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ASEAN Perceptions of the Mekong Region

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Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been making strides toward developing a robust supra-national grouping that goes far beyond the Association's original Cold-War aims as a bulwark against communism. ASEAN has now incorporated the very states - Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam - that were considered a danger to the Association's original members. ASEAN is now being reconceptualized as a region of nations that can be integrated with common interests, a common market/free trade zone, greater ease of travel between nations, common ASEAN-focused educational curricula, and common passports and currency, among other things. Most of these initiatives are either merely ideas floated in meetings and press reports or (for example, with the ASEAN-oriented curriculum) still in early stages of development. Nevertheless, ASEAN has shifted from a narrowly conceptualized framework for international relations to a more broadly conceptualized political, economic, social and cultural project.

This paper discusses one aspect of a larger research project that examines ASEAN as an evolving cultural project. In the present essay, I examine the perceptions of ASEAN's newest members from the point of view of its original five members. I focus on comparative data

collected among students at leading universities in those countries - Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. The larger project, of which this is a part, is a multi-method approach to include individual and focus group interviews and content analysis of national educational curricula among other things. In this project, I am interested in comparing the ways in which citizens of the different nations think about ASEAN, its member nations and the relationships among and between them.

The survey of university students used a questionnaire with two main sections. The first section of the questionnaire utilizes a 'triad test' to elicit respondents' judgments of similarities and differences among the 10 ASEAN nations. In a triad test, the respondents are given a series of sets of three items (in this case, ASEAN countries) and asked to judge (circle) which among them is the most different from the others. The purpose is to elicit the implicit criteria that respondents use in organizing and thinking about the 'domain' (in this case, a group of countries) in question. The second section asks respondents for words or phrases that they would use to describe countries - including the 10 ASEAN members along with a set of other countries (America, Brazil, China, France, India, Japan, Saudi Arabia). Note that descriptive terms were elicited in the language of instruction at the respondent universities; for convenience in this paper I will be using English translations of these terms.

In the following, I briefly describe 'cognitive maps' of ASEAN derived from the judged similarities and differences of students in the five respondent nations. The cognitive maps show a great deal of similarity across all five nations, especially with regard to clustering of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (CLMV), although some differences and unique perspectives from each respondent nation can be seen in these maps as well. In the second part of the paper, I discuss descriptive terms that students provided, which shed further light on how the CLMV countries are perceived.

Students in all five nations consider the countries of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam to be very similar to one another, particularly in comparison to the other member of ASEAN, which have more distinctive identities. Their knowledge of CLMV countries is for the most part (with the exception of Thai respondents) limited to relatively simple, categorical economic/developmental criteria. They conceive of CLMV not only as indistinct but also very different from the rest of

the ASEAN region - and also inferior by the economic criteria that are relevant to their judgments).

Cognitive Maps

The 'cognitive maps' (see Appendix 1) in this paper provide one way to represent and visualize respondents' views on the similarities and differences between countries in ASEAN. I call these representations 'cognitive maps' because they are spatial representations of judged similarities and differences. In a typical geographic map countries, cities, rivers, and whatnot are represented spatially based on their relative physical distance from other points on the map. Bangkok and Yangon, for example, are shown closer to one another than either is to Jakarta, based on measuring the physical distance (kilometers) between the three places. The distance between points in the cognitive maps is based on measuring relative perceived similarity and difference.

The cognitive maps here use correspondence analysis (a procedure akin to factor analysis) and multidimensional scaling in order to reduce a large and complex set of data from multiple respondents into a single, two-dimensional 'map' (the procedures actually produce multiple-dimensional maps, but for purposes of this paper, I only discuss the two primary dimensions which contain most of the information in the data and are much easier to interpret than high-dimensional maps. The maps provide an interpretable view of the relationship among countries of ASEAN based on the implicit (and often complex) criteria of the respondents. In each case, a convenience sample was used and I do not make a strong claim to statistical generalizability from these samples to the population of citizens of each country (such a survey would be impossible in practice, as it would require the resources equivalent to a national census agency). However, the procedures used for producing these maps, which are based on the strong assumptions and statistical techniques of cultural consensus theory as well as additional qualitative evidence relating these maps to the broader national frames within which they are situated, provide good reasons for seeing these maps as giving us a view of how the relationship among ASEAN countries is perceived in each of the respondent nations.

