Nation-states, Citizenship, Globalization and Regionalism: Enduring Themes in Southeast Asian Studies

Barbara Watson Andaya

This introduction to a special issue of the journal *SOJOURN* begins with a brief overview of the challenges to area studies following the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978. In the 1990s, area studies faced further criticism by proponents of globalization theories. Although these criticisms adversely affected the situation of Southeast Asian studies, especially in the United States, in the region itself the field remained healthy, as demonstrated in *SOJOURN*’s thirty years of publication. A persisting theme in the articles included in this issue is the relationship between state and subject, nation and citizen, which is explored in several different contexts. A second theme concerns the interaction of global and area studies, especially in regard to the application of Western theory in non-Western environments, and the extent to which locally produced knowledge can contribute to global conversations. The essay ends with comments on the current strength of Southeast Asian studies in the region itself, and on the role of *SOJOURN* in contributing to that strength.

**Keywords:** *SOJOURN*, citizenship, nation, globalization, area studies, Orientalism.

This special anniversary issue of *SOJOURN* celebrates over thirty years of high-level scholarship that has opened up new ways of approaching Southeast Asia, both as a region and from the viewpoint of individual countries. When introducing the first issue of the journal
in February 1986, the then Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, the late Professor Kernial Singh Sandhu, underscored his rejection of the theory that global forces would eventually lead to cultural homogenization and the blurring (or even disappearance) of national boundaries. This did not mean, of course, that Professor Sandhu and his colleagues had underestimated the pace of change or the extent to which Southeast Asia had been caught up in an increasingly compressed world, but they were convinced of the need to maintain a regional focus. Accordingly, in 1985 the institute convened a special meeting of social scientists with expertise in Southeast Asia. The result was the launching of a dedicated programme of research, funded by the Ford Foundation, which would focus on “Social Issues in Southeast Asia”. It was in conjunction with this research programme that SOJOURN: Social Issues in Southeast Asia, as it was then called, made its appearance. The journal’s mission statement, now published on the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute website, reflects the concerns that have remained constant over three decades: “SOJOURN is an interdisciplinary journal devoted to the study of social and cultural issues in Southeast Asia. It publishes empirical and theoretical research articles with a view to promoting and disseminating scholarship in and on the region” (ISEAS n.d.).

The continuing focus on a particular world region is noteworthy because it represents a forceful response to the challenges faced by “area studies” specialists, vehemently expressed with the publication of Edward Said's Orientalism in 1978. In this highly influential book, individuals who had devoted their careers to studying about the languages and cultures of the non-Western world, and even those from the region itself, found that they were classified under the dreaded term, “Orientalist” (Said 2003, p. 53). The influence of such criticisms inevitably filtered down into Asian studies, although the arguments made by Said in relation to the Middle East were less evident here, as he himself acknowledged (ibid., p. 301). Nonetheless, some scholars have still seen echoes of Orientalism in, for instance, the dismissal of Asian regional organizations like ASEAN as “ineffective” in comparison with the European Union (Acharya 2006, p. 91n8). Although Southeast Asia was only rarely
invoked in the intense debates generated by Said’s book, those scholars who had defended what they saw as a legitimate world region against arguments that it was a “residual category” created out of “intellectual inertia” (Lewis and Wigen 1997, p. 176) felt the assault on area studies keenly.

If this was not enough, Southeast Asian specialists faced further challenges. The 1990s witnessed the virtual explosion of “global studies”, and of debates about the causes of globalization and its consequences in a “post-national” world. To many it seemed that human society was entering a new historical phase because of shifts in the international balance of power, innovative forms of technological communication, the apparent erosion of traditional and territorially linked identities and the attrition of state-bounded systems of production (Axford 2013, pp. 18, 63–66). Centres for area studies in the United States saw a retreat of support from grant agencies and university administrations, as funds were diverted away from “outmoded” country-focused research. Battling to retain relevance in an unsympathetic environment, some scholars began to talk of a “crisis” in area studies, especially for Southeast Asia (Szanton 2002; King 2005). Fortunately, the turmoil that preoccupied academia in Western universities had little effect in Southeast Asia itself; ISEAS continued to be a welcoming oasis for beleaguered researchers, and the concept of regionalism had strong defenders (Thompson 2013). The successive editors of *SOJOURN* remained true to the original goal of publishing material that was both original and timely, so that the journal could provide a forum for both regional and international voices (Lee 2015, p. 138). Its survival and expansion (moving to three issues a year in 2013) is a heartening reassurance of the field’s continuing relevance in a period when university faculty outside the region have experienced declining funding for Southeast Asian studies.

### This Special Issue

Common themes that are explored through different approaches and in different contexts thread through this collection of nine articles that extends over nearly three decades. The most obvious and most
pervasive of these themes is the relationship between state and subject, a topic that has long absorbed the interest of historians of Southeast Asia but that gained a fresh saliency in the aftermath of the Second World War. The prospect of a new international order, the end of colonialism and the call for “autonomous” histories galvanized a determination to recast the national story. In most cases this narrative was presented as one of achievement against odds, when Southeast Asian societies threw off the yoke of Western control, regained pride in their ancient accomplishments and looked forward to future success. It was in the non-colonized Thai environment, however, that such largely unquestioned narratives were challenged, first by Benedict Anderson (1978), and subsequently by Thongchai Winichakul (1994). Independent Thailand, it now appeared, had aped colonial territorialism, mapping borders that reduced ethnic minorities, especially the Muslims of the South, to second-class citizens.

