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Culture and international imagination in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Using methods developed within cognitive anthropology, we examine the relationship between particular national discourses, cultural concepts and subjective ideas about the international system of nation-states referred to colloquially as countries in English, negara in Indonesian and prathet in Thai. The analysis is based on data collected among university students in Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand. Broadly speaking, Indonesian, Singaporean and Thai university students share a similar domain of ''countries'' and similar understanding of what a country is, but they differ in important respects in the descriptive language and cultural schemata they deploy in thinking about this domain. The study has implications for debates on the status of culture in social theory and geography and for the future of regional integration in Southeast Asia.
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Geographers, historians, anthropologists and others have written extensively in recent years about the role of culture and imaginative geographies in spatial practices and place-based identities. Most research in this area focuses on discourses through which geographic imaginings

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are produced and reproduced, embodied in such diverse media as postcards, schoolbooks, literature, television, maps, money, and personal narratives (e.g. Clifford, 1997; Kahn, 2000; Raento, Hämäläinen, Ikonen, & Mikkonen, 2004; Suwannathat-Pian, 2003; Thongchai, 1994; Thompson, 2002; Tolentino, 2001; Unwin & Hewitt, 2001; Williams, 1973). These studies have argued that our understanding of places and relationships between places at various scales, from cities and villages (Bunnell, 2002a; Thompson, 2004) to high-tech investment zones (Bunnell, 2002b) to national "geo-bodies" (Thongchai, 1994), are shaped by discursive practices and cultural concepts, such as divergent and shifting definitions of Central Europe or *Mitteleuropa* (Hagen, 2003) or an imagined Orient (Said, 1979).

This body of work has drawn significant relationships between, for example, historical events, political-economic practices, and geographic discourses. An often taken-for-granted and somewhat more difficult empirical question is the relationship of cultural concepts and discursive practices to individual subjective ideas about geographies and places. In a recent commentary, Sidaway et al. (2004) have illustrated the distinctive geographies implicit in such languages as Portuguese, Spanish, Malay, Korean, Japanese, Urdu, and Thai. Theoretically, these differences would be reflected in different ways of thinking and acting by subjects operating within those linguistic (and more generally cultural) frameworks. However, the extent to which this is the case is still an open and debated question within anthropology, linguistics and related fields.[1] Some anthropologists have argued, for example, that a different lexicon does not correlate with a demonstrably different way of thinking about a particular domain of ideas or experience.[2] We seek to address this question in the present article. In other words, can we demonstrate a relationship between divergent discourses, cultural concepts, and the ways in which different people actually think about the world?

This study draws on techniques that cognitive anthropologists have developed in order to assess the relative universality or cultural particularity of human reasoning in relationship to semantic domains (domains of meaning), such as emotions, kinship terms, and concepts of health and illness (e.g. Moore, Romney, Hsia, & Rusch, 1999; Romney & Moore, 1998, 2001; Romney, Boyd, Moore, Batchelder, & Brazill, 1996; Weller & Baer, 2001). 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 & Romney, 1988:9; see also Spradley, 1979:100–105). In our research, we applied these techniques to an explicitly geographic domain of "countries."

The term "countries" is part of what Akzin (1964) described as a terminological jungle (see also Lodén, 1996; Smith, 1998; Guibernau & Montserrat, 1999). Countries, nations, states, nation-states, and similar terms are differentiated in scholarly disciplines and multifarious everyday contexts. We do not discount the importance of this complexity. At the same time, the students among whom we did our research have a demonstrably similar and clear understanding of "countries" (English), "*negara*" (Indonesian) and "*prathet*" (Thai) as a domain of what most scholars would call "territorially defined sovereign nation-states." Our analysis is of

[1] As Sidaway et al. (2004:footnote 1) note, this debate relates to the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis" in anthropology and linguistics, which argues for a strong relationship between language and cognitive processes, i.e. the language one has to talk about the world strongly shapes the ways in which one thinks about the world (for reviews of the hypothesis see Gumperz & Levinson, 1996; Lucy 1992a, 1992b; Pinxten, 1976).

[2] Examples include classic work on color lexicons by Berlin and Kay (for a review, see Lucy, 1992a:178) and more recent studies of emotion terms in comparative contexts (e.g. Romney et al., 1997; Rusch, 2004).

that domain. For clarity in this paper, we use the term ‘‘countries’’ to refer to the domain and the word ‘‘nations’’ to refer to the places where the study was conducted.

We conducted research among university students from Chulalongkorn University (Thailand), the National University of Singapore, and the University of Indonesia using a series of methods to elicit their knowledge of countries: a free-listing exercise, in which students listed as many countries as possible in two minutes; a questionnaire in which they judged the similarity and differences among countries; and pile-sort interviews, in which they sorted a set of countries written on cards into piles based on which countries they considered to be most similar to each other. Each task was carried out independently (i.e. with different students). Overall, responses were collected from several hundred students at each university. In the questionnaires and interviews, we collected qualitative descriptions of individual countries, which we use to support our interpretations of the quantitative data on judged similarities and differences. We also conducted focus group sessions and seminars in which the findings were reported and discussed with students at each university to elicit their feedback and interpretations.

Comparing these students shows that that there is a very high consensus among the students at each university, but significant differences across nations in their perceptions of relationships among countries and in their perceptions of supra-national regions of Asia and Southeast Asia. Based on the cognitive maps produced in the study and associated descriptors, we argue that these differences can be attributed to cultural concepts specific to each nation.

Our use of the term ‘‘cognitive maps’’ differs from that commonly used in geography, but also has important overlap with some research on cognitive maps by geographers. In geography, a ‘‘cognitive map’’ is generally taken to mean a mental representation of spatial phenomena, such as a person’s environment (Gould & White, 1986; Kitchin & Freundschuh, 2000; Lynch, 1960). We use cognitive map to mean a visual, spatial representation (map) of cognition, specifically, culturally normative ways of thinking about a particular domain – in this case, countries. Our use of the term and work done in geography overlaps with respect to several studies of cognitive maps (generally collected in the form of sketch maps) of the world and countries (Chokor, 2003; Kong, 1988; Kong, Savage, Saarinen, & MacCabe, 1994; Pinheiro, 1998; Saarinen & MacCabe, 1995).

Sketch maps, by their nature, are biased toward a particular graphic representation of geographic knowledge. A review of the literature on sketch maps shows, for example, that a country’s size on Mercator projections and actual area in square kilometers are important determinants in their inclusion in sketch maps (Pinheiro, 1998:331). Similarly, Australia is among the most commonly included of all countries in sketch maps of the world, for the obvious reason that it is an independent continent (Chokor, 2003:431).

Our approach to knowledge of countries is purely verbal rather than graphic (cf. Pinheiro, 1998:326). While this approach does not encompass all that could be said (or for that matter, drawn) about countries, it gives us insights into the geographic domain of countries that is not constrained by the entailments of sketch maps. In this purely verbal approach, terrestrial location can be taken as one variable, rather than a necessary governing principle of association and difference among countries. We are interested in examining what constitutes such governing principles among each of the groups of subjects in our study. The methods we use highlight the importance of particular words and phrases that shape thinking about countries and the conceptual schemata that prevail among each group for organizing the domain of countries.

Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand

Our choice of Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand in this study is both illustrative and substantive. The authors teach at the universities where the surveys and interviews were conducted. The results are from a broader project, which has collected data from eight of the ten nations in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). But the data we have from Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand is among the most comprehensive. These countries are also among the ASEAN members about which the authors have the most extensive knowledge. In this sense, these countries are targets of opportunity, and used to illustrate general principles of the role of culture in international imaginings, which of course warrant testing (and contesting) in other sites using other data. At the same time, Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand hold substantive interest, especially with regard to questions of Asian identity and ASEAN integration.

Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand are all founding states of ASEAN (Acharya, 2000:83). However, aside from this formal association and geographic proximity, they are very disparate nations. The Kingdom of Thailand was the only state in Southeast Asia to avoid direct rule by a European power during the colonial era. Indonesia and Singapore, like many other postcolonial nation-states, were in large part produced through the historical circumstances of Dutch and British colonialism, respectively. The three nations have different national *lingua franca* – English in Singapore, Indonesian in Indonesia and Thai in Thailand. Indonesia is a predominantly Muslim country with multiple ethno-linguistic communities. Thailand is predominantly Buddhist and historically has been more assimilationist as opposed to multicultural vis-à-vis non-Thai minority groups (especially Thai–Chinese). Most Singaporeans identify as ethnically Chinese, but the state promotes explicitly multi-ethnic policies; with ethnic groups being conceived in ethno-religious terms as much as or more so than ethno-linguistic groups. Both Indonesia and Thailand are relatively large nation-states. Singapore, on the other hand, is a small ‘‘city-state’’ with a population of only a few million. In the past thirty years, Singapore has become a financial and business hub in the global economy and relatively wealthy in comparison to its immediate neighbors. Thailand and Indonesia are usually described as ‘‘developing’’ economies; based on their role as production and manufacturing sites in the global economy.

The university students who are our subjects are thus operating in quite different national, religious, ethnic, political, economic and linguistic contexts. In these contexts, cultural concepts about countries undoubtedly develop through exposure to a wide variety of discursive fields mediated by school textbooks, newspapers, television, and the like (cf. Kong, 1988). Thai secondary school textbooks we have examined, for example, place a great emphasis on national cultural characteristics, particularly of Thailand but also of other countries. They also have some of the most elaborate references to other Southeast Asian countries amongst national curricula found in the region. Singaporean textbooks, by contrast, place much greater emphasis on the imperatives of economic development and contain much less material on Southeast Asian countries beyond Singapore and Malaysia (Thompson, 2006:200–201). These differences in content, as we will see, correspond to results that emerge in our empirical investigation of students’ perceptions; although a detailed analysis of these media is beyond the scope of what we can accomplish in this article (see Chulanee & Thompson, in press; Thompson, 2006).

At the same time, preliminary research showed that Indonesian, Singaporean and Thai students shared a largely similar domain of ‘‘countries’’ (Thompson & Zhang, 2006). Not only did the term ‘‘countries’’ or its equivalent conjure up a similar set of terms signifying ‘‘nation-states,’’ the salience of particular nation-states was generally highly correlated across Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand. While some differences do exist, such as a higher cognizance of

"Mainland" Southeast Asia for Thai students (i.e. Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam), among students at all three universities the domain is dominated by Southeast Asian, Other Asian and Western countries. Countries in Latin America and the Middle East are significantly less salient, while Africa is practically *terra incognita.*

Given that the students from all three nations have a fairly similar cognizance of the domain, in this paper we are examining their perception of the relationship among countries within the domain. We argue that those relationships are based on cultural concepts, identifiable in terms of words and conceptual schemata, some of which are shared by the students from the three nations and some of which are unique to students in particular nations. In the following sections, we discuss the key findings from the research bearing on these two elements of cultural concepts – descriptive words and conceptual schemata – through which our Indonesian, Singaporean and Thai respondents express and organize their understanding of "countries". We begin with the most significant elements in the descriptive repertoires used by students in each nation, then move to the broader organizing schemata.

Describing countries

We asked respondents in several different ways to describe countries using words and sentences. The results reported in this section are drawn primarily from a formal analysis of one of the tasks that we gave to respondents as a part of the judged similarity and difference questionnaires. All of the terms and trends we discuss are supported by a broader, less formal review of a much larger body of descriptive data collected in the course of pile-sorting interviews, focus groups and feedback seminars.

The most important descriptors for countries came in two types, iconic descriptors unique to particular countries – such as kangaroo for Australia or Eiffel Tower for France – and categorical descriptors used to describe multiple countries – such as "rich," "island(s)," or "Islam." We focus on the most common categorical descriptors. Overall, the responses give us a good sense of the descriptive repertoire that students in each of the three nations bring to bear in describing and thinking about countries. Given the vast array of terms involved, in this article we can only illustrate this repertoire by highlighting key words and phrases. We are especially interested in the ones that give us insights into how and why the domain is configured differently – in other words, the cultural differences – across the three nations.

Thai and Indonesian ethnological and regional concepts

Among Thai descriptive words for countries, one uniquely Thai term stood out: *khaek*. The term "*khaek*" literally means "visitor" in Thai, but is commonly used as a racial-cum-religious descriptor encompassing "Muslims" but also persons who phenotypically appear "dark", Arab, South Asian or Malay. Historically, Thailand (and its precursors, Siam and Ayuthaya) was host to trade flowing from two major directions – with Chinese from the north and east and with traders from the south and west, who became collectively referred to as "*khaek*" (Dirake, 2002; Glowing, 1975; Julispong, 2003; Nadnaphit, 1986).

Khaek was among the most common terms used by Thai students and applied to Saudi Arabia, India, Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Brazil (the last only once). For the Thai students, "*khaek*" is a major cultural category for differentiating among Asian countries. Saudi Arabia and India are the most typically "*khaek*" countries followed by Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia. The Philippines is *khaek* only with respect to being "Malay," not Muslim. Brazil

would not normally be considered *khaek*, except in so far as the term implies a population with darker skin tone than is common in Thailand.

Indonesian language (like English) does not have any convenient general term to describe the ''*khaek*'' countries. But Indonesian respondents did use the term ''*sipit*'' with great frequency. *Sipit* refers to the phenotypic feature of having ''narrow eyes'' (*mata sipit*) and is commonly used to describe ethnic Chinese within Indonesia. Projected onto the domain of countries, Indonesian students overwhelmingly used *sipit* to describe China, but also (with decreasing frequency) Vietnam, Japan, Singapore, Cambodia, Myanmar, and once each for Laos and the Philippines.

Khaek and *sipit* are both derogatory expressions. In Indonesia, *sipit* connotes Chinese–Indonesians as strangers and foreigners and is frequently associated with negative portrayals of Chinese as money-minded and antisocial (cf. Coppel, 2003; Suparlan, 2003; Suryadinata, 2002). Similarly, *khaek* implies a set of negative associations – dark, foreign, Muslim (non-Buddhist), stingy – and the term is rejected by Thai-Muslims of Southern Thailand as well as by official Thai government discourse (cf. Dirake, 2002; Glowing, 1975).[3] In the case of Singapore, socioeconomic and ethno-religious terms (*developing, backwards, Muslim*) play a prominent role in their descriptions. All of these are indicative of a cultural ''othering'' (Hagen, 2003; Neumann, 1999; Said, 1979; Young & Light, 2001).

