

The Poverty of Regionalism

Limits in the Study of Southeast Asia

Forum >
Southeast Asia

The idea of Southeast Asia as an academic field has a European pedigree stretching back to the early twentieth century. The term arose partly for convenience – it was useful to have a concise name for the region lying between India and China – and partly from a sense that there was some form of identity in this part of the world which transcended the cultural diversity of the region and the numerous international borders cutting across it. Since the term was coined, the borders of ‘Southeast Asia’ as a region have been remarkably flexible.

By Robert Cribb

Until the middle of the twentieth century, the term Southeast Asia referred most commonly to the mainland peninsula, now comprising Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Burma. The Indonesian archipelago was often considered part of the Pacific, rather than Asia. The short-lived and unlamented South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO, founded in 1954) even included Pakistan. Of course Pakistan’s eastern wing, now Bangladesh, bordered on Burma, but technically SEATO gave Southeast Asia a border with Afghanistan and Iran. The Philippines, for its part, was often barely considered Asian at all and was treated as a trans-Pacific extension of Latin and North America. Although the concept of Southeast Asia seems to have settled down today to refer to the region included within the ten countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN, founded in 1967), the persistent uncertainty about the region’s ‘natural’ boundaries lingers on in newly independent East Timor’s hesitation between applying to join ASEAN and seeking membership of the South Pacific Forum.

The case for treating Southeast Asia as a useful category rests on several grounds. First, scholarly research has highlighted important elements of culture which are widely shared across the region: elements of technology such as outrigger canoes and houses on stilts, as well as deep-seated features of the social structure such as a dyadic line of descent in which the female line is not dramatically less valued than the male. Second, there is a history of cultural, political, and economic interaction across the region, which has given it a true regional character. We find this interaction reflected in the distribution of ceremonial drums and trade ceramics, in patterns of invasion and trade, and even in matters such as language use. Third, many historians have identified a common general trajectory in the history of the region, a historical sequence based on the agricultural and trading ecologies of distinct coastal and riverine heartlands which led the peoples of the region through phases of state formation, Indization, commercial prosperity, colonialism, democratic experiment, and authoritarian developmentalism. In addition, of course, Southeast Asia has now become a perceived identity for people in the region and has taken institutional form in the shape of ASEAN. ‘Southeast Asia’ exists, if only because tens of millions of people in the region see themselves as Southeast Asians, even if that identity may be less important to them than other markers of identity such as nationality.

The success of Southeast Asia as a concept is all the more striking when one considers the relative intellectual, emotional, and institutional failure of other regional concepts such as Maphilindo (Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia), the ‘Malay World’, Mainland Southeast Asia, and so on.

Nonetheless, we should not blind ourselves to important instrumentalist reasons for the strength of Southeast Asia as a concept. The first of these relates to the politics of academic importance. Southeast Asia as an academic field is a stage on which specialists on Brunei, Laos, Arakan, Panay, and even Indonesia can stand shoulder to shoulder, as it were (and sometimes head-to-head), with specialists on China, India, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and so on. Whatever our own narrow individual fields of research, we stand as Southeast Asianists for half a billion people, for some of the world’s most dynamic economies and for a truly impressive body of scholarship.

Even if our own individual fields of research are narrow, we draw academic strength and status from the importance of the region within which those fields are located. In the same way, it is hard not to believe that the new practice of referring to Madagascar, Mauritius, and the Comoro Islands as ‘Insular Southwest Asia’ does not have something to do with a desire to detach those regions from the apparently bleak prospects of Africa and to harness them to the glittering chariot of Asia.

The second reason for the strength of Southeast Asia as an academic field is political in a different way. For much of the post-Second World War period there has been a tension



The Portrait of Ho Chi Minh looks down on a Chinese family

between approaches to Southeast Asia which focus on the states of the region as the most important (and, implicitly, as morally justified) historical agents, and approaches which seek to focus attention away from states and towards people. The avowed aim of these people-centred approaches has been to give voice to the voiceless, to women, to workers, to the poor, to sexual minorities, to isolated communities, and so on. Recognizing the existence of ‘Southeast Asia’ strengthens our awareness of the contingency of the current state boundaries in the region. In something like the same way – though to a lesser extent – in which the European Union created a political framework that allowed the resurgence of regionalism in Belgium, Spain, and Britain, the concept of Southeast Asia strengthens the position of those who argue that states provide only a framework – not the framework – for studying social phenomena.