Questions about qualifications for citizenship have not died away, and have proved particularly intractable in regard to migrant communities from other parts of Asia. Because the growth of these communities is closely linked to the expansion of regional trade, their histories are embedded in the region’s economic development. Indians, Arabs, Armenians and others can all claim a significant presence in Southeast Asia, although the best documented and most studied are undoubtedly the Chinese. The depth of the sources means that it is possible to look back over several centuries and track cycles of changing relations between Southeast Asian states and China, and between Southeast Asian societies and Chinese migrants. The experiences that emerge follow different trajectories. On the one hand, Southeast Asian readiness to accept Chinese settlers fostered a legacy of intermarriage and amicable accommodation, while Southeast Asian rulers proved perfectly willing to acknowledge Chinese emperors as overlords. On the other hand, the sources can reveal recurring animosity, for the economic prominence of the Chinese was often a cause of local resentment. Tensions became especially pronounced when religious beliefs and cultural practices established boundaries of difference that were not easily surmounted. Europeans also vented their animosity towards Chinese, and in the
seventeenth century the savagery of the Christian Spanish towards the Chinese of the Philippine Islands is a matter of record. As time went on, intermarriage with local women and the adoption of Christianity led to the creation of a mestizo class that came to be part of Philippine culture, maintaining a dual identity that allowed its members to claim an identity that was simultaneously Chinese and Filipino (Chu 2010).

The Philippine case finds its counterpart in Thailand, where the classic study by Skinner (1957) persuasively explains why the Chinese were incorporated so easily into Thai society, and why Chinese Thais became so influential in elite circles. It is appropriate that the first article in this special issue of *SOJOURN*, originally published in 1992, represents the voice of a Southeast Asian, but in this case a scholar of Chinese Teochew descent, Kasian Tejapira. A prominent academic and public intellectual and himself a student of Benedict Anderson, Kasian argued that prior to the twentieth century there was little sense of “Chineseness” in Siam and that only from the reign of Rama VI (1910–25) were the Chinese singled out as an identifiable group, separate from the “true” Thai. The basis for his argument rests on a “pre-history” of the changing meanings attached to the male hairstyle, the braided queue or “pigtail”. Mandated by the Manchu Qing dynasty in the seventeenth century, its adoption by overseas Chinese signified what was initially a grudging but pragmatic recognition of Qing authority rather than a marker of Chinese identity. Gradually, however, the queue acquired a cultural weight because it denoted deference to Chinese tradition and culture, and according to Skinner it was accepted as such by the Chakri dynasty that came to power in Siam in 1782. As Skinner saw it, individuals who wore their hair in a queue chose to identify themselves as “Chinese”; those who cut their hair were treated as assimilated Thai. Kasian countered this argument by pointing to the incorporation of “pigtail”-wearing Chinese into the *phrai* system, which controlled manpower through corvée labour. These *jin phrai* may have seen themselves as Chinese, but were not considered to be so by the Chakri state. Meanwhile, new laws intended to prevent opium smoking were enforced against all groups except for the
Chinese; those Thais who could not give up opium were permitted to continue as “fake Chinese” (jin plaeng) by wearing their hair in a queue and registering with a local official. Only with the accession of Rama VI were individuals of Chinese descent racially identified, regardless of whether or not they wore a queue and irrespective of their lifestyle and general appearance. What had changed, said Kasian, was official attitudes towards Chinese in Siam, who were now viewed as an alien minority within the new nation state. The influence of Kasian’s article is indicated by its frequent citation and its inclusion in subsequent collections (for example, Tong and Chan 2001), but it is worth noting that Chinese Thais have fared better than their counterparts in some other Southeast Asian societies. The cultural barriers to absorption in such societies were, for example, painfully evident in the appalling attacks on Indonesian Chinese following the fall of Soeharto in 1998 (Purdey 2006).

If anything, the fraught connection between citizenship rights and the obligations of government have been even more pronounced in the relationship between indigenous minorities and the state. In his provocative study, The Art of Not being Governed, James Scott (2009) traced what he saw as a long history of flight by hill peoples who sought to escape the demands of intrusive governments. In effect, he argued, the process of state-making in Southeast Asia should properly be seen as a form of “internal colonialism”. Although other scholars have responded by pointing to the problem of overgeneralization and to evidence that linkages to the centre offered real benefits, it is certainly possible to trace a history of growing disdain evinced by political and cultural elites in Southeast Asia towards those regarded as outside mainstream cultures in terms of lifestyle, occupation, beliefs and language (Andaya and Andaya 2015, p. 68). It is apparent, however, that increased urbanization during the colonial period saw a heightening of such differences, while the new formulations of state structures that emerged after 1945 provided little room for the integration of ethnic minorities. This applied especially to the nomadic groups whose members moved across different political zones and whose allegiance was shifting and pragmatic. In Indonesia
the term “isolated peoples” (*suku terasing*) only disappeared from official documents in 1999, and its replacement with words such as “forest clearers” (*perambah hutan*) or “shifting cultivators” (*peladang berpindah*) points to the persistence of disparaging distinctions (Duncan 2004, p. 87). Internationally, too, the world has moved slowly, and not until 2007 did the United Nations issue an official declaration in support of the rights of indigenous peoples.

