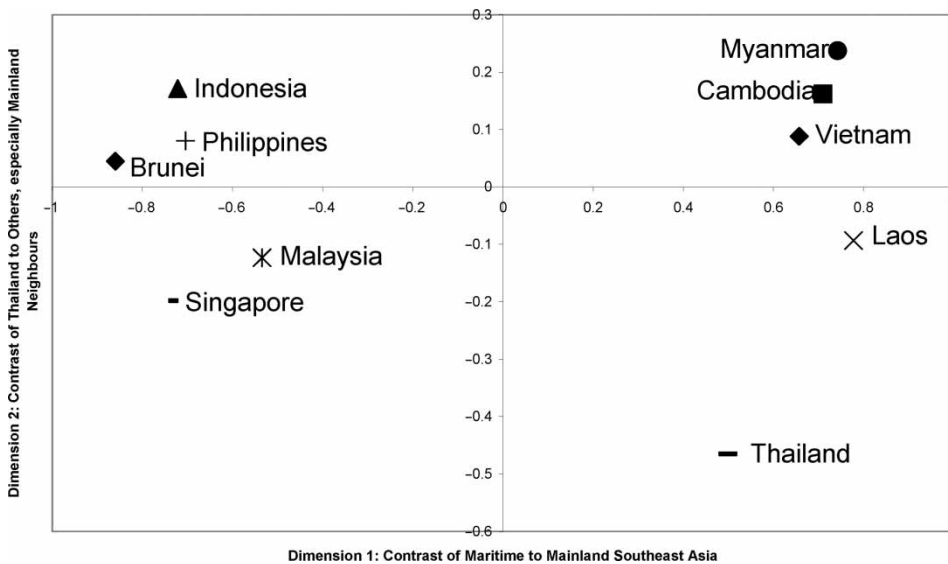

Figure 3. The Cognitive Map of Southeast Asia

Table 1. Common Groupings (Pile-Sorting, Thailand) List of All Groupings Made by Three or More Respondents ($n = 80$)

Grouping	Made by no. of respondents
West	
European groupings	
Europe (England, France, Germany, Italy, Russia)	29
Europe (excluding Russia)	17
France-Germany-Italy	3
Non-European groupings	
America-Canada	26
America-Canada-Brazil	10
America-Canada-Australia	7
America-Brazil	3
Asia	
Northeast Asian groupings	
Northeast Asia (China, Japan, South Korea)	24
Northeast Asia plus Singapore	7
Northeast Asia plus Russia	4
Japan-South Korea	3
ASEAN groupings	
ASEAN 10	16
Cambodia-Laos-Myanmar	6
Mainland Southeast Asia (CM-LS-MY-TH-VN)	5
Cambodia-Laos-Myanmar-Vietnam	3
Other Asian groupings	
All Asia (15 Countries)	6
All Asia plus Russia	4
"Khaek" and residual groupings	
India-Saudi Arabia	9
Brunei-Saudi Arabia	8
Brazil-Saudi Arabia	5
Brunei-India-Saudi Arabia	4

Note: The 24 countries included in the pile-sort exercise were America, Australia, Brunei, Brazil, Canada, Cambodia, China, England, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam.

Several of ASEAN's immediate neighbours show a remarkably low salience: only 3–5 per cent listed East Timor and Papua New Guinea; 19–21 per cent listed Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. ASEAN countries also showed a high degree of clustering in individual free lists – cognitively, one ASEAN country implied others in a series (cf. Anderson, 2004, pp. 29–45; Roenker et al., 1971).

Regionally, ASEAN, Northeast Asia, and "the West" dominate the domain of countries among Thai students. India is the only high salience South Asian country. No countries of the Middle East or Africa appear among the 30 most salient countries. All of our findings confirm that "Asia" and "the West" dominate conceptual structuring of the domain of countries among the Thai students we surveyed. To uncover these structures in detail, we strategically selected a number of countries from among the most salient for more extensive triad test and pile-sorting exercises.

At a "world-wide" level, Thai university students differentiate foremost between countries of "Asia" and "the West". Visually represented (Figure 1), the minimal

horizontal distance between Thailand (the "most Asian" country) and Japan and Saudi Arabia indicates the strong sense of affinity among Asian countries. While differentiation between Asia and the West appears in all other ASEAN universities surveyed, the sense of similarity among Asian countries is weaker, for instance, among Malaysian and Singaporean students (cf. Thompson, 2006).

Thai students' cognitive maps also display strong association among ASEAN countries. They are the "most Asian" countries (in contrast to the West) and are clustered centrally within Asia between the extremes of Japan and Saudi Arabia. When "East Asia" is considered alone (Figure 2), Thai respondents judge the greatest difference in the domain to be between Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia, reiterating the strong sense of affinity among ASEAN countries. While Singapore lies in a somewhat intermediate position, between Southeast and Northeast Asia, it is clearly much closer to the former (Singaporean students, by contrast, judged their own country to be more similar to Northeast Asia than to its ASEAN neighbours; Thompson, 2006).