The cognitive maps can be qualitatively interpreted by visual inspection of the arrangement of points on the map. The closer together

that two points (countries) are, the more similar they were judged to be; the further apart, the more different. Furthermore, the horizontal distance between countries represents the primary dimension of difference (and similarity) among the ten countries and the vertical distance represents the second most significant dimension of difference. Mapping the points in this fashion also displays significant 'clusters' of countries - indication a very high degree of similarity among such clusters in the opinion of the respondents.

As an example of how to 'read' these maps consider the Thai map (Map 5). It is clear that the most significant (horizontal) dimension of similarity and difference among countries is between what have traditionally been termed 'Mainland' countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam) and 'Island' countries (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore). Comparatively, the difference (represented as distance) between these Island and Mainland subregional clusters is greater in Thailand than any other country. But, secondarily (vertically, on the map), Thailand is sharply distinguished from other Mainland countries. The map also indicates some greater similarity of Singapore, Malaysia and Laos to Thailand, as opposed to other countries in this secondary dimension.

It is apparent from these cognitive maps that across the five respondent nations, the countries of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam are consistently clustered together - they are all considered more similar to each other than to any other countries. Thailand, which would be the most likely to be seen as similar to the CLMV group, is always judged to be different (as depicted by the distance on the map).

The similarity (or lack of distinction) among CLMV countries from the perspective of Singaporean and Malaysian respondents is remarkable. The four countries appear at almost exactly the same point across the two dimensions. Singaporeans and Malaysians basically make no distinction whatsoever among the four CLMV countries. In both the Philippines and Indonesia, the countries are closely clustered, although Vietnam is perceived as slightly distinctive while Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar are indistinguishable (especially in the data from the Philippines). Thai students make the greatest distinctions among the CLMV countries, though the degree of those distinctions is still not great. Thai students are also the only group to perceive a greater similarity between Thailand and Laos (and single out Myanmar as most different from Thailand).

Descriptive Terms for CLMV Countries

In addition to judged similarity and difference, students in the five respondent countries were asked to provide words or phrases that they would use to describe various countries. The terms to describe Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam yield further insights into the respondents' knowledge (or lack thereof) and perception of these countries. (See Tables 1-5, which show the most frequent descriptors of the CLMV countries from each respondent nation.)

First, it is clear from the responses that many respondents from the five original member nations of ASEAN have little and/or an imprecise knowledge of CLMV. Very frequently, terms like 'unknown' or 'don't know' were used to describe Laos in particular but also Cambodia and Myanmar (but not Vietnam). In addition, many 'iconic' descriptive terms were misplaced. Among all the descriptive terms collected, I use 'iconic' for terms identified with specific countries - such as 'Eiffel Tower' for France or 'kangaroo' for Australia - as opposed to 'categorical' descriptors, such as large, small, rich, poor, etc. While these examples as well as other iconic descriptors for countries such as America or Japan were never misassigned, a number of misplacements occur in the case of CLMV countries. For example, Cambodia's Angkor Wat and Khmer Rouge appear in Myanmar and Vietnam; Myanmar's opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi appears in Cambodia and Vietnam.

Another indication of the lack of knowledge among students from the respondent nations toward the CLMV countries is the use of general, often geographic terms to depict them. 'Asia' and 'ASEAN' in particular were used much more frequently to describe CLMV than for other countries (i.e. other ASEAN members or other Asian countries). From the lists of descriptive terms, respondents display a wider range and more intricate vocabulary to describe other ASEAN members and well-known countries outside the region (especially America, France, China and Japan) than to describe the new members of ASEAN.

