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EDITORIAL

Some Thoughts on Social Science Research: 50 Years of Engagement in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

The paper briefly discusses the merits of multidisciplinary-based studies as against disciplinary perspectives in relation to Southeast Asia. It suggests that the main conceptual innovations and established methodological approaches derive from academic disciplines. There is then a sequential series of reflections on changing priorities in the sociological study of Southeast Asia which plots the movement from those concerns which derived from 'classical' Western-based sociology and certain key ideas which emerged from those concerns, and a more recent shift to interest in the concepts of culture and identity. The paper illustrates this shift in describing one of the possible autobiographical routeways to the encounter with culture.

Keywords: changing sociological perspectives, classical concepts, culture, identity, Southeast Asia.

I am delighted to have been asked to present some introductory remarks on the launch of the new journal *Horizon* with its focus on the humanities and social sciences. It is now a highly competitive world in academic publishing, and almost every month another journal in the humanities and social sciences appears on the Internet. The global publication regime, dominated by a relatively small number of Western-based multinational corporate publishers, which sets the rules, exerts control over the process of getting published, and primarily publishes in English, also places many academic authors in a subordinate and dependent position (Cohen, Cohen and King, 2018). A further worrying development is the rapidly increasing number of predatory journals, very many with the inclusion of the terms 'International' or 'Global' in their titles, which, among other practices, charge fees for the publication of articles and operate a relatively light-touch reviewing system (Beall, 2019). *Horizon* styles itself an open access journal and is committed to publishing two issues a year. It has instituted a stringent double-blind peer-review process and does not impose charges on authors to publish in the journal. It has ambitions to secure Scopus listing in the next two years. There is still room for journals of this kind.

It has been suggested that I provide some thoughts on my experiences in undertaking research in the humanities and social sciences, in my case in relation to the Southeast Asian region. I was fortunate to have been educated and then to become engaged in a multidisciplinary environment in the United Kingdom, first of all, embracing geography, sociology and social and cultural anthropology, and then in addition to these disciplines, working with colleagues in economics, history, politics, international relations, language and literature. There were certain advantages in seeing subjects of research from different perspectives and bringing together colleagues from across disciplines in collaborative and comparative research projects. However, I have consistently argued, at least on the basis of my own work, that research should be based on a strong disciplinary core of theoretical literature and on disciplinary-based training in methodology. In all my research and publications, even though I have addressed historical, geographical, political and economic issues, I have always seen myself primarily as a sociologist-anthropologist. More recently there have been lively debates in Southeast Asian Studies on whether the field of area studies has developed distinctive methodologies and perspectives. My position is one of scepticism.

The connected issue of the contribution of area studies to theoretical innovation is a rather more vexed one. My position has been that methodological and conceptual development has been located firmly in disciplinary contexts and there is little evidence that it derives, or has the potential to derive from multidisciplinary approaches in a regional context. I am sure these debates will continue. A related set of discussions in which I have been involved has focused on the problem of defining regions in the era of globalisation and whether or not, in an increasingly interconnected world, the enterprise of area studies has a rationale and justification. On this matter, I think the study of regions does have a place, but we will continue to argue about what constitutes a region (which is a particularly acute problem in relation to Southeast Asia) when we are increasingly concerned with cross-border and transnational movements of people, goods, capital, information, ideas and images.

Let me now turn to the sociology and anthropology of Southeast Asia and how my concerns have changed during the past half-century since I became involved in advanced research on the region. After focusing in my early work, which was in traditional anthropological mode, on rather more localised and country-based issues, particularly in Malaysia and Indonesia, from the 1990s onwards I began to turn my attention to the wider region in sole-authored and co-authored books and papers and then in a series of sole- and co-edited books. I will focus on one of these projects.

In the early part of 2007 I managed finally to complete a manuscript entitled *The Sociology of Southeast Asia. Transformations in a Developing Region* which appeared with NIAS Press and University of Hawai'i Press in hardback and paperback (2008). The book focused heavily on Western sociology and to some extent anthropology in the work of the major nineteenth- and twentieth century theorists: Karl Marx and Max Weber; with regard to the study of imperialism Nikolai Bukharin, Rosa Luxemburg, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (Lenin) and Rudolf Hilferding; in addressing the historical sociology of W.F. (Wim) Wertheim and the Dutch school in Amsterdam; in engaging with the wide-ranging German sociology of Hans-Dieter Evers and his colleagues; and also deploying the vibrant sociology of development and underdevelopment and the world systems perspective of Andre Gunder Frank, Immanuel Wallerstein among many others. I also considered early American contributions in what came to be called 'modernisation theory' (primarily Walt Rostow, Samuel Huntington, Manning Nash, S. N. Eisenstadt, and, in a more eclectic and complex way, Clifford Geertz). In addition, the insights of political-economists excited my attention: early on John S. Furnivall and rather later the Australian-based trio: Richard Robison, Kevin Hewison and Garry Rodan. Finally, I examined critically the 'autonomous' history approach, and 'history from below' of such writers as Jacob van Leur, James C. Scott, Benedict J. Kerkvliet, Michael Adas, and the 'alternative discourses' perspective of Syed Hussein Alatas, Syed Farid Alatas, and many other committed Southeast Asian scholars. The concepts which exercised me, and others, at that time were rather restricted, including dualism/dual society, pluralism/plural society, involution, moral economy. The subjects which I ranged over included modernisation, underdevelopment and dependency, social class and the state, ethnicity and society, patronage and corruption, gender and changing work patterns, urban transformations, Asian values and social change, and a brief glimpse at the relations between modernisation and globalisation.

