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**THE NEW AREA STUDIES AND  
SOUTHEAST ASIAN HISTORY**

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## THE NEW AREA STUDIES AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN HISTORY

### I. INTRODUCTION

There has been an ongoing debate on the nature and function of area studies from its inception in the 1950s but especially since the end of the Cold War. Quite a number of articles and collective volumes have appeared reflecting on the question whether, and if so, how area studies, particularly Southeast Asian studies, should be practiced (Reynolds & McVey 1998; Reid 2003; Szanton 2004; Kratoska 2005; Houben & Chou 2006; Sears 2007; Goh Beng-Lan 2011). Especially since the 9/11 event those who heralded the end of history and the uniform adoption of largely similar capitalist lifestyles in a homogenous global village have been silenced and since then what I call new area studies have been on the rise. Luckily for us specialists, Southeast Asia has been far from peripheral in global politics, which explains why Southeast Asian studies have not been neglected within the broader academic project of area studies. Starting in the 1950s, when Southeast Asia became a key theatre of confrontation between capitalism and communism and the status of Indonesia being unclear for some time, Southeast Asian studies could establish itself as one of the liveliest fields of area studies. Since the 1990s, Southeast Asian studies have benefited from the increasing awareness that the future lies in the Asia Pacific region and that more Muslims live in this area than in the Middle East. Besides being driven by considerations of global political economics, Southeast Asian studies have by comparison been highly productive since its unusual cultural richness drew in many anthropologists, linguists as well as many representatives of the humanities and social sciences.

In this contribution I aim at bringing up some reflections on what the new area studies actually are, what is their epistemological basis and what could be the contribution of Southeast Asian history. In order to clarify why I take this line of argument some initial information on my own scholarly background might be of interest, since it shows how phases in the development of a particular field of study are intertwined with the stages of my own career, amounting to what could be called a postcolonial European trajectory of practicing area studies (on other historians and Southeast Asian history see Tarling 2007).

My early exposure to Southeast Asia was linked to a resurgence of overseas history at Leiden University, Holland, where I began studying history in the mid-1970s. In retrospect, what happened at the Institute of European Expansion and Reaction was an attempt to build upon the Dutch tradition of colonial history by re-entering the meticulous study of archival sources but now in the broader framework of non-western history. Since I took the then current model of expansion and reaction seriously, I soon found myself taking up Modern Indonesian and Javanese as minors in a study that moved away more and more from Europe to Southeast Asia, and to Indonesia in particular. The Indonesian studies Department in Leiden was in a transitional phase, in part continuing colonial style philology but also trying to adapt to postcolonial circumstance, halfway between the need to service a large community that had migrated from Indonesia to Holland after World War II and the awareness that Indonesia had be-



come a reality of its own (see Houben 2004). Sitting in Holland in the midst of kilometres of books and archives, it was hard to see beyond the Dutch-Indonesian connection and conceive of Indonesia in the context of the Southeast Asian region.

Broadening out only happened when I went overseas on several occasions. A short but very intense encounter happened when I visited Cornell in 1985, because I had been shortlisted for an assistant professorship there, a position that was then given to Takashi Shiraishi. The interviews I went through there and my participation in some of the brown bag lunches, introduced me to an academic environment utterly different from that of Leiden. This kind of experience was extended in 1993, when I changed places with Robert Cribb (both of us being lecturers at that time) and landed at the History Department of the University of Queensland, being conducted to take on an Anglo-American style of teaching and research. In that year I visited several other renowned places of Southeast Asian studies in Australia, such as Sydney, Monash and the ANU, institutions to which I have returned repeatedly since then. And of course there was Indonesia itself, a country in which I spent a considerable amount of time since 1983, coming back there almost every year. My travels in the 1980s and 1990s allowed me to see beyond the Dutch-Indonesian linkage, beyond history and language as objects of study. Rather I began to see Indonesian history in relation to the contemporary economic, social and cultural dynamics of the country and as part of a field of study that was multi-centred and driven by several distinctive academic projects.