The second article in this collection, by the late Grant Evans and also originally published in 1992, should thus be seen as an early expression of advocacy for indigenous minorities in Southeast Asia — often seen as victims of development and unsympathetic state policies. As an anthropologist once closely linked to Australia’s New Left, Evans may well have believed that the reunification of Vietnam in 1975–76 under the renamed Socialist Republic offered hope for a more egalitarian society, especially for the Montagnards of the Central Highlands. Pawns in a conflict that had stretched over thirty years, they had suffered forced dislocation, epidemics, malnutrition, privation. It now seemed possible that they might be able to return to their traditional way of life, for had not Hồ Chí Minh himself reportedly said that “the minorities are Vietnam’s children” and they that are all “blood brothers and sisters” with the Kinh majority (Salemink 2003, p. 147)? Yet, as Evans argued, mountain people continued to encounter discriminatory policies under the new Vietnamese regime, and the statistics that he includes — confirmed in some cases by his own observations — are depressing and disturbing. Misleading claims abound; for instance, the environmental destruction of which so many minority groups are accused is in fact the result of forced relocation policies, even though commercial logging and the movement of lowlanders into accessible highland areas causes much greater degradation. According to contemporary reports, the situation has improved since Evans wrote, but the gap between Vietnam’s growing urban middle class and its ethnic minorities, who number around twelve million in a population nearly eight times that figure, continues to widen. Regarded with considerable suspicion by the government, the spread
of Christianity among some Hmong groups can be seen as a sign of a persisting sense of alienation from the national culture (Taylor 2011, p. 21; Rumsby 2017).

A second concern for Evans was the passive response of Vietnamese academics, given that ethnography could draw on a reasonably strong base, especially in the North, where some effort had been expended in developing this field of study. Evans acknowledged that some specialists in Vietnam recognized the problems faced by the country’s minorities, and that they were more sympathetic than the society at large. At the same time, however, they had to accede to party ideologies, expressing support for “socialist development” that would address the “time gap” separating the “primitive society” of the highlands from the majority Kinh. Even when criticisms were more overtly expressed, the effect on Central Committee planning was minimal or absent, and the promise of autonomous zones was rescinded as the Vietnamese state sought to strengthen control over border areas. Evans contended that, in the interests of a unified state, Vietnamese anthropologists had collaborated with the government in “deflating” any claims that the highlands might have had to some kind of self-government.

Looking back on this article, one could say that the final word — hopes that future fieldwork by foreign anthropologists might convey a more detailed picture — has to some degree been met, as shown by the work of Oscar Salemink (2003), Andrew Hardy (2005) and others. Nor is the picture as bleak as it is typically portrayed, and ISEAS itself has sponsored work that highlights the agency of minorities, their strategies for survival, and the evolution of their own sense of identity (for example, Taylor 2011). Nevertheless, although the official view of minorities — now termed “contemporary ancestors” — in Vietnam is not monolithic and may be evolving in positive directions, it is as yet unclear whether the infusion of outside ideas has aided Vietnamese ethnographers to “hazard bolder criticisms of the state’s policies”. Vietnamese academics have largely inherited the teachings and attitudes of their teachers, and though the ethnographic maps and classifications that Evans so carefully
charted have themselves been challenged by minority peoples, a majority of academic cadres continue to assert that Vietnam is a “multiethnic community” of fifty-four identifiable ethnic groups that remain stable and unchanging (Ito 2013, p. 187).

In contrast to Vietnam, Singapore is distinguished because of the extent of Western influence, even though roughly 75 per cent of the population is of Chinese descent. In their article in this issue of *SOJOURN*, two academics working in Australia, Ien Ang and Jon Stratton, discuss “multiracialism” in Singapore in relation to efforts to reshape the nation’s identity. It is useful to recall that in 1995, when this article was published, the fourfold classification of CIMO (Chinese, Indians, Malays and Others) was well established in the Singapore imaginaire, and that the government had espoused a commitment to building a multicultural society. Even so, as the article reminds us, incorporation of the various Chinese, Indian and Malay peoples into select groups based on “mother tongues” was already solidifying the categories that would determine how the envisaged plural society would operate. The “Speak Mandarin” campaign had been in operation for over fifteen years and even English-educated Chinese Singaporeans were being exhorted to use Mandarin and to cultivate their Chinese heritage (Vasil 1995, p. 13). Meanwhile, despite Western-style development, a prosperous and confident Singapore was promoting itself as the exemplar of “Asian values” that could effectively challenge an economically declining and morally bankrupt West (Emmerson 1995).

