

Reminiscences by a Historian of Southeast Asia¹

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Abstract: This presentation had several goals. The first was to provide a sense of the ways in which the field of Southeast Asia studies, especially history, has developed during my own career, especially during the 1960s. A second goal was to address the tension between country-based history and comparisons across the region. Third, I described the decline in Southeast Asian studies in the 1980s and 90s and the new questions that arose as global histories assumed greater prominence. A fourth goal was to highlight the rise of women's history, although this tended to focus on the late 19th and 20th centuries. The identification of the early modern period as a focus of historical interest opened a door to thinking comparatively about the role of women during a time of regional change. The talk ended with comments about the apparent decline of history in the United States and the expectation that the study of the past, so fundamental to national and regional identities, will be maintained in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Southeast Asian Studies, 1960s, early modern history, gender history presentism

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Introduction

Leonard Andaya and I have been an item, you might say, since 1967, and as in so many of our other endeavors, we are sharing our time this this afternoon with you as we talk about how we came to be where we are, and our personal views about developments in the field of Southeast Asian studies. From my perspective, when I look back over the last fifty years, I feel that my career as a historian has been shaped less by my choices than by changes in the academic environment and shifting concerns in society itself, combined with unexpected good fortune. The award of an East-West Center grant, for instance, completely changed the direction of my life, and I owe the Center a great deal. Leonard feels the same about the Fulbright grant that took him to the Netherlands in Fall 1965.

Studying Southeast Asia in the 1960s

A year later, in Fall 1966 when I registered as an East-West Center graduate student in the History Department of the University of Hawai'i, "Southeast Asia" as a field of study was beginning to emerge as a focus of student interest in the United States, with over 184,000 American military personnel deployed to Vietnam. In my incoming class, 150 students signed up for the two semester course on Southeast Asian history, although the professors warned them that they would not begin to touch on modern Vietnam until the spring! Indeed, that first semester introduced me to places I had never heard of Srivijaya, Bagan, Sukhothai, and even Angkor.

Although as a teacher in Sydney I had been charged with teaching 14 year olds about "our neighbors to the north" (i.e. Indonesia), I then had little sense of Southeast Asia as a region. At the University of Hawai'i the history of Southeast Asia was only introduced in 1962, four years before I arrived, with the appointment of Walter Vella, a Thai specialist; in 1965 he was

joined by Professor Robert van Niel, whose field was colonial Indonesia. However, I don't remember any fanfare when the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (then only five members) was founded in 1967. Indeed, at that time any focus on the region as a whole was in its early stages. It's worth remembering that although Cornell had already established a Southeast Asian Studies Program, the primary interest was Indonesia, and that the Philippines had only been included in the standard textbook on Southeast Asia - D.G. E Hall 's A History of Southeast Asia (Hall 1964)- two years before I entered graduate school. In 1967, I was able to spend 12 months as a special student at Cornell (incidentally meeting Leonard in Ruth McVey's "Politics of Southeast Asia" class). With the support of Professor D.G.E. Hall, support for which I will be everlastingly grateful, I gained a scholarship to return to Cornell in Spring 1969 as a Ph.D. candidate in 1969. My engagement with the region had begun in Hawai'i, but intensified at Cornell because of the vitality of the program, the community of students and scholars, the unique academic environment in which Leonard and I were now situated, and the global focus on Southeast Asia as a result of the war in Vietnam.

At the time the Western world still seemed wedded to the domino theory, the belief that if Vietnam fell, Communism would spread through all Southeast Asia. It goes without saying that the ongoing war was uppermost in student concerns, since so many were liable to be drafted. However, Cornell's Southeast Asia Program also had other concerns, as attention focused on the rise of the military in Indonesia and Myanmar, the separation of Singapore and Malaysia, ethnic riots in Malaysia, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. It was natural that the focus of those studying Southeast Asia, including local scholars, was less on promoting a sense of "Southeast Asia-ness" than on the problematic issue of nation building and whether scholarship could contribute to this.

