Disciplining Southeast Asian Studies

I’d like to begin by quoting Ashley Thompson in her review of Sheldon Pollock’s *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*. She notes, as an aside, that “The existential question—[What] is Southeast Asia?—has been constitutive of and essentially coterminous with the field of Southeast Asian Studies since its emergence after World War II.” This is a wonderfully straightforward way of summarizing the fundamental anxiety of Southeast Asian studies, that we cannot quite defend our own existence as an area.

This evening I want to address another existential question for our field: what is it that we do when we study Southeast Asia, when we append the word “studies” to our contested area? When I teach undergraduates about Southeast Asia, we spend a lot of time exploring the notion of Southeast Asia and using it to expose the way that global politics and academic imperatives have constructed our conception of the world. But among graduate students, and scholars more generally, the more urgent question has always been disciplinary and methodological. Our question is not “what is Southeast Asia,” but rather “how do we study it?” It is almost as if we have made a separate peace with our contested region while we struggle to define its status as a field or discipline.

Drawing on that thought, I aim to make two points, and one plea, all in the service of thinking through this year’s theme of “Southeast Asia in the Disciplines.” The first point is fairly obvious: that our disciplines determine how we approach Southeast Asia as a field of study. But a subsidiary message is not so obvious. That is, that the disciplines themselves are not monolithic, also defined internally by their own existential debates. We do ourselves a disservice when we essentialize the disciplines of history, or regional science, or any other field that might encounter, as being immutable things with singular features. Disciplines don’t have just have disciples, they have heretics too.
My second point is to turn around the way that most of us think about this year’s theme, and to talk about Southeast Asia’s place in our disciplines, rather than the place of discipline in Southeast Asian studies. I will draw in part on my own perspectives as a political scientist to describe some recent changes in my discipline that may have gone unnoticed by other Southeast Asianists. This is important because I suspect that much of anxiety associated with the “studies” in Southeast Asian studies is not really about the clash between area and discipline, but the tensions between disciplines, or within disciplines, that emerge when we interact in the area.

My plea is to embrace the tensions within disciplines, between discipline and area, and across disciplines in the area, as functional for our joint endeavor Southeast Asian studies. I mean this seriously. It is only through the self-conscious reflection on what it is that we think that we do when we study Southeast Asia that we can make sense of our place within it. The disciplines are the place to do that, for the simple reason that the disciplines are where we have thought most rigorously about what it means to contribute to knowledge more generally. This is, then, not your standard plea for interdisciplinarity in area studies, or the oft-repeated complaint that we are a field rather than a discipline and that is something to be lamented. Whatever the benefits of crossing disciplinary borders in the service of contributing to knowledge about Southeast Asia, and I take it as self-evidently true and incontestable that there are huge benefits to such cross-disciplinary engagement, I want to mount here a provisional defense of disciplinarity in Southeast Asian studies.

Disciplines in the History of Southeast Asian Studies

Let’s begin by talking a bit about the disciplinary foundations of Southeast Asian studies. Here at Cornell the backbone of the Southeast Asia program has always been an interdisciplinary enterprise, what Duncan McCargo and probably several other have called the “Cornell school” of
Southeast Asian studies. It is a neat model, and many of the greats of Cornell Southeast Asian Studies were known to find their greatest intellectual stimulation when interacting in the Southeast Asia Program than with their colleagues in the home departments. This model is far from unique, it has analogues at Kyoto, and perhaps Leiden and NUS.

But not here, not anymore. The Cornell school does not exist in the way that it once did. We have here at the Southeast Asia Program an interdisciplinary group, with historians, anthropologists, linguists, political scientists, sociologists, regional scientists, scholars of religion, music, art, culture, and others. We even—at least officially—have economists too, although I have never met them. But the legendary model of truly interdisciplinary Southeast Asian studies at Cornell, described in reverent tones by my old anthropology professor Pat Symonds, is not one I’ve ever encountered. This is not to say that we are enemies—I count my colleagues in the Southeast Asia program as both friends and collaborators—but we aren’t all doing the same thing. I’m not sure if that ever was true, but it isn’t now.

Instead, each of us is animated by both area and discipline. Anthropologists have a particular set of theoretical concerns. Musicologists and ethnomusicologists, and artists and art historians, are attuned to the expressive dimensions of the human experience in Southeast Asia. Political scientists like me are concerned with things like generalizability, conceptual theorizing, and cumulative research programs.

But you know what? I actually don’t know what animates the other disciplines, because the disciplinary walls are pretty tall. It was hard to come up with those last examples, except for the political science part. I think of these divides in terms of the Game of Thrones, which may be familiar to some of you, and specifically the Night’s Watch, which patrols a giant fortification called The Wall to defend the Seven Kingdoms a poorly understood threat that exists in the northern reaches beyond. Now I don’t know exactly what’s on the other side of The Wall, this
disciplinary boundary, probably some Wildlings who don’t accept the way that we do research, or the White Walkers who might storm across wielding weapons of intersubjectivity or general equilibrium. I just know that it’s different on the other side, and I like it down south where it’s warm and I feel secure. That defines me as a researcher—just like the Seven Kingdoms are defined as the stuff on Westeros that’s not on the other side of the Wall. And lest this be interpreted either as a critique of political science or a critique of other disciplines, what I describe is certainly symmetrical, paralleled in other disciplines as they look out beyond their disciplinary Walls to see the White Walkers of, say, rational choice theory amassing on their frontiers.