The third step on my intellectual journey occurred when I left the Netherlands for Germany in 1997 in order to become the successor of Bernard Dahm at the small Bavarian university town of Passau. Hans-Dieter Evers and Dahm were the founding fathers of modern Southeast Asian studies in Germany, both of them transferring their late-1960s and early-1970s experiences at Yale University to Germany. At Passau I became a professor of Southeast Asian studies and had to engage myself far beyond Indonesia alone. Because I more or less created the program alone, I was free to leave the field of Indonesian studies as it had been preconceived at Leiden and enter into Southeast Asian studies proper. As a result, in my teaching and research I am engaged in a type of area studies that is a mix between European and Anglo-American academic styles and I try to combine history with current preoccupations on a wide range of themes. Since my move to Hum-

boldt University Berlin in 2001, I have been involved in several collaborative research and teaching projects, which on the one hand re-linked me to history proper, especially European history, and to Islamic studies on the other. From this I have received methodological as well as theoretical impulses, getting involved in transdisciplinary and transregional research programs where I have acted primarily as an area specialist rather than a historian. The orbit of my area travels has become larger as well, both within and beyond Southeast Asia. Besides Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam have become prime destinations within the region. Beyond it West Africa and India have become part of my exposures to the global South.

Reflecting upon the multiple traditions and the gradual broadening out embodied in my career as a Southeast Asianist and historian underscores my current endeavour to bring the debate on the potential and pitfalls of Southeast Asian studies, as an academic project at the juncture of area and discipline, a step further.

## II. DISCIPLINES AND AREA STUDIES

Any scholarly activity intends to produce knowledge on a matter that is preconceived, including its aims and methods. What is a relevant research issue, how to formulate a valid research question and by which method to tackle it are decisions to be taken before the actual research is done. These decisions are normally guided by the academic background of the researcher as well as his/her personal preferences. Whereas science in the West has been rather universalist for a long time, since the introduction of modern universities in the nineteenth century, separate disciplines have emerged which engage themselves with a particular aspect of reality only through highly differentiated theories and methods. Therefore what and how to research and even how to speak about certain themes has to be formatted according to the assumptions of clearly demarcated fields of academic knowledge. The deepening of knowledge within disciplinary fields has no doubt been very productive and this western kind of knowledge production has become institutionalized within modern universities and research institutes, which have by now spread almost worldwide.

Within this context area studies are somewhat of an anomaly for the simple fact that their point of departure is a certain space instead of a particular thematic field of study. Whereas disciplines can boast of a very large, well-organized body of knowledge and established theories and methods



in order to extend that knowledge, studies of non-western areas face a number of problems which make them appear weak from the very start. The first problem is that their origins appear to lie within Orientalism, a Western way to view, categorize and ultimately attempt to subjugate the non-West. Like it or not, colonial knowledge – even if submitted to critical reappraisal – still informs much of the work that is currently being done on Africa and large parts of Asia. In addition, a liberal political agenda is often supposed to have driven area studies, which emerged in the United States in the 1950s and have been adopted almost everywhere since then. The second problem is the area itself, since it is unclear how it can be demarcated properly as a unit of analysis; ‘area’ in itself does not explain how it could be studied in a fruitful manner. However, I think these fundamental issues, instead of having to be framed as ‘problems’, should rather be conceived of as opportunities to re-evaluate mainstream scientific knowledge production.