For Ang and Stratton, however, the notion that there is a broad category of distinct Asian values is based not on a measurable reality, but on an imagined East and an imagined West. Although the financial crisis that rocked Asia in 1997 undermined the argument that Asians could stand as the West’s mentors, the perception of a competition between “the West” (in effect, the United States) and “Asia” (that is, China) has by no means been laid to rest. But, unlike Japan, Singapore’s modernity has drained away the mysterious and exotic quality associated with the fictive Orient. The relationship with the West is also complicated because Singapore’s experience
of colonialism was rather different from that of neighbours such as Vietnam or Indonesia, as suggested by next year’s celebration of its founding by Stamford Raffles in 1819 and an acceptance of the names of British officials or visiting royalty on street signs and Mass Rapid Transit stations.

Since Ang and Stratton’s article was published, more attention has been paid to earlier history, but it is not easy to incorporate accounts of early trade into the trajectory of the modern Singapore story. The tools for creating a “Singapore identity” that affirms the nation’s essential Asianness have been activated by celebrating the multiracial vision, even though CIMO’s homogenized, idealized and reified divisions hark back to colonial times and are increasingly distant from the lived realities of Singapore life. Rather than fitting neatly into one of these categories, and despite normalizing tendencies, an increasing number of Singaporeans come from culturally and linguistically heterogeneous lineages. In 2016 about one in five marriages (21.5 per cent) were inter-ethnic, a marked increase from 7.6 per cent in 1990, and in 2008 the founding of the Peranakan Museum explicitly acknowledged the hybrid culture of those who can trace their descent to the mixture between different ethnicities. But although ethnic categorization was irrelevant when a spellbound population watched swimmer Joseph Schooling’s gold medal victory in the 2016 Olympics, the ambivalences of identity remain. In a letter to the New York Times, the Singapore ambassador to the United States roundly supported the “speak Mandarin” campaign as a foundation of unity, despite efforts to resuscitate dialects such as Hokkien and Teochew, once so common in Singapore streets (Mirpuri 2017). At a popular level, however, it seems that Singaporeans are more relaxed about their evolving identity. One thinks, for instance, of the irreverent acceptance of kiasu, the fear of failing, as a characteristic of Singapore’s competitive society, and of cartoonist Johnny Lau’s revival of the popular and fondly remembered Mr Kiasu. Now presented in a technologically advanced and modern Singapore, he has become a symbol, the publicity blurb assures us, that “kiasu-ism never dies” (Lim 2015; Lau 2017).
The year that saw publication of the essay by Ang and Stratton, 1995, also witnessed the execution of Flor Contemplacion, a Filipina domestic worker convicted in Singapore of killing another Filipina and the young boy under the latter’s charge. Albeit unsettling, this coincidence of dates provides a transition into Jun Aguilar’s 1999 article, since Singapore has been the destination point for many of the labour migrants whose journeys he tracks. Aguilar’s interest in this topic was sparked by his own experience as part of the Filipino diaspora, first as a student at Cornell and then as an academic in both Singapore (where he wrote an article on the Flor Contemplacion case) and Australia. According to current figures, over two million Filipinos leave annually to work overseas in what is now a well-regulated programme. Because of the institutionalization of international labour migration under government oversight, it may seem that individual agency is constrained and that there is little space for “spontaneous human action”. This, Aguilar avers, is not the case. Invoking an intriguing parallel, he compares the labour migration of Filipino contract workers to a religious pilgrimage, though one reconfigured in a modern and secular context. In an analogue of a ritual journal, the contract worker embarks on a quest, enduring hardship and deprivation in pursuit of an ultimate objective in a new site of employment. But, unlike pilgrims, foreign workers are not embraced by the receiving society; rather, they enter a liminal space suspended between cultures, where the past is of no significance and where they have no rights of citizenship and may be scorned as alien outsiders. For Aguilar, however, the resemblance to a testing ritual still holds. Despite the risks, Overseas Filipino Workers, or “OFWs”, are willing to move to unfamiliar environments, take up demanding work, often under difficult conditions, and at times gamble with their own destinies because of the financial and personal rewards that they believe will come to them. They may accept low-status positions well below their qualifications, but their remittances can make a major contribution to the economic position of their families, and even the Philippine government will welcome them home as national heroes. Recalling the concept of a debt of gratitude (utang na loob) that has formed
a theme in studies of Philippine society (Rafael 1988, p. 123), this sense of achievement is reinforced by the reception accorded to returnees, and by the esteem in which they are held by those who have benefited from their sacrifice and their generosity.

