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REVIEW ESSAY

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Research and regionalism in Southeast Asia

Cynthia Chou and Vincent Houben (eds), *Southeast Asian studies; Debates and new directions*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006, viii + 206 pp. ISBN 9789812303844, price SGD 29.90 (paperback); 9789812303851, SGD 49.90 (hardback).

Frost, Ellen L., *Asia's new Regionalism*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2008, x + 292 pp. ISBN 9789971694197. Price: SGD 38.00 (paperback).

Norman G. Owen (ed.), *The emergence of modern Southeast Asia; A new history*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005, xxiii + 541 pp. ISBN 9971693283. Price: USD 31.00 (paperback).

Laurie J. Sears (ed.), *Knowing Southeast Asian subjects*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007, xi + 283 pp. ISBN 9789971693664. Price: USD 30.00 (paperback).

Nicholas Tarling, *Regionalism in Southeast Asia; To foster the political will*. Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2006, 276 pp. ISBN 9780415379625. Price: GBP 80.00 (hardback).

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Southeast Asian studies continues to be plagued by a perverse taint of inauthenticity, largely because it fails to conform to the methodological geographies used for authoritatively defining the location and scope of social and historical research elsewhere. Southeast Asia is not a singular nation-state, nor is it dominated by a single nation-state or other historical polity or cultural force that would allow its history to be easily read through a simple master narrative (as is the case for the Roman Empire and Europe, Dynastic China

and East Asia, or Islam and the Arab world). In addition, over the past ten to twenty years, there has been a great deal of discussion and hand-wringing over the possible decline of American interest in Southeast Asia and what, if anything, might emerge in the twenty-first century to replace or reinvigorate the legacy of the American school of Southeast Asian studies of the late twentieth century and the European colonial and orientalist scholarship traditions which reached their zenith in the century preceding the Second World War. That said, there is no dearth of research and writing in the new century under the rubric of Southeast Asian studies, both critiquing and advancing the field. The works reviewed in this essay all demonstrate that Southeast Asian studies continues to be a thriving, intellectually engaged undertaking with much to offer.

Of the five books considered in this review essay, two assess the state of Southeast Asian studies: *Southeast Asian studies; Debates and new directions* (hereafter, *Debates*), edited by Cynthia Chou and Vincent Houben, and *Knowing Southeast Asian subjects* (hereafter, *Knowing*), edited by Laurie Sears. Three further volumes are studies motivated by regionally framed agendas. *The emergence of modern Southeast Asia; A new history* (hereafter, *Emergence*), edited by Norman Owen, revisits and updates the now classic historiography of Southeast Asia by the American school of Southeast Asian studies. Nicholas Tarling's *Regionalism in Southeast Asia* (hereafter, *Regionalism*) and Ellen Frost's *Asia's new regionalism* (hereafter, *New regionalism*) both focus on the question of regionalism itself, which often vexes scholars in the field. All of the books address fundamental questions for research and writing on the subject of Southeast Asia. What, if anything, is 'Southeast Asia'? How is it configured as a field within, as Yoko Hayami puts it, an 'evolving "ecology" of the global academic endeavor' (*Debates*, p. 83)? The first two volumes, Knowing and Debates, address the latter question, while *Emergence*, *Regionalism* and *New regionalism* are concerned mainly with the former question.

Knowing and debating Southeast Asian studies

The 'circles of esteem' (discussed by Robert Cribb in *Debates*) which define Southeast Asian studies as a field of research, writing, learning, and teaching, are complex, hierarchical, semi-institutionalized networks of scholars whose interactions produce not only scholarship but also a system of professional values driven primarily by esteem and derision (*Debates*, pp. 50-2). While Cribb mainly considers Southeast Asian studies as a whole (as a 'global academic endeavor', in Harami's words), the world of Southeast Asian scholarship is large and diverse enough to have numerous, overlapping 'circles of esteem'. In comparing Sears's *Knowing* and Chou and Houben's *Debates*, the most striking

