



Review Article

Conceptualising Culture, Identity and Region: Recent Reflections on Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

Debates concerning the definition of Southeast Asia as a region are intense and on-going, and the delimitation and rationale for regional analysis have become increasingly problematical in the era of globalisation. Southeast Asia is characterised, though not clearly and unequivocally defined by cultural diversity and openness. It has a long history of cultural connections with other parts of the world and it demonstrates the importance of physical migrations and cultural flows into, across and out of the region, which have generated cross-cultural encounters and social intercourse, with the Indian sub-continent, East Asia, the Middle East, Europe and the Americas. These interactions have in turn resulted in cultural hybridisation, synthesis and mixed or *mestizo* communities, the phenomena of pluralism and multiculturalism within national boundaries, and in the co-existence of culturally different majority and minority populations. The processes of cultural differentiation and interaction have made Southeast Asia one of the most culturally complex regions in the world and have complicated the process of regional definition. In spite of these cultural complexities, there are those who have argued that it is 'the ubiquity of publicly displayed cultural forms' and the fact that Southeast Asia is 'arguably the best place to look for culture' which serves to define it as a region. The centrality of culture in the definition of this region will be explored and it is proposed that the conceptualisation of the relationship between culture and identity might be a way forward in addressing these regional complexities.

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INTRODUCTION

This review brings together a compilation of ideas related to culture, identity and region with reference to Southeast Asia; it comprises reflections on what has been happening in this field during the past decade. When the author was engaged in the writing of *The Sociology of Southeast Asia: Transformations in a Developing Region* (King, 2008, [2011]), which was primarily an exercise in historical, structural, political-economic and comparative analysis within a regional context, it became clear that there was a substantial literature in what can appropriately be labelled ‘the sociology of culture’, including the complex interrelationship between culture and identity, which could not be included in that volume. It seemed difficult to accommodate it within the particular tradition in which the book was located at that time, which had been inspired by the Dutch school of Non-Western Sociology founded and developed by W.F. Wertheim and continued by Otto van den Muijzenburg and researchers at the University of Amsterdam (see, for example, Wertheim, 1964, 1967, 1974, 1993).

The cultural turn in sociology had 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, preoccupied with the dramatic and expanding impact of the global media, and communication and information technology on developing societies. A major inspiration for these intellectual developments

were Foucault-Derrida-Lacan-derived relationship between power and knowledge, the all-consuming passion among increasing numbers of people for consumption in late capitalism, the emergence of cultural politics and an engagement with the enormous opportunities for cross-cultural encounters in diasporas, international labour migration, the movement of refugees and asylum seekers, business travel and global tourism (Jenks, 1993, pp.136-158; and see Clammer, 2002, pp.9-12; Goh, 2002a, pp.21-28, 2002b; Kahn, 1995; and Turner, 1990).

Although the author is not an enthusiastic supporter of post-modern and post-structuralist fashions (see, for example, Jackson, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005), the importance for social scientists of coming to terms with the concept of culture has to be acknowledged, and specifically for those scholars interested in understanding culture within a Southeast Asian regional context. In Southeast Asia, these cultural interests have flourished in the recent concerns among social scientists with what is often referred to as ‘ethnicity’ (King & Wilder, 1982; and see Brown, 1994; and for Asia, see Mackerras, 2003), 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’ (see, for example, Kahn, 1998). In its full-blown modes, post-modernism and post-structuralism, though variegated, frequently require the same kind of efforts of translation into a simple and straightforward English language which, in an earlier sociological excursion, C.

Wright Mills undertook on behalf of Talcott Parsons (Mills, 1959, pp.25-33). Stanislaw Andrewski makes the same point with regard to Parsonian sociology about the impenetrable style adopted by some post-war senior sociologists and their acolytes in his characterisation of social science 'as sorcery' (1972). As a more recent example, James Goodman's work has been selected at random in the author's general reading on globalisation; the concluding pages of his chapter on 'the new inequalities' in Asia Pacific demonstrate a similar kind of linguistic density, comprising expressions such as 'reciprocal and reflexive mobilisations', 'resistance identities', 'the capacity to reground the public realm', 'transformative project identities', 'liberal hegemonism', 'transversal solidarity', 'disrupting disembodied liberalism', 'alternative normative foundations', and 'an enveloping politicisation of hegemonism and the agents of new constitutionalism' (2003, pp.46-47). It is doubtful that most university undergraduate students would begin to comprehend this barrage of opaque and concentrated concepts, yet, in spite of this lack of clarity the author recognises there is something in post-modernism that requires attention.

