Notes & Comment

Disciplining Southeast Asian Studies

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The purpose of this essay is to explore the role of Southeast Asian studies in the disciplines, and to argue that there are distinct benefits to preserving a plural, disciplinary foundation for Southeast Asian studies as a field of inquiry.

The tension between discipline and area is one of the two fundamental tensions in Southeast Asian studies. The other such tension is the ontological status of Southeast Asia as a coherent region. Ashley Thompson, in her review of Sheldon Pollock’s *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (Pollock 2006) notes, almost 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” (Thompson 2012). For Thompson, the fundamental anxiety of Southeast Asian studies is that we cannot quite defend our own existence as an area, and scholars of Southeast Asia have long recognized that the regional ambit of Southeast Asia is something of a historical accident (McVey 1991, pp. 1–3).

Yet the place of Southeast Asia in the academic disciplines is no less contentious, and the fundamental tension in Southeast Asian studies to which it gives rise centres on the question, what is it that we do when we study Southeast Asia, when we append the word “studies” to our contested area? When we teach undergraduates about Southeast Asia, we are usually careful to unpack and historicize the notion of Southeast Asia as a region,
and in doing so to expose the way that global politics and academic imperatives can construct our conception of the world. But, among graduate students, and among 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?” Most of us have made a separate peace with our contested region. Yet we continue to struggle to define the status of its study as a field or discipline.

Drawing on that thought, in this essay I make two points and offer one plea, all in the service of the theme of “Southeast Asia in the Disciplines”. The first point is fairly obvious: our disciplines determine how we approach Southeast Asia as a field of study. But a subsidiary message is not so obvious. The disciplines themselves are not monolithic; they are themselves defined internally by their own existential debates and disagreements. Whether we come from a disciplinary background or from an interdisciplinary area studies background, we do scholarship a disservice when we essentialize disciplines as immutable and coherent things with singular features. Disciplines do not just have disciples; they have heretics, too.

My second point is to turn around the way that most of us think about “Southeast Asia in the Disciplines”, and to talk about Southeast Asia’s place in our disciplines rather than the place of discipline in Southeast Asian studies. I 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 the anxiety associated with the “studies” in Southeast Asian studies is not really about the clash between area and discipline, but about the tensions between disciplines, or within disciplines, that emerge when we interact in our shared area of interest.

My plea is that we embrace the tensions within disciplines, between discipline and area, and across disciplines in the area, as functional for our joint endeavour in creating Southeast Asian studies. Whether we come from anthropology, or the arts, or economics, 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 its study. The disciplines are the place for that self-reflection, for the simple reason that the disciplines are where scholars have thought most rigorously about what it means to contribute to knowledge more generally, and there are different answers. The plea in this essay, then, is not your standard plea for interdisciplinarity in area studies, or the oft-repeated complaint that Southeast Asian studies is a field rather than a discipline and that 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 immense intellectual benefits to such cross-disciplinary engagement — I want to mount here a provisional defence of disciplinarity in Southeast Asian studies.

Disciplines in the History of Southeast Asian Studies

Consider first the disciplinary foundations of Southeast Asian studies. As the field of Southeast Asian studies emerged in the United States, it was an interdisciplinary enterprise. At universities like Cornell, this became what Duncan McCargo (2006, p. 104) and others have called the “Cornell school” of Southeast Asian studies (see also Kahin 2003). Many of the greats of Cornell Southeast Asian studies were known to find greater intellectual stimulation when interacting with others in the Southeast Asia Program than when doing so with their colleagues in the disciplinary home departments. This model is far from unique, and there are possible analogues at Kyoto, Leiden, the National University of Singapore, the Australian National University, the School of Oriental and African Studies and elsewhere.