Within ASEAN, Thai respondents differentiate between mainland and maritime countries (apparent in both Figures 2 and 3). But the cognitive maps also suggest ambivalence with regard to the close affinities between Thailand and its mainland neighbours. Considered in terms of the "world-wide" domain of countries, the contrast between Northeast and Southeast Asia, or even the contrast between maritime and mainland ASEAN countries, Thai students locate Thailand firmly in the midst of Asia, Southeast Asia and mainland Southeast Asia respectively. But following this positioning of Thailand in each of these regional clusters, the students also register Thailand's distinctiveness. Thai students perceive Thailand to be simultaneously very Asian, very ASEAN, and very unique. Their affinity for Asia, Southeast Asia and Thailand follows a logic not of "either/or" but of "both/and".

Principles of Association and Difference

Interviews in which students were asked to sort 24 countries into piles revealed four primary principles of difference and twelve common principles of association (Table 2), which explain much about the configuration of countries found in the students' cognitive maps. The principles are primarily geographic, historical and cultural and secondarily economic-developmental.

The pile sorting produced the same substantial divide between "Western" and "Asian" countries as was seen in the cognitive map. More than any other principle, the difference between Asia and the West dominates the Thai cultural conceptions of relationships among countries. This is not a matter of simple geography so much as a sense of cultural difference. Both Australia and Russia, which can make geographic claims to be in Asia, are nevertheless associated strongly with the Western groupings of countries and only rarely with Asia. Likewise, Saudi Arabia, which in terms of mere distance is closer to other "Western" countries than Australia, is much more part of Asia as conceived by our Thai respondents.

Fewer than 12 per cent of pile-sort groupings cut across the Asian-Western divide. Most "violations" were groupings that included Russia, Australia or Brazil along with a series of Asian countries. Russia and Australia in these cases were brought into a broader pan-Asian association based on geographic proximity. At least twice Brazil was grouped with several countries (especially Brunei, India and/or Saudi Arabia) according to the "*khaek*" principle (to be discussed below). Another important principle students used to violate the exclusive difference between Asia and the West was the wealth and power of

Table 2. Principles of Difference and Association Based on Pile-Sorting Exercise (n = 80)

Four principles of difference

1. A strongly exclusive principle of difference between Asia and the West.
2. A strongly exclusive principle of difference between Europe and non-European countries in the West, with the latter anchored in North America.
3. A weakly exclusive principle of difference between ASEAN and non-ASEAN countries within Asia.
4. A weakly exclusive principle of difference based on judgments of the wealth and development of countries.

Twelve principles of association (Listed hierarchically)

1. Asian countries
2. Western countries
3. European countries
4. American countries
5. ASEAN countries
6. Northeast Asian countries
7. "Khaek" countries
8. Asian Economic Tigers/Dragons
9. Mainland Southeast Asian countries
10. Wealthiest, most developed (e.g. "G8") countries
11. Moderately wealthy/Developed countries
12. Least developed countries

nations. Seven students combined a series of Western countries with Japan and/or China (and in one case, Singapore). In several cases, students referred to these groups as "G8 countries". Other groups comprising both Asian and Western countries were described as "moderately rich or developed" countries.

Asia: ASEAN, Northeast Asia and "Khaek"

Among Asian countries, regional groupings of ASEAN, Northeast Asia and Southwest Asia were clearly evident. The most common groupings the students made of Asian countries were China, Japan and South Korea (made by 30 per cent of students), the ten ASEAN countries (made by 20 per cent) and India and Saudi Arabia (made by 11 per cent). But several crosscutting principles of association among Asian countries make regional exclusivity weaker than the difference between Asia and the West: ideas of "*khaek*", of economic "tigers" and pan-Asian identity.

In Thai, the term "*khaek*" means "visitor" but is also commonly used as a somewhat ambiguous ethno-racial term to refer to Muslims and/or Arabs, South Asians and Malays (Julispong, 2003). For most of recorded history, traders from the Arab peninsula, South Asia and the Malay archipelago have played a significant role in the long-distance economic networks involving Thais and other Southeast Asians. These "visitors" from the south and west of what is now Thailand have come to be known collectively as "*khaek*" in contrast, presumably, to the Chinese, Japanese and Koreans from the north and east and the more recent "*farang*" of European descent. The continuing resonance of "*khaek*" as a descriptor of people, and through people, of countries, is revealed in common (though various) groupings of Brunei-India-Saudi Arabia, along with several cases in which respondents included Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Brazil. The latter cases

highlight the ambiguity of "*khaek*". It suggests both dark-skin and Muslim religion. Malay Muslims, along with Indian Muslims and Arabs, are the prototype of "*khaek*". A few students also used the term to describe both the Philippines and Brazil, based on the physical appearance of Filipinos and Brazilians (i.e. dark skin as well as "Malay" features in the case of the Philippines).

