

Scholarly Viewpoints, with Victor T. King

ABOUT VICTOR T. KING

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books include *The Sociology of Southeast Asia: Transformation in a Developing Region* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press and Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008; ebook 2011), with William Wilder *The Modern Anthropology of South-East Asia: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2003; reprinted 2006), and translated into Indonesian as *Antropologi Modern Asia Tenggara: Sebuah Pengantar* (Yogyakarta: Kreasi Wacana, 2012); and co-edited volumes with Michael Hitchcock and Michael Parnwell, *Tourism in Southeast Asia: Challenges and New Directions* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press and Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009; and *Heritage Tourism in Southeast Asia*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press and Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010). Another recently co-edited volume with Park Seung Woo entitled *The Historical Construction of Southeast Asian Studies* is being published in Singapore by ISEAS Press, 2013.

1. IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT WOULD BE THE CURRENT TREND OF YOUR DISCIPLINE; SPECIFICALLY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION?

What intrigues me about the ways in which the questions are posed is that they assume that we all work in disciplines. Since I have been given the welcome opportunity to present a "scholarly viewpoint" on Asia Pacific I would like to take a rather different tack. I want to make reference to certain recent developments in and contributions to what has come to be referred to as the multidisciplinary field of "area studies," which was promoted vigorously in the United States during the Cold War period and became increasingly important in institutional academic development in Western Europe, Australia, Japan and in Southeast Asia from the 1950s and 1960s. Since the 1970s, however, the popularity of this field of studies has tended to wane in the West, following the American departure from Indochina and then the end of the Cold War, and the questioning of the value and validity of teaching and research in regional studies by representatives of Western governments and the sponsors of scholarly activity. With the apparent undermining of the rationale for area studies, doubts were expressed about its theoretical and methodological rigour and whether or not area studies practitioners possessed the willingness and the academic capacity and expertise to respond to the major challenges posed by a fast-moving and globalising world. In short, opinions in the West began to turn against regional studies and it came to be seen as old-fashioned, conservative, parochial and poorly equipped to address and understand the social, cultural, economic and political issues and problems of a post-modern world. Paranoia, anxiety and a feeling of crisis set in among the area studies community, which resulted in an outpouring of publications in the 1970s and 1980s defending regions and those who studied them.

Nevertheless, despite this change of heart in the heartlands of area studies, and particularly in relation to the study of Southeast and East Asia, we have witnessed a significant expansion in programmes of study, research and teaching in universities and research institutions in the Asia Pacific region itself over the past couple of decades, encouraged in no small way through the establishment and development of such regional organisations as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation; dialogue, exchanges and interactions are now being conducted in greater volume and with greater intensity across the Asia Pacific Rim. Area

studies has also witnessed a resurgence in the West, though this is somewhat patchy, with the influx of Asian migrants into the USA and the emergence of vibrant Asian cultural activities in such places as California and on the university campuses there, and America's need and that of the European Union, and indeed Australia and New Zealand, to engage with the growth economies of China, Japan, the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, and to increase their knowledge of the politics and economics of the Middle East after 9/11, the post-1991 re-emergence of Russia on to the world stage, and most recently the dynamic economic growth which we have witnessed in parts of Latin America, particularly Brazil. Even in the U.K. where there was a retreat from the study of areas as such there is now a renewed interest in studying languages (particularly Chinese, Japanese, Arabic and Russian, and most recently Portuguese and Spanish) and situating this linguistic expertise in the cultural, historical, geographic, economic and political context within which it is used. Sadly this British revival has not embraced Southeast and South Asia to any extent.