Area studies have the potential of moving into the centre of scientific research instead of remaining a rather peripheral undertaking within the knowledge factories of the contemporary world. There are several developments that point to this direction. First, the so-called classical disciplines, whether they like it or not, seem to be in a state of crisis, since postmodernism with its deconstructionist agenda has been adopted by a majority of scholars, putting their very epistemological foundations into question. It has become increasingly clear that the disciplines themselves are area studies, since they basically describe the processes and structures of a Western world that has begun modernizing and expanding in the 19th century. Their contextuality in the spatial and temporal sense makes the disciplines partially inappropriate to explain processes of intertwinement between globalization and localization beyond the West. Also, because of their fixed theoretical and methodological apparatus, standardized disciplinary research can only produce strictly limited results. Second, over the last decades there has been a tendency of disciplines to move from their epistemic centres towards the edges or even to transgress these by promoting inter- or transdisciplinarity. It seems that the most promising zones of scientific innovation are located at the interstices of several disciplines rather than at their cores. But the way in which academic disciplines have organized themselves and the preponderance they still occupy within university structures has made the outward shift of the disciplines a very slow and haphazard process. In contrast, area specialists have or should

have fewer problems with adopting inter- or transdisciplinary approaches because that is what their study objects require from them from the very start.

A fundamental question to be raised is whether area studies can replace the disciplines or whether it would be more productive to think about how area studies and the disciplines can be combined. The terms of ‘enlistment’ – a term used by Donald Emmerson – seem to be important here. Is it that area studies should become tuned in such a way that they nourish the disciplines more effectively or should disciplines become more de-centred and integrate more area studies perspectives within them? Or is it so that we are currently experiencing the dissolution of the familiar disciplinary and western-led landscape of scientific research and the emergence of a new, more plural and truly globalized knowledge system? In order to answer these questions, I want to bring up further epistemological principles that seem to be underlying any sort of endeavour in the social sciences and humanities.

First, knowledge itself should be reflected upon. Knowledge of the world is only indirectly possible, since we need representations in order to express what is in the world around us. Also, there can be no clear division between the researcher and the object he/she studies, because some form of personal engagement is unavoidable. This means that human subjectivity is an innate quality of everything we produce as scientific knowledge. Second, knowledge orders are set within particular spatial and cultural/social/political contexts. Various scales of knowledge co-exist, ranging from the local to the national to the academic-global. What and how to explain things is governed by the cultural orders in which the relevant knowledge is produced. At the same time so-called cultures are never self-contained but constitute themselves through complex interactions with other cultures. Third, the acquisition of knowledge always includes the adoption of a particular perspective. Since we cannot disentangle ourselves completely from the objects we research, we are by necessity caught somewhere in the relationship between the emic and the etic from which meaning can be inferred. These three considerations combined imply that all we know is somehow situated in a ideational space governed by at least three dialectical oppositions – between reality and representation, between local and global, and between emic and etic.

Based upon these basic epistemological considerations, what constitutes area studies and how are they related to the disciplines? My main



point here is that area studies elevate the spatial-temporal specificity of any phenomena researched upon to the core of cognition, whereas the disciplines try to replace specificity by systemic generalization. This implies that both are juxtaposed and that this is a consequence of their different points of departure. Area studies start from an area, i.e. a specific locale or situatedness, whereas the disciplines usually start from a set of theoretical preoccupations and look for empirical case-studies to verify or falsify their abstract assumptions about reality. The methods applied are also different, since social scientists and practitioners of the humanities use those heuristic instruments which have been accepted within their disciplines to produce proper scientific results. For instance, a social scientist does quantitative or qualitative surveys, an anthropologist carries out fieldwork and a historian reads archival sources. However, those involved in area studies mostly apply mixed methodologies that seem appropriate to the specific locale they research. Finally, I think the cognitive aim of area studies and the disciplines are different, in the sense that the former are engaged in 'Verstehen' and the latter in rational explanation.

Although they seem opposites by their very nature, I consider area studies and the disciplines to be on a par and interconnected since they simply exemplify two sides of the same coin. The problem is that, from a historical perspective, the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge has been pursued vigorously in the West since the classical age and Enlightenment and this kind of knowledge has steadily gained prevalence over other kinds of knowledge that were more area-based. In addition, the dominance of the western disciplines cannot be disentangled from a colonial-cum-postcolonial condition, maintaining the tenet that only western disciplines can produce valid knowledge and other kinds of knowledge production are vastly inferior. Therefore Southeast Asian countries have been desperate to reproduce Western knowledge in their university systems, a venture that allows for connecting to the progress of the so-called first world but at the same time has produced disconnectedness with their own social and cultural surroundings.