contrast is the different 'circles' from within which they are written and how that difference affects their content. The former is a very distinctive product of the American tradition of Southeast Asian studies. The latter reflects writings of what – for want of a better term – might be called an 'international' but not American-centred perspective on Southeast Asian studies. Many of the chapters in *Debates* were first presented at the third International Convention of Asian Scholars (ICAS) held in 2003 in Singapore. The international perspective reflects a 'circle' of esteem and interaction that is an alternative to (though by no means completely separate from) the American circle, yet also weighted toward extra-regional rather than intra-regional networking and to some extent toward centres in Europe (but also Australia, Japan, Singapore and various other centres within or near Southeast Asia). Both *Knowing* and *Debates* make reference to a third – and even more inchoate – 'circle of esteem', an aspiring but still underrepresented (in terms of international prestige) intraregional field of Southeast Asian studies in Southeast Asia.

Knowing primarily addresses concerns of American Southeast Asian studies, especially with regard to the relationship between regional insiders and outsiders. The preface situates the authors in terms of their 'travel(s) between Southeast Asia and the United States [over] several decades' (p. ix). Most of the authors (four of the six) either worked or studied at the University of Washington, and two of them provide detailed discussions on the mechanics, so to speak, of American and Southeast Asian scholarly interactions. Judith Henshy addresses the problems and politics facing the collection and keeping of Southeast Asian materials in American research libraries, as well as threats posed by profit-oriented American copyright laws to the fair and free use of such materials. George Dutton discusses the 'missing links' (institutional, collaborative, educational, technological, and political) between American and Southeast Asian scholarly communities.

Laurie Sears's and Celia Lowe's contributions are broader and more conceptual in orientation. Lowe provides an elegant, detailed description of interconnections and articulation of a project involving natural ecology and resource management in the Togean Islands of Indonesia, with complex relationships between local, national and international concerns (pp. 111-4). She raises numerous challenges facing researchers in such conditions, including the problem of 'what has been politically and institutionally possible to say and do' in different places and at different historical moments (Lowe in *Knowing*, p. 115). She then broadens her scope by recounting examples of differently configured projects centred in Thailand and Vietnam, offering readers a lot in terms of examples and points to consider (if not always clear and convincing answers to questions of collaborative ethics).

Sears's chapter details the history and configuration of the angst (mainly liberal American but also, as in the case of Ariel Heryonto's chapter, Southeast

Asian) surrounding the historical imbalance between the plethora of studies of the region produced outside Southeast Asia and, at least until recently, the relative dearth of prominent research conducted within the region by scholars from the region. By now, this critique has become very well established – verging on received wisdom – at least among scholars in Southeast Asian studies.

The crux of Sears's argument is that one of the most important endeavours of scholars from outside the region is to engage with Southeast Asian subjects (the 'other') as 'knowing subjects' rather than objects to be studied. This concern is discursively motivated primarily by way of a critique of how past Euro-American, male-biased scholarship imposed itself on Southeast Asian subjects and studies (pp. 49-58). Throughout this volume, as well as in *Debates* and elsewhere, there can be no doubt that the general tenor of the Southeast Asian studies community (the circles of esteem within which we work) champions all efforts to facilitate scholarship within the region by people from the region (see King in *Debates*, p. 37). Yet Sears's approach when demonstrated in the chapter itself gives pause to consider if one dominant Western framework (male 'biased' liberalism) is not simply being replaced by another one (critical, progressive feminism). I do not take issue with the merits of feminist theory nor wish to discourage its development, but Sears's engagement with her 'Southeast Asian subject' involves an exposition of gender theory (in which overwhelmingly the work of Western scholars is considered, pp. 53-8) and how it could inspire a 'radical rewriting of the scholarship on Southeast Asia'. She then invokes the work of Indonesian novelist Ayu Utami to demonstrate how an explicitly gendered, close reading of Utami's work can provide a critique of 'the patriarchal vision of the postcolonial nation'.