But as McCargo, Kahin and others note, Cornell did not create a programme that granted doctorates in a field called “Southeast Asian studies”. And, in fact, the Cornell school does not exist even at Cornell in the way that it once did. Here, my own perspective as a member of this community may be clarifying. The Southeast Asia Program is an interdisciplinary group, with historians, anthropologists, linguists,
political scientists, sociologists, regional scientists, economists, scholars of religion, music, art, culture, and others. But the legendary model of truly interdisciplinary Southeast Asian studies at Cornell is not one that I have ever encountered. Southeast Asian studies at Cornell is a vibrant intellectual community. I count my colleagues in the Southeast Asia Program as both friends and collaborators. But each of us is animated by both area and discipline. Anthropologists have a particular set of theoretical and epistemological concerns. Musicologists and ethnomusicologists, and artists and art historians, are attuned to the expressive dimensions of the human experience in Southeast Asia. Political scientists are concerned with things like generalizability, conceptual theorizing and cumulative research programmes.

In this sense, the disciplinary boundaries are clear, but the mistake is to assume that boundaries between disciplines entail homogeneity within disciplines. There are great fault lines within — for example — political science, with implications for knowledge production in 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 behaviour 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? Criticizing neoliberalism in Singapore? There is no singular political science answer to this question.

Other disciplines are no different. Consider two examples, anthropology and history. Anthropology has long struggled to delimit the precise role of science within its discipline. The recent hullabaloo over the very use of the word “science” in the American Anthropological Association’s own description of anthropology is a clear illustration (Wade 2010). 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.
The past decade's simmering controversy over the Yanomamo is but one example (see Dreger 2011). Among historians, there are sharp divides over the primacy of Western relative to non-Western subjects, over proper histories of great civilizations versus fragmentary histories of peripheries, over global history (singular) versus local histories (plural), over subaltern studies and structuralism and psychoanalysis and countless other theoretical concerns. To quote one historian of Southeast Asia who will remain nameless, “history is too big and diverse to have a disciplinary center”. One might push further on the existential debates within anthropology or history, or broaden the discussion to other disciplines. What is ethnomusicology, and how is it different from musicology? Should economics draw on psychology and other behavioural sciences to dispense with utility maximization as a short-hand for representing individual behaviour? Suffice it to say that every academic discipline, without exception, is internally diverse.

The summary point is that our disciplines do discipline us, but that does not make us disciples. We probably cannot know as much as we think about a person’s scholarly outlook from his or her disciplinary background alone.

The Case of Southeast Asian Politics

The existence of diversity within disciplines motivates my second point, about how Southeast Asia fits into the disciplines. Here, my case study will be political science, and some changes that have taken place in the past decade and a half that represent new opportunities for Southeast Asian studies.

It is easy to get the sense from an older generation of Southeast Asianists working in political science — especially in the United States — that truly engaged area studies was incompatible with disciplinary trends towards generalization, conceptualization, formalization, mathematization and other -izations. I do not disagree with this. In 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 Southeast Asia is too hard to study because Southeast Asians do not speak English and they are far away from North America, but that the region is interchangeable with any other part of the global South because political science is not interested in the specifics of any one place. To quote Gary King, an immensely influential scholar in political methodology, “the professional goal of all scientists should be to attempt to demonstrate that context makes no difference whatsoever” (King 1996, p. 160). Once we capture all of the theoretical variables, Vietnamese peasants are no different from anyone else: their “peasantness” can be described independently of anything special about Southeast Asia, and their “Vietnameseness” is entirely incidental.

King’s view has never been truly dominant. 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, using Southeast Asian cases as well as others. Why? Because of trends and debates within the political science discipline that have opened new doors. There are at least five disciplinary turns that have favoured a return to area studies, and, while none of these emerged from the concerns of Southeast Asians, they have nevertheless opened new doors for reconciling Southeast Asian studies with political science’s disciplinary concerns.

First, competitors to the awkwardly named thing called “rational choice theory” are pushing back like never before. Much of the pushback is behavioural in nature, and the research is still often quite technical. But the opening is there to show the ways in which different kinds of cultural, political, economic or environmental contexts can moderate or overturn predictions drawn from highly stylized models of human decision-making. The point is not to show that rational choice theory is false — for models do not have the property of being true or false (Clarke and Primo 2012, p. 1) — but rather that we can extend or refine models in a way that makes better predictions about human decision-making possible, and that
allows variation across societies or within societies to emerge as a natural result rather than an aberration.

Second, the turn towards what political scientists like to call “microfoundations”, which really means trying to disaggregate macro-level explanations into claims operating at the level of the individual. It is natural to expect that different configurations of individuals will generate different macro-level outcomes. This expectation invites explorations of variation across individuals.