In the growing field of migration studies, the condition of female contract workers has garnered considerable research attention, often because such women (who make up 53 per cent of the Philippines’ overseas contingent) are seen as victims of exploitation. Comparing them to eager pilgrims embarking on a religious journey certainly offers an alternative and more encouraging view, but, as Aguilar acknowledges, the metaphor only works to a point, for it “will not suffice to grasp the complexity of labour migration”. Indeed, other ramifications can have a significant impact on the “reconstruction of selfhood”, especially for women. Nicole Constable (2014) has explored the situation of children “born out of place” in Hong Kong to female contract workers from the Philippines and Indonesia who have established a temporary relationship with some male counterpart, often from a very different culture. Frequently overlooked, too, is the migrant experience of men, although here Aguilar links the “ritual passage” allegory to the Minangkabau custom of rantau, travel for trade, religious study and adventure, a quintessentially male activity. A critic might remark that the metaphor of migration as a religious pilgrimage is less easily applied to the cases of many male migrant workers, for the majority of Filipino men employed overseas are on ships, their worldwide numbers reaching 380,000 in 2016 (Kritz 2017). In a later article on nineteenth-century Filipino sailors, Aguilar himself pursues an alternative line of thought; namely, that despite their global dispersal, the so-called Manilamen still maintained a sense of identification with the Philippines as their homeland, and that this sense, however vague, was a precursor to nationalism (Aguilar 2012). Other scholars have contended that Filipino sailors are expected to operate as “exemplars of masculinity”, displaying their physicality in the endurance of hardships and manifesting their virility in relationships with port women (Mckay and Lucero-Prisno 2012). Yet, Aguilar could well argue that there are also glimpses in their lives of the personal sacrifices characteristic of the pilgrim
experience. For married sailors, sexual self-restraint during port visits is considered praiseworthy, and, like pilgrims, they may have to overcome misfortune and adversity. In a recent case, unpaid Filipino seamen stranded in Bangkok even took to Facebook to petition President Rodrigo Duterte to intervene so that they could receive their wages and return home (Seaman Republic, 25 July 2016). Notwithstanding the undoubted benefits that accrue to most overseas workers, such accounts of exploitation, dishonest recruiters and physical abuse raise again a persisting theme in the study of Southeast Asia — the question of the state’s role in relation to its citizens.

Clive Kessler, long known as an outspoken commentator on the Malaysian scene, directly addresses this issue in his article on “State and Civil Society”. Published in 1998, his essay is a revised version of an argument originally developed in 1991, and Kessler would be the first to admit that much has changed since the 1990s, especially in regard to Southeast Asia activism. Nonetheless, despite the thousands of monks who demonstrated in Myanmar in 2007, the crowds of people wearing red and white (“no colour”) shirts who occupied Bangkok’s commercial heart in 2010 and the flood of demonstrators who have taken to the streets in support of Malaysia’s Bersih movement, the note of pessimism in this article still seems justified. It is not merely that across Southeast Asia we see a tightening grip of governments on the reins of power; it is also apparent that citizen engagement, often considered positively, can have a more repressive face. Indonesia’s Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defenders Front), for example, was a major factor in the 2017 electoral defeat of the incumbent governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (“Ahok”), a Chinese Christian (Kurniawan 2017), and in Myanmar ultra-nationalist Buddhists have been in the vanguard of anti-Muslim agitation. Rather than breaking down the boundaries of the nation state, it seems that the forces of globalization have turned many Southeast Asian states inwards upon themselves. Resistance to what some societies see as an unwelcome assault on “traditional” values has stimulated the tendency to reassert a national identity and a cultural coherence that is often imagined or
recreated. From this standpoint, residency within a state’s territorial boundaries by no means guarantees “rights”, and the consequences can be particularly unsettling for those relegated to the peripheries of the social mainstream. In Malaysia, for instance, there are still some older individuals whose parents arrived as migrants. Unable to produce the documentation necessary to prove local birth, their red identity cards mark them off as non-citizens. A more extreme case is the situation of the Rohingya, many of whom were born in Myanmar’s Rakhine state but have become stateless refugees, unwelcome in either Bangladesh or Myanmar. Kessler also points to the position of migrant workers, vulnerable to economic downturns, liable to be blamed for social problems and generally denied access to permanent residency, much less citizenship.

Because of the relentless pursuit of economic growth, Kessler feels, developmentalism and “modernity” have emerged as the current watchwords. In a social climate from which the obligations of citizenship have drained away, consumerism has become the public ethos and the mall the gathering place. Resistance to such trends should be led by a modern and politically involved citizenry, whose members can take their place at the centre of development, sustaining civil society by accepting difference and protecting the rights of the vulnerable. By this means, “active citizens” can operate together in “reasoned and reasoning engagement”. The idea of largely unquestioning allegiance to an “exemplary centre”, a legacy of the past, has been a key element in the evolution of Southeast Asian states, and even in contemporary times the notion of “loyal criticism” has not been easily accepted. Yet, there are precedents on which Southeast Asians can draw for inspiration, even when a state’s moral and political codes are unsympathetic to dialogue or to the idea of an active civil life. Islam, for example, has always stressed the importance of donating alms to further the public good, and charitable foundations, *waqf*, have a long history in the entire Islamic world, including Southeast Asia. It has been in these spaces, independent of government and detached from colonial intervention, that Muslims have joined together in faith (Khoo 2014; Yahaya 2013).
Kessler does not end his article on a positive note. In his view, post-independence Southeast Asian nations inherited political structures that emphasized state strength at the expense of civil society and active political participation. In the transition to contemporary times, he argues, modern states may be strong domestically, but they are still weak internationally. Increasingly interventionist governments seek to control public discourse, while newly affluent elites appear depoliticized. Overwhelmed by consumerism, philanthropic traditions have faded, and the concerned and politically engaged citizen is seen as a deviant. If Malaysia, for instance, wishes to attain the goals laid out in Vision 2020 (now fast approaching), it must modernize intellectually, a slow process in which civil society should play a crucial role. Now more than ever, Kessler concludes, the basis of the contemporary state in Southeast Asia and elsewhere must be a revitalized and independent citizenry, for only thus can the nation’s integrity be secured.