History was invoked as an important tool, and in 1965 the Indonesian scholar Soedjatmoko had lauded “history instruction” as “an important means of training good citizens and developing love and loyalty to one’s own country” (Soedjatmoko 1965). What was needed now, it was felt – especially among Southeast Asians – was an emphasis on successful struggles, especially against colonialism, the movement towards independence, and on the tenacity and leadership that was providing the basis for nationhood. Against this background, I sometimes felt a need to apologize for my own Ph.D. thesis – on the history of the Malay state of Perak in the 18th century, which maintained its independence from incursions by more powerful neighbors only through an alliance with the Dutch (Andaya 1979). Not a particularly popular message at this time!

Studying Countries versus the Region

The research focus on specific countries in Southeast Asia rather than regionality has been remarkably resilient, in part because so much is invested, especially for those who must acquire new languages. The diversity of Southeast Asia that we so proudly proclaim as a hallmark has in many ways made it difficult to follow the maxim of O.W. Wolters – that “comparative studies is the ultimate justification for regional studies” (Wolters 1999). In our own careers, Leonard and I have followed colleagues like Anthony Reid and Victor Lieberman, and have tried to be missionaries for the region as a whole, even though the concept of “region” has come under sharp attack from those who see “Southeast Asia” as a Western and post-colonial construction, or perhaps more kindly, simply a reflection of academic apathy about what to do with the very large area between China and India. I would have thought that the division of the globe into “world areas” would have settled the matter, especially in the United States with the recognition of National Resource Centers in 1958. Even so, one still encounters phrases expressing

reservations, such as “the region we call Southeast Asia.” I don’t want to belabor the point, but thinking regionally remains hard. A book may have “Southeast Asia” on the cover, but when you look at the table of contents, it is often a collection of chapters each dealing with a different country. I have to admit, even in my own teaching I have found it hard to give the singularity of every country due consideration while breaking away from specific cases to discuss issues that are common across the region.

As graduate students in the 1960s, Leonard and I were very much aware of other concerns, including accusations that our field was too “Euro-centric.” Following the seminal articles by John Smail in 1961 and Harry Benda in 1962, we were committed to dispelling the notion that we viewed Southeast Asia (in the words of the Dutch scholar Jacob van Leur) “from the deck of a ship, or the ramparts of a European fortress” (Smail 1961; Benda 1962; Leur 1939). My generation was determined to write histories that put local societies at the forefront, and at Cornell, O.W. Wolters encouraged us to focus on targeted studies in order to understand how events were viewed from a local perspective. This focus on how the world was seen in different contexts, he believed, would provide the building blocks for wider regional generalizations that would come later on.

The heady days of the 1960s did not last. In 1975 the war in Vietnam ended, and in consequence student interest in Southeast Asia began to decline. Area studies as a whole was dealt a body blow with the fallout from Edward Said’s book, *Orientalism* with its trenchant critique of area studies specialists as “orientalists” (Said 1978). The idea that “area studies” was intrinsically useful was increasingly questioned and this resonated among major funding agencies. It became evermore evident that a successful grant application and promising job prospects would be strengthened by addressing questions that were applicable beyond Southeast Asia. Historians had been at the forefront of

arguing for regional approaches to Southeast Asia and for its coherence as a region, but they had always been challenged by the challenges of generalization. While doing justice to the range of difference in the diverse area, they now had to try and insert “Southeast Asia” into the larger field of “world history” which had been initiated in the 1970s by historians who wished to move beyond national and regional approaches.

Where are the Southeast Asians?

The 1980s and 1990s posed new and unsettling questions. While ASEAN strengthened its efforts to promote a sense of regionalism, it was disturbingly evident that academic work in Southeast Asia was still dominated by individuals from outside the region. Southeast Asians themselves were (and still are) aware of these issues one thinks of the book edited by Taufik Abdullah and Yekti Maunati, *Towards the Promotion of Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia*, published in 1994, and nine years later, *New Terrains in Southeast Asian History* edited by Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Liok Ee. Despite the difficulty of access to primary sources that were often in Europe or the United States, and the major challenge of publishing in English, we should note seminal works such as Sartono’s study of the Banten revolt in 1888, published in 1966, Moertono’s *State and Statecraft in Old Java*, (1968), Rey Iletto’s *Pasyon and Revolution* (1979) and Thongchai Winichakul’s *Siam Mapped* (1997). I am just citing a few – the list could go on]. Nonetheless, in 2002 Ariel Heryanto could still ask, “can there be Southeast Asians in Southeast Asian Studies?” (Heryanto 2002). The comparison with South Asia or East Asia is telling, especially in regard to the discipline of history. Certainly, there have been efforts to train historians, not only at home, but also abroad – the monographs that resulted from the TANAP project (Towards a New Age of Partnership) at Leiden University from 2001 to 2006 are particularly memorable, but did not address the thorny issue of generalizing across Southeast Asia.