But beyond demonstrating a general lack of knowledge about the CLMV countries (which to a very large extent accounts for the strong clustering of these countries in the cognitive maps), the descriptive terms also reveal a general view of the CLMV region held by the respondents. The most common terms to describe the countries suggest that concepts of economic development are at the forefront of defining the image of CLMV. Secondarily is a historical legacy of war and perception of ongoing instability. Political issues (e.g. form of

government) as well as cultural and religious identities of the countries are also apparent, but less prominent.

'Poverty' or 'poor' was the most common, or among the most common, terms used to describe Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar by students across all five respondent countries (with some exceptions in Thailand). Poverty was accompanied by similar economic terms with similar connotations: underdeveloped, developing, backwards, rural, agricultural and others. These terms were commonly used for Vietnam as well, but with somewhat less frequency. The descriptions indicate some sense among respondents that Vietnam is not quite so 'poor' and 'underdeveloped' as the other three. This perception also corresponds to the slight distinctiveness of Vietnam apparent in some of the cognitive maps (i.e. among Indonesian and Filipino students).

Vietnam is (perhaps unsurprisingly) also distinguished by having the strongest association with a history of war and instability. In every nation, save Singapore, 'war' was the primary term used to describe Vietnam, suggesting that even for respondents born after 1980, 'Vietnam' is still thought of more as a war than as a country. In Singapore, 'poor' was used far more frequently, reflecting a general trend in Singapore to see the ASEAN region through a lens of economic development far more than by any other criteria. 'War' was also very commonly used to describe Cambodia and with some frequency for Laos and Myanmar as well. Interestingly, Singaporean respondents (in contrast to all others) used 'war' to describe Cambodia twice as frequently as they used it for Vietnam (the opposite was generally the case in the other four respondent nations). Again, this reflects both the sense that Vietnam is slightly more economically developed along with Singaporean students' emphasis on that particular criterion in describing and evaluating countries.

Chaos, conflict, danger, riots, instability and similar terms appear in the descriptions of CLMV countries across all five respondent nations. While outright war is often cast as a historical legacy, these terms give a sense that social and political strife continue into the present - and again with little differentiation among the countries (though Cambodia is described in these terms slightly more than others). At the same time, all the CLMV countries are occasionally (though very infrequently) described in opposite terms - as 'peaceful'. This contradictory image (to that of chaos and instability) is associated with perceptions of CLMV as a slow-paced, rural idyll, implicitly contrasted with the urban, industrial surroundings of the respondents (i.e. in Bangkok, Manila, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore).

In addition to instability, respondents made explicit reference to the political systems of the countries. In all countries, save Thailand, 'communist' (or more rarely 'socialist') was commonly used to describe all CLMV countries. The Thai respondents surveyed almost never used 'communist' to describe the CLMV countries and while they did use 'dictatorship' and 'central government' these terms were also relatively rare. For Myanmar, however, by far the most common term among Thai respondents was 'Aung Sang Suu Kyi'; and unlike other respondents, those in Thailand did not misassign that name to the wrong country. In other respondent nations as well, aside from labeling the CLMV countries as 'communist', terms to describe the countries' political systems (dictatorship, military government, democracy, and others) were infrequently used.

Terms referring to cultural and religious aspects of the CLMV countries were rare compared to economic and political references discussed above. Buddhism was used to describe almost all of the CLMV countries across all the respondent nations, although not with great frequency (often by only one or two respondents) and always less frequently than key economic terms. Other cultural terms (such as temples, art, cultural, pagodas, etc.) and iconic terms (e.g. Angkor Wat, Shwedagon) appeared in responses, but again relatively infrequently in most cases. Singaporean, Malaysian and Filipino respondents described the CLMV countries least often using such cultural terms. The terms were somewhat more common among Thai and Indonesians. For Thai students, the Shwedagon in Yangon was among the three most frequent terms used in reference to Myanmar (the other two being Ang Sang Suu Kyi and Asian). No respondent from any other nation mentioned the Shwedagon.