In total, around 21 per cent of students grouped "*khaek*" countries together. Rapid economic growth and development of countries described as Asia's "tiger" economies was used as a principle of association by around 19 per cent of students. Another 21 per cent grouped countries together based on "pan-Asian" identity, combining ASEAN and non-ASEAN countries, but not using a principle such as "*khaek*" or "tiger economy" (including four cases in which Russia was considered part of Asia).

Associations not Made

Just as revealing as the associations among countries made by Thai students are the numerous associations that did not appear (or very rarely appeared). Numerous students grouped together Thailand's neighbouring mainland countries (either including or excluding Thailand itself). But no student grouped Thailand with the four countries (Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia and Myanmar) that border it, and only one created a grouping of those four countries. Malaysia is not seen as substantially similar to the other bordering countries of Thailand. Vietnam has stronger affinities to this group and to Thailand, despite the lack of geographic adjacency between the two.

Grouping countries in ASEAN according to similarities in economic development was also rare. The cognitive map of ASEAN (Figure 3) shows that students judged Singapore and Malaysia to be somewhat closer (more similar) to Thailand, once the primary "mainland/maritime" distinction was accounted for. However, in the pile sorting, only one student grouped Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore together. And only a few others made similar economic-developmental groupings. Economic and development criteria play a role in structuring this domain among Thai students, but it is not a primary role, especially not with regard to associating countries of Southeast Asia. Rather, economic-developmental considerations play their strongest role in engendering a sense of difference between Thailand and mainland neighbours.

The common association of mainland Southeast Asia was not mirrored among maritime Southeast Asian countries. We might expect Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei to be grouped (in some combination) based on their historical-cultural similarities as "Malay-Muslim" countries. While they do appear in some groups of "*khaek*" countries, Thai students did not group them together to any significant degree. Likewise, only one respondent made an exclusive pairing of Malaysia and Singapore, despite their similar status as ASEAN's two most industrialised countries and their historical-cultural similarities (given that until 1965 Singapore was a part of Malaysia in one form or another). Nor were Singapore and Brunei grouped together to any significant degree, despite being considerably wealthier (based on GDP) than other ASEAN member states.

ASEAN as a Metaphorical Village [*Mu Ban*]

The association, in a cognitive sense, of Southeast Asian nations comes across clearly in every set of data we collected. In descriptive terms, Thai students referred to ASEAN

members, and particularly mainland neighbours, as their *"prathet pheuan ban"*, echoing a phrase found in their secondary-school textbooks and elsewhere. While this phrase could be translated into English as "neighbouring countries", *prathet pheuan ban* implies somewhat more affinity or emotional connotation (and less urban orientation) than the term "neighbourhood" implies in English. "*Pheuan ban*" is commonly used in Thai to refer to people from the speaker's place of origin. "*Pheuan*", usually translated as "friend", implies or asserts an affinity to the speaker.

"*Ban*", while usually translated as "house", has connotations of "home" – a place, again, of special affinity for the speaker. "*Mu ban*", literally a cluster or group of houses, is the Thai term for villages, and in rural Thailand the "*mu*" is sometimes dropped in colloquial reference to a person's village. While the term "*pheuan ban*" can be flexibly applied on different scales, for instance by overseas Thai migrants to refer to other Thais in general, the prototypical usage is in reference to others from the same hometown or village. Metaphorically, "*prathet pheuan ban*" implies that these countries constitute a neighbourhood, hometown or village.

The imagery of an ASEAN *mu ban* is apt, not only as a heuristic description of the Thai students' groupings of ASEAN members but also of the affective associations they represent. We use the metaphor of an ASEAN "*mu ban*" furthermore to reflect the complex interplay of elite top-down and instrumental initiatives that seek to impart substance onto the signifier "ASEAN" and the way in which cultural knowledge is taken for granted and imbued with affective meaning by individual subjects. Much has been written about the extent to which villages [*mu ban*] in Thailand are administrative constructs (e.g. Hirsch, 2002; Kemp, 1988). Nevertheless, the *mu ban* takes on a discursive life of its own as a site of personal sentiment and public nostalgia in the everyday world of Thai culture (Hirsch, 2002). Similarly, official attempts to promote an ASEAN identity articulate with a positive reception of those messages among individuals, such as Thai students, who do not have a particular vested interest in the institutions or diplomatic interactions of ASEAN as a political organisation. Early twenty-first century Southeast Asia and particularly ASEAN is undeniably a product of political, diplomatic, and of course scholarly invention; but that does not make it a fabrication – in the sense of a lie or deceit. In the pile-sorting activities, students stated that geographic and cultural connections made them feel more bonded to ASEAN countries than to other countries. It gave them a sense of comfort to know that they shared many characteristics with others.