Here is what you know may not know, though. The discipline of political science is no more united than the Seven Kingdoms are, and any semblance of order is just as illusory. There are great fault lines within political science with tremendous implications for Southeast Asian studies. They are most apparent when we ask what our priorities ought to be as scholars of Southeast Asia who both care about the people who live there and wish to make contributions to knowledge. Should we concentrate on learning more about voting behavior in emerging democracies like Indonesia? Should we be conducting field experiments on governance in Thailand? Constructing detailed historical narratives of social movements or state forms in Malaysia or Burma? Broad sweeping historical comparisons across the region? Complaining about neoliberalism in Singapore? If you think that there is a singular political science answer to that question, you are mistaken.

Here’s my point: From the non-political scientist’s perspective, I know that we can seem like a homogeneous bunch. But when I sometimes hear Southeast Asianists muttering about political science and lumping rational choice theory together with behavioralism, I can’t help but
cringe. To me it’s absurd, no less absurd than saying that Chomsky and Saussure were both just linguists doing something complicated.

Other disciplines are no different. I’ll take two examples, anthropology and history. Anthropology has long struggled to delimit the precise role of science within its discipline. Many of you are no doubt familiar with the recent hullabaloo over the very use of the word “science” in the American Anthropological Association’s own description of what anthropology is. There are also deep controversies about the responsibilities of scholars in the field and the propriety of various practices that fall under the label of participant observation. Last decade’s simmering controversy over the Yanomamo is but one example. Among historians, there are sharp divides over the primacy of Western concerns over non-Western subjects, proper histories of great civilizations versus fragmentary histories of peripheries, global history (singular) versus local histories (plural), over subaltern studies and structuralism and psychoanalysis and countless other theoretical concerns. To quote a historian of Southeast Asia who will remain nameless, “history is too big and diverse to have a disciplinary center.” I could go on at length for anthropology or history, or broaden our discussion to other disciplines—what is ethnomusicology, and how is it different than musicology?—but I trust now that the essentially contested character of the disciplines is clear.

Here, then, is my first point. Our disciplines do discipline us, but that does not make us disciples. You probably do not know as much as you think you know when you learn someone’s disciplinary background. Neither do I. We’ll return to this later.

The Case of Southeast Asian Politics

The existence of diversity within disciplines motivates my second point, about how Southeast Asia fits into the disciplines. Let me talk for just a minute about how things look from
within political science, and describe some changes that have taken place in the past decade and a half, since I was where you are right now as a graduate student.

It’s easy to get the sense from an older generation of Southeast Asianists working in political science that truly engaged area studies was incompatible with disciplinary trends towards generalization, conceptualization, formalization, mathematization, and any other -ization that you might be able to think of. I won’t disagree with this: taken to the extreme, it is possible to view political science in a way that leaves no analytical room for local experience. The point here would not be just that politics in in Southeast Asia is too hard to study because Southeast Asians don’t speak English and they are far away, but that the region is interchangeable with any other part of the global South because we are not interested in the specifics of any one place. To quote Gary King, an immensely influential scholar in my field, “the professional goal of all scientists should be to attempt to demonstrate that context makes no difference whatsoever.” Once we capture all of the theoretical variables, Vietnamese peasants are no different than anyone else: their peasantness can be described independently of anything special about Southeast Asia, and their Vietnameseness is entirely incidental.

In practice, though, it’s never really been that way. After the post-Vietnam War hangover decades, during which it could be tricky to combine an interest in case materials from Southeast Asia with professional advancement, there has been a renaissance of regionally-focused comparative research. Why? Because of trends and debates within the political science discipline that have opened new doors.

And what are these? Here are some of the disciplinary turns that have favored Southeast Asian politics in the past fifteen years or so.

First, competitors to the awkwardly named thing called rational choice theory (which, incidentally, was never that hegemonic, and never really a thing either) are pushing back like
never before. Much of the pushback is behavioral in nature, and the research is still often quite technical, but the opening is there to show how different kinds of cultural, political, economic, or environmental contexts can moderate or overturn predictions that are drawn from highly stylized models of human decision-making. The point is not to show that rational choice theory is false—models don’t have the property of being true or false—but rather that we can extend or refine models in a way that makes better predictions about human decisionmaking, and allows variation across societies to emerge as a natural prediction rather than an aberration.

Second, the turn towards what political scientists like to call microfoundations, which really means trying (with various degrees of success) to disaggregate macro-level explanations into claims operating at the level of the individual. Different configurations of individuals will generate different macro-level outcomes, and the field is wide open to exploring that variation.

Third, what the Latin Americanist Richard Snyder calls “scaling down,” which reconfigures comparative politics into comparisons across regions within countries instead of broader comparisons across countries.