Although there is a chapter in the author's book *The Sociology of Southeast Asia* (2008, [2011]) on 'Ethnicity and Society' and another on the 'Asian values' debate, as well as references to identities in the context of changing class, gender and urban relations, insufficient attention was devoted to a comparative study of the

development and transformation of complex and shifting identities across Southeast Asia. In the present author's book there was a failure to embark on any sustained sociological consideration of the burgeoning literature on the effects of and responses to globalisation, consumerism, the media, migrations and tourist encounters (see for example, King, 2013, pp.167-180, 2015, pp.497-527). With regard to this failure there had to be an acceptance of the very persuasive case which has been made in a Southeast Asian and wider Asian context for the integration of perspectives from cultural studies with political economy analyses in understanding a region (Clammer, 2002, p.11; and see Ollier & Winter, 2006; Reynolds, 2006). Furthermore, the concern to locate cultural studies, following Stuart Hall, within the histories and legacies of colonialism in the post-1945 developing world should also be addressed (see Morley & Chen, 1996, pp.10-13).

My current commitment to promote the study of 'identities in motion' in a regional context is designed to rescue my earlier excursions into the sociology of Southeast Asia in an attempt to comprehend the dynamic, shifting, fluid, open-ended and contingent character of cultural identity. Regional analysis necessarily involves a comparative approach, but in my view, it requires a more loosely formulated notion of comparison or 'apt illustration', or 'inter-referencing' and affinities' in order to reveal the social and cultural characteristics of Southeast Asia and the social and cultural processes at work there (see, for example,

Chua, 2014; Bêteille, 1990). In recognising the problematic nature of comparison in the social sciences, I believe we are on safer ground by confining ourselves to 'restricted comparisons' rather than indulging in such bold exercises that entail comparison across Asia as conducted by Aat Vervoorn (2002). In Vervoorn's attempt to cast light on social, cultural, political, economic and demographic changes across Asia, he fails to give any precision to what he means by Asia other than that it embraces the Middle East through Central Asia to East Asia and includes Southeast Asia. He undertakes an impossible task.

THE DEFINITION OF SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE PROBLEM OF AREAS

Attempts to define Southeast Asia as a region in its own right and studies on the related multidisciplinary field of Southeast Asian Studies have intensified during the past decade; sometimes debates and discussions are confined to Southeast Asia, and at other times the region is located in broader discussions of Asia and Asia-Pacific (see King, 2014; Goh, 2011a, 2011b, 2014). The intensification of these concerns appears to be generated by five main concerns (see Ludden, 2000; Miyoshi & Harootunian, 2002; Morris-Suzuki, 2000; Szanton, 2004; Waters, 2000). They are:

- 1) The relative decline in interest in regional studies in the West specifically with regard to such regions as Southeast Asia, as a result of increasing scepticism of the ability or need to demarcate regions in the era of globalisation;
- 2) In pedagogical and financial terms the decline in student interest in the value of regional studies and learning other languages, and the decrease in government funding for area studies;
- 3) A questioning of the theoretical and methodological contribution and robustness of area studies approaches;
- 4) Criticisms of Euro-American-centric perspectives in area studies, particularly with regard to Asia, the colonial and Orientalist roots of the study and demarcation of regions, and the assumed continuation of Western academic hegemony;
- 5) The continuing problematic relationships between social science disciplines, as the proper generators of 'universalising' theories and appropriate methodologies, and the localising, grounded concerns of area specialists.

That these debates and trends should be qualified in that the so-called 'crisis' in area studies remain patchy; there has been decline in some countries and institutions and expansion in others. Not all areas of the globe have experienced a decline, even in Western academic institutions where there has been a noticeable decrease in the attention to such regions as Southeast Asia and South Asia, there is still considerable and increasing interest in such regions as East Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe and Russia. There are strong advocates of an area studies approach and its scholarly value whereby they persist in arguing the

case for context-specific, locally sensitive and grounded research.

The preoccupation with the definition of Southeast Asia wider Asia and the importance of area studies escalated dramatically from the early 2000s through to the present time with publication of edited books (accompanied by numerous journal articles, for example, Evans 2002; Jackson 2003a, 2003b; Burgess 2004; Kuijper 2008; Schäfer 2010), though we can discern the interest to provide substance and essence to Southeast Asia well before then (see for example, Fifield, 1976, 1983), which continued through the 1980s (see, for example, Emmerson, 1984) and through the 1990s (see for example, McVey, 1995; Reid, 1999).