Student descriptions and the results from triad questions and pile sorting suggest that students conceived of and categorised their ASEAN *prathet pheuan ban* into two different groups. Extrapolating on the Thai metaphor, the ASEAN *mu ban* is divided into two adjacent but distinct clusters of *prathet*, much like the many Thai villages that in recent years have been divided into separate *mu* for administrative purposes.[3] The immediate neighbours, and affectively closest *pheuan ban*, are the bordering countries of Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia. Vietnam, while not directly adjacent to Thailand, is also among these immediate neighbours in the *mu ban*. These five countries constitute one subcommunity – or "*mu nueng*" in Thai administrative terminology. The rest of ASEAN, conventionally called maritime or island Southeast Asia in area studies scholarship, makes up a second community – *mu song* – of *prathet* within the *mu ban*. Each country's historical, economic, social and political relations to Thailand influence the "neighbourhood" into which they are grouped.

Mainland *Pheuan Ban*

For most Thai students, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand shared many commonalities. Primarily, they expressed the close bond between these countries in terms of similar cultural history, rituals, arts and customs, origin of language, Buddhist orientation, and the indistinguishable physical appearance of their people. Secondary characteristics binding the countries together include a shared climate, connected geographical area bordering Thailand, tropical natural resources, and a shared struggle and experience of the same developmental stages. As one student put it, "[w]e (Thailand and mainland neighbours), like many of the Southeast Asian countries, are developing countries that have to struggle and improve ourselves to be at the top".

This last characteristic, the shared struggle to develop, at once connects and differentiates Thailand from its mainland neighbours. From a Thai perspective, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam are like Thailand in the past, when Thailand was still struggling to advance its economic development and trying to be noticed in a competitive world. Perceiving Thailand's mainland neighbours in this way engenders feelings of both empathy and difference. The students see Thailand as having avoided or overcome numerous obstacles faced by Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam that have caused them to be "left behind" – unstable political systems in which the military is heavily involved, destructive consequences of French and American Indochina wars, lack of technology and scientific knowledge, and an unwillingness to open up to the world capitalist system. Finally, Thailand's pride in avoiding direct European governance even at the height of European colonialism in Southeast Asia is a strong factor in Thai students' perceptions. As one student remarked in a group discussion:

> Like my friend said, Thais don't think that they are the same as these countries. Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam used to be colonies of the West before. In contrast, Thailand is an independent country and has always been independent!

Laos

Among the four mainland *pheuan ban*, Thais easily feel the closest to Laos. A common description of the relationship between Thailand and Laos is reflected in the words of one interviewee:

> Thailand and Laos are siblings [*phi nong*]. We are able to communicate with one another through the same language. Lao watch and can understand Thai dramas, whereas we (Thais) sometimes use Isan language (the language/dialect of Northeastern Thailand and Laos) whenever we want.

The refrain used to express the Thai-Lao relationship stems from a common saying "*Khwam samphan chan phi nong*" [sibling relationships]. During the course of their education, students learn that modern Thai and Lao are descendants of an ancestral Tai tribe. This sense of ancestral kinship is further reinforced through similar traditions and customs, religious beliefs, scripts, language and food. As one student said with enthusiasm, "We eat Lao food practically everyday. *Somtam, Lap, Namtok, Plala*, and sticky rice (naming various Lao dishes)". Moreover, Thais perceived Lao people to be innocent,

harmless, loyal and kind. As one respondent stated, "Thai and Lao have a similar way of life and are both kind at heart".

But while the sibling relationship connotes familial intimacy, in Thai it also implies hierarchy (cf. Bechstedt, 2002, p. 242). The "*phi nong*" of siblingship is literally "older sibling, younger sibling" (the terms are gender neutral). Thai students would almost universally consider Thailand to be *phi* and Laos to be *nong*. More generally, with the ease of crossing borders in and out along the Mekong River, Lao people are seen as assimilating into a dominant Thai culture (cf. Mandech, 2001). Of course, in Laos itself, the hegemony of Thai culture is a matter of some concern and is officially resisted (Chalisa, 2005). The hierarchy implied in the Thai-*phi* Lao-*nong* relationship is not popular. And Lao accounts of the historical relationship between the two countries differ markedly in tone from official Thai histories (Pholsena, 2004; Thongchai, 2005, p. 119).