Sears seems to be plucking Utami's work out of its Indonesian context to put it in engagement with postmodern literary theory (Jameson) and progressive Western feminist ideals in such a way that the latter are not seriously challenged or changed (there is no hint that Utami might force postmodern literary critics or feminists to rethink their positions) but rather the Indonesian (patriarchal) system is placed under critique. Sears is not necessarily wrong in doing this; however, how different really is this from mid-twentieth-century scholarship in which Southeast Asian 'cases' were read and critiqued through modernization or Marxist theory? Utami's female characters are in fact so thoroughly Westernized that they 'inhabit a Kantian cosmopolitan subjectivity' in Sears's reading (p. 61).

In addition to Lowe's and Sears's general discussions of American-Southeast Asian engagements, an earlier widely read essay by Ariel Heryanto is reproduced in *Knowing*, which queries the position of scholars of Southeast Asian origin in Southeast Asian studies. In *Debates*, Victor King (cited in Heryanto's introduction) responds to Heryanto's query. It is not clear that King and

Heryanto are very substantially at odds, but rather differ in their tone and timing, with Heryanto recounting historical conditions and King aspiring to future ones. Heryanto outlines the many ways in which an exogenous concept of Southeast Asia combined with other factors, such as methodological nationalism, excludes or at least curbs the involvement and development of local (Southeast Asian), intraregional scholarship on Southeast Asia. In response, King characterizes Heryanto's description of the situation as 'overly narrow' and 'increasingly out-of-date' (p. 37), though this is already anticipated when Heryanto himself describes his essay as overly pessimistic and notes a changing situation (p. 98).

In both *Debates* and *Knowing*, various authors make reference to the many institutions and undertakings within Southeast Asia – from the establishment of the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore in 1971 to the much-praised Southeast Asia Research Exchange Program (SEASREP) promoting intraregional research since the mid-1990s. What remains to be written (in contrast to the well-known histories of American, European and even Japanese schools of Southeast Asian studies) is a systematic, coherent history of these endeavours. In addition, one problem with some criticism is the impatience to see desirable outcomes materialize miraculously overnight, such as a shift in the centre of gravity in sites of production of regional studies toward the region itself. Hayami's metaphor of the ecology of global academia (echoing comments of Ben Anderson in the 1990s as well as many others) needs to be taken seriously. Ecological processes are never instantaneous, but involve growth over time and – with human endeavours such as Southeast Asian studies – careful cultivation.

In addition to King's 'personal reflections', essays in *Debates* by Robert Cribb on circles of esteem, Yoko Hayami on perspectives from Japan, and Cynthia Chou on reconfiguring Southeast Asian studies all address broad configurations and general concerns of scholarship. Together with four chapters that focus on more particular disciplinary concerns (such as political science and history), the collection in *Debates* provides readers with a very rich (if occasionally slightly repetitive) collection of issues, concerns and arguments. Martin Platt makes a case for the importance of (and threats to) serious, intensive language training in any program for developing knowledge about Southeast Asian studies. Vincent Houben and Duncan McCargo make broad and detailed surveys of historiography and political science, while Tim Barnard demonstrates historical and social contextualization of cultural production (film, in particular) through a review of the films of P. Ramlee (the greatest icon of twentieth-century Malay and Malaysian cinema).

Comparison of McCargo's essay in *Debates* and Bonura's essay in *Knowing* provides one further (and final) illustration of the different perspectives that these two volumes represent. McCargo's essay in *Debates* covers some of