More recently, there have been studies that point to certain socio-cultural, historical and geographical characteristics which enable us to differentiate Southeast Asia from other parts of Asia (Winzeler, 2011; Osborne, 2013; Reid, 2015). Indeed, in the writing of a general book on Southeast Asia, there is a requirement and a necessary compulsion to identify and define the area within which the subject matter, debates and themes are being presented.

There have been some prominent Southeast Asian scholars who have proposed a different pathway from the attempt to essentialise Southeast Asia namely replacing the 'old' Euro-American-dominated Southeast Asian Studies with something 'new' which is based on local scholarship, interests, agendas and priorities and on 'alternative', Asian-constructed discourses,

though with some recognition of the need to continue scholarly engagement with the West (Goh, 2011a, 2011b; Heryanto, 2002, 2007; and see Sears, 2007).

There are also those who contend that there have been significant theoretical developments generated in the study of Southeast Asia, and that the region should be seen as an 'epicentre' for scholarly innovation within the context of 'centrality' of Asia (Chou & Houben, 2006a, 2006b; Edmond *et al.*, 2011a, 2011b); in this vein, some anthropologists have also argued the study of Southeast Asia can be defined by a certain dominant scholarly style and preoccupation (Bowen, 1995, 2000; Steedly, 1999).

Despite the decline of interest in Southeast Asia in some countries, particularly in Europe and North America, there are many studies involving the region in other parts of the world (Reid, 2003a, 2003b; Saw & Wong, 2007; Park & King, 2013). Scholars have pointed to the opportunities and possibilities provided by methodological developments in the practices and approaches embodied in Southeast Asian Studies (Huotari *et al.*, 2014; Huotari, 2014), and have attempted to establish the importance of grounded and locally contextualised research. Some scholars have noted recent developments in the teaching and learning environment of area studies and innovations particularly the way in which knowledge of an area is presented (Wesley-Smith & Goss, 2010).

Goh Beng Lan's position (2011a, 2011b, 2014) embraces much of what has just been

presented. She argues for the importance of Southeast Asia in global terms, for the vitality of scholarship within the region and for the contribution of local scholars to understanding their own region. She also emphasises the importance of situating knowledge production in a Southeast Asian context and addresses the distinctions and mutually enriching interactions between locally generated (insider) and Euro-American-derived (outsider) interests, perspectives and approaches.

However, in accepting some elements of what has been argued for Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian Studies, the author's overall position up to now has been a sceptical one. Although he has written and edited general books on Southeast Asia (see King, 1999; King & Wilder, 2003 [2006], King, 2008 [2011]), he continues to hold to the conceptualisation of the Southeast Asian region as a 'contingent device', following the stimulating paper by Sutherland (2005; and see McVey 2005, pp.308-319), and the edited book by Kratoska *et al.* (2005a, 2005b). Scholars who have specialised on Southeast Asia, particularly those located in Southeast Asian Studies centres, institutes and programmes, have frequently been engaged in debates about what defines their region and what is distinctive about it; they naturally desire to give it some kind of form, substance and rationale. Furthermore, these concerns have been much more prominent in academic disciplines which have a greater preoccupation with location, contextualisation, concreteness, and the need for grounded and detailed

understanding. History, archaeology and pre-history, geography, anthropology and linguistics immediately come to mind; regional definition does not have such a preoccupation for universalising academic disciplines as economics, political science and international relations and sociology.

Nevertheless, there does seem to be another pathway that we might take in our concerns to delimit a region. I accept that Southeast Asia now has a clear political and regional identity and a global voice through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It has become a reality after being constructed by external powers in the context of the Pacific War, decolonisation and the Cold War (Kratoska *et al.*, 2005b). That reality continues to be expressed in academic centres, institutes, departments, posts, programmes, publications, conferences and media engagement. But there is always the desire to give substance to an artificially created political entity: to fill it out and anchor it in social, cultural, historical and geographical terms. Although the author remains sceptical, his current view is that an exploration of the concept of culture and its relationship to identity can at least provide a partial solution to the dilemma of regional definition. The concept of culture and identity is explained below.

THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

What should be emphasised here, in the lines of John Clammer, is that Southeast Asia is characterised by cultural diversity and openness; it has a long history of cultural connections with other parts of

the world demonstrating the importance of physical migrations and cultural flows into, across and out of the region, which have generated cross-cultural encounters and social intercourse. These interactions have in turn resulted in cultural hybridisation, synthesis and mixed or *mestizo* communities, the phenomenon of pluralism and multiculturalism within national boundaries, particularly within a country like Malaysia, and the obvious defining characteristic of the region expressed in the co-existence of culturally different majority and minority populations (Clammer, 2002, pp.9-11; and see Forshee, 1999, pp.1-5).

These historical processes can be framed in terms of the twin concepts of differentiation (and diversity) and convergence (Mackerras *et al.*, 1998, pp.1-14). Using this simple perspective we need not trouble ourselves endlessly about whether or not Western theories on culture, particularly post-structuralist ones, are appropriate in analysing and understanding other cultures (see Jackson, 2004, and Morris, 1994, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2002). The processes of cultural differentiation and interaction nevertheless have made Southeast Asia one of the most culturally complex regions in the world. Indeed, there are those who have argued that it is 'the ubiquity of publicly displayed cultural forms' (Bowen, 1995, pp.1047-1048) and the fact that Southeast Asia is 'arguably the best place to look for culture' which has served to define it as a region (Steedly, 1999, pp.432-433). The centrality of culture has in turn prompted social scientists of a

particular theoretical persuasion, to pursue these cultural expressions relentlessly and develop a particular way of perceiving and examining culture in the region (Bowen, 2000; King, 2001, 2005, 2006). On this last point Mary Steedly has proposed that it is the work of a particular assemblage of American social scientists, pre-eminent among them Clifford Geertz (see, for example, 1973), which has 'thoroughly associated this part of the world, and Indonesia in particular, with a meaning-based, interpretive concept of culture' (1999, p.432; and see Goh, 2002a, p.29, 2002b).

Yet, the situation in Southeast Asia has become, if anything, infinitely more complex since Geertz's and his followers' field research. More recently, processes of cultural change in the region have become intertwined with and indeed are generated by modern forms of globalisation, the expansion of consumer culture under late capitalism, and the rapidly growing influence of the global media and transnational communication systems. Zygmunt Baumann, for example, has pointed to a shift from the focus on political economy to 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 (1987, 1998). In engaging with Baumann's observations on current post-modern predicaments, regional specialists of Southeast Asia need to address and understand the character of cultural

change and encounters in the region and the responses of local people to this bewildering range of forces, pressures, interactions and influences. The comparative, region-wide study of culture is therefore central to this enterprise and within that the importance of understanding identity and its construction and transformation in political and economic contexts. However, *contra* Bowen and Steedly, the author of the present study would argue that rather than seeing culture as ‘publicly displayed’, ‘interpretive’ and ‘meaning-based’, it should be linked with the concept of ‘identity’.

As Goh Beng-Lan has argued in her interesting study of cultural processes, cultural politics, power, resistance and identities in contemporary urban Penang and specifically the conflicts and struggles which the Portuguese-Eurasians of Kampung Serani experienced against the redevelopment of their long-established community, our current notions of modernity in late capitalism are influenced by ‘the issue of cultural identity and difference’ and in the construction of what we call ‘the modern’. Moreover, when local agency, context, interests and priorities are acknowledged then we can better understand how ‘modern forms and ideas are produced, imbued with local meanings, and contested in modern Southeast Asia’ (2002a, p.28). One of the most important elements of these more recent approaches to the understanding of change in Southeast Asia is that of culture as comprising ‘meanings’ and ‘understandings’ within the context of identity construction, maintenance and negotiation.

Definition of Culture

It is without doubt culture is a concept. It is, as Kahn proposes, an ‘intellectual construct’ (1992, p.161). Nevertheless, there are several considerations in contemplating the character of culture. Culture is taught, learned, shared and transmitted as a part of collective life (this is purely Parsonian [1951] and also derives from the Tylorian ‘complex whole’ [1871]). It comprises ideational, conceptual, conscious dimension of human life and the ideas, accumulated skills and expertise embodied in material objects (art and artefacts) and carried and given expression most vitally in language. Culture encompasses the symbolic, meaningful, evaluative, interpretative, motivated, cognitive and classificatory dimensions of humanity (Geertz, 1973). It refers, in its more popular connotations, to ‘ways of life’ and ‘ways of behaving’ and therefore, pervasive. It has to be understood in terms of form, content and process and although there are cultural regularities and continuities which are easily detected. There are also quite obvious alterations, modifications, contestations and transformations. In some ways, though not as neatly bounded as was once originally supposed, it is patterned and has a certain systematic quality so that someone who has not been socialised into a particular culture, can, when he or she has discovered its ethical judgements, values, standards, beliefs and views of the world, see the connections which it makes between cause and effect and the explanations which it provides for the place and function of

humans within the natural world and for the bases of human interaction, organisation and behaviour, can make sense of it even without necessarily approving of its underlying principles. Having said this we need to accept that there may be events and behaviour which are beyond culture or constitute a 'counterpoint' to it which they not 'meaningful' or 'comprehensible' (see Daniel, 1991).