But terms of affinity are prevalent as well. Indonesian students used the term ''*Melayu*'' (Malay) at least once as a descriptor for every ASEAN country except for Cambodia and Vietnam. Indonesian respondents overwhelming used ''*Melayu*'' to describe Malaysia. They also used *Melayu* frequently for Brunei, occasionally for Indonesia and Myanmar and once each for Laos, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Singaporeans used the English equivalent (Malay) very frequently to describe Malaysia, a few times for Indonesia, and only once or twice for Myanmar, Laos, and Brunei. In general, as a term for thinking about countries within Southeast Asia, Malay or *Melayu* was of great significance to Indonesians, less significance to Singaporeans, and in Thailand it was subsumed within the larger category of *khaek*.

Khaek, *sipit*, and *Melayu* are all highly generalizable terms applied descriptively to a range of countries across Asia (and in several cases apparently ''misapplied''). Each one is tied to the historical and cultural circumstances of the national language in which it is used. For *khaek*, it is a history of international trade in which the diversity of peoples to Thailand's south and west were agglomerated under a single conceptual term. The currency of *sipit* derives from its application to ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, which then gets projected onto not only China but other countries that have large Chinese populations or are seen as being ''like Chinese'' in appearance and behavior. *Melayu* developed, most likely, as an ethnonym for peoples of the powerful Srivijayan polity of seventh to fourteenth centuries C.E. based at a location with the same name (Jambi-Melayu), and subsequently applied in a general way to people of the ''Malay archipelago'' (cf. Barnard, 2004; Marzali, 1995). Its application to Laos, by respondents in both Indonesia and Singapore remains something of a mystery. Our best guess is that in both places Laos is the least known of all Southeast Asian ASEAN nation-states and for the most part known *only* known as a member of ASEAN. Since *Melayu* is a regional ethnonym, applying ''*Melayu*'' to describe Laos logically (if mistakenly) follows.

[3] The language for describing the Muslim inhabitants of southern Thailand is highly politicized. In the eyes of the Thai state they are ''Thai-Muslims,'' with emphasis on *Thai*. Many ''Thai-Muslims'' see themselves as ''Malay'' or ''Malay-Muslims'' and only secondarily as ''Thai'' citizens. But both strongly discourage use of the popular Thai term ''*khaek*.''

In addition to these ethnonyms, several other descriptors, such as "*kumlung phadthanaa*" (developing; in Thailand) and "*beras*" (rice; in Indonesia) were associated primarily with some or all Southeast Asian countries as opposed to other countries in the domain. But none of these descriptive terms clearly stood out as uniquely characterizing the region. Similarly, while both Thai and Indonesian students used the term "ASEAN" to describe member states, they did not do so with great frequency. "Asia" was a much more common descriptive term, but still less frequently used by Indonesian and Thai respondents as opposed to Singaporeans.

Singaporean exceptionalism and regional identity

The more common application of the term "Asia" or "Asian" by Singaporeans was not necessarily indicative of a strong sense of common Asian identity. Rather it indicates the opposite. "Asian" (as well as "ASEAN") was applied most often in cases where very little else was known about a country. A variety of evidence, some of which we will review here, shows that Singaporean students displayed a relatively weak affinity for ASEAN and Asia (see also Thompson, 2006). Singaporean respondents descriptively associated their own country most closely with America, France, Japan, and Australia. The chief terms they used to describe their own country and these four were *clean*, *rich*, *developed*, *democracy*, *advanced, capitalist*. Conversely, Singaporeans used an array of contrastive terms associated primarily with Asian and Southeast Asian countries (other than Japan and Singapore): *poor*, *developing*, *backwards*, *large population*, *dirty*.

Both Thais and Indonesians described their own countries in terms most common with other Southeast Asian and Asian countries. Thai students described Thailand in most similar terms to Vietnam, the Philippines, India and Japan, with terms such as *Buddhist*, *Asia/Asian*, *culture*, *food*, *hot*, and *beautiful*. Indonesians listed the most shared descriptors with Malaysia, India, and Thailand. In this case, unlike Singapore and Thailand, the descriptive similarities with other countries did not overlap to a large degree. Rather, Indonesia shared *Islam*, *Malay*, and *friendly* with Malaysia; *poor* and *over-populated* with India; and *traffic jams* and *beautiful* with Thailand.

Given the very wide variety of terms used to describe and think about countries, how can we determine which are really significant in the minds of our respondents? We have indicated, for example, that terms like "*khaek*" may be important to the way Thai students think about Asia. But Thais used "island(s)" more frequently than *khaek* to describe countries. Would mere frequency indicate that similarity of "island" countries like Japan, Indonesia and the Philippines in contrast to "non-island" such countries as China, Laos, and Cambodia are more significant than differences between *khaek* and non-*khaek* countries? Similarly, how are we to evaluate how Singaporean students see their own country in relationship to ASEAN neighbors and Asia in general? Does their sense of living in a "clean, rich, and developed" country overwhelm any sense of commonality with other countries of Asia and ASEAN?

Schemata for making sense of the world

As the hundreds of descriptive terms supplied by our respondents demonstrate, countries are complex entities and can be thought about in complex ways. Anthropologists and linguists have long recognized that human beings utilize schemata to guide and organize our knowledge of large and complex domains (D'Andrade, 1995; Spradley, 1979). We may know a great deal about some members of a domain – for instance here, students undoubtedly know much more about their own country than most other countries. But, baring extensive domain

expertise, we use general principles (i.e. schemata) to understand most elements of the domain, and to place them in meaningful relationship to one another.

Hypothetically, many different schemata could be applied to countries. In an analysis of Brazilian world sketch maps, Pinheiro analyzed a laundry list of variables from country area in square kilometers to football world cup participation, many of which were found to have significant correlations with the appearance of particular countries on the maps (Pinheiro, 1998:331). Myron Wish and colleagues showed that "political alignment", "economic development", "geography and population" and "culture and race" were the main schemata used in the late 1960s by international students at Columbia University in the United States to evaluate relationships among countries (Wish, Deutsch, & Biener, 1972). Like Wish's study, our approach highlights a relatively small set of schemata that dominate thinking about the relationship among countries internationally for our respondents; and we show that the schemata vary between respondents from Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand.

Two general types of schemata were most important in our respondents' perceptions of the relationships among countries. We call these two general types historical-cultural and economic-developmental. Evidence for a very wide variety of other factors, such as politics, size, travel (e.g. desirable tourist destinations) and physical geography (e.g. "island" countries) is found in the data. But these factors are dwarfed by the dominant historical-cultural and economic-developmental schemata. Students, for instance, may note that particular countries are democracies or dictatorships, but they do not give very much weight to this when asked to judged similarities and differences among countries.