In this account of the terms used to describe the CLMV countries, I have written for the most part about the general responses from across all five nations where the survey was conducted. There is, as I have indicated, a very broadly shared similar view in which the CLMV countries are perceived largely in terms of their relative poverty, economic 'underdevelopment' and places of social or political instability. At the same time, the descriptions do indicate discernible differences in the perceptions of the CLMV countries.

While some Thai respondents described the CLMV countries as poor or underdeveloped, they did so with considerably less frequency than respondents from other countries. Cambodia was the only country among the CLMV for which 'poor' was the most frequent descriptor

among Thai students. By contrast 'poor' or 'poverty' was the leading descriptor (by far) for all four CLMV countries among Singaporeans and for two or three of the countries among Malaysians and Indonesians ('war' or a similar term competed with 'poverty' in the other cases.) Filipinos most frequently used the terms 'Asian' and 'small' followed by 'poor' or 'third world' to describe the CLMV countries.

The terms used by Thai respondents also suggest a much more nuanced view and richer understanding of the CLMV countries than among Indonesian, Malaysian, Filipino and Singaporean students. In the case of the latter, in each respondent nation, a handful of fairly simple, categorical descriptors (e.g. Poor, Small, Asian) are used to describe the CLMV with other terms appearing on only one or two questionnaires. Comparing the descriptive terms for the CLMV countries to those provided for other ASEAN and Non-ASEAN countries (e.g. America, China, France, Japan), respondents had a much richer vocabulary to describe the latter. Thai students by contrast used a broader range of terms for the CLMV countries with moderate frequency - similar to the distribution of terms used to describe countries other than the CLMV group. The Thai descriptions of Laos in particular are more positive than those of other respondent nations, emphasizing its proximity ('neighbor') and its cuisine over poverty and underdevelopment. Vietnam is also noted for its food; and while 'war' is a common descriptor (like in other countries) other terms indicate a more positive view toward Vietnam and also recognition of it as 'developing' (and potentially an economic competitor). Thai students' responses about Myanmar and Cambodia are less favorable, but again, compared to those from other respondents, they are more nuanced.

The kinds of terms used to describe CLMV countries reflect broader themes in how students from each nation think about other countries (or at least the vocabulary that they deploy to express their ideas). Broadly speaking, Singaporeans, Malaysians and Filipinos use economic terms to describe other countries more than other terminology. Thais and Indonesians by contrast, describe and distinguish among countries in 'cultural' terms. Angkor Wat, for example, appears prominently in Thai and Indonesia descriptions but not in those of the other three nations surveyed. Various other terms from Indonesia, appearing at low frequencies, give a similar impression of emphasizing 'cultural' aspects of the countries (e.g. temples, pagodas, Buddhist, Hindu, etc).

These general ways of thinking about countries are reflected in the cognitive maps as well. Thai and Indonesian students' judgments of similarity and difference produce significant 'cultural' clusters - for example, students strongly associate Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei (Malay-Muslim countries). The primary (horizontal) dimension of difference/similarity, show the clearest differentiation, among Thai students, between Mainland and Island Southeast Asia. By contrast, none of the samples of students from other nations produce a clear Mainland-Island distinction in the horizontal dimension of the maps. Singaporean students come closest, but their map is based primarily on differentiating Singapore from all other countries, and countries are close or distant from Singapore based on criteria of economic development (note that in the Singaporean view, Brunei is rich, but not 'developed'). The Malaysian map is similar to that of Singapore, and the Philippines is judged more similar to most of the Mainland countries than the (arguably) culturally more similar Island countries (though of course, the Philippines has often been considered a bit of an awkward fit in relation to other 'Island' Southeast Asian countries). Filipino responses divide the countries between the very poorest (CLMV) and the richer countries, and within the richer countries cluster the richest (Singapore, Brunei), next richest (Thailand, Malaysia) and least rich (Indonesia, Philippines).

