

Conference Report

*Southeast Asian Studies Symposium – “Contemporary Issues in Southeast Asia”
St. Antony’s College, University of Oxford
10-11 March 2012*

On 10-11 March 2012, the first annual Southeast Asian Studies Symposium was held at St. Antony’s College, University of Oxford, attended by more than 80 participants travelling from within and beyond the UK. A range of quality papers were presented on the contemporary issues in Southeast Asia covering eight key themes such as religion, state power, local governance, political economy, culture, marginality, environment and human development; and were followed by constructive comments and lively discussions.

The Symposium was hosted by Project Southeast Asia (<http://projectsoutheastasia.com/>) and was co-financed by the Asian Studies Centre at St Antony’s College, the Annual Fund of St. Antony’s College and ASEASUK. Project Southeast Asia thanks the symposium organisers, Narae Choi, Elvin Ong, Claire Soon, Shinta Puspitasari and Catherine Zara Raymond for their hard work in the last six months and congratulates them on hosting the Symposium successfully.

The next edition of the Symposium will be held in Oxford on 9-10 March 2013.

The proceedings began with an informal tour of Oxford (by historian Dr Pingtjin Thum) and a friendly dinner at a Thai restaurant on Friday night. At the end of Saturday’s panel presentations, participants were treated to a full hour of Gamelan performance by the Oxford Gamelan Society, the longest running community Gamelan society in the UK, and an elegant classic dance piece by Ni Made Pujawati, an internationally renowned Indonesian dancer. The performance was kindly sponsored by the Indonesian Embassy to the UK. The Ambassador H.E. T.M. Hamzah Thayeb and the Educational Attache Mr. T.A. Fauzi Soelaiman attended the Symposium expressing their genuine interests in contemporary issues of the region and also supports to academic discussions.

Day 1 (10 March 2012)

Professor Robert Barnes (University of Oxford) opened the symposium by giving an overview of the Project Southeast Asia’s goal, progress and current endeavours. Thereafter, Professor Jonathan Rigg (Chair of the ASEASUK) delivered his keynote speech on unplanned development in Southeast Asia which catalyzed a lively discussion on the discourse and practice of development planning.

Opening Panel

Discussant: Professor Jonathan Rigg (Durham University, Chair (ASEASUK))

In line with a call for critically rethinking development in Southeast Asia as suggested in the keynote address, the opening panel examining ‘The Past and Future Directions in Southeast Asian Studies’ engaged with enduring questions about the identity of Southeast Asian Studies and the region itself.

Dr Pingtjin Thum (University of Oxford), in his paper ‘A Historical Analysis of Southeast Asian Studies’, suggested that Southeast Asian studies had experienced all the major paradigms of area studies in its soul-searching as to what Southeast Asia is and the position of Southeast Asians in Southeast Asian Studies. Thum argued that it had been defined by self-interested values, had been created to serve established interests and had been used to push forward the agenda of a concatenation of governmental, business, and military interests. In view of this, Thum called for self-consciousness within the academic world and a challenge to the accepted values, so as to bring about more humanistic social thought and policy. **Tom Hoogervorst (University of Oxford)** then tackled the long-standing question of what Southeast Asia is in his paper ‘Some reflections on Southeast Asia and its position in academia’. Although it had not been seen as a cohesive region, he suggested that the Southeast Asians are a constantly reconstituted group. Rejecting notions of Southeast Asian culture being merely derivations of China and/or India, he argued that a shared culture in Southeast Asia could be seen in diverse respects ranging from food, agriculture and dance to even betel-nut chewing. He urged such transnational elements to be recognised and suggested that the sea has provided a critical space for interaction within the region.

Panel I: Religion

Discussant: Dr Mirjam Küinkler (Princeton University)