Looking back on this book and related papers much of it does seem rather old-fashioned. Nevertheless, I had worked on this project off and on for some years, going back to the early 1980s, but as it progressed, if that is the appropriate way of describing my writing process, it became very clear to me that there is a very substantial literature in what I refer to as 'the sociology of culture', which I could not include in that volume because of the word-length constraints given by the publisher. I owe the sociology of culture perspective to my mentor from the early 1970s, John Clammer, who brought together his interests in political economy and modernisation in Southeast Asia with those from cultural studies (2002). Another major influence in cultural studies in Southeast Asia was clearly Joel Kahn (1995).

The developing focus on culture emerged especially from the 1980s with the increasing interest in 'posts': post-modernism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, post-Orientalism and the multidisciplinary enterprise of cultural studies in its preoccupations with the dramatic and expanding impact of the global media and information technology on developing societies. A major preoccupation was with the Foucault-Derrida-Lacan-derived relationship between power and knowledge, the all-consuming passion among increasing numbers of people for consumption in late capitalism, and in the enormous opportunities for cross-cultural encounters in diasporas, international labor migration, business travel and tourism. To gain a flavour of the somewhat convoluted discourse of post-structuralist and post-colonialist debates and the problems of applying Western theories to Asian cultures then we need go no further than Peter Jackson's penetrating work on Thai culture (2004, 2005) and his

encounters with post-structuralists like Rosalind Morris (2000).

In Southeast Asia specifically these cultural interests flourished in the more recent concerns among social scientists with what I have still tended to refer to in rather die-hard mode as 'ethnicity', and with what has come to be called increasingly and in a much more expanded and all-encompassing cultural studies sense 'identity' or 'cultural identity'. Although I am not greatly enthusiastic about the 'posts', I decided that I needed to steel myself and plunge into what is often, for me at least, an occasionally rewarding yet decidedly turgid and dense literature. It frequently requires the same kind of efforts of translation into simple and straightforward English which C. Wright Mills undertook on behalf of Talcott Parsons (the latter's style of exposition I have always referred to as the 'Parsonian jungle') (1959); and the writings of the post-modernists and post-structuralists are often equally luxuriant and impenetrable. Stanislav Andrewski makes the same point about the impenetrable style adopted by senior sociologists and their acolytes in his characterisation of social science 'as sorcery' (1972). In my defense in my early preoccupations with social structure and the social, I did not entirely neglect culture, or what I understand by the concept of culture; it surfaces in chapters in my sociology book on ethnicity and Asian values especially.

Therefore, I think I can claim that I have embraced 'culture' from an early age, but not entirely consciously nor in a systematic way; I suppose I thought that it was not a comfortable concept with which to work. I am reminded of Chris Jenks' laudable attempt to get to grips with the concept when he proposed that 'culture' is one of the most crucial, though overworked, and indeed 'complicated', 'complex', 'controversial' and 'divergent' concepts in the social sciences (1993). Given its status as a focal point of interest, it has quite naturally been the subject of the most intense debates and disagreements. In debates about what culture is, as an intellectual construct (or more specifically elements of it are), we have to address arguments that it is malleable and fluid in that it is produced or constructed, deconstructed, invented, reinvented, reproduced, modified, discarded, lost, contemplated, inherited, disseminated, adopted, assimilated, absorbed, used, deployed, manipulated, elaborated, displayed, commoditized, exchanged, and transformed.

My main route to culture in a rather subdued and unrealised way was through a developing interest in tourism and heritage in Southeast Asia from the early 1990s, though I continued in parallel my engagement with issues of ethnicity and identity. Then, reflecting on the more anthropological side of my academic personality, bearing in mind that I was trained in British social anthropology, I began to tease out what I was thinking about culture in those formative years (not in any systematic, coordinated, or coherent fashion) from my more 'traditional' anthropological phase in Indonesian Borneo in the early 1970s. Eventually I wrote a general book on *The Peoples of Borneo* (1993), which clearly promoted the notion of a Borneo cultural area.

My first period of field research in the early 1970s tended to treat culture as a means to delineate the communities in which I was interested at the time and draw boundaries around them as ethnic groups, and, although I had the framework more or less handed to me (1985), I suppose I was also attracted subsequently to the utility of the notion of 'a culture area' in my general book on Borneo (1993). Grant Evans experienced a similar attraction in his attempts to understand the Tai-speaking sub-regions of mainland Southeast Asia (1999). To continue in this vein, my later co-edited book with Michael Hitchcock on images of Malay-Indonesian identity (1997a), then explored some of the issues, particularly in Indonesia, raised by what we then called 'images' of national, regional and local Malay-Indonesian identities and the interactions between these different expressive levels or layers of identity; we felt that it was especially important to examine how citizens and constituent groups of a nation-state attempt to come to terms with and respond to national level projects of identity formation (1997b). Since then, in revisiting my earlier field research and in response to my critics, I have adopted a much more open-ended and contingent notion of culture and identity. This shift in perspective has also been especially evident in my recent collaborative research on tourism and cultural change in Southeast Asia, particularly now in Thailand in my engagement with Erik Cohen's exemplary and pioneering studies (King, 2018).