Benedict Kerkvliet, who began his career by working on the Philippines, and then developed expertise on labour conditions in Vietnam, picks up similar themes in his discussion of state–society relations under the latter country’s Communist regime as he saw it in 2001. In Vietnam, he says, the boundaries between society and the state are murky, and, because the availability of data is limited, it is not easy to understand the convoluted pathways by which policy in Vietnam is developed and enacted. Some observers have argued that the Communist Party is all-powerful, and that Vietnamese people themselves have no influence on the functioning of government (the “dominating state” theory). A second view (“mobilizational corporatist”) contends that the state deploys organizations (Women’s Association, Peasants’ Association and others) to introduce new policies and oversee their implementation. A third view sees state–society interaction occurring through a form of dialogue, a negotiation between the government and public interests. Kerkvliet then evaluates the extent to which these three interpretations are manifested in four areas of state–society interaction — government processes, the media, agricultural collectives and corruption.
In all four areas Kerkvliet finds evidence to support each view, but he gives particular attention to the personal connections and informal negotiations that fall outside official structures. Even when the government does enact regulations, people may not necessarily comply, officials look the other way, and government-tolerated NGOs tap both international and state resources to fund areas of need. Kerkvliet supplies convincing examples to show that Vietnamese peasants also adopted the “weapons of the weak”, the “everyday forms of peasant resistance” used so effectively in Malaysia (Scott 1985). In some cases, in fact, resistance from below may exert sufficient pressure for laws to be revised to reflect what is actually happening on the ground. For instance, because of their hostility to collectivization, villagers not only dragged their feet but took bolder steps, such as encroaching on collective land and thus extending the area available for private farming, garden plots, and house construction. As a result of what can be interpreted as a form of dialogue between state and citizen, collectivization ended in the 1980s.

Though publications on Vietnam have exploded over the last decade, many of the points that Kerkvliet makes still hold. Of particular relevance is the question of media control, since radio, television and the telephone system are all subject to close government oversight. Debates about the value of censorship continue, even within the party, but the possibility that open discussion will lead to state disintegration has cast a long shadow, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of cyberspace.

The costs of suppression may nevertheless be high. A new book by Thomas Bass (2017) specifically addresses the long-term effects of censorship and self-censorship in Vietnam, and the ways in which the sense of reality can be reshaped by government surveillance. Nearly two decades on, however, Kerkvliet must be buoyed by the fact that technological change, particularly in the form of the cheap and available mobile phone, has made it easier for individuals to disseminate ideas that the state might find objectionable. In 2001, for instance, only 1.3 per cent of Vietnam’s population could access the Internet; by 2016 this number had reached 52 per cent, and it
can only continue to rise (Internet Live Stats n.d.). Popular protests against rampant corruption at all levels of the party hierarchy can be tracked from the 1980s, but critics have found a new outlet in social media, despite the government’s efforts at control. Although outspoken dissidents may be jailed, it is increasingly clear that it is almost impossible to become “global” and yet retain national direction over the flow of ideas and opinions (Gelernter and Regev 2015). In Vietnam, and throughout Southeast Asia, the old rationale of the nation state cannot control a new and expanding generation of netizens who communicate globally (Tostevin 2017). As the twenty-first century advances, it is thus the Internet, rather than the mall, as Kessler saw it, that is becoming the new “public space” and the platform for popular discourse. There are, of course, caveats. In 2001 Kerkvliet expressed doubts about the potential for change in Vietnam, and it remains to be seen whether the recent conviction of high-level executives and party officials, accused of embezzlement, will pacify vociferous critics of government corruption who have found an outlet on social media (Pennington 2018).

Linked to the issue of global conversations, Peter Jackson’s 2003 article returns to the recurring question of the future of area studies in a globalizing world. Well known for his work on modern Thai cultural history, on religion and on sexuality, Jackson reorients himself in “Space, Theory, and Hegemony” to consider the application of theoretical approaches to Southeast Asia. As he notes, area studies has been under fire since the 1970s, but criticism became more trenchant with the ascendancy of post-structuralism and post-colonial studies in the 1990s. Globalization theorists, says Jackson, have tended to dismiss area studies, grounded in the culture–language approach, as lacking rigour, and as theoretically naive and thus “old-fashioned”.