### III. AREA STUDIES AND HISTORY

Far from being opposites area studies and history have always been interconnected. I see history not as a discipline in the classic sense. Except from dealing with the past, there is neither a single theme which historians work on nor a special

method they apply. History as an academic enterprise tries to describe and to explain past human interactions within their social, political and cultural contexts, focusing particularly on change. Their core business focuses on the nature of the past itself but also, and necessarily so, on the relationship between past and present. This relationship is of an intrinsically double nature, since we assume that the past has evolved into the present and the present influences the ways in which we look at the past. Between what was before and what came afterwards, chains or causality are built which are supposed to contribute to an understanding of how past and present are interrelated. Causation involves the intersubjective construction of correlations between cause and effect which are captured within a finite temporal frame. Heuristically historians distinguish between primary i.e. contemporaneous and secondary sources, but in practice they use all possible sorts of data, such as texts, images and the statements of eye-witnesses, which they then weigh-up and subject to source criticism. As is the case with any scientific activity, the past itself cannot be approached directly but only indirectly by the agency of the historian infusing it with a structure and a meaning.

Besides studying history itself, historians increasingly occupy themselves with the manner in which societies and their members remember. For the constitution of socio-cultural identities of individuals but also of groups and nations it is important to be able to integrate the own, individual past into a broader, overarching diachronic narrative (Assmann 2007). So, besides history proper, the construction and modification of historical memory as a political, social and cultural process – in part embedded in historiography, i.e. the ways in which previous historians wrote their narratives – has become a field of historical research. Here the past itself is not the epistemological aim but rather historicity. Historicity addresses the conditions of producing historical narratives and the place which historical research occupies within it (Koselleck 1979).

History and area studies share a number of characteristics. Since the past does not exist as such in the present, the historian is forced to engage in time travel, in order to try to understand the social customs and ways of thinking that are no longer part of the contemporary world. Of course certain remnants of the past remain in the present but other parts have been lost or transformed. Although past and present are interconnected, entering into the past is like crossing over into a different sort of reality. In history there is concurrence between subject and object, since



the historian researches the history of human beings and therefore ultimately aspires to knowledge of the Self through the Other. A historian who studies the past of an area that is not his/her own faces the additional challenge of trying to understand and thereby locating him/herself within a spatial-temporal setting that is 'different'. Area studies specialists – even so-called home scholars – face the same kind of challenge.

This crossing over into a different context and making sense of it can only be achieved by what historians call 'Verstehen'. There has been a long-standing debate among historians on the hermeneutical problem of explanation (the construction of causality) versus that of Verstehen but the majority of those in the profession now agree that both cannot be separated and should be joined together in a 'explaining kind of Verstehen' (Muhlack 2007). There exist various sorts of 'Verstehen', a.o. hermeneutical (capturing the meaning of something) and existential (a perspective on the world or another human being). Intercultural 'Verstehen' requires reflexive conditioning, in the sense that cognition of the other presupposes reflection on the self, and also entails a rejection of essentialising strategies which reduces the complexity of the other (Rehbein and Saalman 2009). Nevertheless, a hermeneutical form of 'Verstehen' across cultural contexts seems viable and increasingly both historians and area specialists use Foucauldian discourse analysis for such a purpose.

Within the discipline of history there have been new trends that also have strengthened the connection with area studies. Postmodern and postcolonial studies have impacted on history as a discipline, although maybe less so in Germany than elsewhere. The spatial turn has brought spatial (and not so much discursive) configurations, their socio-political construction as well as dissolution into the limelight of scholarly attention, especially since the end of the Cold War has restored a polycentric and interdependent world. Subsequently global, transnational, comparative history and the history of entanglement and transfer have been on the rise. These formats offer possibilities for both the de-centring of history as a discipline and the upgrading of the historical dimension of area studies. Van Schendel has pointed to process geography in order to find inspiration for spatial formations that move far beyond a simple opposition between local and global worlds. Focusing on the asymmetries of distance, on interregional connections, border regions and flows of ideas, objects and people may help to discover new sorts of space that have been

overlooked so far: grids, archipelagos, hollow circles and patchworks (Van Schendel 2005).