In any case I think a general and comparative excursion into the field of culture and identity in Southeast Asia, building to some degree on John Clammer's work, is long overdue and whereas in my first sociology book I focused on the broad sweep of Southeast Asian history and examined in some detail the colonial period and its aftermath in terms of the notions of underdevelopment and dependency among others, I am now primarily concerned with the post-war period in the Southeast Asian region and the cultural effects and processes of modernisation and globalisation and 'identities in motion'. I am also attempting to reflect the dynamic, shifting and fluid character of

cultural identity in a comparative way, analyse culture as process, and as an arena of conflict, contestation and negotiation in the context of cultural politics, and the relationship between the 'cultural' and the 'social'. However, recognising the problematical nature of comparison in the social sciences I think that I have chosen safer ground by confining myself to 'restricted comparisons' between neighbouring cases within one particular part of Asia (King, 2016).

The framework with which I am now attempting to understand Southeast Asia is through the concept of 'identities in motion' and to examine these in a range of circumstances: identities, nations and ethnicities; globalization and identities; the media, communication and identities; identities, consumerism and the middle class; tourism encounters and identities; gender and sexual identities; migration, diaspora and identities. I am reminded of the important observation of Zygmunt Bauman that we have now shifted from concerns with political economy, as I have done in my research, towards an understanding of the centrality of culture in post-modern society so that power, influence and control operate in more subtle ways through advertising, public relations and the creation of needs and longings by those who generate and control flows of information and knowledge (1998). Michel Foucault's concept of 'discourse' and the role of knowledge, ideas, images and cultural categories in exercising control, regulation and domination over others is also part of this perspective in that people deal in cultural capital and use it in social and political strategies (1977). As a regional specialist I think it vital to understand in comparative terms these different dimensions of identity construction, maintenance and transformation.

As I final few points in conveying my warm best wishes for the success of the journal, I hope that this new venture will attract 'reflexive' papers, those which are boldly comparative and move across boundaries, those which debate current concepts which enable us to understand our 'world on the move' and a world that is moving ever faster. What has disappointed me in a significant number of papers which I have recently reviewed for journals, though these are mainly Asian regional journals, is that they only provide useful empirical, case-study material, and some read like feasibility studies (which is what, I suppose, was the purpose of their research and the funding support they received). But there is little sign of any conceptual development, comparative vision and engagement with wider literatures, and there is a rather burdensome preoccupation with quantitative methods, questionnaire surveys, statistical manipulations, and commentaries on tabulated material. I am not suggesting that the route I have taken in my academic career is the one to take, nor is it probably typical, but I think researchers should be willing to grasp new opportunities and fields of research, however risky. A recent edited book project in which I am involved on 'fieldwork and the self' in Southeast Asia focuses on research errors, misinterpretations, mishaps, confessions, secrecy, the unexpected, chance encounters, personal engagements in liminal fields, conceptual dead-ends, shifting research pathways and improvised itineraries. I do hope the new journal attracts interesting, bold and innovative papers

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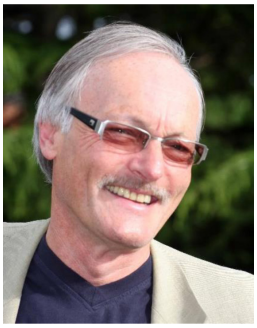

Emeritus Professor Victor T. King

Victor King has been teaching and undertaking research in the sociology and anthropology of Southeast Asia since the early 1970s when he completed his Master's degree at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, in anthropology, geography and Indonesian Studies, and then undertook field research in Kalimantan, Indonesia for his doctoral degree in social anthropology at the University of Hull. Most of his career was spent in the Centre for South-East Asian Studies and the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at the University of Hull. He was appointed to a Senior Lectureship there in 1988 and immediately thereafter to the re-established Chair in Southeast Asian Studies (from 1988 to 2005). At various times, he served in Hull as Director of the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Dean of the School of Social and Political Sciences, Director of the University's Graduate School and Pro-Vice-Chancellor. He joined the University of Leeds in 2005 as Professor of Southeast Asian Studies and became Executive Director of the White Rose East Asia Centre (WREAC) in 2006. He was awarded the title of Emeritus Professor in the School of Modern Languages, Cultures and Societies in 2010. In 2012-2013 he was Eminent Visiting Professor at the Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam (IAS-UBD), then in 2015 a Distinguished Visiting Fellow and from 2017 Professor of Borneo Studies at IAS-UBD. From 2014 to 2016 he was Adjunct Professor at the Regional Center for Sustainable Development (RCSD), Chiang Mai University, and then Senior Editorial Adviser from 2016 to 2019 at RCSD.