The decline in Asian studies in Australia and of area studies more generally in the United States is a direct result of such criticisms. Finding it hard to respond, some of the most eminent scholars of Southeast Asia have lamented an inability to defend their field against claims that it was a spurious colonial creation and out of step with the perceived disappearance of national borders (Abraham...
More particularly, Jackson believes that a trend towards the elevation of theory, sometimes driving an argument at the expense of empirical data, presents problems because it implicitly legitimizes the global hegemony of the West and trivializes the localization and “situatedness” that are necessary if cultural studies is to remain open to “imaginings of global diversity”. The positioning of theory as all-important imposes a particular burden on Southeast Asian scholars, since it effectively requires that academic traditions developed in the West should shape the ways in which they present their research. But globalization has also challenged the significance of studies that focus on the nation, a matter of direct concern to those same scholars whose research has largely concentrated on their own societies and on matters of national interest.

In response to these challenges, Jackson presents a persuasive case for the recognition of spatially bounded domains, regardless of size, and of the insights that they can generate. Despite increased travel, migration and cultural mixing, globalization does not mean homogenization, and geographical spaces, however small, still stand as significant domains for an examination of “discursive and cultural difference”. As an addendum, recent publications of the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute are a reminder that national borders have not been erased and that informed assessment of a situation like that in Myanmar’s Rakhine state cannot be made without the context-rich knowledge that area specialists bring to the table (for example, Oh 2016; South and Lall 2017).

Jackson is at the same time concerned to stress the value of theoretical hypotheses, especially in the comparative work that can feed into exchanges on a global stage. Nonetheless, theory must be applied with caution, for transplanting analyses developed on the basis of the idea (for example) that poststructuralist theory is universal will not serve the Southeast Asia field well. In order for area studies to regain and maintain academic standing, he argues, it is vital to develop sophisticated and informed theoretical frameworks that are adjusted to the Asian — and, for our purposes, Southeast Asian — environment and that can embrace all scholars, regardless of their place of origin. If contemporary events have taught us
anything, it is surely that the trajectories of change associated with globalization have not led to a homogenized cultural order, and that disjunctures and divergence persist even as the world becomes more economically integrated. Reconciling the problematic but potentially rewarding interaction of theorization and empiricism through the acknowledgement of the spatial dimensions of globalization will be critical if Asian cultural studies is to advance.

In the next article in this special issue of *SOJOURN*, published three years after Jackson’s, the sociologists Solvay Gerke and Hans-Dieter Evers pick up the theme of the relationship between “global” and “local” knowledge, using data banks to trace the development of social science research on Southeast Asia. Their conclusions certainly provide food for thought. More material is being published on Southeast Asia and by Southeast Asians themselves, but the degree to which local knowledge produced in Southeast Asian universities and research institutes penetrates global conversations is very limited. Furthermore, while the publication of social science research has increased substantially in the period surveyed, 1970–2000, much of this knowledge has been produced outside the region. Though such knowledge may be “imported” into Southeast Asia, acquisition, absorption and the adjustment to local needs all take time. The profitability of translations has certainly encouraged the transfer of knowledge, but there is always a danger that incoming ideas and theories will be adopted simply because they impart legitimacy through invocation of international references. It could well be argued that an “academic dependency” on Western scholarship has in fact contributed to the under-representation of Southeast Asians in regional scholarship (Alatas 2003; Heryanto 2007).

This under-representation is disquieting because the challenges of globalization require that societies experiencing rapid social transformation understand the processes of change and be able to contemplate the ways in which they will be affected. Such “reflexive modernization”, primarily the domain of academics and an intellectual elite, is precisely what needs to be encouraged in Southeast Asia, but it is certain to be impeded if the production of social science is dominated by outsiders. As an extension of this argument, one
could suggest that more comparative work by Southeast Asians themselves would also aid in promoting self-reflection. Although international organizations, such as the Ford Foundation, have tried to foster a regional outlook and to develop cohorts of mid-career Asian specialists able to deal comfortably with societies other than their own, comparative work of any depth is limited because mastery of new languages and cultural familiarity does not come overnight. Thinking outside one’s own society is nonetheless essential if we are to truly appreciate the density of human experience.

Gerke and Evers go on to show that despite the ASEAN call for a regional “knowledge-based economy” the output of social science research is unevenly distributed. Southeast Asia can be divided into an upper (Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Brunei, Thailand) and a lower level (Indonesia, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar). The development of the kind of economy that ASEAN has envisaged is highly dependent on quality education, access to global and local research, and the availability of publishing outlets. Interestingly, it is the Philippines that has generated the most social science research in the period under consideration, but that result probably reflects Filipinos’ ability to write and publish in English. There are other regional disparities in the findings of the article. Vietnam, for example, receives high global attention, in part because of its interest to Americans, but the contribution of Vietnamese scholars to this pool of knowledge is low, even allowing for linguistic limitations. One wonders, for instance, whether “an Indochinese intellectual space” did in fact open up with the translation of Orientalism, as Said (2003, p. xi) believed. By contrast, Singapore has a high level of local knowledge production, but in global terms generates relatively little interest among social scientists. Nevertheless, the article ends on an optimistic note. While the tendency to rely on ideas and models from outside the region is still prevalent, Gerke and Evers believe that a trend towards greater autonomy in social science research will continue.