However, by placing space over time the post-modernist spatial turn bears the danger of again privileging the synchronic over the diachronic and the systemic over the historical (Bachmann-Medick 2006, 285). The historian Frederick Cooper criticized the postcolonialists' ahistorical use of categories like identity, globalization and modernity, since these have to be understood much more in their concrete contexts than as analytical concepts able to explain something. Postcolonial studies are, according to him, in need of a much more rigid historical practice because often they are engaged in – from a historian's point of view – problematic manners of story plucking, leapfrogging and doing history backwards (Cooper 2005).

World history, global history and transnational history have overlapping but at the same time distinct agendas. World history offers a de-centred perspective on long-term processes of constituting societies and civilizations. Global and transnational history, on the other hand, deal with the history of interactions, mobility across boundaries and the history of entanglements in a sphere of interaction between globalization and localization (Osterhammel 2007). Until now, global history has been dominated by four main themes. First, the evolution of the global system in general and the global economy in particular, starting with the dependency of Immanuel Wallerstein to the great divergence of Kenneth Pommeranz to the Reorient thesis of Gunder Frank. Second, the analysis of civilizations, in which authors such as Francis Fukuyama, Samuel Huntington and Simon Eisenstadt have set the tone. Third, the history of globalization, as a non-linear long-term process of densification (Anthony Hopkins and Christopher Bayly) and a new way of understanding difference (Arif Dirlik). Fourth, postcolonial approaches which have not produced large new frameworks but have invoked a focus on trans-cultural interactions, power asymmetries and agency (Conrad & Eckert 2007).

Comparison has been an issue of debate within and between disciplines. Comparison is more than just the juxtaposition of cases in the search for similarities or differences. Charles Tilly distinguished between four types of comparison: individualizing, inclusive, variegating and universalizing. However, the major weakness in comparison lies in the construction of comparative units, which do not exist as such in reality but are taken as point of departure for the purpose of comparing. The comparison of nation-states (often the practiced) and of whole civilizations is



questionable, whereas local or regional comparisons seem to be more productive. As a result, historians have increasingly moved away from comparison and turned instead to transfer. Transfer history does not rely on the construction of units of comparison, it is open to processes of alterity situated between nations and civilizations, historical dimensions of adaptation and repackaging are dealt with much more and, finally, it opens up a key understanding of the causes behind similarities and differences. Whereas comparison is based on distinction, transfer allows for connectivity. A third option is that of a combination of comparison and transfer in the form of entangled history. It tries to find a way out of the oppositions between the constructedness of distinguishing between cases and the distinction of an original before and an adaptation after transfer occurred, between synchronic comparison and diachronic transfer, and between social science-oriented, generalizing comparison and historical individualizing forms of comparison (Kaelble 2003). Its aim is the history of the process of entanglement or connectivity, since no historical object is an isolated phenomenon in itself and spatial-temporal structures are always overlapping (see Werner and Zimmermann 2004).

#### **IV. SOUTHEAST ASIAN HISTORY AS A FORM OF AREA STUDIES**

Southeast Asian history is a hybrid field of studies in which history as a discipline and area studies overlap. It follows up on the general trend towards reflexivity and a reappraisal of how scholars frame their object of research, what terminologies they use and what kind of methods they apply. There are at least five groups of Southeast Asian historians: disciplinary historians who take the theoretical concepts of political science, social science or economics and apply them to the past of the area; colonial historians who work on a history of colonialism in Southeast Asia from a postcolonial perspective; national historians who are engaged in constructing or deconstructing the nation-state backwards in time; global historians who concentrate on the role of Southeast Asia in world history; and local historians of the area who reconstruct local dynamics on the basis of meticulous study of mostly indigenous sources (Houben 2009).