Herstory

In this regard I would like to turn to my ongoing interests in social history and particularly women's history and gender relationships. Of course, when I entered graduate school there was no field of "women's history" or "gender studies." But as Bob Dylan sang in 1964, "the times they are changing". The 1960s saw the civil rights movement, black rights activism and most memorably the energy of women's liberation. In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, a landmark in women's studies, and three years later, the same year I entered graduate school, she co-founded the National Organization of Women. Through the 1970s and 1980s the influence of the women's movement in academia generated a range of powerful books and essays, such as Joan Kelly's questioning of historical periodization "Did women have a Renaissance?" published in 1977. The United Nations inaugurated the International Decade of Women in 1975 (incidentally, the year I received my PhD) but the pace of female incorporation into academics was slow. In 1970 Cornell was the first Ivy League university to establish a women's studies program, but it did not become an undergraduate major until 1992.

Initially I had no specific interest in this field. For the most part, my life had not been determined by gender, although I went into teaching because my father said, "It's a good job for a woman". Yet as a graduate student I did encounter reservations about the advisability of offering financial support to a female student, and after our marriage in June 1969 there seemed to be an underlying feeling that my academic career would have a short shelf life. In other words, my own experiences helped me think more about women in the past. As we moved into the 21st century I could see the expansion of studies on women in Southeast Asia – usually focusing on specific countries – but this development, though welcome, could be imagined as a mushroom: a good deal

on the top, but with a very weak stalk. How can you think about change if you do not know what you are changing from? The field seemed happy with the generalization that Southeast Asian women had comparatively higher status than other parts of Asia, but this generalization had preceded the case studies which Professor Wolters had believed should come first. At the same time, proponents of global history in the 1990s appeared to “discover” Southeast Asia as a region linking Europe and Asia in a period (roughly 1400-1800) that could now be termed “early modern” – now generally accepted, albeit with some reservations, as preferable to the old “pre-colonial” (which didn’t fit Thailand anyway). Thinking about the multiple ways in which Southeast Asians in the early modern period responded to expanding connections, and how the position of women was changed or how they negotiated new influences seemed to me a topic that could combine the specifics of local developments with the region, with Asia and the Pacific, and with other areas that were brought into unprecedented contact with each other. Even in 1961 the historian Harry Benda had commented that “the social status of women” deserved attention, but the mantra that Southeast Asian women enjoyed high status in comparison to East and South Asia had rarely been evaluated (Benda 1962; Andaya 2006; 2021). Now more than a generation of scholarship has significantly nuanced this picture, preferring phrases such as “a relatively favorable position,” but in a region of such diversity it is still difficult to think laterally and comparatively. Nonetheless, I believe the effort is worthwhile, and welcome the expansion of women’s studies into gender more generally – itself a reflection of the contemporary interest in the many ways in which gender and sexuality can be expressed. Nor is this interest simply of the moment, for it is one of the primary aspects of the human experience

Conclusion

I would like to end by making a few comments about my own discipline, history. The declining support for the humanities in the United States is a matter of record, and the statistics of student enrolment and fewer university positions are disturbing. The dominance of presentism is understandable, but it has resulted in relegating history to a minor position (although one notes the fascination with archaeology). Yet history matters, not least to those whose past is under discussion. I believe that for Southeast Asian societies the study of the past must remain not merely as an indispensable aid to understanding the often deep roots of contemporary issues but of value in its own right. It is thus encouraging to see that most universities in the region do have departments of Southeast Asian studies, and that history is still alive and well. It is in the region, more than anywhere else, that the study of Southeast Asia will be fostered and will always be relevant. New preoccupations, such as the environment and climate change, may drive the histories of the future, serving as a reminder that our understanding of the past reflects our experience of the present, and that these experiences will themselves change in ways we may not yet foresee.

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