But we should note that it is not simply "area studies" that is trans-disciplinary in its purpose and operation; a whole range of other subject areas (which are not confined to disciplines) have emerged: media, performance and film; cultural studies; environment and ecology; tourism and hospitality programmes; the study of gender relations; the continuing interest in development studies; and of course the enormous popularity enjoyed by management and business studies, to name but a few. Indeed it seems to me that the traditional academic disciplines are finding that the comfortable boundaries and barriers with which they had surrounded themselves are increasingly under threat. In my own discipline of social and cultural anthropology I find that the elective undergraduate courses which I offer are now usually also attended by students pursuing programmes in media, gender and culture. However, this is not to say that disciplines are in danger of disappearing or that the theoretical and methodological apparatuses that they have developed are no longer valid. What it does mean is that scholarly enquiry is much more open, fluid and collaborative than it once was.

2. IMPACT OF YOUR DISCIPLINE ON THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION; 'WHAT,' 'HOW,' 'WHY,' ETC?

The answer to this is simple; studies of the Asia Pacific (within area studies and beyond) have contributed enormously to our knowledge and understanding of a complex, and some would say difficult-to-define region. However, the term "impact" suggests something altogether different, and for me, conjures up notions of relevance and utility. Let us look at this issue for a moment. It is often assumed that area studies confines itself to such matters as language training and the scholarly, academic dimension of regional research and teaching, usually in multidisciplinary mode. But this is far from the case, particularly as it is practised in the region itself. If we look at more recent developments in the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, for example, there has been a noticeable trend in its involvement in and contribution to what we might term policy studies. Examining the list of publications which the Institute has produced and its sponsorship of research programmes, research fellows and visiting scholars since the 1990s we can see a quite noticeable shift in emphasis. From the founding of the Institute in the late 1960s until the early 1990s a balance was struck between, on the one hand, the more policy-oriented disciplines with an interest in public affairs such as economics, politics, security and strategic studies, and international relations and, on the other, those academic subjects which tended to be less concerned with engaging policy-makers, government agencies and think-tanks, which would probably include anthropology, sociology and history, and to some extent, geography. The same shift towards a policy and practical agenda can also be detected in the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore. Indeed across the Asia Pacific region I think the emphasis on the relevance and application of findings from locally sponsored and organised research to national and regional problems and issues is much greater than it is in Western-generated area studies programmes. But the "ideology of pragmatism" to use Habibul Haque Khondker's words, is not celebrated in all quarters (2012: 62). I recognise its dangers, but overall I've been much more enthusiastic about using social science research within area studies for practical ends than others who see it as merely being used to add value and profitability to government concerns with the market-place. Indeed I wrote a whole book on applied anthropology in Southeast Asia well over a decade ago in recognition of the value of bringing academic findings to bear on real-world problems and an acknowledgement of the need (whether we like

it or not) for governments and other agencies to plan and to understand socio-cultural, economic and political processes.

Leaving aside this shift to policy and practice for one moment one of the major impacts of area studies, though one should beware of overly romanticising this, is to encourage cross-cultural understanding, promote the study of languages other than one's own, and develop an important scholarly sense of the importance of comparative studies. I make this comment in spite of the charges against area studies that it was really Saidian "Orientalism" in a new post-war guise and that it merely continued the intellectual hegemony and ethnocentrism of the West, particularly the USA, in relation to the developing world, and this in spite of the grand claims that its major purpose was to expand the sum of human knowledge on parts of the world which were increasingly seeing themselves as regions. There is some truth in the charge of continuing neo-colonial dominance and interference, but we have moved quite a long way from this set of patron-client relations with the emergence of vigorous and well-funded programmes of research and training within the Asia Pacific region itself and with the rapidly developing collaboration between scholars across the region. Again examining the academic environment in Singapore, it is one of the most important places where Southeast Asianists and the wider Asian Studies community across academic disciplines gather to exchange ideas and to enter into discussions about the state-of-the-art of studies of the region. Although very well developed and funded in Singapore to bring Asian researchers together to examine the region within which they live, it is happening in other capitals in Southeast Asia as well (in Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Jakarta, Manila) and in Hong Kong, Taipei, Beijing, Shanghai, Tokyo, Kyoto and Seoul. Locally organised and funded conferences, joint research programmes, visiting fellowships and academic posts also bring Western researchers to the region in increasing numbers to work and interact with locally-based scholars.