Cambodia

By contrast, perceptions of Cambodia and Myanmar cast these two countries as reclusive and unpredictable. Thai students think of Cambodia as a closed society that wants to shut itself off from the world. Although they have some awareness that in the distant past Cambodia played an important role in the region (i.e. the Angkorean period from the ninth to the fourteenth century CE), Cambodia now seems the least known and most mysterious of Thailand's mainland neighbours. Thai students have an impression of Cambodia as lacking the will-power to struggle and short of the initiative to play a part in a competitive world. More than it did for any other country, poverty marked descriptions of Cambodia as did the need for improvements in education, sanitation, social welfare, political stability and general social discipline. The 2003 controversy over comments made by a Thai actress, which culminated in the burning of the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh, and in particular the depiction of events by the Thai press, fuelled perceptions of Cambodian "wildness" and even "savagery" (Chanokporn, 2005).[4]

Myanmar

Perceptions of Myanmar likewise reflect media attention to transborder social problems and conflict between Thailand and Myanmar, including issues of Myanmar refugees, trafficking in drugs and women, and the smuggling of illegal labourers to Thailand. These negative perceptions are compounded by popular reiteration, in the form of television dramas, films and novels, of historical Thai-Burmese rivalry. Such portrayals of Burma, now Myanmar, as an arch-enemy of Thailand have a modern lineage dating back more than a century (Sunait, 1992; Thongchai, 2005, pp. 118–19).

Myanmar is one of the few cases in which perceptions of the country's internal politics are especially salient in the Thai students' point of view. Aung San Suu Kyi was mentioned more than any other single feature in reference to Myanmar (second most common was the Shwedagon pagoda). Her name appeared more than that of any other political figure with the exception of George Bush (in descriptions of America). While Mahathir, Suharto, Lee Kuan Yew and others were mentioned in association with their respective countries, all were far less salient than Myanmar's opposition leader. Although they are not necessarily knowledgeable about Myanmar's internal politics in any detail, the students' familiarity with Aung San Suu Kyi and their characterisation of Myanmar

as a military dictatorship indicate their perception of the country as politically troubled. They also pointed to Myanmar's international isolation as one of the country's worst characteristics. Isolation has prevented the people of Myanmar from learning from the outside world despite Myanmar's entry into ASEAN and what the students – echoing official discourse – consider to be Thai policies of constructive engagement. Still, Thai students (in contrast to students from other nations who were interviewed) were the only ones to register familiarity with the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon as an icon of Myanmar Buddhism.

Negative perceptions of both Cambodia and Myanmar clearly dominate the descriptions of the two countries by our Thai respondents. Yet these negative views are mixed with some optimism embedded in an ideology of development. Their portraits of neighbouring countries suggest that change, and from their perspective improvements in both the internal conditions and external relations of these countries, are possible and even probable. They believe that such an improvement requires support not only from Thailand and neighbouring mainland countries, but also from ASEAN more generally.

Vietnam

Perceptions of Vietnam are rather different from those of other mainland countries. Vietnam continues to be strongly associated with a historical legacy of mid-twentieth century wars, particularly the American war in Vietnam. But Thai students also associate Vietnam with a rich cultural heritage (influenced by China and Buddhism) and see it as an emergent nation rapidly overcoming its war-torn past. While terms such as "Vietcong" come to mind for Thai students when they describe Vietnam, it is perceived more as a country opening up to the world economy and even positioning itself to be an economic competitor with Thailand (for instance in rice exports) than as a closed communist or socialist state.

Despite its troubled past and a sense of contemporary competition with Thailand, the feeling that comes across toward Vietnam seems on the whole a positive if somewhat orientalist one, making reference, for example, to imagery of *ao dai*-clad women in conical hats peddling bicycles. The enmity found in the Myanmar-Thai rivalry seems largely missing with regard to Vietnam. The students see Vietnam as being on the right track, in terms of economic development, and as a country capable of gaining worldwide respect, both for its perseverance during independence struggles against France and America and in its contemporary market-oriented development.

Maritime Southeast Asia: *Mu Song* of ASEAN

The countries commonly characterised as part of maritime or island Southeast Asia constituted a secondary and distinct cluster of countries within ASEAN from our respondents' perspective. Thai students, very clearly influenced by the ASEAN concept, considered these countries to be part of their regional community. At the same time, they display much less knowledge about Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore than they do about their affectively and geographically closer mainland neighbours. Very commonly, for example, their primary description of Indonesia, the Philippines and Singapore was simply as "islands". Detailed ideas and comments on these countries were generally less forthcoming than they were for mainland countries. That said,

a number of clear and consistent patterns of thinking emerged about this second community of countries within ASEAN.