Alternatively, having contemplated what culture 'is' we should also address what culture 'is not'. It is not, in 'essentialist' mode, firmly bounded, closed and delineated. It is not a totality, rather, it is open-ended and constantly in motion. In this connection, social science analyses need to adopt carefully delineated comparative perspectives, examine several sites, and move across disciplines and time. Moreover, culture is not homogeneous, integrated and agreed, rather, it is contested and is part of systems of power, privilege and economic inequality, as well as generated, sustained and transformed in strategies, discourses and practices; these contests and struggles operate at different levels and in different arenas. But although those who have power and control economic resources can more easily impose their cultural visions, values and behaviours on others, this imposition, or in Gramsci's terms 'cultural hegemony', is never complete (Gramsci, 1990, pp.47-54; 1978; Hall, 1996, pp.411-440; Wertheim, 1974).

Culture and Identity

Culture is also very closely implicated in the concept of identity or ethnicity. It was Raoul Naroll, among many others, who defined 'ethnic units' as 'culture-bearing units', although his out-of-date mechanistic approach to cross-cultural classification was abandoned many years ago (1964). Some social scientists have indeed talked of 'ethnicity' and 'cultural identity' in the same breath because the main elements of ethnicity and identity are cultural: they comprise values, beliefs, and behaviour and the meanings which are given or attached to these as well as differences (and similarities) in language and material culture.

However, ethnicity has increasingly come to be seen as a special kind of identity attached to particular groups, communities, majorities or minorities and which command broader or larger scale forms of allegiance and loyalty. In its specifically ethnic dimension, identity is what distinguishes or differentiates a particular category and/or group of individuals from others. Ethnicity is frequently expressed as unifying and differentiating people at varying levels of contrast, and with the process of separating or distinguishing some from others by certain cultural criteria (Hitchcock & King, 1997). In many cases that which unifies and defines some people is considered to be what makes them human; in other words, it is their particular culture which marks them off and gives them identity and which logically encourages them to classify others as less than human: sub-human, savage, barbaric or primitive (Leach, 1982). This is especially

the case when the majority or dominant population in nation-states categorise the minorities as 'marginal', 'undeveloped' and 'unsophisticated'.

In this connection, one of the major concerns of political scientists working on Southeast Asia has been the process of nation-building and the associated tensions and conflicts between attempts by political elites to unify and homogenise, and the responses of the constituent communities of the state which often wishes to retain separate, viable and valued local identities. Boundary definition and maintenance are also rendered much more problematical in situations of 'cultural hybridization and syncretism' (Chua, 1995, p.1); yet, our attention to boundaries is crucial in any study of identity maintenance and transformation (Barth, 1969). A relatively neglected field of research in Southeast Asia has been the ways in which the media and communications technology have been deployed in the construction of national identities and the effects of the globalised media and other cultural flows on both national and local identities (in the Malaysian Borneo context, for example, Postill, 2006; Barlocco, 2008). It is interesting that this subject has not received the attention it deserves given the legacy of one of the most prominent social scientists of Southeast Asia, Benedict Anderson, and his examination of the ways in which the nation is constructed and 'imagined' through various devices, including such media agencies as newsprint (1991). However, it is important to emphasise that identity, phrased

in terms of ethnicity and nation, embraces other categorical and group markers such as class, gender, and age or generation (Du Gay *et al.*, 2000a, 2000b); and we need to focus on the major processes which have been involved in identity formation and transformation: nation-building, the media, tourism, physical movement and globalisation, and the construction of majorities and minorities.

THE WAY FORWARD

Whilst recognising the contingency of Southeast Asia as a concept and as the focus of attention within the multidisciplinary field of Southeast Asian Studies and which has shifting boundaries depending on the criteria deployed and the research interests pursued, I would argue that there is no contradiction between adopting this fluid conceptual approach and one which defines Southeast Asia more clearly, concretely and explicitly in terms of the regional identity embodied in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). However, what is required is to bring this dual conceptualisation of a region into a framework of culture and identity, though keeping in mind the importance of addressing the political-economic environment within which culture operates, as Clammer has already argued (2002).