Furthermore, I recognise that there is still a movement of young people from the Asia Pacific to Western universities and to Australia and New Zealand to undertake higher education training, but equally there is considerable movement of students across the region, and it is noticeable that more and more students from the West come to universities in the Asia Pacific on exchange programmes and funded research and training.

3. YOUR COMMENTS ON THE STATE OF RECENT (LAST 2–3 DECADES) SCHOLARSHIP OF YOUR DISCIPLINE?

Any comments on the state of recent scholarship on Asia Pacific from an area studies perspective are impossible to make. The field of studies is staggeringly large if one ranges across all social science and humanities disciplines which fall within the ambit of Asia Pacific Studies. The international publishers Taylor and Francis alone have over 20 journal titles on Asia Pacific or Asia, then you add those with titles referring to China, Japan and Southeast Asian countries into the mix and you get at least another ten. To get a feel for the quality of what has been done recently I usually go straight to the results of the annual book prize competition of The Association for Asian Studies at Madison, Wisconsin (in my own field of Southeast Asian Studies, the Harry J. Benda Prize and the George McT. Kahin Prize), and also check what they are publishing in their "Key Issues in Asian Studies" series. What I would say in response to this almost impossible question is that during the last decade we have witnessed an explosion of interest in revisiting, rethinking, re-conceptualising, remaking, re-centring, decentring and diversifying the field of area studies and, within this academic endeavour, the specified regional fields of Southeast Asian, Asian and Asia Pacific Studies. I have counted at least ten major edited books which have emerged since the early 2000s on these themes, and I am not including relevant major articles and papers. Those which I have come across and read with profit are Anthony Reid's *Southeast Asian Studies: Pacific Perspectives* (2003); the very important volume by David Szanton which takes stock of what was happening in area studies across major regions of the world including Southeast Asian Studies in the USA, *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines* (2004); the thought-provoking volume which included contributions from leading scholars of Southeast Asia (including Heather Sutherland, Ruth McVey and Wang Gungwu) edited by Paul Kratoska, Remco Raben and Henk Schulte Nordholt, *Locating Southeast Asia: Geographies of Knowledge and Politics of Space* (2005); the very upbeat book which in its editorial introduction argues for the vital importance of Southeast Asian Studies in promoting our understanding of a fast-changing region edited by Cynthia Chou and Vincent Houben *Southeast Asian Studies: Debates and New Directions* (2006); the post-modern project of Laurie J. Sears which makes a case for the increasing localisation of area studies within the Southeast Asian region itself, *Knowing Southeast Asian Subjects* (2007); in acknowledging that the locus of expertise

and knowledge of Southeast Asia is not confined to the West and to the region itself, but is being developed very rapidly in neighbouring East Asia there was Saw Swee-Hock's and John Wong's *Southeast Asian Studies in China* (2007); then a more general text edited by Terence Wesley-Smith and Jon Goss which focused on how we might develop our pedagogy to encourage a more empowering form of area studies and seek much greater cross-regional collaboration, *Remaking Area Studies: Teaching and Learning across Asia and the Pacific* (2010); another book edited by Jacob Edmond, Henry Johnson and Jacqueline Leckie arguing for the "renewed centrality" of Asia in discussions about cross-national encounters, exchanges and contestation, *Recentring Asia; Histories, Encounters, Identities* appeared in 2011; and finally Goh Beng Lan's volume which, in revealing the intellectual biographies of a number of prominent senior and junior scholars of Southeast Asia, argues for the need to relocate and encourage the study of Southeast Asia from within the region itself in her *Decentring and Diversifying Southeast Asian Studies; Perspectives from the Region* (2011a).

