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CHAPTER 2

GLOBALIZATION, ASIAN DIASPORAS AND THE STUDY OF SOUTHEAST ASIA IN THE WEST

A CHANGING PERSPECTIVE FROM CALIFORNIA¹

The United States, as I have again been forcibly reminded since moving there in 1999, is even more obsessed with its own concerns than smaller and less prosperous countries. Speaking a language and possessing a currency which are now in great international demand have not, evidently, made the rest of the world more accessible and comprehensible to Americans, but if anything the reverse. The contrast between the global power of U.S. institutions and the parochialism of the U.S. media and electorate never ceases to disturb the visitor or sojourner from other parts. Much therefore rests on the capacity of the formidable American system of tertiary education to correct the inadequacies elsewhere, and to train both specialists and generalists who guide the increasingly global concerns of official and corporate America.

Despite the great variety of U.S. universities, which fortunately includes a traditionally trans-Atlantic orientation in some of the oldest and richest institutions, there is surprising uniformity in the way the study of the non-West is organized. Since the 1960s, the Federal Government has encouraged universities to compete every three years for what are known as Title VI funds, designed to support a handful of "National Resource Centers" for the study of specified parts of the world. Southeast Asia is one such specified area, along with East Asia, South Asia, Latin America, and so forth. This encourages universities to establish centers for each of these areas of study, and to maintain a basic strength in language instruction and across the social and human sciences, so as to be able to compete for these funds. Although some outstanding specialists (including Clifford Geertz, of whom more will be said below) neither studied nor taught at such centers, the area studies enterprise as a whole has been critically important to maintaining a high level of knowledge and competence in the U.S. about the rest of the world.

THE ATTACK ON AREA STUDIES

The last two decades of the twentieth century, however, was a difficult and demoralizing one for American area studies in general, and Southeast Asian Studies in particular. At the crudest level, one could point to the end of the cold war as having removed some of the urgency with which legislators and policy-makers felt it necessary to fund activities that informed America about distant parts of the world. The Title VI funds themselves were under attack, particularly in the Reagan era, and the resources available for Southeast Asian Studies appeared to be on a declining path.

But there were far more profound intellectual reasons for why the current appeared to be moving away from area studies in general in the 1990s.

1. Globalization has had a clear intellectual dimension. The extraordinary rise of English as an Asian *lingua franca* has spawned a literature and discourse that is genuinely global in participation, but centered in the U.S. and Britain as far as publishing goes. The statistical unification of (most of) the world in the form of believable and uniformly coded data assembled by the United Nations and the World Bank was almost equally important for the analysts, and not unconnected with the end of the Cold War. Whether or not the world really has become more unified, the new discourse has been able to make it seem so. The particularity of the Chinese, or Thai, or Russian way of perceiving the world no longer appeared an essential barrier to understanding.
2. As a corollary of this trend, theoretical preoccupations gripped the social sciences and humanities. On the one hand, mathematical models of the comparative performance of different countries and other political actors have taken over economics and political science to a degree where single-country-focused empirical scholars cannot get a job in these U.S. departments. On the other hand, a dominant element within post-colonial and cultural studies made theory, the reworking of colonial texts, and personal introspection more valid concerns in much humanities training than the mastering of difficult languages and the crossing of cultural barriers.
3. Finally, there was enough self-doubt among the community of U.S. area specialists to make their counterattack a rather feeble one. Edward Said's (1985) unfortunate choice of title, "Orientalism," for the kind of essentializing, of the other in the name of romanticism and domination, which he wished to attack, appears to have had the (perhaps unintended) effect of discrediting a great tradition of linguistic and cultural analysis, particularly in contrast with the generally monolingual theoretical trends described above. In the case of Southeast Asian Studies, the very concept was surprisingly widely accepted in the U.S. (in contrast to Australia, Japan, or Europe) as somehow a product of cold war thinking – "conceptually implicated in the global realpolitik of US foreign policy interests" (Steedly 1999, 434).²

Perhaps the severest outward indication in the U.S. of these trends against area studies was the decision of the Social Science Research Council in the early 1990s to move away from its forty-year-old emphasis on an area basis for its extensive channeling of foundation funds to graduate students and scholars. This move was strongly contested and eventually modified, and by 1998 the SSRC Board was denying any intention to abolish area studies from its program. Nevertheless, the 1990s probably marked the most dangerous time for the whole concept of area studies in the United States.

THE PARLOUS STATE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

Southeast Asia specialists themselves have been the first to announce the fragility, and even the dubious validity, of their field. At a 1990 Conference called by the Ford and Luce foundations to discuss what was seen as an alarming decline in the field, this kind of pessimism was palpable. The most celebrated of the gathered Southeast Asianists announced that “no very convincing intellectual case has been made for the field, which continues to rest on visibly shaky foundations” (Anderson 1992, 31). Particularly in America, there was an understandable self-doubt of this kind on the part of what might be called the second generation of Southeast Asianists (appointed in the booming 1960s) as they saw students desert their field in the 1970s and 1980s. That same 1990 conference documented effectively the thirteen percent decline in the number of professional Southeast Asianists between 1978 and 1988,³ the ageing in their ranks, and the tendency for graduate study on the region in that period to become a matter of Southeast Asian nationals writing about their own country in a U.S. university—usually not one specializing in the region (Hirschman 1992).

The intense controversies of the Vietnam War period had attracted huge classes at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. As the war ended, however, the mood in U.S. universities was to turn right away from this dark and divisive engagement. The best of those who had completed dissertations on the modern history or politics of Indochina after the downturn—David Marr, David Chandler, Alexander Woodside, Milton Osborne, John Whitmore, Carl Thayer—found refuge in Australia or Canada, or eked out an existence outside of the formal academic network.

Offsetting to some extent this extraordinary swing of the pendulum against anything related to the Vietnam War was the prominence of Clifford Geertz in U.S. cultural anthropology. It has been remarked that thanks to Geertz, some knowledge of Java and Bali was as much a reference point for cultural anthropologists as the French revolution was to historians (Steadly 1999, 432, citing D. Segal). From the time that the U.S. began withdrawing from Vietnam, around 1971, Anthropology replaced Political Science in the U.S. as the most popular discipline for those doing fieldwork in Southeast Asia. In the period between 1975 and 1995, more than one-third of dissertations on the region by U.S. nationals were in Anthropology. (Emmerson 1984, 15-16; Reid 1994, 269-70). Most of these were not written in Southeast Asia Centers, however, and the tendency of many anthropologists to learn the local dialect in the field site rather than the national language in area-specific academic institutions meant that anthropologists were less reliably part of the area studies enterprise than historians and political scientists had been.

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