Conclusions

The results of the survey make it clear that Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam are very closely associated in the minds of citizens of other countries within ASEAN. With the exception of Thailand, very little is generally known about the CLMV countries in the rest of ASEAN, other than a view of this region as one defined primarily by poverty, relative economic 'underdevelopment' and a history of instability (including wars).

The twentieth century was dominated by the development and consolidation of a global nation-state system. At the beginning of that century, many of the current nation-state members of ASEAN did not exist as such. In the meantime, nations (nation-states) and nationalism have become so mundane they are now largely taken for granted. As many others have pointed out, our understanding of the world is largely contextualized within a nation-state framework. This is true of people's general knowledge of the world, as much as scholars, diplo-

mats, politicians and others. National educational curricula, national press and media, and other institutions see to it that knowledge of the world emphasizes nation-state boundaries (both in terms of territory and identity).

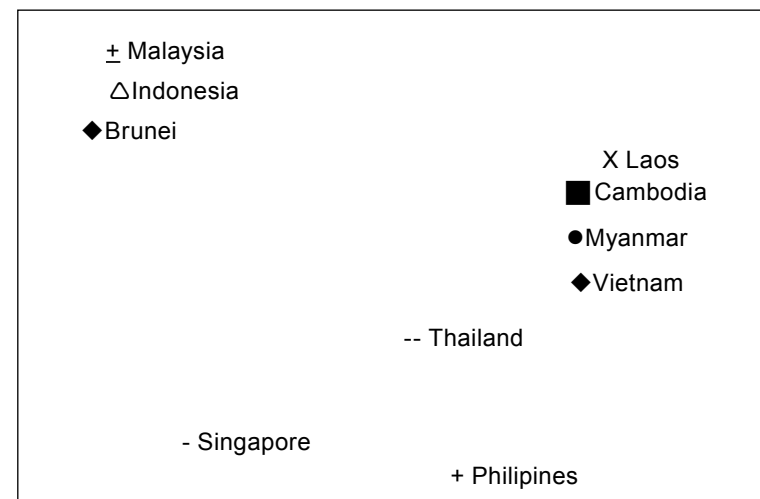
Within this framework, citizens of most countries learn much more about the world within the boundaries of whichever nation-state they live in than what lies beyond. Moreover, knowledge of the world beyond is shaped by complex relationships of power, communication technologies, media, and movement of people among other things. The countries of ASEAN are currently in a state in which knowledge about the world beyond the immediate neighborhood eclipses knowledge and understanding of nearby countries.

In this context, initiatives such as the current ASEAN curriculum project centered at SEAMEO-CHAT in Yangon are of interest. As the survey results show, knowledge about the 'cultural' (and historical) aspects of the ASEAN region seem especially weak among most students at leading ASEAN universities. An initiative to include more 'ASEAN related' content in national primary and high school curricula across the region would do well to focus especially on aspects of the regions cultural history and the iconic symbols of the member states. Such an approach is of course thin and shallow. One would hope for a much nuanced knowledge of the region, one that would even go beyond the mundane nation-state framework. But such an idea seems unlikely when the base of knowledge about the ASEAN region - particular the CLMV countries - is so weak to begin with.