Historical-cultural schemata are much more complex than economic-developmental schemata. The latter come down to two primary, and distinct, things: the perceived wealth of a country and the sense of a country being industrially "developed." Data from the Philippines (which space does not allow us to discuss in detail here) show that, like Singaporean students, Filipino students emphasize an economic-development schema, especially with respect to the relationship of countries within ASEAN. The Filipino schema differs from the Singaporean schema in that the former emphasizes rich vs. poor countries, while the later emphasizes industrialized development.

While economic-developmental schemata are culturally variable, historical-cultural schemata exhibit much more culturally sensitive variation and diversity across the groups of respondents from different Southeast Asian universities. The schemata that appear in our analysis (characterized in general terms) include: Asian vs. Western; Northeast Asia vs. Southeast Asian; Southeast Asian vs. Other Asian; Northeast Asian vs. Southwest Asian; Mainland vs. Maritime Southeast Asia; One Country vs. All Others (uniqueness of a particular country); Muslim vs. non-Muslim; Malay vs. non-Malay. While many of these are written here in broadly regional geographic terms (e.g. "Northeast Asian"), the evidence we collected shows that they are conceptualized primarily based on sense of historical, cultural, and ethnological similarities among the countries, with geographic proximity playing only a minor role. The schemata and their varying significance among each group of respondents are derived inferentially by mapping normative cognitive patterns based on the questionnaire data and secondarily the pile-sorting interviews.

Cognitive cartography: mapping and methods

We use the term "cognitive maps" as shorthand for the visual representations found in Figs. 1–9. These "maps" are based on responses to questionnaires that used a triad method

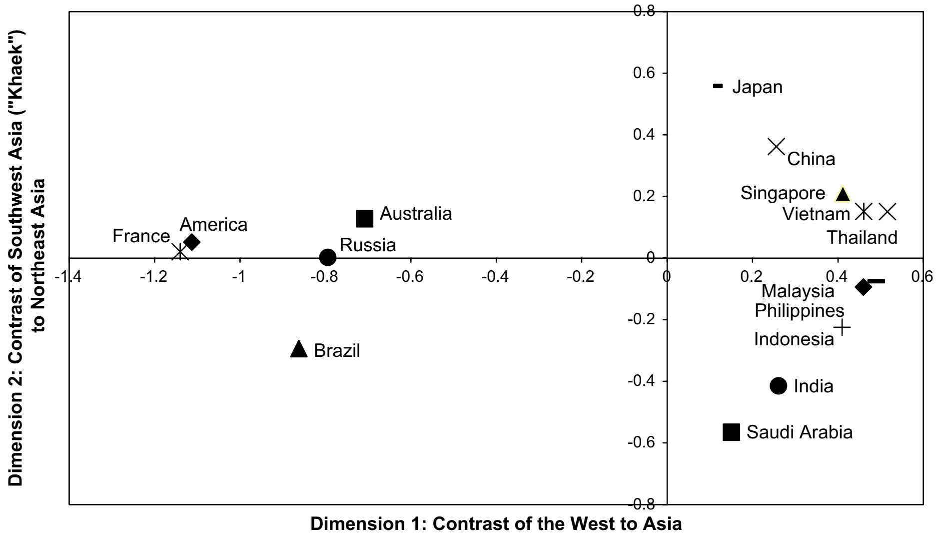

Fig. 1. Thai cognitive map of countries worldwide.

to elicit judgments of similarity and difference among countries. The triad method is a standard procedure for testing such judgments within a semantic domain (Weller & Romney, 1988). The respondents are given sets of three countries and asked to circle the country they consider to be most different from the other two, such as:

Indonesia Thailand Singapore

Responses to the questionnaires (with 60 or 105 sets of countries depending on the number of items being tested) produce a very large amount of data largely uninterpretable in raw form. Drawing on previous research in semantic domain analysis, we used correspondence analysis

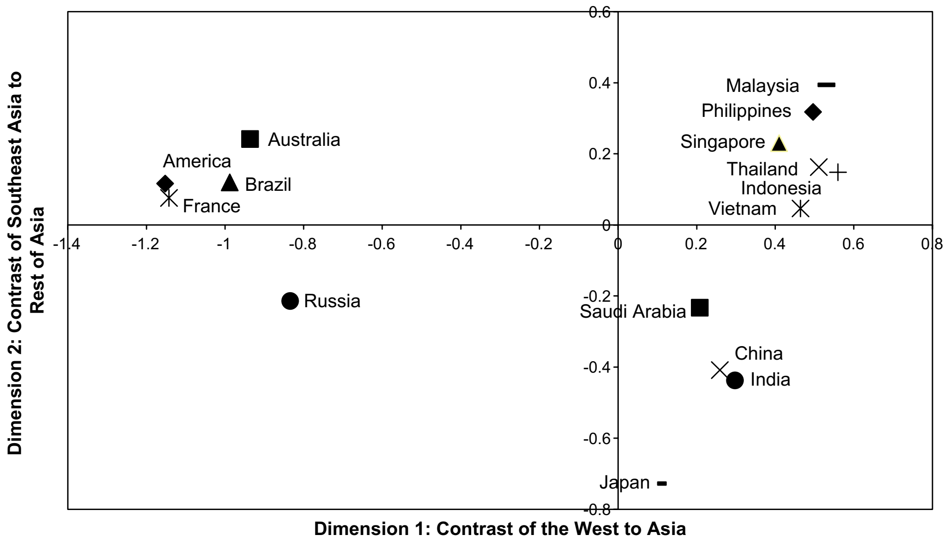

Fig. 2. Indonesia cognitive map of countries worldwide.

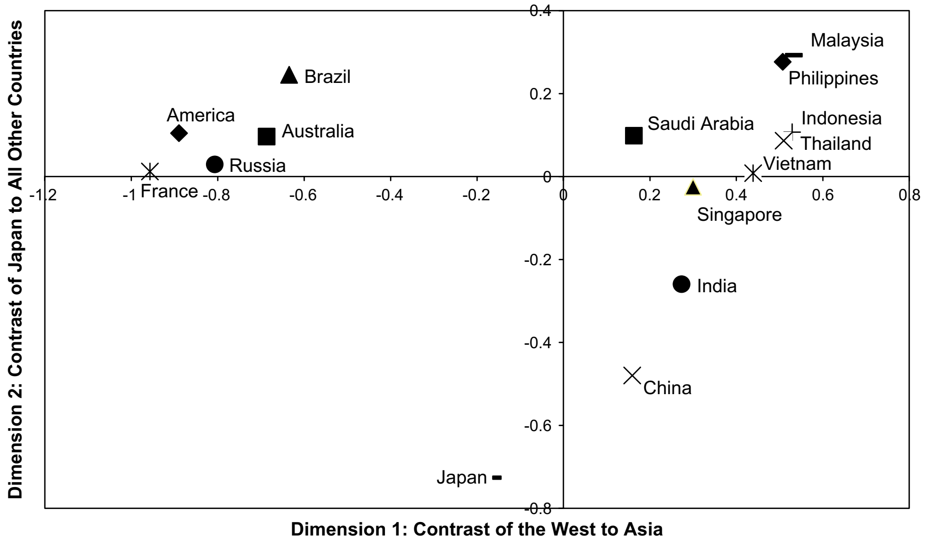

Fig. 3. Singapore cognitive map of countries worldwide.