the same ground as Bonura's in discussing American political science and Southeast-Asia-based research and concerns, but also ventures more broadly to discuss a wider range of international and Southeast Asian modes of engagement in studies of politics and governance. As with most of *Knowing*, Bonura's essay on political science centres primarily on the discipline-versus-area-studies debate within American political science. While Bonura adeptly outlines and addresses the debate, the debate itself seems incredibly perverse from any perspective other than a myopically American one. It can only be sustained on the basis of a political science discipline (also found in sociology, economics and elsewhere) in which the vast, overwhelming bulk of scholars are North American (United States) area studies specialists and parochial to the point that they do not even recognize the temporal and geographic boundedness (the narrow, arcane 'area studies' specialization) of their own knowledge. Bonura does a good job of outlining this bias; but perhaps missing is the question of whether it is very relevant to research outside of the United States (other than the extent to which dominance of the American academy projects this 'debate' onto other contexts). Implicitly, another question is raised: is not part of the conundrum of 'Southeast Asian studies' that many scholars working locally in Southeast Asia need not concern themselves with being 'area studies' specialists any more than do political scientists or sociologists working in the United States? Is it just as well for those researching politics or society in Indonesia, Laos or the Philippines to be just as blissfully ignorant of their own methodological nationalism as are their American counterparts? If not, then perhaps an enduring value of 'Southeast Asian studies' would be to undermine blissful ignorance in favour of comparative illumination.

Region, history and regionalism

It is a broad regional Southeast Asian studies framework that is used in the other three books reviewed here. *Emergence* is a thoroughly revised and rewritten edition of *In search of Southeast Asia* (first edition 1971; second, revised edition 1987), which is undoubtedly among the most important general texts on the region produced by what Sears (quoting Ileto in *Knowing*, p. 50) calls the 'male, liberal enlightenment fantasy' of the twentieth-century American school of Southeast Asian studies. The current volume endeavours to respond to developing research and critical scholarship on the region, but the general framework for understanding 'modern' Southeast Asia has not been radically transformed from earlier incarnations of this text. In producing *Emergence*, the authors collectively engaged younger scholars for critical feedback on the earlier editions; it was suggested that they break the original book completely open, take a fresh look, and draft a shorter, more accessible text for the

twenty-first century (p. xiv). While the text is accessible (it reads very well and is jargon-free), the editor and authors did not substantially shorten the book, which on the whole is to be commended. It would be a shame had they so altered the text that it reflected the sound-bite culture of the present and abandoned the strengths of the original, first edition context when scholars wrote and (rumour has it) even undergraduates read long, detailed books.

Emergence is a compendium of long and serious thinking about historical processes and events across this wide, diverse region. It still retains many of the fundamental structures of perspective and presentation which have been a point of (largely negative) critique over several decades now. It deserves to be looked back upon in decades to come as the high-water mark and cumulative wisdom as well as faults of twentieth-century American Southeast Asian studies. The quality of the authors' scholarship cannot be questioned, but I will briefly outline a few main points of criticism.

The long-standing and oft-criticized perspective which views Southeast Asia 'from the deck of a ship' is updated in *Emergence* with the trope of the tourist whisked about by air from country to country. Chapter 1 begins by imagining 'a first time visitor to Southeast Asia [arriving on a] national airline [with] flight attendants [...] in ethnic dress' (p. 1). Reading this and similar passages sprinkled throughout the text, particularly in the first sections, my first reaction was to cringe at this emphasis on an 'external' view of the region and the presentation of serious scholarship as tourist guide (that is, written primarily for the benefit of 'first time' visitors rather than inhabitants of the place). On further reflection, perhaps this is an appropriate and honest way in which to frame the volume, as a deeply involved, well-informed and sympathetic but nevertheless 'outsider' perspective on the region. Moreover, the men and woman (Jean Taylor being included in this old boys' club) who authored the volume are long-time observers with serious commitment to the region whose knowledge will – all criticism aside – undoubtedly be a valuable lasting legacy. Among the criticisms, the most significant, perhaps, is the way in which the entire framing of emergence of 'modernity' places European colonialism at the core of Southeast Asian history and experience.