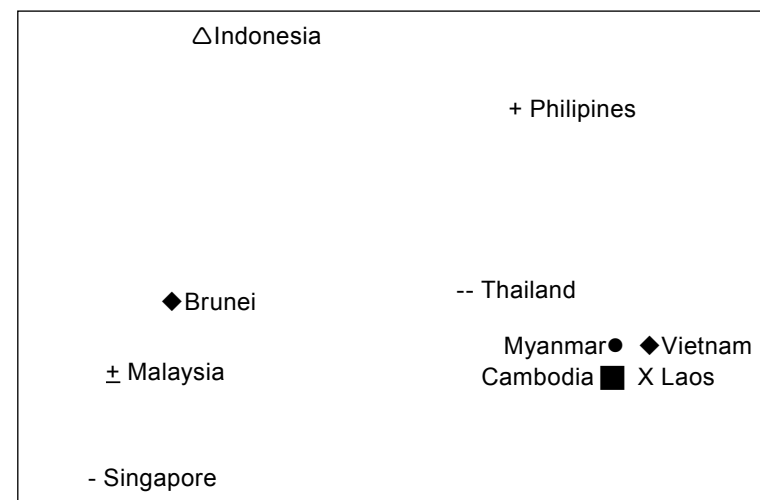
The survey results also indicate the severity of the challenge to ASEAN integration posed by the sharp economic disparities between countries in the region. The students surveyed show a strong inclination toward thinking of countries in ASEAN (and the world more generally) in terms of economic criteria and a worldview strongly shaped by economic developmentalism. In particular, there is a strong tendency revealed in the responses to associate one's own country 'up' with those 'more developed' (and wealthier) and to dissociate 'down', differentiating ones own country from those 'less developed' (and poorer). Any serious efforts toward the development and integration of ASEAN must address these disparities both in perceptions and in economic terms.

APPENDIX I: COGNITIVE MAPS

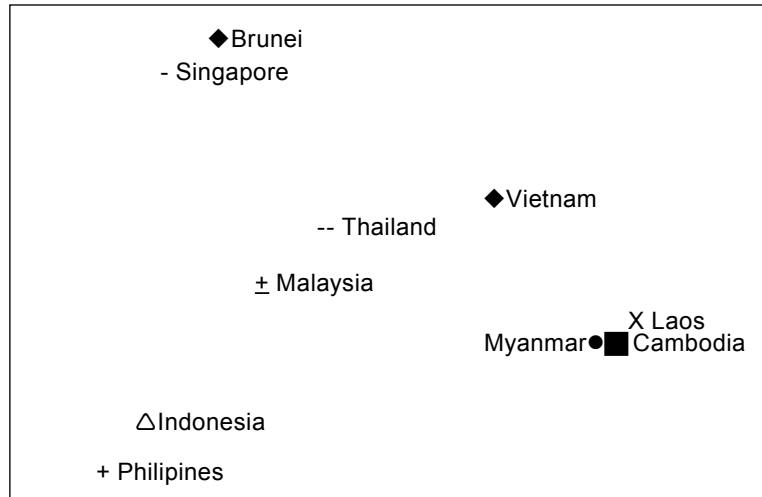
Map 1: Indonesian Students' View of Southeast Asia



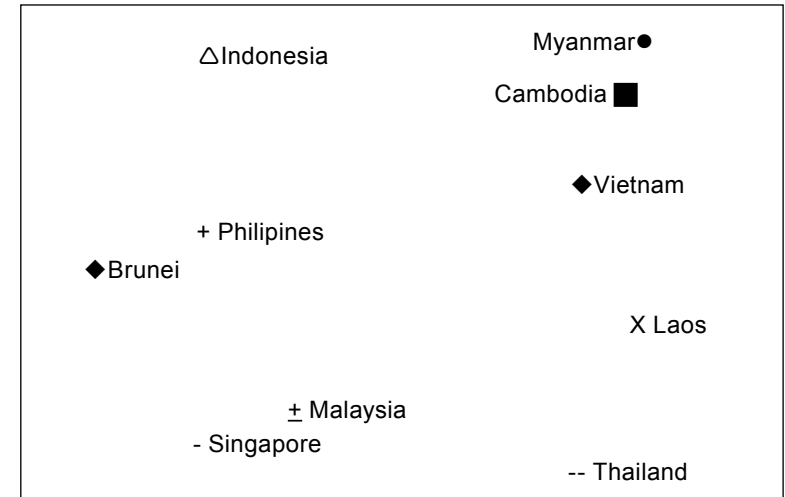
Map 2: Malaysian Students' View of Southeast Asia