The maritime countries are much more diverse both socio-culturally and economically than mainland Southeast Asia (in the perception of our Thai respondents and arguably from almost any other perspective). They are on the whole wealthier than the mainland countries, which resonated strongly in several aspects of Thai perceptions both of this group and of ASEAN as a whole. At the same time, different countries of maritime ASEAN reflect different types of wealth and development – Brunei a sort of aristocratic wealth, Singapore an image of "new rich" Chinese merchants and businessmen, Indonesia and the Philippines a global economic industrialisation, and Malaysia a combination of the latter two. In socio-cultural terms, the concept of *khaek* and Malay-Muslim identity is important; however, it operates more to distinguish Singapore and the Philippines from the others than to suggest a strong set of affinities between Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia.

Brunei and Malaysia

Thai descriptions of Brunei emphasise its small size, likening it to Chantaburi, a province in Eastern Thailand (Siriporn, 1997). When asked about Brunei, the image of oil resources and wealth most often came to mind for these Thai students. Unlike many small countries, it is sparsely populated and needs workers from elsewhere, including Thailand, to facilitate the export of oil and natural gas. Thus, Brunei is known as a destination for Thai labourers, who in turn have brought back stories of wealth and superb social welfare policies (cf. Supat, 1996). They also return with money to circulate in Thailand's domestic economy. Along with Singapore and Malaysia, among ASEAN members Brunei provides Thai students with a positive feeling of association with countries that have (through their relative wealth) a degree of status and bargaining power in the broader world economic system. But the image of Brunei is decidedly exotic from a modern Thai perspective – associated in orientalist fashion with sultans and harems. Also indicative of this, students used the more archaic term "*khaek*" more often than "Islam" or "Muslim" to describe Brunei, whereas for both Malaysia and Indonesia "Islam" and "Muslim" were used around twice as often as was "*khaek*".

After Islam as the primary defining characteristic of Malaysia, the iconic Petronas Towers were a close second. As the tallest buildings in the world (prior to 2004), Malaysia's twin towers symbolise the development and prosperity of Thailand's southern neighbour. While the practical and symbolic aspects of economic progress are attractive to Thai students, affinity for Malaysia as a counterpart and model for Thailand in modernisation and economic development is muted by a sense of sharp cultural-religious difference between the countries. Among these Bangkok-based students, the fissure is exacerbated to some degree by association between the Malaysian state and the restive Malay ("Thai-Muslim") minority in Thailand's southern provinces.

Indonesia and the Philippines

Descriptions of both Indonesia and the Philippines highlight island geography first and their respective cultural-religious identities second – Muslim and "*khaek*" in the case of Indonesia; Filipino/Tagalog language and Christianity in that of the Philippines. Rather less salient, though present, are impressions of both countries as economically

developing yet troubled by political instability – especially in the form of terrorism – and corruption. The relatively low salience of terrorism in this context seemed somewhat remarkable, given the attention to these issues in the media and elsewhere since the dramatic events in New York in September 2001 and Bali in October 2002. Although the Bali bombings came up several times during interviews and discussions, students' impressions of Indonesia were tied more to general historical-cultural impressions than to recent political events. For example, Indonesia's image as "spice islands" was mentioned in our research as much as Indonesia as a site of terrorist activity. Overall, students lacked any detailed knowledge of Indonesia and the Philippines.

Singapore

Singapore, on the other hand, made a much stronger impression. In the eyes of Thai students, Singapore is clearly a model for Thailand to follow. Singapore is thought of as a small, prosperous and developed country that Thai students can look up to. Its well-established economic stability, technological advancement and strong political leadership make Singapore stand out from other Southeast Asian countries. As one student elaborated:

> At one point Singapore and we (Thailand) were the same. I mean in terms of the (economic) size and potential of the country. However, Singapore has already stepped up to be the leader of the NICs. When I say similarity, I mean we both can be ports of many transactions. Nowadays, Thailand has built many seaports and made lots of progress in industrialisation. Western countries can use our port to facilitate a better transportation of goods to Laos, Cambodia and Burma. Thailand can be a centre of trading, as Singapore has done. The current Thai government is trying to motivate people to invest in Thailand so that our economy will grow at a rapid rate. I think we have a good potential to be successful like Singapore.

For many years, Thai people have been taught to view Singapore as an example of social, political and economic success. Both direct learning at schools and indirect daily conversation have shaped Thais' perspective so that they feel that Singaporeans are educated, diligent, hard-working, efficient and good citizens. Thus, it is not surprising to see Thailand's young generation wanting to strive to be like Singaporeans.

The contrast between the two "sub-communities" of ASEAN creates something of a conflict in the students' affective associations of Thailand – as the country with which their primary political affinity lies – with the rest of the region. This conflict derives from the two overwhelming schematic criteria through which the semantic domain is organised: historical-cultural similarity and level of economic development. The sense of binding ties among the mainland countries, based especially on Buddhism but also on more general historical interactions and shared ethno-cultural characteristics, is most powerful in drawing those countries together from our respondents' perspective. But economic development as a framework for evaluating countries via gross domestic product, income levels and other statistics cuts in the opposite direction. It impels Thais to dissociate from their immediate neighbours in ASEAN and aspire toward greater affiliation with their more prosperous southern neighbours, even if a sense of historical-cultural difference, particularly from the predominantly Malay-Muslim countries, makes them ambivalent about such an association.