Our understanding of Southeast Asia as a region acknowledges that the politically defined Southeast Asia which comprises territorially demarcated nation-states does not have a culturally and ethnically defined Southeast Asia. However, in deploying

concepts of culture and identity, we can then understand Southeast Asia by using various shifting frames of reference. This approach which focuses on the construction and expression of identity can embrace populations beyond the ASEAN-defined region which are culturally related to those within the region, as well as giving us the capacity to examine ASEAN as a segment of the global system which is also defined in terms of culture and identity. We must emphasise the politically defined ASEAN is not merely political; the Association has also been engaged in translating a political-strategic community into one which expresses a cultural and regional identity.

In recognising that Southeast Asia is not a unitary and “fixed” region, we move on to disaggregate the populations and territories of our variegated Southeast Asia. This can be done by looking at the constituent nation-states of ASEAN as entities defined by political criteria but also demarcated and expressed by a culturally constructed identity, and as units, continuously engaged in the process of imagining and creating those identities. At the sub-national level we need to engage with constituent ethnic groups, some of which are contained within nation-state boundaries, and others which cross boundaries. Indeed, in addressing the issue of boundary-crossing and the fact that ethnic groups are distributed across territorially demarcated states within and beyond the ASEAN-defined Southeast Asia, the interrelated concepts of culture and identity will enable engagement with

units of analysis at various levels and scales (extra-regional, regional and sub-regional).

Two recently published books on Southeast Asia demonstrate this on-going engagement with the definition of Southeast Asia. Anthony Reid, a distinguished historian and who has been a strong advocate for a Southeast Asian regional identity, present a strong case for its integrity (and see Osborne, 2013); but, in his recent book, the present author found the Reid had subtly shifted his ground. In his book on the general history of Southeast Asia, we find that in defining the region it is constructed and envisioned as an entity defined by what it is not; in other words it is ‘Not China, not India’ (2015, pp.26-29). But this too presents problems if we are operating with a nation-state-based approach to defining Southeast Asia. I would argue that in terms of the concepts of culture and identity, it is possible to accommodate what we conceptualise as Southeast Asian culture as spilling over, intruding into, interacting and engaging with the areas which are now defined as ‘Indian’ and ‘Chinese’. In other words, in my view, we should not counterpoise Southeast Asia with entities which we refer to as ‘India’ and ‘China’. We need to include them in the process of defining Southeast Asia.

Robert Winzeler’s *tour de force* focuses on ethnography, ethnology and change among the peoples of Southeast Asia and he makes the point that the definition and delimitation of Southeast Asia as a region is problematic in that, it was ‘a creation of European colonialism, rather than a reflection of natural, geographical, cultural,

or linguistic boundaries' (2011, p.1). As Winzeler demonstrates, the political map of nation-states does not sit neatly vis a vis the messy distribution of ethnic groups. But Winzeler's book is an excellent illustration of what I am proposing here with regard to the importance of comparative studies of ethnic groups in the region and the importance of addressing culture and identity (Winzeler, 2011, p.20).

Winzeler suggests that the character of Southeast Asia can be captured in a series of contrasts, which in turn acknowledges the complexity and diversity of the region which is constantly open to outside influences (Winzeler, 2011, p.6). Interestingly, some of the contrasts he identifies have been around for a long time and have been explored in anthropological studies (see for example, Leach, 1954; Burling, 1955). He draws attention to the differentiation between upland/highland and lowland populations, majorities and minorities, the local and the immigrant (overseas minority) communities, mainland and island cultures and linguistic groups, and world religions and local religions.

However, in the present author's view, Winzeler does not provide a sufficient conceptualisation of these crucial regional markers. Therefore, the main purpose of this review, in surveying the intense preoccupation in the scholarly literature over the last 15 years to define Southeast Asia, is to propose that we engage more thoroughly and deeply with the twin concepts of culture and identity. They do not provide perfect and

all-encompassing solutions to the problem of regional definition. But in the Southeast Asian case, the adoption of a concept of cultural identity which enables us to address different scales, levels and kinds of identity, and the shifting and fluid nature of how local communities identify themselves and how they are identified by others, may provide a pathway out of the impasse which the field of multidisciplinary area studies is grappling with.

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