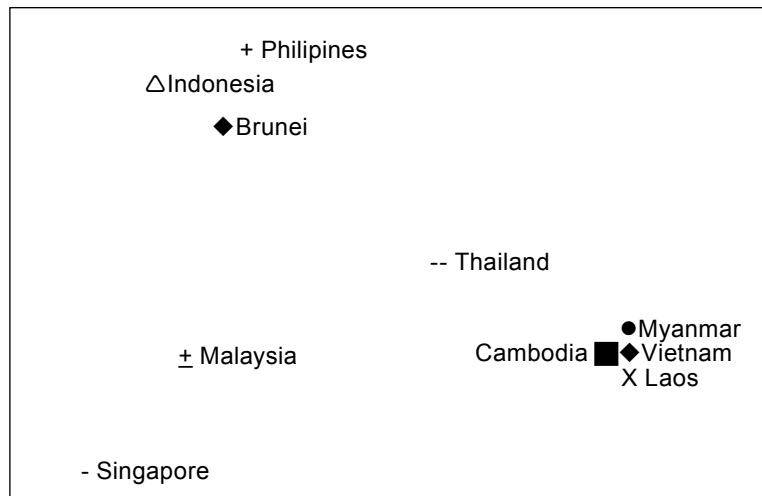
Map 3: Philippine Students' View of Southeast Asia



Map 5: Thai Students' View of Southeast Asia



Map 4: Singaporean Students' View of Southeast Asia



APPENDIX 2: DESCRIPTIVE TERMS

Table 1: Indonesia Respondents

Cambodia	Laos	Myanmar	Vietnam
Khmer Rouge (15)	Poor (13)	Asia (14)	War (31)
Poor (12)	ASEAN (12)	ASEAN (10)	Vietcong (10)
ASEAN (9)	Asia (10)	Burma (7)	Asia (9)
Angkor Wat (6)	Small (6)	Poor (5)	ASEAN (8)
Asia (6)	Developing (5) Indochina (5)	Rangoon (5) China (5)	Communist (8)

Table 2: Malaysian Respondents

Cambodia	Laos	Myanmar	Vietnam
Poor (12)	Poor (17)	Poor (8)	War (13)
Backwards (9)	Backwards (15)	Backwards (6)	Backwards (8)
War (7)	Small (11)	Paddy (6)	Communist (4)
Disease (3)	ASEAN (4)	Buddhism (5)	Poor (4)
(Other 2 or less)	Developing (3)	Developing (5) Immigrants (5)	(Other 2 or less)

Table 3: Filipino Respondents

Cambodia	Laos	Myanmar	Vietnam
Asian (9)	Small (8)	Asian (5)	Asian (5)
Poor (8)	Poor (7)	Small (4)	War (4)
Third World (3)	Asian (6)	Third World (3)	Communism (3)
(Other 2 or less)	Unknown (3)	Rich culture (3)	Third World (3)
	(Other 2 or less)	(Other 2 or less)	Poor (3)

Table 4: Singaporean Respondents

Cambodia	Laos	Myanmar	Vietnam
Poor (17)	Poor (16)	Poor (18)	Poor (12)
War (12)	Under-developed (7)	Developing (7)	Communist (8)
Underdeveloped (6)	Backwards (6)	Asian (5)	War (5)
Developing (5)	Small (6)	Backwards (5)	Backwards (4)
Asian (4) Khmer Rouge (4) Skulls (4)	Developing (5)	Burma (4) Southeast Asia (4) Undeveloped (3)	Cultural (4) Developing (4) Hot (4) Mines (4)

Table 5: Thai Respondents

Cambodia	Laos	Myanmar	Vietnam
Poor (9)	Neighbor (9)	Aung Sang Suu Kyi (10)	Asia (7)
Angkor Wat (8)	Som Tum (8)	Asia (7)	War (7)
Khmer (7)	Mekong River (7)	Shwedagon (7)	Food (6)
Backwards (5)	Sticky Rice (7)	Dictatorship (5)	Bicycles (5)
Asian (4) Developing (4) Khmer Rouge (4) War (4)	Underdeveloped (5) Vientiane (5)	Neighbor (5)	Chinese (5) Hanoi (5)