Emergence utilizes a periodization which inexorably places European colonialism at the crux of understanding Southeast Asia both historically and in the present. 'Modern' history begins around 1750; in other words, at or just before the dawn of intensive Anglo-Dutch engagements in Southeast Asia, which we can now see with historical hindsight culminated in the short but pivotal era of European high colonialism (from about 1874, with the signing of the Pangkor Treaty, to 1942, when the Japanese military crushed European and American powers throughout the region). The entire volume (consciously or not, it is not clear) is organized around this 'pivot'. The first third of the book (Chapters 1-11, pp. 1-157) covers the period from 1750 to

1900, setting the stage for this pivot point and 'emergence' into the modern period. The remaining two thirds (Chapters 12-37, pp. 161-508) cover 1850 to the present (c. 2000).

Seven chapters (12-18) detail the transformative effects of European and American high-colonialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The authors are at pains to illustrate the active engagement (rather than passive victimization) of Southeast Asians in the social, political and economic processes sweeping through the region in these years. Yet it seems impossible not to read this era as one of European (and, belatedly, American) action and Southeast Asian reaction. Also, in contrast to the well-documented and thoroughly researched European colonial endeavours, the 'ungrounded empires' (Ong and Nonini 1997) of Chinese merchants, family networks and *hui* or 'secret societies' maintain a ghostly presence throughout the text – ever present, clearly important, but consistently inscrutable apart from a few passages (pp. 141, 175-7, 389-92).

The second half of the volume (Parts 4 and 5) moves increasingly toward nation-state histories (still interspersed with some general, thematic chapters). In passages out of colonialism (Part 4, pp. 283-375) and coping with independence and interdependence (Part 5, pp. 379-508), the modern nation-states of the region come ever more sharply into focus. Pre-colonial histories and events as well as those in which Europeans played little role seem systematically (if unintentionally) downplayed. This is most evident, perhaps, in the way that Laos is treated. The Siamese sacking of Vientiane in the early nineteenth century, and the resettlement of Lao populations across the Khorat Plateau, are only vaguely discussed in passing (p. 96). This is arguably as important an event in Lao history as the capture of Malacca by the Portuguese in Malaysian history. But Laos is for the most part deprived of any pre-twentieth-century history (p. 371), despite an active contemporary Lao historiography, which for example references Lan Xang in much the same terms that modern Thai historiography references Ayutthaya and Sukhothai or Cambodian history references the Angkorean Khmer Empire. The main conclusion to be drawn from *Emergence* overall is that 'modern' Southeast Asia consists of an assortment of colonially-inherited nation-states, whose pre-colonial pasts are of vague and relatively little significance. Similarly, regional processes or institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are discussed only briefly as compared to the national histories.

The final two books to be considered, Nicholas Tarling's *Regionalism in Southeast Asia* and Ellen Frost's *Asia's new regionalism*, take us from the epistemology of studying the region (in *Debates* and *Knowing*) and from historical narratives of emergent nation-states (*Emergence*) to analysis of processes of regionalism and regionalization. In other words, understanding the ways in

which Southeast Asia over the past century has come into being as a region – particularly, though not exclusively, in the context of ASEAN. As with *Emergence*, Tarling's historical contextualization of Southeast Asia is embedded in the European colonial era and project. A large portion of Chapter 2, for instance, is devoted to an Atlantic-centred 'world' history (pp. 25-32). Frost, by contrast, does a remarkably good job of contextualizing Asian and ASEAN regionalism within Asia and presenting it as a different – not inferior – form of regionalism in contrast to the oft-cited European Union case (pp. 11-4).

Following an introduction to 'definitions and chronologies', Tarling frames his book in terms of what he labels 'the view from without' (Part 2) and 'the view from within'. But in fact, Tarling's organization is as much chronological as it is based on geography or perspective. Ideas of regionalism and processes of regionalization in Tarling's account move simultaneously from past to present and exogenous to indigenous. Tarling's main focus is on the institutionalization of Southeast Asia through multiple, interrelated entities: Association of Southeast Asia (ASA), ASEAN, Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Tarling's book will be very valuable to anyone interested in the intricate international and elite diplomatic relationships involved in forging ASEAN and its associated structures for regional and international relations. At various points, such as the institutional and ideological shift from ASA and Malphilindo to ASEAN in the 1960s, Tarling fluently details an intricate, complex dance of the many partners in the endeavour, who by turns lead, follow, and drop in and out of the process. For general readers, the detail may leave them with a sense of information overload. For such readers, Ellen Frost's *New regionalism* will likely be more comprehensible, if less detailed.