Third, what the Latin Americanist Richard Snyder (2001) calls “scaling down”, which reconfigures comparative politics into comparisons across regions within countries instead of broader comparisons across countries.

Fourth, as Vietnam specialist Edmund Malesky (2008) has detailed, there has been 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 poor 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 Southeast Asia has something to say to the discipline. The first big statement was an edited volume entitled Southeast Asia in Political Science (Kuhonta et al. 2008), which — incidentally — earned some interesting negative reviews from Southeast Asianists and political scientists (see Pepinsky et al. 2010). But developments have only accelerated since the appearance of that volume. In early 2014, the American Political Science Association recognized an organized section on Southeast Asian politics. Even before that, Southeast Asianists were running major sections of the American Political Science Association’s annual meeting: comparative politics, political economy, electoral systems and others. There is
a new community called the Southeast Asia Research Group that is designed to highlight important research by rising scholars in the social sciences.

As a result, Southeast Asia in mainstream political science has never been stronger, and this is precisely because there are various cleavages and fault lines and alliances within political science that leave room for Southeast Asianists to leverage local expertise to make important theoretical and empirical contributions. There have been at least five single-country papers on Southeast Asia in the American Political Science Review in the past five years (Malesky and Schuler 2010; Olken 2010; Malesky et al. 2012, 2014; Paler 2013), and when you add other top general journals the numbers climb even higher. Scholarship on a region with subnational variation in identity, violence, development; fine-grained data on local politics; untapped sources of public opinion; unexpected successes and setbacks in democratic consolidation with global implications; and long-term historical trajectories that defy easy classification can make innumerable contributions.

Of course, all is not perfect. There are still some structural disadvantages facing Southeast Asian studies in political science. It would be convenient if Southeast Asia cohered as a region in the same way that Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa do, at least in the minds of most political scientists. It would be even more convenient if Southeast Asianists only had to learn one Romance language to do broadly comparative fieldwork. More troublingly, I join many working in particular world regions in worrying that political scientists are obsessing too much about the latest research fads — Causal identification! Big data! — and not focusing 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 battle the perceived peripheral nature of Southeast Asia, especially for North American and European audiences. But I see all of this as probably inevitable, and no less essential to what makes Southeast Asian political studies what it is than the essentially contested nature of our region.
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Functional Disciplines in Southeast Asian Studies

This brings me to my plea, to accept the division of Southeast Asian studies across disciplines as more than just unavoidable, but actually functional.

It sounds decidedly old-fashioned to appeal to greater engagement within the disciplines for Southeast Asian studies in an era when funders and governments alike are highly invested in promoting interdisciplinary research (see Taylor 2009). But the experience of political science in recent years has shown what is possible. Narrowly, there are some individual professional benefits for emerging scholars. Southeast Asianists can strive to write papers in generalist journals and publish generalist books, something that hiring and promotion and tenure committees enjoy because it makes area specialists legible on their terms. Southeast Asianists can participate fully in the internal disciplinary debates that are both normal and helpful for getting Southeast Asia on the disciplinary map. Indeed, Southeast Asianists can also help to remake their disciplines as insiders rather than outsiders, insisting that their field sites and local concerns are no less vital to understanding the human condition than are those found elsewhere.

But there are benefits for the 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 area that interests 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 to concrete places, then this can actually lower the existential stakes in interdisciplinary interactions in the field. This goal does require some understanding. It requires Southeast Asianists to accept and
to respect the real theoretical, epistemological and methodological divisions within disciplines that I described previously. But this point only strengthens my case. There need not be a battle to uncover the singular voice of the field of Southeast Asian studies if those engaged in knowledge production decide together that the field is an emergent phenomenon.

In this model, interactions across disciplines in Southeast Asian studies can be seen in a different light. This highlights the importance of disciplinary context, understanding the disciplinary concerns that lie behind knowledge production. It can also force us to clarify how our own research fits into the disciplinary debates that may not be obvious to those from other disciplines. This would be a different kind of foundation for Southeast Asian studies — not for debating the essence of the field, but for seeing the parts that constitute the joint endeavour.

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NOTE

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