

Scholarly Viewpoints, with Professor Adrian Vickers

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ABOUT ADRIAN VICKERS

Professor Adrian Vickers is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and a specialist on the cultural history of the Asia Pacific. He is Professor of Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Sydney, and has held several Visiting Fellowships, including at Magdalene College, the University of Cambridge and most recently as the Brayton Wilbur Jr. Fellow at the Asian Art Museum San Francisco. He is the author of widely acclaimed books on Indonesian history and art, some of which have been translated into six languages. He won two History of the Year book awards for *The Pearl Frontier* (2015), a history of pearling in the Indian-Pacific. Professor Vickers has appeared on programmes aired on the History and National Geographic Channels and is often called upon by the Australian media to comment on events in Asia that affect Australia.



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

Actually, I move between a number of fields and disciplines. If you're talking about Southeast Asian Studies, then there has definitely been a shift in the centre of gravity. The old centres of Cornell, SOAS and Leiden are not what they used to be, and a long way from Southeast Asia. The trend now is for Southeast Asia to create new centres of Southeast Asian Studies, notably in Singapore.

In terms of history, my main discipline, there has been a big generational change. The senior scholars have retired or are retiring, and even my generation is getting ready for retirement. This will mean a major shift, and there are outstanding young scholars coming through from all over the world.

In terms of art history, my current interest, there are very exciting developments in the study of modern and contemporary art. I'm pleased to be part of two linked projects that are bringing out fresh talent, *Ambitious Alignments* and *Site and Space in Southeast Asia*, both of which feature outstanding new scholars from Southeast Asia.

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

This goes back to my earlier responses. The increasing role of Southeast Asians in Southeast Asian scholarship means that there is greater immediacy. By this I mean that there is a much shorter lead-time between announcement of research results and local interest in the results of research. Previously, Western scholars could write without any sense of what Southeast Asian readers might think. This created a major ethical problem, one that reinforced Euro-American-Centric views of the world. Now, people have to face up to the ethical implications of their research, meaning that Southeast Asians are no longer the “objects” of investigation, but are subjects, and of course colleagues.

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

Things have got very complicated: disciplinary boundaries have changed, and it is much harder to keep up with the volume of both theoretical and empirical material in any field. While in critical theory there are still canonical figures such as Foucault, in some areas it is equally as important to be familiar with the work of Bambang Purwanto or Patrick Flores. Notwithstanding Bambang's important role as a maverick in the Indonesian historical scene, Southeast Asian history is in danger of being left behind in many fields.

In relation to this, one of the significant developments is the move to trans-national studies. This started in the early 2000s, and has seen exciting works such as Sunil Amrith's study of the Bay of Bengal, crossing South and Southeast Asian Studies. It is important that people look beyond national boundaries in their work.

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

See previous. I think one of the major impediments to future developments is the politics of the region. Scholars in many countries are politically active, which is important, because it shows that their ideas are part of their social commitment. The down side of this is the increasing tendency towards authoritarianism in many countries (and perhaps here, Malaysia is one important exception). Many of the most active scholars risk banning, imprisonment or worse because of their commitment to truth and social justice.

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

I think we can see the future in recent initiatives. One of the most exciting developments is the journal *Southeast of Now*. This is published in the region, and the main editorial team and writers are from Southeast Asia and Australia. It has been exciting to see new ideas coming forward, both from Australian and local PhD theses. This journal also signals that a lot of the intellectual action is not only coming from universities, but also from other institutions: public and private museums, independent groups such as Indonesia's KUNCI collective, and many other areas.

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

Keep doing what you are doing, it is important.