(a form of factor analysis) and multidimensional scaling to produce the cognitive maps. The technical details of these methods are beyond the scope of this paper (see Kruskal & Wish, 1978; Moore et al., 1999; Romney et al., 1996; Romney, Moore, & Rusch, 1997; Weller & Romney, 1990). In simple terms, the procedures reduce the complexity of the data to a small number of significant "dimensions" (or "factors"). The assumption is that in any given set of data, there is an underlying structure or pattern that explains much of the data, which is the case with our data.

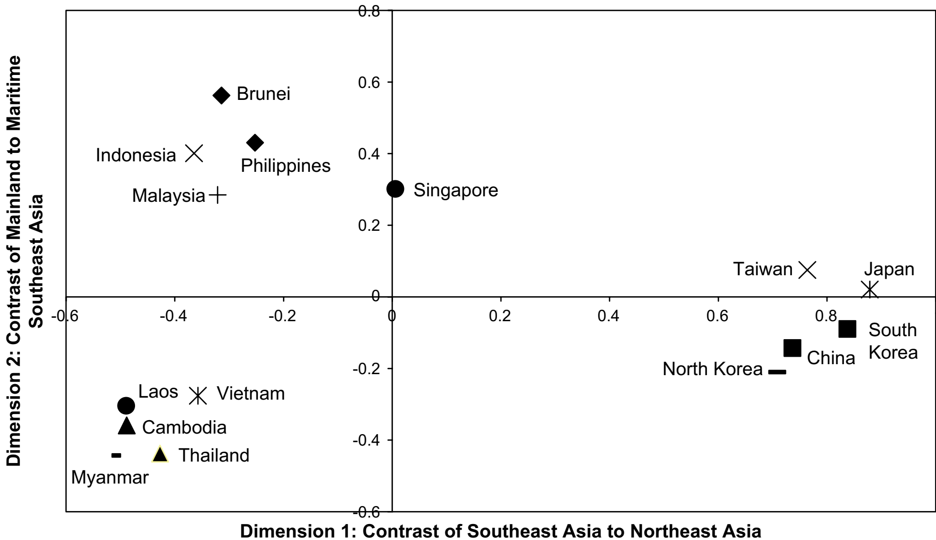

Fig. 4. Thai cognitive map of East Asia.

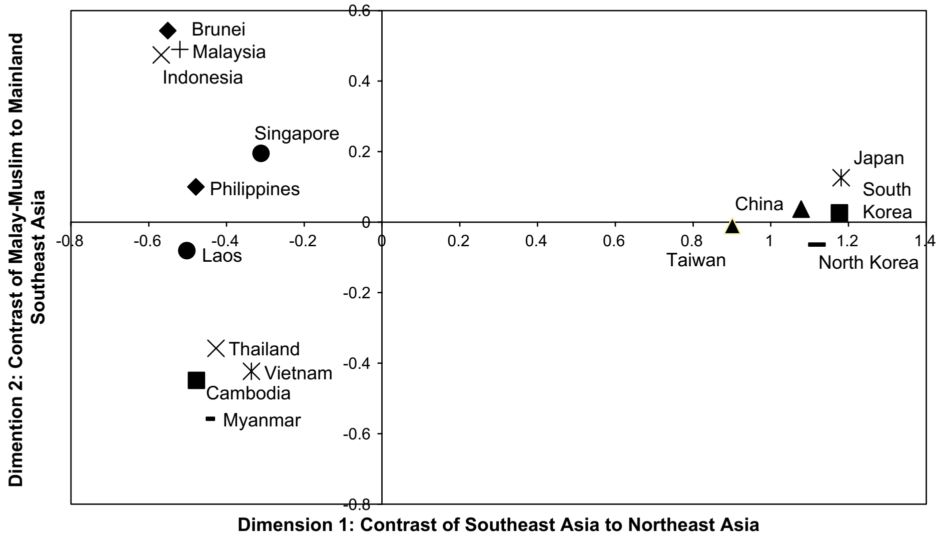

Fig. 5. Indonesia cognitive map of East Asia.

The first two dimensions explain 30–34% of the data in the first two dimensions for fifteen items and 40–45% for ten items. These are the dimensions shown in the figures in this paper. The first two or three dimensions do not explain everything – minor schemata, idiosyncrasies, errors and the like are accounted for in "higher" dimensions. But the lowest dimensions reveal dominant patterns. Each country has a score in each dimension. The mapped location of each country is based on those scores, plotted on an XY axis. A third dimension often has substantial explanatory power as well. Space does not allow us to display that dimension. Where appropriate, we discuss the third dimension of the data in the text.

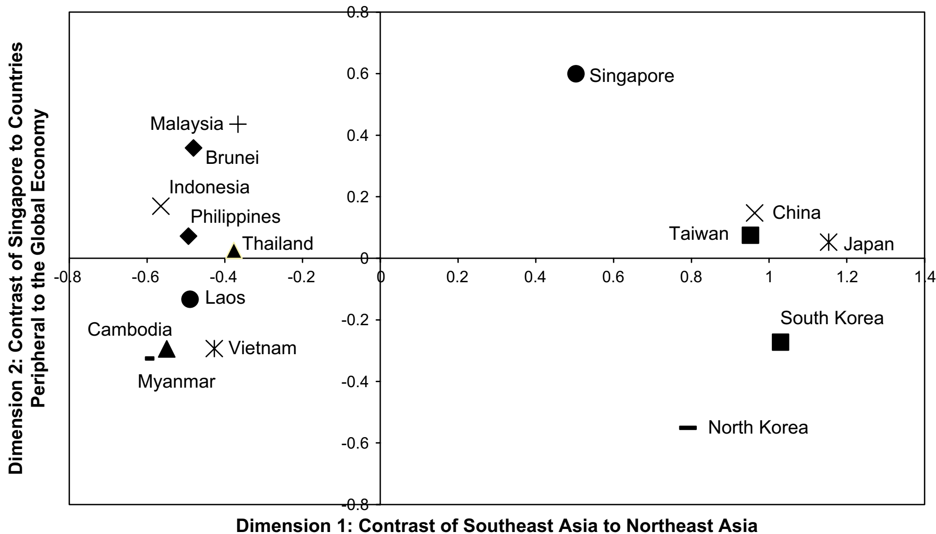

Fig. 6. Singapore cognitive map of East Asia.