As I have argued elsewhere, Southeast Asian history has mainly followed the trends of the discipline with a certain time lag over the past sixty years, moving from political to social to cultural history and back. At the same time neighbouring

disciplines have increasingly historicized themselves and have come up with ideas which Southeast Asian historians have then taken on board (Houben 2006). More recently there has been a trend to de-centre the perspective, moving away from the capitals of Southeast Asia towards the border regions. Thongchai Winichakul has pleaded for writing history beyond the nation and rather 'at the interstices' or margins since these were and are the places where the global and the local colluded and processes of transculturality abounded (Winichakul 2003). His plea coincided with other publications by Jean Michaud and Van Schendel, arguing for the addition of Zomia as a new area in area studies, focusing on the highlanders of Northern Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Southern China and the Himalayas. This culminated in the recent monograph of Jim Scott on *The Art of Not Being Governed* (Scott 2010). Others, like Oscar Salemink, Andrew Hardy and Jörg Engelbert, have similarly moved to the hills, in this case in Vietnam.

The current dynamics in area studies towards interconnectedness and de-centring, have informed the recent historiography on Southeast Asian identity formation, colonialism and nationalism. Historians of insular Southeast Asia as well as area specialists of other disciplinary backgrounds have preoccupied themselves with the historical mapping of ethnic labels that still seem to carry much political capital. An extensive literature on 'Malayness' has appeared, to which Leonard & Barbara Andaya, Timothy Barnard, Joel Kahn, Anthony Milner and many others have substantially contributed. Basing his analysis on the concept of 'scale of forms' in relation to 'pasisir', Adrian Vickers has tried to demonstrate that 'Malay' is far from merely a colonial invention of tradition which has been transferred to independent Malaysia to defend a Muslim-Malay political and social order. Europeans were not the principle agents of such a construction because pre-colonial indigenous agency within a hybrid scale of forms and patterns of cultural overlap, along with patterns of physical movement, had already put basic notions into place. Instead of having been centred in the Johor-Riau area, the origins of 'Malayness' lie on Kalimantan and Sumatra (Vickers 2004). Taking kinship as a classificatory system for social relations as a starting-point, Judith Nagata likewise discussed the history of Melayu as a grid organization of a mobile society within an area without frontiers, spanning Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula, Kalimantan, Java and all localities inbetween (Nagata 2011).

The efforts to develop de-centred perspectives do not preclude nation and state creeping



back into the narrative of Southeast Asian history. Somehow flows and the constitution of nation-states cannot be disconnected, as a recent book on travelling nation-makers shows. Nation-states themselves have been born out of multiple flows and all sorts of circulations but research on it, if at all, has been focusing on movements within an administrative space only, leaving out 'travel' beyond these containers including its transformative effects upon nation-building projects. Transnational Islam and international communism have been particularly important in showing how the 'fluidity of social and ideological' projects have strengthened national self-identification (Hau and Tejapira 2011, 9). Indeed, the formation of nation-states within the plural area of Southeast Asia is in the process of being rewritten from the perspective of global history. Anthony Reid has argued that nationalism in this extremely plural region acted as 'alchemy' by which empire could be turned into nation. Far from being ethnically homogenous, the continued existence of Southeast Asian nation-states along imperial borders stands in contrast to the collapse of empires elsewhere. Distinguishing between ethnic nationalism and state nationalism, Reid proposes anti-imperial nationalism as the specific driving force for this region, a result of a particular context emerging after 1900 (Reid 2010).

## V. OPEN QUESTIONS AND SOME FURTHER DIRECTIONS

Moving away from centre to periphery, from the upside to the underside in the form of subaltern histories, or doing surface histories of movement do not, however, address some pressing methodological issues of Southeast Asian history in conjunction with area studies. To these I want to devote the final part of this paper. First, how should the temporal-cum-spatial scales be configured in order to make the most of Southeast Asian history within both the discipline and area studies? Second, how can specific area studies findings be translated into a format which can be accommodated into the global academic knowledge system?