Granted, many of these volumes have emerged from an environment in which areas studies, Southeast Asian Studies and Asian Studies have been perceived as being in some sort of crisis and they require a robust defence. But in this defence some crucial issues about the understanding of regions and the shift in emphases in scholarship and research have been raised. Two matters stand out for me. First, there is reference to the rather misleading distinction between disciplinary studies and area studies, given the loosening up of subject boundaries, and the need to rethink the relationship between discipline and area. Nevertheless, whilst I am all in favour of "multidisciplinary approaches" and "mixed methodologies," I do not think there is much that has come out of area studies which is truly "interdisciplinary." Furthermore, though the distinction between area studies and disciplines is less meaningful and appropriate than it was up to about two decades ago, I think the main theories, concepts and methods are still generated, developed and disseminated from disciplines rather than regional studies. Having said this there seems to be a degree of methodological novelty in the trans-cultural, interactive kinds of research which are being developed within and across some area studies programmes. A good example comes to mind in the pedagogical work conducted by the School of Hawaiian, Asian and Pacific Studies at the University of Hawai'i, Manoa, which comprised an important outreach, dialogic and student-centred teaching and learning approach in partnership with institutions in New Zealand, Fiji, the Philippines, Singapore

and Japan. It attempted to develop innovative and collaborative teaching practices across countries and cultures in the Asia Pacific region so that area studies could be brought to the areas studied through the use in the classroom of interactive technologies (including e-mails, websites and video-conferencing) (Wesley-Smith and Goss 2010). Another is the German-Indonesian reciprocal, tandem, complementary, role-reversal kind of research within the Southeast Asian Studies programme at the University of Freiburg, which takes into account the importance of conducting an equal "dialogue," a "productive conversation" and "self-reflexivity" in the context of the coming together of different academic cultures and different ways of generating knowledge.

A second issue raised is that of the power relations in knowledge production, and the question of the "indigenisation" or "decolonisation" of area studies. What are the possibilities for decentring, re-centring and diversifying Asia Pacific, Asian and Southeast Asian Studies and developing and recognising "local" or "within-region" perspectives, interests and priorities? These questions bring us back to debates which surfaced in the early post-war period about the relations and encounters between foreign/local, exogenous/endogenous (indigenous), and outsider/insider, though, like the categories "discipline" and "area studies" these categories are rough-and-ready ones and the boundaries are ill-defined and problematical.

4. ON CURRENT SCHOLARS OF YOUR DISCIPLINE, VIZ. INDIGENOUS OF THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION OR FROM WITHOUT, INTERESTS, CHARACTERISTICS, ETC.?

In a field as large as Asian Studies and Asia Pacific Studies, it is impossible to form an overall opinion of current scholars working on the region. I will not even go into the whole issue of how we might define Asia Pacific Studies to provide a framework within which we might make this evaluation other than to refer to remarks made by Teresia Teaiwa in a chapter entitled "For or *Before* an Asia Pacific Studies Agenda" in the recent edited book by Wesley-Smith and Goss on *Remaking Area Studies* (2010). In many of the books which I have referred to above contributors seem to adopt a rather taken-for-granted attitude in talking about Southeast Asia, Asia and Asia Pacific as regions. Teaiwa is one of the few who does not do this when she draws attention to the rather loose way in which Asia Pacific Studies, and

specifically for her Pacific [Island] Studies has been conceived and practised; that those involved in this field of studies do not define it consistently, that a lot of the work "published and presented under the rubric of Pacific Studies has a single national or ethnic focus, does little to extend the possibilities for comparative analysis within the region, and tends to rely on theoretical sources from outside the region as a point of reference."