Contextualising "Thai" Perspectives

The perceptions of young Thai university students at the beginning of the twenty-first century should not be taken as primordially "Thai", uncontested or uncontestable. Temporal, generational, and other conditions play a part in shaping the perceptions reported in this article. For example, the deeply divisive geopolitics of the Cold War have little resonance among our respondents. Almost all of our respondents were born after 1980. By the time they entered their teens, the Cold War had been declared over and communism dead (at least in anti-communist states such as Thailand). Negative views of Laos and Vietnam, due to their communist regimes as well as border disputes between Laos and Thailand that led to open warfare as recently as the 1980s, are simply not part of the cognitive repertoire of our respondents to any appreciable degree. Instead, they have been far more influenced by contexts of rapid economic development and internationalism prevalent since the 1990s. In Thai students' responses to our questionnaire, only Russia and China were commonly described as "communist",[5] and no student used "communist" to describe either Laos or Vietnam.

The importance of the economic-developmental context of the 1990s onward is reflected in the positive perception and relative familiarity of Vietnam in contrast to Myanmar and Cambodia. While perceptions of Vietnam are still haunted by imagery of war, the students perceive Vietnam as the most successful country (next to Thailand) in their immediate neighbourhood. Vietnam is promoted in Thailand as a site for both tourism and investment. In both of these respects, it is seen as having more potential for positive interactions than either Myanmar or Cambodia.

Generational effects are also at play in the greater prominence of Myanmar in the students' cognizance than Cambodia. For an earlier generation, the horrors of the Khmer Rouge and the proliferation of Cambodian refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodia border may have played a role in making Cambodia significant to Thais in the late 1970s and 1980s. But since the 1990s, both the political situation within Myanmar (reflected in the prominence of Aung San Suu Kyi in our responses) and the role of Burmese migrants in Thailand have been more prominent than events in Cambodia.

Responses to a survey such as this may well be influenced by current events. Anti-Thai rioting in Cambodia in the year preceding our survey was reflected in the specific responses of some students. Similarly, the data was collected well before the 2006 scandal involving the sale of shares of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's Shin Corp to the Singaporean Temasek Corporation. In the scandal, Singapore became the target of generalised criticisms of both Thaksin and sale of Thai assets to foreigners. The extent to which these events might have had long-lasting or deeply negative effects on Thai perceptions of Singapore would require further research.[6] If we replicated the survey in 2006, we might find more negative perceptions of Singapore. However, our expectation is that the events and discourse focused on Thaksin far more than on Singapore and that negative perceptions of the latter generated by the scandal are most likely to be transient.

In general, further research would be necessary to establish the stability or variability of the geopolitical imaginings underlying responses to our survey. From the research in Thailand and comparable research elsewhere (see Thompson, 2006; Thompson et al., 2007; Thompson and Zhang, 2006), we can infer a complex interplay of forces from deep historical trends (for instance, in the description of Indonesia as "spice islands" and the very establishment of "countries" as a broadly shared domain) to recent fashions and the latest international news. It would appear that they can shift substantially from one

generation to the next, as evidenced by the almost complete irrelevance of Cold War geopolitics to students who were not yet in their teens when that international architecture collapsed. Recent newsworthy events can influence perceptions, but do not seem to radically alter them. Most of the results we have found suggest that the perceptions we report are developed primarily over the span of a particular generation, through recurrent exposure to ideas about countries by way of multiple, mutually reinforcing mass media, education and the like (cf. Thompson et al., 2007).

It is beyond our present scope to provide a comprehensive analysis of Thai media or education. In the case of the latter, a survey of secondary textbooks from Thailand and several other countries in the region suggests that the Thai texts being used in schools at present have substantially more content on Southeast Asia than do others.[7] Everywhere, the dominant framework for presenting Southeast Asian history and geography is that of the nation-state (country or *prathet*). And everywhere among ASEAN member states in modern secondary-school curricula attention is given to Southeast Asia as a region (whether as "*Dong Nam A*" in Vietnam or "*Asia Tenggara*" in Malaysia). But the Thai texts have, arguably, the most detailed information on this topic. Media attention, particularly to Thailand's immediate neighbours, is also more extensive in Thailand relative to some other nations. All of this feeds into a heightened cognizance and conceptualisation of the region. Consensus analysis of the data we collected, for example, shows that the responses from Thailand score higher on consensus among respondents than those from any other nation – an indication of a strong, singular perception of the region among Thai students relative to those from other nations (cf. Thompson, 2006; Thompson et al., 2007).

