Received legacies for research and publication
Before we may speak of ‘new types of scholars’ or ‘new scholarship’, I wish to begin with a survey of two regimes that have been inherited. First, without discounting the heartfelt passion, devotion and intrinsic motivation of individual scholars for the pursuit of knowledge, one may note that the underlying motivations for the patronage of European scholarship on Asia in the preceding centuries lay in the utility of such knowledge for European imperialism and epistemological control. The ‘old regime’ on scholarship on Southeast Asia was generated by institutions founded to serve and augment the administration and management of various colonial territories. They remain vital today.

Scholarship was also generated through the exploration and record of peoples and languages for evangelism by various European and American religious groups. These centres of knowledge production and archiving, and their journals and published works, continue to shape and influence scholarship on Southeast Asia. The Siam Society and its journal founded in 1904 under royal patronage in Bangkok is the notable exception of Southeast Asia that was ultimately modelled after the antiquarian societies of European colonial powers and is in fact linked to Siam’s own imperial ambitions in the Southeast Asian mainland and its anxiety to democratise its parity with European imperial powers. From the 1940s to the 1980s, a second regime emerged, with North American and Australian universities joining European ones in developing centres or programs on Southeast Asia connected to strategic foreign policy imperatives. Benedict Anderson observed acerbically the contrast between the ‘entrepreneurial’ North American university researcher and the ‘unhurried’ European colonial civil servant-scholar, both of whom were creatures of their respective ‘ecologies’.1 Significantly, Anderson does not discuss any other ‘ecology’ beyond these.

Both European colonial and Cold War North American scholarship regimes shape Western scholars producing research with utility for Western knowledge consumers, at times within their national contexts. Yet, both legacies for research and publication shape contemporary scholarship in powerful and fundamental ways. Recent trends in promotion and tenure assessment for Asian universities based on American modes of knowledge validation through academic journal publication have renewed the power of both regimes of knowledge production.

It is these traditions, in English (and to a limited extent, other European languages) and refuted by Euro-American institutions, which form the received modes of scholarly enquiry, academic validation, career advancement, and familial inheritance. Alternative discursive domains and traditions of scholarship remain very limited even today – and language medium and milieu play an important role in determining their usage. We need only recall that while J.C. van Leer’s dissertation of 1934, with its well-known observations, destabilised not merely the epistemological assumptions but also the ontological bases of knowledge about Southeast Asia, its fundamental revision gained wider recognition only after an English translation of his thesis had been published in 1955.1 His critique was then supplemented by those from Anglophone scholars such as John Smail calling for ‘autonomous histories’ in 1966.2 Likewise, influential critiques by Asian scholars such as Arjan Appadurai and Lila Abu-Lughod of tropes and lenses inherited from colonial scholarship in anthropology were written in English. English-language Asian scholarship has largely remained the preserve of groups that have not only mastered and appropriated the language – notably those from former British colonies such as India and the Straits Settlements at Penang, Malacca and Singapore – but also have particularly sought to question inherited ways of seeing and discussing Asia or the ‘Orient’ and, further, explored new ontological terrains that expose the limitations of categories central to the discipline.

The lack of any sustained scholarship in English among former colonies of France and the Netherlands in Southeast Asia should be considered against the rupture from inherited colonial educational legacies. These former colonial languages – French and Dutch – have a much-reduced utility as mediums of scholarly communication in the relevant former Southeast Asian colonies today. It is revealing too that the Bjørgvin has opted to use English since 1948.3 One may contrast Indonesia with the Philippines in this respect. Their former colonial languages, Dutch and American English respectively (notwithstanding the Philippines’ earlier Hispanicisation), enjoy vastly different fates in international academia today. While Asian Studies, issued by Manila’s Asian Centre at the University of the Philippines Diliman, has enjoyed continuous publication in English since 1963, the University of Indonesia’s Wacana, begun in 1999 as a bilingual journal for the humanities, in Bahasa Indonesia and English, chose in 2010 to use English exclusively. Gajah Mada University Press stands out in this regard – beginning in the 1950s, and particularly from the 1970s, it has published a number of English-language books despite belonging to a non-English-speaking milieu.

Pioneering ‘new scholars’ – PhD holders in the early post-independence milieu
Asian intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century were internationally-mobile individuals well-aware of their shared colonial predicament and attuned to the socio-political developments elsewhere4 – and they were mainly autodidacts. Subsequently, a different generation of intellectual circles emerged, who underwent further formal education in Western universities leading to higher degrees. A parallel transition took place in Southeast Asia. Willem Wolters conducted his doctoral research at SOAS in 1961, under the supervision of D.G.E. Hall, who had an MA in English History. Hall’s entry into Southeast Asian scholarship began when the British government despatched him to assume the Chair of History for a newly-created University of Rangoon (Yangon) to continue to referee and shape scholarship on Southeast Asia. The Soem Soemarjo Society and its journal founded in 1904 under royal patronage in Bangkok is the notable exception of Southeast Asia that was ultimately modelled after the antiquarian societies of European colonial powers and is in fact linked to Siam’s own imperial ambitions in the Southeast Asian mainland and its anxiety to democratise its parity with European imperial powers.