The temporal-spatial scales within which Southeast Asian history can be written are multifarious and constitute much more than merely context. Space and time themselves guide human actions and ideas, so that they not only offer a particular avenue to the world but, in a certain sense, constitute the world as it has become and as it is experienced. Southeast Asian history as a form of area study needs to position itself at some point in the overlap between the local and the global. Globalization studies have touched upon

this, primarily abstracting from the dynamics of global processes. James Rosenau wrote about processes of fragmentation within a sphere of distant proximities which give rise to 'nonlinear processes in which every effect is a cause of yet another outcome in a complex and endless array of feedback loops'. Distance involves non-territorial forms of space across hierarchies and sequences and including subjectivity, in which scale and range as habitats of meaning matter more than miles (Rosenau 2003, 6–7, 12). Similarly, Arjun Appadurai wrote on the cultural dimensions of globalization, stressing that scapes are not objectively given relations but perspectival constructs (Appadurai 1996). At the same time, he seems to discard area studies, since areas presuppose coherences and aggregations that are not helpful in studying global geographic and cultural processes. Instead, a new architecture for area studies would entail studying the imagination of areas from other locations in a sort of 'optical reversal' (Appadurai 2005, 275–76). While it has become abundantly clear that areas are representations in themselves and that these were and are enmeshed in global political, social and cultural dynamics, it remains an open question whether areas are still a useful heuristic device for a new kind of area studies. I think they still are but should at least be loosely and variably defined in order to avoid further closed-box analysis. Instead of focusing on trying to define area anew, the direction should be towards developing new perspectives on the complexities of distance and scale.

Appadurai's idea of optical reversal brings us to the second question on translation. Is translation needed at all and if so from what towards what using what kind of language? The most radical response would be that no translation is needed. In a truly globalized knowledge system many points-of-view could exist side-by-side and none is either privileged or marginalized. This is not likely to happen very soon, however, although China and India may aspire to overtake the West at least in sheer volume of knowledge output (for Southeast Asia, see Menkhoff & Evers 2010). It is obvious that area studies can neither be Eurocentric nor universalistic anymore, which forces us to be more precise on our method of translating our data on local and/or regional phenomena into a more general academic language. According to Stanley Tambiah translation tries to transport specific understandings of reality across boundaries of time, place and culture. This involves a double subjectivity, since the observer has to enter the minds of the actors he/she stud-





ies and then distance him/herself again to translate the observed phenomena into, usually western, categories of understanding. The translation of cultures involves comparability and commensurability, some measure of which is already implied in its execution. Comparability involves the notion of a shared space of intelligibility which is based upon rational principles that have been developed in western science (Tambiah 1985).

I myself am not convinced that area phenomena require a translation into western rational scientific principles, since in that manner much of the substance is lost. Several options come to mind, although the matter is not yet satisfactorily solved. First, we could argue that there is something like a globalized language of the humanities and social sciences which may have had its origins in western science but is no longer necessarily specific to the west, and is now shared by a worldwide community of scholars in order to help them communicate to one another. This shared language does not, however, imply a pre-figured acceptance of any single theory or epistemological principle. Second, we need to develop a new area studies theory which is underscored by detailed case-studies of non-western phenomena and from which differentiated and contextual medium-range concepts are to be derived. These concepts are no longer aimed at producing universal theory but should rather elucidate 'structured difference'. For history, I am thinking of researching particular historical conjunctures which add qualitative dimensions to the study of change over time. Change in this vein is never absolute but always relational in a spatial and temporal sense, which opens it up to the study of comparison, transfer and entanglement. Third, area studies should bring out the interconnectedness of phenomena, thus leaving the grounds of an older western-type of scientific knowledge that bases itself on the method of dissecting or splitting of research objects instead of explaining them in terms of whole yet complex as well as processual interdependencies. Through a kind of concerted action along these proposed lines, Southeast Asian studies have the ability to move to the forefront of scientific research.

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