Fourth, as my colleague the Vietnam specialist Eddy Malesky has detailed, an ever-greater emphasis on research design. This means field experiments that get researchers out of the library or the computer lab and out into the messy world of politics. It means frustration with lousy cross-national data that motivates a quest for fine-grained subnational data and greater quality control. It means, most of all, the sort of research design possibilities that local and historical knowledge provides for a theoretically oriented and opportunistic comparativist.

And fifth and most importantly, the changes in how Southeast Asia interfaces within political science are the result of some entrepreneurial activities by Southeast Asianists who think that we have something to say to the discipline. The first big statement was an edited volume entitled *Southeast Asia in Political Science*, which—incidentally—was poorly received
both by the establishments in Southeast Asian studies and in comparative politics. But the tide has really turned since then. Just this month, the American Political Science Association recognized a Southeast Asian politics organized section. Even before that, Southeast Asianists were running the major organized sections of the American Political Science Association’s annual meeting: comparative politics, political economy, electoral systems, and so on. There is a new community called the Southeast Asia Research Group that is designed to highlight new research by the next generation.

The result? Southeast Asia in political science has never been stronger, and this is precisely because there are various cleavages and fault lines and alliances within the Seven Kingdoms of political science that leave room for Southeast Asianists to worm their way in, the Littlefingers of the discipline. There have been at least five single-country papers on Southeast Asia in the American Political Science Review in the past five years, and when you add other top general journals the numbers climb even higher. Need subnational variation in identity, violence, development; or fine grained data on local politics; or untapped sources of public opinion; or unexpected successes and setbacks in democratic consolidation with global implications; or long term historical trajectories that defy easy classification? We have that, and more.

Now let me be clear that all is not perfect. There are still some structural disadvantages: it would be really convenient if Southeast Asia cohered as a region in the same way that Latin America and Africa do (at least in the minds of political scientists), and even more convenient if we only had to learn one Romance language to do broadly comparative field work. More troublingly, I join many working in particular world regions in worrying that we are obsessing too much about the latest research fads—Causal identification! Big data!—and not enough on important questions as defined by the regions themselves rather than the literatures to which we hope to contribute. And we still have to work hard sometimes to get noticed—I routinely put up
a map of Southeast Asia when I present to general audiences. But I see all of this as our cross to bear, no less essential to what makes Southeast Asian political studies what it is then the essentially contested nature of our region.

**Functional Disciplines in Southeast Asian Studies**

This brings me to my plea, to accept this state of affairs as functional.

I know that it sounds decidedly old-fashioned to appeal to greater engagement within the disciplines, but the experience of political science in recent years has shown what is possible. Narrowly, there are some individual professional benefits. We can strive to write papers in generalist journals and publish generalist books, something that hiring and promotion and tenure committees really like because it makes us legible on their terms. We can participate fully in the internal disciplinary debates that I have argued are both normal and helpful for getting Southeast Asia on the disciplinary map. Indeed, we can also help to remake our disciplines as insiders rather than outsiders, insisting that our field sites and local concerns are no less vital to understanding the human condition than are those drawn from elsewhere.

But there are benefits for us as a community of Southeast Asianists too. Rather than trying to reconstruct a logic of Southeast Asian studies that transcends disciplines, or lamenting our inability to do so, I would like to imagine a broadly catholic field of Southeast Asian studies in which we each bring perspectives drawn from the disciplines to the study of the things that interest us. We construct the field of Southeast Asian studies—studies plural, not singular—out of the interaction of those disciplinary perspectives as we grapple with questions that we face in the region. If we define our theoretical concerns, epistemological positions, and methodological preferences with respect to the disciplines rather than concrete places, then this might actually lower the existential stakes in interdisciplinary interactions in the field. This does require some
understanding: it requires us to accept and to respect the real theoretical, epistemological, and methodological divisions *within* disciplines that I described previously. But this only strengthens my case. There doesn’t have to be a battle to uncover the singular voice of the field of Southeast Asian studies if we decide together that the field is an emergent phenomenon.

One way that I am going to test this is at the Association for Asian Studies meeting this spring. I am part of a panel together with an anthropologist, a musicologist, and a religious studies scholar in which we all try to conceptualize politics in Indonesian Islam. I can’t imagine that we will decide that one of us has the master approach (or perhaps each of us will decide that he has the master approach). But I assume that debates will follow about why it is that each of us approaches this single question from such a radically different perspective, and that will help us to ask questions about what each perspective’s foundational assumptions and orientations are. Who knows, maybe there will even be some cross-fertilization? Maybe some learning? You know, we’ll see what happens.

Let me conclude these remarks by asking each of you to keep these thoughts in mind over the course of this weekend. Ask what sorts of disciplinary concerns are motivating the types of research that you see, and in turn, how your own research fits into the disciplinary debates that are obvious to you but not to others. Then turn that around, and share those debates with one another, across disciplines in the region. Let’s take that as a foundation. Not for debating the essence of Southeast Asian studies, but for seeing the parts that constitute our joint endeavor. Thank you.