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Notwithstanding reservations about generalising across regions, in this discussion I consider the notion of ‘new Asia scholars’ in connection with Southeast Asia. I look at two possible assumptions: either that new types of scholars have emerged that change the circumstances for knowledge production, or that new scholarship among Southeast Asian scholars may change or challenge the forms of knowledge produced about the region, I discuss both angles in relation to old and emerging regimes of knowledge production and their engagement with society.

Imran bin Tajudeen

Koentjaraningrat


As a journalist he was critical of the Suharto regime; he served the Department of Information and Publicity of Indonesia (UI) in 1951. His students, known as the so-called ‘Berkeley mafia’, received doctorates or masters in economics in the US by the late early 1960s, under a cooperative agreement with UC Berkeley facilitated by the Ford Foundation, and served Indonesia through public office or civil service. Strikingly, in this early post-independence period, academic programs in the US attracted, sponsored or courted the key Indonesian scholars. Koentjaraningrat, independent Indonesia’s pioneer anthropologist, was a bright scholar who studied at Yale before returning to Indonesia for his PhD at UI in 1958, in 1974 Utrecht University bestowed upon him an honorary causa doctoris. He founded the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) in 1964, while his students headed Departments in various universities across Indonesia. Deliar (Muhammad Zubair) Noer (PhD Cornell 1963) taught in Jakarta for seven years before being sacked in 1974 just before delivering a lecture on ‘Participation in Development’, which the Suharto regime deemed seditious, and thereafter held a number of English-language books despite belonging to a non-English-speaking milieu.

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Koentjaraningrat

Indonesian scholars also founded the important think-tank LP3ES in 1971, which continues to produce academic publications and journals today. Meanwhile, the Singapore Planning and Urban Research (SPUR) Group was founded in 1965, but was disbanded by the state in 1975. Both academic think-tanks saw a mission in critiquing state planning schemes and in contributing alternative visions to policy. Both also achieved a number of fruitful outcomes.

K.S. Jomo, an economist from Malaysia (MPA and PhD Harvard, 1974, 1982) represents the following generation of Southeast Asian PhD-holders who taught, engaged in social activism, and founded a think tank for social analysis (NSAH) in his homeland before later assuming a role in the UN. His very name Jomo Kwame was fashioned by his father, who was also an economist, after the anti-colonial first presidents of Kenya and Ghana. Between his Masters and PhD, Jomo taught at USM Penang and also Yale and Harvard, before teaching in the University of Malaya from 1984 to 2004, during which time he also assumed visiting positions in Cambridge, Cornell, and Asia Research Institute (ARI) in NUS. Since 2005 he has served the UN in various capacities. As befits his generation, Jomo maintains his own website: www.jomo.ws.

New scholarship and post-bureaucratic frameworks? The early post-independence milieu was concerned with the "two American peculiarities", namely the "theory market in the academic marketplace" and "the link of theory to public policy". Scholarship with a concern for social engagement must now operate beyond and in spite of the contemporary shift of Asian universities towards this American "academic marketplace" model. A new scholarship for Asia would also utilise not only the colonial written archives but also the living archive in its midst, through a dialectical relationship between researcher and community - with the latter as source of information and feedback, and the former performing the duty to inform and serving as a source of informed critique. To generate critical and socially-engaged scholarship, new avenues must be paved for forums involving the general public and institutions so that research may reflect concerns rooted in the locality studied, and for debates that engage Western scholarship and local circles of knowledge. These ideas can radically change the ontological basis for knowledge production, and have informed my public engagements since 2011. They align with the idea of the open university, and simultaneously involve direct encounters with, and field documentation of, foundational, embodied knowledge that cannot be accessed via written archives, may not fit received conceptual frameworks, or defy immediate distillation into theoretical discussions. These ideas resound with Dell Upton’s ‘cultural landscape’ approach to architecture and urban history, and the notion of the ‘flipped academic’ where publication is delayed in favour of community engagement.

This year I was named ‘Most Promising New Civil Society Advocate’ for my sustained effort at public engagement and fieldwork on Singapore urban heritage and place histories. But these efforts take time and energy from work that adds to the academic publications record. Asian universities, particularly in Singapore, are currently driven to align with the ‘academic marketplace’ mould for international ranking. There is presently no motivation for universities to consider alternative grounds for assessment. If scholars must pander to the quick-turnover, theory-driven requirements of the ‘academic marketplace’ regime, to the detriment of public engagement or long-term fieldwork, new scholarship and innovative teaching is thwarted – especially for areas of study that concern cultural landscapes connected with a living milieu, and that derive academic renewal precisely from sustained advocacy and painstaking, time-consuming foundational groundwork.

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