Regional Perceptions: Beyond Navel Gazing

The knowledge of Southeast Asia demonstrated by Thai students is clearly not the sort of counter-hegemonic, alternative knowledge Thongchai refers to as "local knowledge" (Thongchai, 2005, pp. 125–26). The cohort of students from which we drew our responses is primarily Bangkok-based (only a small minority indicated that they came from outside Central Thailand). As students at Thailand's leading public university, they are recent products of the modern primary and secondary education system and were born in the early 1980s. Moreover, our methods are ones that focus on their normative knowledge, not on alternative or idiosyncratic ideas. The perceptions we have presented are undoubtedly formed in the context of nationalist imaginings of the Thai nation-state and its neighbours.

But, as we have argued, the cognitive and affective knowledge of this young Thai generation vis-à-vis the region of Southeast Asia and beyond cannot be reduced to mere navel gazing and self-referential nationalism. In particular, knowledge of the domain of *prathet* provides a field for thinking in terms of identity, society, culture, politics, economics and related domains. And as we have demonstrated, Thai students express a consistent association of Southeast Asian countries – i.e. the constituent members of ASEAN. They believe in an ASEAN-defined region.

Thai students believe, for example, that Vietnam and Myanmar have more in common with each other than either has with China; that Indonesia is more closely associated with Laos than with India or Saudi Arabia. This belief is not a matter of truth or falsehood; it is a matter of perceiving the world through a domain of countries and applying a set of organising criteria that are largely shared by their peers – and we suspect a substantial segment of the Thai public at large. Undoubtedly, the ideas that Thai students have

about Southeast Asia and the world beyond derive from the "proposed world" that mass media, schooling and other sources provide for them (cf. Keyes, 1991).

From our respondents' perspective, Southeast Asia – as defined by the countries of ASEAN – is a distinct yet open-ended regional construct, nested within a larger domain of Asian countries. The sense of association that unifies ASEAN members and distinguishes them from the rest of Asia is unmistakable. Yet, ASEAN identity is not so strong that it excludes pan-Asian association of countries, either at large or based on characterisation of countries as "economic tigers" or as "*khaek*" countries. ASEAN forms a regional core in relationship to the rest of Asia (Northeast or East Asia – China, Japan, Korea – is another such core).

In this sense, the perception of Thai students closely parallels the "ASEAN-plus" logic of Asian regionalism (e.g. ASEAN + 3 – ASEAN members plus China, Japan and South Korea). Southeast Asian leaders have sought to promote ASEAN as a core from which pan-Asian as well as global international diplomacy can be initiated and negotiated.[8] As an association of relatively "small" countries (either in size, such as Singapore and Brunei, or in political and economic clout, such as Indonesia or the Philippines), one important aspect of ASEAN's search for "security" has been to shield the region and especially the individual countries of the region from the hegemony of more powerful nation-states. The domain of *prathet* and the way in which it is configured suggest that Thailand's post-1980 generation situate themselves and their nation within an ASEAN-defined region. They have inculcated a worldview that sits well with the ASEAN-plus logic of relating to the region and the world.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. We use the Royal Institute standards for transliteration of Thai terms into Roman script. All surveys, interviews, and focus groups were conducted in Thai.
2. Detailed discussion of these methods is beyond the scope of this article; see Moore et al., 1999; Romney et al., 1996; 1997; 1998; 2000; Weller and Romney, 1990; Wish et al., 1972.
3. Our thanks to Rachel Safman for discussions based on her extensive fieldwork in Northern Thailand, which contributed to our formulation of some of these ideas and metaphors.
4. Both Thailand and Cambodia have made historical claims to the site of Angkor Wat. In January 2003, reports circulated in the Cambodian media and by word of mouth that the Thai soap opera actress Suwanan Kongying refused to visit Cambodia unless Angkor Wat was returned to Thailand. Although she denied the statement, the reports and rumours led to the burning of the Thai embassy and the destruction of numerous Thai-owned businesses in Phnom Penh.
5. One student used "communist" to describe Myanmar.
6. The Shin Corp sale scandal has been cited as a key turning point in Thaksin's premiership, leading to his eventual ousting by a military coup in September 2006. However, references to the scandal during 2006 focused far more on Thaksin than on Singapore.

7. The second author has collected current textbooks from seven ASEAN members. A comparison of the representations of Southeast Asia in these textbooks is in preparation.

8. It is beyond our scope here to discuss Thailand's or ASEAN's foreign policy, relationship to great powers or general geopolitics. These subjects have been written about at great length elsewhere (e.g. Acharya, 1999b; Hussey, 1991; Nischalke, 2002; Sharpe, 2003; Vatikiotis, 1999). The ASEAN framework is only one of several competing frameworks for international relations.

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