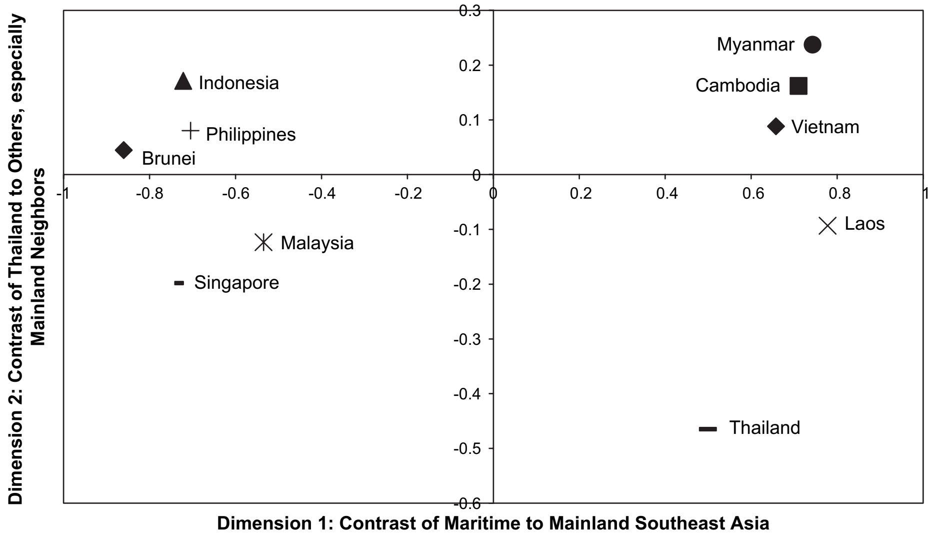

Fig. 7. Thai cognitive map of Southeast Asia.

What do these dimensions represent? Because our data is based on judged similarities and differences, the structure of the data is an effect of the *evaluative criteria* upon which respondents are making these judgments. The maps illustrate, in succinct form, the dominant cultural schemata being used by our respondents and the specific position of each country in relationship to other countries based on those schemata. The primary (first, second and third) dimensions of our findings result from large numbers of respondents using essentially the same evaluative criteria. In other words, they represent normative, culturally shared judgments about the relationship among the countries. The maps allow us to interpret the data by visual inspection — the closer countries

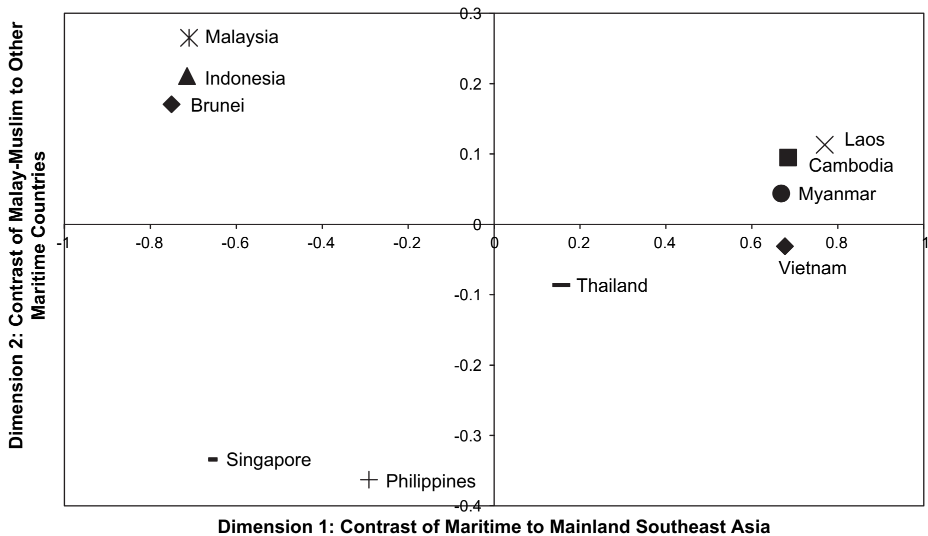

Fig. 8. Indonesia cognitive map of Southeast Asia.

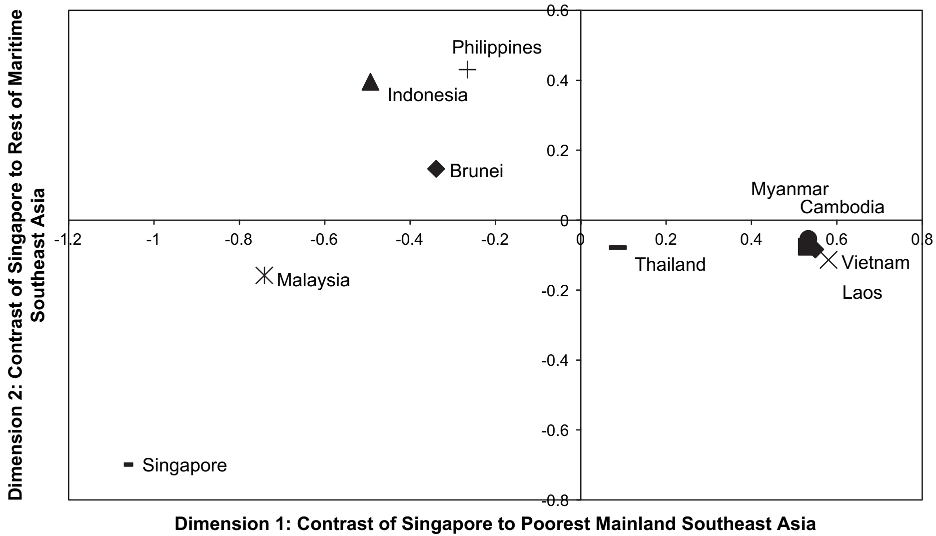

Fig. 9. Singapore cognitive map of Southeast Asia.

appear to one another, the more similar they are judged to be; the farther apart the more different. The distribution of countries along a particular dimension allows us to infer the schema involved in its production. We interpret and label these dimensions based on the qualitative, descriptive data collected from cohorts of students who produced the "maps."

The techniques limit us to a maximum of about 15 terms for any single test. We used three separate questionnaires to get responses to a domain of countries "World Wide" (Indonesia $n = 76$; Singapore $n = 62$; Thailand $n = 60$), East Asian countries (Indonesia $n = 71$; Singapore $n = 82$; Thailand $n = 68$), and Southeast Asian countries (Indonesia $n = 75$; Singapore $n = 68$; Thailand $n = 61$). The samples were gender-balanced and where possible collected from across different faculties (although, analysis of the results show that students' discipline of study has no discernable influence on their responses; while the effects of gender are negligible). The countries in the "World Wide" domain were strategically chosen from among the countries most salient to students based on the prior free-listing exercise. The Southeast Asia domain contains the ten ASEAN member states. The East Asia domain contains the ten ASEAN countries plus the five most salient countries of Northeast Asia: China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, and Taiwan (the free-listing results clearly indicate that students in Southeast Asia think of Taiwan conceptually as a "country").

In terms of sample size, in most cases thirty or more respondents will produce stable results, i.e. representing a normatively shared map not significantly influenced by individually idiosyncratic answers (Romney, Weller, & Batchelder, 1986:325–327). Our interpretation and discussion of the cognitive maps also draws on results of pile-sorting interviews conducted at all three universities (Indonesia $n = 83$; Singapore $n = 72$; Thailand $n = 80$). The pile-sorting technique provides an independent method for testing respondents' organization of the domain. In the pile-sorting exercise, respondents were given a set of twenty-four cards, each with the name of a country, and ask to sort the cards into piles of countries similar to each other. After they had sorted the countries, we asked them to describe each pile and why they had chosen to organize the countries in the ways that they did, along with a number of follow-up questions. These interviews provided

us with both quantitative (based on number of times countries were grouped together) and qualitative data (descriptions). Space does not allow us to report these results in detail, but they largely support the findings that follow (see Chulanee and Thompson, in press; Thompson, 2006).