Despite all of this I do detect a vibrant quality in local scholarship on the Asia Pacific region, and by this I mean not simply indigenous scholars but also those from outside the region who are living, working and researching in the region. There is also an enormously important legacy bequeathed by senior figures in regional studies. An excellent example of this with reference to Southeast Asia is to be found in the recent book edited by Goh Beng Lan referred to above (2011a). This work emerged from a series of workshops held in Singapore. One of the workshops in November 2004 brought together senior, middle generation and junior scholars; the senior figures comprised Uthai Dulyakasem, Tay Kheng Soon, Charnvit Kasetsiri, Taufik Abdullah, Dao Hung, Zeus Salazar, Adrian Lapijan and Syed Hussein Alatas; Wang Gungwu and Reynaldo Ileto also made a contribution, as did second generation scholars including Wong Soak Koon, Yunita Winarto, Melani Budianta, Paritta Chalermpong Koanantakool, Patricio Abinales and Goh Beng Lan herself. The common themes which cut across the individual concerns of these senior colleagues were their experience of colonialism, war and conflict in their home region; and their engagement with the state in the production of certain kinds of knowledge and, in turn, their identification of the more general interrelationship between the construction and acquisition of knowledge and relations of power and domination in post-colonial settings. What is interesting about their biographies is that most of them are what might be termed "public intellectuals"; they have been or are activists, who apply their knowledge and expertise to real-world problems and issues, and who also write for wider non-academic audiences. This should be something to be applauded in our desire to promote area studies and give it real direction, meaning and relevance.

5. THE FUTURE OF YOUR DISCIPLINE IN RELATION TO THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION, VIZ. TRENDS, DIRECTION, VISION?

What should be emphasised in contemplating the future of area studies across the region is the importance of contextualising knowledge production on the Asia Pacific and, in this regard, to argue for the continued relevance of multidisciplinary regional studies. We should also endeavour not to be so rigid in our categorisation of both academic "disciplines" and "area studies," particularly if this leads to setting them up in opposition to each other. Nor should we get too hung up on the distinction between locally generated ("insider") and Euro-American-derived ("outsider") perspectives on Asia Pacific. Of course, I welcome recent initiatives which argue for the importance of local voices and the willingness to address and respond to their accounts of their experiences, practices and views. Goh Beng Lan has argued passionately for the need to provide a platform for local perspectives, local interests and local agendas on Southeast Asia (2011b). For these to be pursued with any chance of success we may be required to eschew some wider or higher level social science theories which do not square with the "lived realities" of the region, but I have never been one to argue for grand theories. The success of area studies, it seems to me, has been in developing lower level concepts and frameworks to capture and understand forms, patterns and processes "on the ground." Nevertheless, I am still grappling with the problems engendered by her call for locally generated area studies which provides alternative and emergent conceptual and analytical models with which to address local priorities and concerns. It seems to me that the major theoretical and methodological templates have already been determined in dialogue with Western social theorists and philosophers and, though they might need some adjustment, the ways in which we understand societies, cultures, histories, and political and economic systems will not necessarily require the development of indigenous or local alternatives.

Do Asia Pacific Studies and the subfields of Asian and Southeast Asian Studies have a future? Of course they do. In spite of my own critical comments on area studies (that this field of studies does not have a distinctive set of concepts or its own methodological approaches, nor is it possible to arrive at an agreed upon definition and delimitation of Asia Pacific, or Asia or Southeast Asia) this field of studies is here to stay. Asia Pacific Studies has been institutionalised not least in our own *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies*. Major publishers like Taylor and Francis, Cambridge

University Press, the University of Hawai'i's East-West Center, Routledge and Macmillan have ongoing and successful publication series on Asia Pacific. The Singapore powerhouse at its Institute and National University continue to produce publications on Southeast Asia and the wider Asia Pacific at an alarming rate. The issues affecting Asia Pacific which currently exercise authors who publish in these series will undoubtedly continue, many of them urgent issues which require practical, policy and hands-on involvement from those of us within the academic community and within area studies: globalisation and regionalisation (though I have argued elsewhere that the whole globalisation enterprise in theoretical terms has been overdone, but I recognise the importance of trans-national flows of people, labour, capital, commodities, ideas, words, messages, images and popular culture); security threats of various kinds (energy supply is a big issue at the moment); naval power, maritime issues and the South China Sea disputes; human security, climate change and environmental disasters; political stability, governance, democratisation and authoritarianism; development, continuing poverty and marginalisation; identity and cultural politics (which includes everything from nation-state constructions of identities, to minorities, to cultural and ethnic tourism and heritage, to religious institutionalisation and change); and economic instability and financial crises. The continued vitality and importance of the Asia Pacific agenda is aptly illustrated with the appearance of Michael Yahuda's widely read and admired *The International Politics of the Asia-Pacific* (2011) in its third edition.