A third reason why Southeast Asia exists as an academic field is heuristic. One of the most fruitful techniques that scholars use to generate new insights is redefining their areas of study to include new elements and exclude old ones. The more daring historians delight in flouting conventional periodization by cutting the ribbon of time in new and unexpected places, aware that different issues arise within different time scales. A history of Indonesia from 1930 to 1960 will not just differ in scale from a history covering, say, 1815 to 1998; it will deal with very different issues.



Chinese in Batavia. Is southern China part of Southeast Asia? Or is Southeast Asia part of southern China?

We achieve similar insights by slicing the geographical pie in different ways. In this respect, the institutionalization of Southeast Asia in the form of ASEAN has probably had the paradoxical effect of galvanizing scholars, in their usual, perversely counter-intuitive way, to search for alternative geographical frameworks. In recent years, important new insights have arisen from defining the Austronesian world, which stretches from Madagascar through maritime Southeast Asia to Polynesia, as a region of study. Something similar has been done by looking at the world of the Tai, which straddles the borders of Southeast Asia, China, and India. New historical research has suggested that the Java Sea, as a maritime region, be explored intellectually. In a paper presented at the 2003 International Convention of Asia Scholars in Singapore (ICAS3), Mario Rutten urged researchers to remember that Southeast Asia was east of South Asia rather than just south of East Asia, and to consider the important parallels and differences between the two regions. Other recent research has taken maritime Southeast Asia seriously as part of the Islamic world.

Perhaps the most ambitious revision of regional borders, however, has been the programme to annex southern China to Southeast Asia. This programme has not focused on the basically Southeast Asian ‘national minorities’ of the region but rather on the elements of mainstream Chinese culture in the South which have Southeast Asian origins, on coastal southern China’s long history of commercial integration with Southeast Asia, and on the observation that the four southern provinces – Guangzhou, Guangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan – are individually comparable in population and economic strength to their Southeast Asian neighbours. From an academic-political point of view, this campaign is risky. In the past, the much larger and more self-assured field of China Studies has been fully prepared to see Southeast Asia as part of China’s world – as ‘peripheral areas’ in the memorable words of Reischauer, Fairbank, and Craig – and there is thus a danger that Southeast Asia’s academic identity will be undermined rather than expanded. Nonetheless, the proponents of this approach should be congratulated for their daring.

All the same, such experimentation with new borders suggests that the old ones have exhausted some of their analytical power. If this is the case, however, the way forward may not be to keep cutting the geographical cake in different ways but rather to range beyond the region in a new and aggressive comparativism. The strong awareness of diversity which is the Siamese twin of any conception of Southeast Asian identity has had the unfortunate effect of closing our eyes to comparisons further field. With such a rich variety of historical experience, social form, and cultural expression in Southeast Asia, it has seemed to many of us that there is no great advantage to be had from looking further afield, at least no further afield than South and East Asia.

Yet for historians in particular, there is much to be learnt from looking at Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and North America. And, more important, there are many ways in which the experience of Southeast Asia can illuminate the rest of the world. Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* argument on the origins of nationalism is one of the rather few examples of an insight developed from an understanding of Southeast Asian experience, but with global application. Similarly, important insights into the nature of genocide as a global phenomenon arise from examining the terrible history of mass killing in Cambodia and Indonesia.

Good comparative work is difficult. The cases to be compared have to be selected carefully and the researcher needs either to develop serious competence in another region, or to find a congenial collaborator with such competence. For those who follow the new path, however, the intellectual rewards will be enormous. ◀

Reference

- Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd revised edition, London: Verso (1991).

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