Our point is to illustrate normative cultural differences between samples of respondents from the three different universities, not make a claim based on random sampling and statistical probability that the results in each case can be generalized to all Indonesians, Singaporeans or Thais. By logical inference (rather than statistical inference) the evidence strongly suggests that the normative view of the world derived from each set of responses is powerfully shaped by national frames of reference, with implications beyond the student respondents to whom we had access (cf. Handwerker & Wozniak, 1997). We will return to discuss these implications in the conclusion.

Cognitive maps of the World, East Asia, and Southeast Asia

In the normative opinion of every group of respondents we studied in Southeast Asia, the most significant difference among countries world wide is between Asian and Western countries, reflected in the first dimension of every ‘‘World Wide’’ cognitive map (Figs. 1–3). In pile-sorting exercises only a small minority of groupings contained both Asian and Western countries. Although all our groups of respondents agree on a substantial difference between Asia and the West, the difference is weakest among Singaporean students. Thai and Indonesian students judged all Asian countries to be remarkably similar in contrast to ‘‘Western’’ countries, indicated by the relatively ‘‘flat’’ distribution along the horizontal axis of the cognitive maps (Figs. 1 and 2). Similarly, in pile-sorting interviews, Thai and Indonesian students less frequently grouped Western and Asian countries together (11.9% of piles in Thailand; 13.6% in Indonesia; 17.4% in Singapore). In all cases, including Singapore, the countries of Southeast Asia are the ‘‘most Asian’’ in contrast to the most Western countries (America and France).

Once the difference between the West and Asia has been accounted for (i.e. in the first dimension), the next major differentiation made is among Asian countries. The Thai responses generated a difference between Northeast Asia (Japan and China) and Southwest Asia (Saudi Arabia and India) in the second dimension, with the ASEAN countries clustered in between (Fig. 1). Indonesian responses generated a contrast between Southeast Asia and the rest of Asia (Fig. 2). Importantly, the second dimension of the Thai data is closely replicated in the third dimension of the Indonesian data. Likewise, the second dimension of the Indonesian cognitive map is closely replicated in the third dimension of the results from Thailand. The conclusion is that the Thai and Indonesian perceptions of the relationship among countries at this World Wide scale are remarkably similar, with only small – but not entirely insignificant – differences. The Indonesian students placed somewhat greater emphasis on Southeast Asia as a cohesive region, in contrast to the rest of Asia. Thai students, to use the Thai terminology discussed above, placed greater emphasis on the distinction between ‘‘*khaek*’’ and ‘‘*non-khaek*’’ countries within Asia. The gap between Vietnam/Thailand and Malaysia/Philippines in dimension two of Fig. 1 marks this difference – all the countries below this dividing line (including, incidentally, Brazil) were described at one point or another in our research as ‘‘*khaek*’’; while none of the countries above the line were.

In the Indonesian results, the countries are aligned along this dimension in exactly the same order, however, a gap occurs between Vietnam and Thailand rather than between Thailand and

Malaysia. In Indonesia, the countries most often referred to as "*sipit*" (China, Japan, Singapore and Vietnam) are differentiated from the rest of Asia. The results illustrate, through the unusually unique cultural concepts of "*khaek*" and "*sipit*", the influence that cultural constructs of identity (in this case, identity of others) play in organizing this domain.

The results from Singapore produce a noticeably different cognitive map (Fig. 3). The locations of Japan and Saudi Arabia are especially noteworthy. Japan is in a much more intermediate position between Asia and the West. Overall, the countries of Asia are more "spread out" along the horizontal axis, demonstrating a weaker sense that they are all similar in contrast to the West. The apparent inclusion of Saudi Arabia among Southeast Asian countries in the second dimension of contrast demonstrates a simultaneous distancing of Singapore from the region (or at least lack of Southeast Asian regionalism as an overwhelmingly significant criteria) and the significance of *Muslim/Islam* as a criterion of association for Singaporeans. The effect of Singaporean self-consciousness as a small "Chinese" island surrounded by large "Muslim" neighbors (i.e. Indonesia and Malaysia) is evident here. Saudi Arabia, as a Muslim country, is associated with the "Muslim" region of Southeast Asia.

East Asia

The similarity of Thai and Indonesian perceptions and distinctiveness of the Singaporean results is reiterated in the cognitive maps of East Asia (Figs. 4–6). In all cases, the primary dimension of difference is between Southeast Asian and Northeast Asian countries. But for Singaporean students, their own country is located conceptually closer to Northeast Asia, taken as a whole, than to Southeast Asia (Fig. 6). For Thai respondents, the second dimension of difference among countries at this scale is between Mainland and Maritime Southeast Asia. Among Maritime countries, Singapore is somewhat distinct (and more "Northeast Asian"), but no particularly discernable pattern is obtained among the others. The Mainland countries are relatively closely clustered together, with Thailand solidly within the cluster. Vietnam, the only country in this group that does not directly border Thailand, is positioned slightly apart from the others. Notably, in all cases – in Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand – Vietnam is never considered remarkably "Northeast Asian" (with the slight exception of its classificatory depiction as relatively "*sipit*" mentioned previously). Scholars and historians have often debated whether Vietnam is more characteristic of a "Southeast Asian" or (north) "East Asian" polity. Among our respondents it is overwhelmingly considered part of Southeast Asia.

Indonesian students produce a close clustering of the three predominantly "Malay-Muslim" countries within Southeast Asia (i.e. Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia). These are contrasted primarily to the countries of Mainland Southeast Asia, but the Mainland/Maritime difference is not so distinctive as in the results from Thailand. Singapore, the Philippines and Laos all seem to float ambiguously in between. In the case of the first two, they are recognized as Maritime Southeast Asian neighbors, distinctive from Mainland Southeast Asia but lacking a Malay-Muslim majority. As for Laos, its position does not have an obvious interpretation, but would seem to relate to the relative lack of knowledge of the country among Indonesian respondents. Of all countries in Southeast Asia, Indonesians indicated that they knew the least about Laos, and in a sense "don't know where to put it".

Singaporean respondents produce even less distinction between Mainland and Maritime Southeast Asia, so much so that a wholly different interpretation is warranted. In the

Singaporean cognitive map of East Asia, the second dimension does not primarily contrast ASEAN countries, but rather Singapore and North Korea. By inference from the other countries and their locations – Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos in the direction of North Korea; Malaysia, Brunei, and others in the direction of Singapore – the contrast is between countries that are wealthy and integrated into the global capitalist economy and those that are not. South Korea is something of an anomaly in this regard, for the obvious reason of its inevitably close association with North Korea.