6. SOME ADVICE AND GUIDANCE FOR UP-AND-COMING SCHOLARS FOCUSING ON THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION?

Any advice depends on what up-and-coming scholars are interested in, what their training and expertise comprises, and whether or not they have ambitions to develop a much broader regional vision and pursue genuinely cross-disciplinary work. Among my guiding principles in academic work are that it should not be treated as a routine, constrained kind of activity subject to closely regulated bureaucratic procedures and to heavy-handed management concerned primarily with impacts, outputs, controls and audits. Idealistic I know, but if it is done in the appropriate spirit of free-ranging, open-ended enquiry, not stifled by closely monitored office hours, form-filling and endless meetings, and it engages with students in a mutual pursuit of knowledge and

understanding, then it begins to meet what I consider to be the major defining characteristic of the scholarly way of life—it is a calling and a vocation. Of course, we now have to meet all kinds of targets, improve our performance in the appropriate citation indices, and contribute to our institutions' ambitions to move up the league tables (and there are many), but we must try at least to continue to enjoy what we do and gain fulfilment from it. For regional studies, one stance that is often taken is that it must be in depth, grounded, context-sensitive research, preferably in the vernacular if the researcher is foreign to that society or culture. I would not argue unduly against this position. But as an area specialist I think one should also be prepared to be bolder and more ambitious and venture into comparative studies and cross-regional research programmes. I suppose that I am now at this stage of my work, having moved from a focus on Borneo (which for me involved research on Sarawak, Sabah, Kalimantan and Brunei, and not a confined part of the island) and then Indonesia and Malaysia to the Southeast Asian region as a whole. The focus on an area invites one to look beyond a particular case, community, country or sub-region and to embrace a wider vision of structure, pattern and process in a regional context.

7. ANY OTHER OPINIONS, VIEWPOINTS TO EXPRESS, SHARE, ETC.

In my view, the multidisciplinary field of area studies focused on the Asia Pacific region, which of course is not a unitary or homogeneous field of studies, cannot be characterised as having a recognisable and distinctive set of theoretical ideas, approaches or methods. In the field of Southeast Asian Studies which I know best, I have not detected a dominant style or tradition of scholarship. It has not produced a set of specific practices or ethical principles which we as Southeast Asianists or Asian Pacific specialists (if we can reach any agreement on what a Southeast Asianist or an Asia Pacific specialist is) might adopt or follow in formulating research questions; deciding how we might address our chosen subject, issue, or theme; identifying what kinds of evidence we require to address the research problem which we have set ourselves; selecting the most appropriate ways to gather and sift the data; evaluating the robustness and validity of the evidence we have mustered; sifting and choosing the evidence which we then use to make our case; and

developing concepts or theories to make sense of and give some kind of logical and coherent form to the information collected. Although there are certainly advantages in being able and willing to view a region from different disciplinary perspectives, enter into dialogue with those from other disciplines and, if possible, try to understand the problem at hand from other researchers' points of view, I think we have still tended to operate on the basis of the disciplinary training (theoretical and methodological) we have received. But I don't see a contradiction in being both an area studies specialist and someone who has commitment to a particular discipline, especially given the increasing fuzziness of disciplinary boundaries, the expanding opportunities to move into disciplines other than one's own, and the exciting multidisciplinary developments in such fields as cultural, media and tourism studies.

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