Frost's *New regionalism* is written, by the author's admission, by an international relations generalist rather than a regional specialist. Frost is also forthright in presenting her book as one that seeks to provide an understanding of Asian regionalism for Western (especially American) policy makers. For all her disclaimers, Frost has managed to document and capture with great detail and accuracy the explicit ASEAN-centred programme for fostering broader Asian regionalism. In this endeavour – which exists currently somewhere between ideological aspiration and institutionalized inter-state governance – a functional Asian regionalism is anticipated in which the small ASEAN nations take a leading role as unthreatening and honest brokers among and between large Asian nations, particularly China and India. The dominance of those two modern nations in East and South Asia makes for uncomfortable imbalances. The very lack of such a regional superpower in Southeast Asia is a source of comparative advantage in terms of positioning ASEAN to play an important role in developing an Asian regionalism.

Another point on which Frost's book is to be praised is that she includes

a simple yet valuable contrast between spontaneous integration carried out through business, travel, tourism and other undertakings of disparate individuals, and the government-driven, bureaucratic creation and implementation of an institutionalized regional architecture (the latter being the overwhelming focus of Tarling's *Regionalism*). Frost is sensitive to the vagaries of regional definition and, like Tarling, devotes two introductory chapters to addressing the contextual and definitional problems associated with 'Asia' as an entity.

What Frost's book lacks in detail (as compared to Tarling's), it makes up for in accessibility and thoughtfulness. Rather than critiquing the ASEAN narrative of a greater Asian regionalism, Frost provides a lucid account of that particular regional vision, while balancing (and contrasting) it with her narrative of individuals as 'spontaneous integrators'. Specialists may object to some of the details of her case, but Frost's contribution lies in providing a very useful frame of reference around which other scholars can debate and develop, while at the same time providing a fine introduction to Asian regionalism that relative novices (non-experts, including students) in the field can turn to for a general overview of both Southeast Asian and general Asian regionalism.

Afterword

All five of the books considered here have much to offer. Overall, they might be categorized as reference works, more so than groundbreaking or discipline-changing studies. Of the first two, *Debates* contains a broader set of issues and is more prospective in its approach. *Knowing* is a valuable but somewhat more limited and retrospective collection of essays on the challenges and concerns of Southeast Asian studies in America. *Emergence* similarly provides readers with the very best – my own criticisms notwithstanding – of the late twentieth-century American-style historiography of the region. Tarling's and Frost's contributions, likewise, are valuable references: *Regionalism* in detailing the diplomatic, institutional efforts of ASEAN and other elites, *New regionalism* in offering an accessible overview of ASEAN-centred but more broadly conceived Asian regionalism.

Not represented among this collection are any of the works coming increasingly from that third 'circle of esteem' alluded to in both *Debates* and *Knowing*, networks of Southeast Asian studies experts within Southeast Asia. It is not difficult to point to scholarship on history (Abu Talib and Tan 2003; Sunait and Baker 2002), international relations (Tay, Estanislao and Soesastro 2001; Tham, Lee and Norani 2009) and other subjects by authors situated and networked in various ways within the region. Over the past decade, this

body of literature (if it can or should be so conceived) has flourished and will in all likelihood become increasingly influential in the coming decades. Similarly impressive is the flourishing of scholarship in Thai, Malay and other vernaculars, addressing local contexts and localizing 'global' theory (Abdul Rahman 2006 and Mohammad Redzuan 2005, to cite just two recent examples from Malaysia). The importance of these works, as well as the serious language work (discussed by Platt in *Debates*) required to engage with them, will be a challenge to both American and 'international' scholars in the coming decades. But by all accounts, including those contained in all five books reviewed here, it is a welcome challenge.

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