Focused on sharia-compliant businesses in Malaysia, “Working in the Islamic Economy: Sharia-ization and the Malaysian Workplace” by Patricia Sloane-White, originally published in 2011, is a telling
reminder of the perceptiveness that results from a long-term study of a local context. In 1971 the introduction of the New Economic Policy in Malaysia was intended to resolve the problem of ethnic disparities in wealth through affirmative action. The subsequent rise of a newly prosperous Malay middle class coincided with the global resurgence of Islamic reformism, to which *SOJOURN* devoted a special issue in 1993. This Islamic turn helped open up new fields that enabled Malaysia to move ahead in Islamic finance and banking, but it also led to a questioning by some Muslims of the model of Western developmentalism and the economic ethos that drove it. Concern about the values of an increasingly materialistic society has also convinced some business leaders that their enterprises should conform better to their faith. As devout Muslims, these Malay men recognize their own cultural and historical links to the trading traditions so long associated with Malay society, but they draw a distinction between themselves and those Malays whom they feel are operating outside the boundaries of ethical behaviour. Of diverse political views, they have also separated themselves from government agendas, seeing their task as furthering the cause of Islam rather than Malay interests as such. Some have even expressed the hope that Malaysia’s entire economic system will eventually follow the path of Islamic compliance that they have chosen.

In considering the interface of area studies, national concerns and the global perspective, Sloane-White’s article is especially important. In the first place, it demonstrates that, in its international travels, the market place has made a specific landing in Malaysia. Secondly, it also shows that the phenomenon of sharia-compliant businesses, operating as “small Islamic states”, is related to the growing Islamization of Malaysian society. As business leaders, the men whom Sloane-White interviewed see themselves as members of a global *ummah*, a worldwide community in which being Muslim comes first and being Malay second. In this new and pious workplace, informed by “corporate sharia”, there should be no bribes, prayer times will be carefully observed, Islamic dress is enforced, and all employees are expected to behave as good Muslims, both in the office and at home. In a workplace environment that is equitable but not equal,
everyone will accept his or her assigned place, including women, who rarely move up the corporate ladder. In consultation with sharia advisors, the CEO becomes a khalifah, a steward of God’s resources who oversees the morality of those under him, and who ensures that Islamic values become those of the business itself. In fulfilling the company’s corporate social responsibility, he will sponsor Muslim charities, assist less-privileged Muslim communities and encourage his employees to involve themselves in Islamic outreach. The prosperity that he enjoys — a large house, elegant offices, a car, a substantial salary — is evidence of God’s blessing (barakah).

“Working in the Islamic Economy” is a fitting end to this collection. It is an outstanding example of the strengths of area studies, in particular the long-term commitment that enabled Sloane-White to identify changes taking place over a decade-long period of research, such as the more widespread study of Arabic and the Qur’an. Recently made available in a book (Sloane-White 2017), these insights are particularly pertinent because across Southeast Asia the boundaries that define a devout Muslim are becoming more rigid and often more exclusive. Understanding the implications of these developments in Malaysia and locating them within a larger framework requires an appreciation of theoretical approaches, a keen awareness of global influences and, above all, a deep sensitivity to the local culture. In combining all these strengths, the article is a cogent example of the nuanced acuity that area studies can bring to regional comparisons and to theoretical analyses of the diversities in the worldwide ummah.

Conclusion

The articles republished in this special anniversary issue of SOJOURN represent a selection of the 348 research articles published in the journal since its inception in 1986. Still intensely relevant, the nation-state’s relationship to its citizens and the interaction between country, region and globalization have been enduring themes. The strength of SOJOURN has always been its commitment to close
examinations of specific situations and to research that locates Southeast Asia in a larger framework. The journal’s founders and those who safeguard its mission understand that case studies must provide the basis for any attempt to advance regional generalizations, and that “small spaces” have the potential to enrich and nuance theoretical discussions. Topical today, such studies will over time attain a different status — as historical sources on which the next generation of scholars can draw. Even now, the passing of years reveals the changes that have come about in the Southeast Asian field. With the growth of regional economies and enhanced opportunities for travel and study, the presence of Southeast Asian students and colleagues at international conferences is no longer unusual, and the “decolonization” of area studies that Edward Said advocated so long ago (Said 2003, p. 325) is already well in train. In offering a personal reading of nine separate articles that range from a discussion of Chinese identity in Thailand to a consideration of the conflicted relationship between theory and area studies, this introduction has sought to trace the intellectual pathways by which they are connected with one another and to contemporary issues. The very process of commentary and of developing an overview generated repeated evidence of the originality and strength of scholarship on Southeast Asia and of the influential role of SOJOURN in supporting this dedicated research and those who produce it. After more than thirty years, and as the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute marks a full half-century of activity, this is an achievement to be truly celebrated.

Acknowledgement

I wish to express my thanks for this invitation to write an introduction to the articles selected by the editorial committee.

Barbara Watson Andaya is Professor in the Asian Studies Program at the University of Hawai‘i, Moore Hall 411, 1890 East-West Road, Honolulu, Hawai‘i 96822-2234 USA; email: bandaya@hawaii.edu.
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