Southeast Asia

The differences among Indonesian, Singaporean and Thai respondents are equally clear in the cognitive maps of ASEAN countries, though several commonalities are apparent. All three groups of respondents make a common distinction between Mainland and Maritime Southeast Asia, which is sharpest among Thai respondents and weakest amongst Singaporeans. All three cluster Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam together and hold Thailand to be somewhat distinctive amongst Mainland countries. But every group has a different way of configuring the Maritime countries, based on different cognitive schemata.

The view of Southeast Asia produced by Thai students reveals a deep ambivalence about Thailand's place within Mainland Southeast Asia (Fig. 7). On the one hand (the first dimension), Thailand is judged to be very much like its Mainland neighbors, in contrast to Maritime countries. On the other hand (the second dimension), Thai students indicate a substantial distancing of Thailand from the rest of Mainland Southeast Asia. The first dimension reflects a sense of historical-cultural similarities among Mainland countries. The second dimension reveals the difference between Thailand and its neighbors which in most respects is economic-developmental. The moderate association of Singapore and Malaysia in the direction of Thailand in this dimension reinforces this interpretation.

Indonesian responses, by contrast, reiterate the importance of historical-cultural association among the Malay-Muslim countries of the region (Fig. 8). Here and in the Singaporean map of Southeast Asia, Thailand floats in between the Mainland and Maritime Countries, not convincingly associated with either. Singapore and the Philippines are also associated, in a sense by default, as not Mainland and not Malay-Muslim countries.

In the Singaporean cognitive map of ASEAN (Fig. 9), although the first dimension can be divided between Maritime and Mainland Southeast Asia, the overall impression is a distinction between Singapore and the rest of Southeast Asia – first, between Singapore and the least developed countries of the Mainland and second, between Singapore and the less-developed countries of Maritime Southeast Asia. The position of Brunei is especially instructive here. Based on per capita GDP and similar measures, Brunei is far more similar to Singapore than any other country in ASEAN. While Singaporean students recognize Brunei's wealth, they do not regard it as a "developed" country, based on their descriptions.

Conclusion

We conclude with reflections on two broad issues to which our findings have relevance; the status of culture in social theory and implications for ASEAN regionalism. Since the 1980s, with a vigorous critique of overly reified and static concepts of culture coming largely from anthropology (e.g. Abu-Lughod, 1991; Marcus & Fischer, 1986), it has become fashionable to argue that "there's no such thing as culture" (Mitchell, 1995; cf. Duncan & Duncan,

2004; Castree, 2004). The approach of this paper has taken culture to mean learned and shared knowledge, which is a standard cognitive anthropological definition of the term (D'Andrade, 1995). Contemporary critiques of the culture concept object to the in-group homogenizing, between-group othering, essentializing, and de-historicizing implications of theories of culture developed in the twentieth century. As productive as these criticisms have been, they have also generated two spurious initiatives: to "replace" culture with an alternative concept (such as discourse and ideology) and to obscure constructive advances in our understanding of how knowledge is learned and shared.

Discourse, power, and ideology are of course important aspects of cultural systems (i.e. systems of knowledge). But so are descriptive repertoires, normative cultural schemata, and the meanings they convey. These are not static over time, innate, or simplistically determinative of individual's thoughts or actions. But at any given time they constitute the dominant ways of thinking about the world for a given community (be it local, national, regional, global or otherwise defined). In Singapore, for example, the dominant mode of international imagination is governed by economic-developmental concerns and in that context our Singaporean respondents registered ambivalence about Singapore's place in ASEAN and more broadly within Asia. Thai and Indonesian responses, by contrast, reveal the dominance of distinctive cultural–historical ways of thinking about relationships among countries.

The results show real cultural differences among students in Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand. These differences are normative (in a statistical sense), not absolute, and not homogenous; there is plenty of difference among respondents in each place. But they are nevertheless "real". These cultural differences – in the form of words and schemata – are of course effects of discourses and ideologies (i.e. politically motivated framing of knowledge). As we suggested earlier, these ideas are produced and reproduced in such discursive fields as national school curricula, mass media, political rhetoric and the like. The evidence we have presented here demonstrates primarily "what" our respondents think about the world, further research into media and discourse will help to elucidate the sources of these ideas.

At the same time, descriptive repertoires and cultural schema form a basis for ongoing discursive engagements and ideological struggles, both of which draw on shared words and schemata to be effective. The preeminence of economic and developmental arguments in trumping all others in Singapore is well documented (Kong, 2000; Wong & Bunnell, 2006). Similarly, anyone familiar with Indonesia or Thailand would not find surprising the significance of "cultural" and ethnological principles for thinking about the world. We have shown that the university students we studied draw on these ideas of economics, development, cultures and peoples and project them onto an international domain of countries. As cultural agents in their own right, as they graduate into full adulthood and at least for some, enter into business, politics, journalism, or other fields, today's students will draw on these learned schema for tomorrow's actions.

The university students are not meant to be taken as (statistically) representatives of Indonesians, Singaporeans or Thais as a whole, but their views are important in two ways. First, they do represent a segment of the next generation of each nations' middle-class professionals and entrepreneurs. Second, they are the products of national education systems and media environments of the past two decades, and as such their views undoubtedly reflect these broader national-level influences, not just an atypical perspective of university students. These views are significant for how people in Southeast Asia perceive the region and its implications for regional cooperation and integration. It has become commonplace to treat Southeast Asia

somewhat dismissively as an artificial region, best considered as a mere heuristic device and product of academic discourse and extra-regional Cold War politics (Bunnell, Kong, & Law, 2005:135; Glassman, 2005; van Schendel, 2002). But as Amitav Acharya has illustrated, leaders within Southeast Asia have been active and relatively autonomous agents in pursuing the development of intra-regional ties and an important part of Southeast Asia's regional development has been a "quest for identity" (Acharya, 2000). This pursuit is at least in part cultural in nature and relevant to the thought worlds of people throughout the region, not just academics, diplomats and politicians.

Our results show that respondents across all three countries recognize the ASEAN countries as constituting a distinctive region; although Singaporeans do not necessarily see their own country as included in that region (see also Thompson, 2006). A sense of Singaporean exceptionalism – as a small island, a city-state among nation-states, a mostly "Chinese" enclave in a Malay-Muslim and Southeast Asian region, a wealthy and developed country in a poor, developing neighborhood – are reflected in the predominantly distancing criteria that produce the unique Singaporean map (cf. Kwa, 2002; Low, 2002; Zubaidah, 1999). The cognitive maps of Thai and Indonesian students place their own countries unambiguously within ASEAN, while at the same time configuring the relationship among countries of the region very differently (see also Chulanee and Thompson, in press). These cultural differences in thinking about the world are not an unbridgeable gulf. We may take for granted that throughout Southeast Asia, as our data reflect, people have a very similar domain of "countries" and ideas of what a country is as a territorially defined nation-state. This was not the case, for example, when European colonial powers and the court of Siam set out to negotiate their cultural and political differences in the nineteenth century (Thongchai, 1994). Most citizens of Southeast Asian nations share a general understanding of geopolitics in terms of "countries" and that general understanding provides a basis for developing regional relationships, within the ASEAN context for example, across nation-state borders. But a shared concept of countries does not erase all cultural difference. We have taken one step here toward mapping and understanding those differences.

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