In the first panel, four highly complementary papers on religion were presented. **Dr Chiara Formichi (City University of Hong Kong)** started with a paper on ‘Reshaping Shi’I identities in Southeast Asia: Between local tradition and foreign orthodoxy’. Formichi studied the Shi’I community in Indonesia to analyse the Indonesiaisation of Islam in the post-Suharto era. She examined the structuring of society, the reshaping of rituals, and the use of Shi’ism as a possible counter to Salafism. She argued that a Middle Eastern influence had been felt since the 1970s in Muslim Southeast Asia as a whole, but Indonesia had been particularly important as a bastion of cultural Shi’ism, with Jakarta at the centre of this network. **Chris Chaplin (University of Cambridge)** brought the discussion to a different group within Indonesia through his paper, ‘Religious Identity and urban piety in Indonesian society: A social movement analysis of the Salafiyaa and the quest to ‘purify’ Islam in Yogyakarta, Java’. He analysed how the decentralised nature of the Salafiyaa movement had allowed for contemporary practices to be shaped within the post-Suharto era. Using case-studies of the Yaysan Majelis Ihya’at Turots al-Islami and Wahdah Islamiyah, he demonstrated that these groups had spread into diverse areas such as lifestyles, Islamic business ethics and herbal medicines, adapting to contextual demands with a degree of flexibility. **Dr Hew Wai Weng (International Institute for Asian Studies)** in ‘Translocal and Cosmopolitan Islam: Chinese-style Mosques in Indonesia and Malaysia’ examined a growing trend of building Chinese-style mosques since the collapse of the Suharto regime. The first such mosque was the Surabaya Cheng Hoo mosque in Indonesia, which could be seen as reflecting the Chinese way of being Muslim, bringing together Muslims and non-Muslims. Hew suggested that these mosques represented translocal linkages and local dynamics, encompassing China’s growing economic power and local politics. They also demonstrate cosmopolitan Islam and its limitations, as while Chinese-style mosques were accepted, the notion of a non-Malay Muslim, for example, was not. **Pei-Chein Wu (SOAS)** in ‘Chinese Muslim Dakwah Work in Malaysia’ looked at the mentality of converts through Chinese Muslim converts and their ‘dakwah’ or conversion work. Stressing the religious diversity in Malaysia in contrast to the stereotypes conflating race and religion, Wu examined two

case-studies of Hussein Ye and Lim Joi Soon in Penang, and explained their success in terms of being able to ‘Dakwah beautifully’ – e.g. using humour and engaging with modern problems. Such converts challenge the idea of incompatibility between Islam and Chinese-ness in Malaysia while shedding light on the formation of Islamic public discourses, ethnic relations and understandings in general.

Praising the empirically driven nature of the papers with fresh and novel data, the discussant, Dr Künkler, emphasized four common themes running through all of them: (i) transnational connections and influences; (ii) local adaptations; (iii) importance of groups with differentiation and elements of competition; and (iv) society and state – the limits of civil liberties and state intervention.

Panel II: State Power

Discussant: Dr Lee Jones (Queen Mary, University of London)

Anisa Santoso (University of Nottingham) started the panel on ‘State Power’ with a paper entitled, ‘Sociological analysis of state policy behaviour in the making of regional policy in migrant workers protection: The case of Indonesia and the Philippines in ASEAN’. Santosa examined the contradiction between ASEAN’s regional integration and the failure to coordinate in the area of protecting migrant workers. Analysing this issue from the perspective of domestic politics in Indonesia and the Philippines (1994–2009), she identified elements that affected progress towards regional protection policy for migrant workers. She concluded that a social consolidation that embraced discourses of human rights was needed to protect migrant workers. **Veerayooth Kanchoochat (University of Cambridge)** in ‘Deficiency by Design: The Coalitional Origin of Thailand’s Inefficient Bureaucracy’ examined the origin and persistence of institutions required for sustaining economic development with reference to Thailand. He argued that inefficient bureaucracy in Thailand could be seen as an outcome of political moves and compromises by King Chulalongkorn in creating the absolutist state in the 1890s. Outlining prominent features of the bureaucracy that the king’s faction had introduced, Kanchoochat proposed that the role of structure and agency be balanced in analysing state development; stressing the need to pay more attention to human agency, contingent choices, and the role of ideas. **Deborah Cheong (University of Oxford)** in ‘Imagining language: The shifting position of prestige Chinese dialects occupy in Singapore’ profiled the exponential drop in Chinese dialect usage. She suggested that of the four factors commonly used to explain shifts in language use educational policy and globalisation would be most relevant in Singapore’s context. Based on an examination of language policy during the 1990s and 200s and social-linguistic surveys of over twenty university students, she also pointed out other factors influencing the spread of language such as the link between dialect and certain religions, low education levels and the rise of the nuclear family.

The discussant **Dr Lee Jones** remarked that the strength of papers with regards to state power was in their examination of why certain state elements failed to work. A tendency to imagine the region based on notions that came out of the European context would lead to a banal form of scholarship. What was needed was a search as to why these institutions had developed and worked in the form that they did.

Panel III: Political Economy

Discussant: Professor Anne Booth (SOAS)

The panel commenced with ‘The Political Economy of Healthcare Commercialization in Vietnam’ presented by **Dr Le Thanh Forsberg (University of Oxford)**. Forsberg examined the rapid commercialisation of Vietnamese healthcare in terms of political-economy considerations, and the role of the state vis-à-vis welfare. In particular, there had been two developments since 1997: the ‘socialisation’ of public services and the decentralisation of service delivery and management. These had mainly benefited the elites and out-of-pocket payments have since become very high. Forsberg concluded that the major policy challenge is institutional ability to reform, without which Vietnam would struggle for a more equitable healthcare system. **Dr Lena Rethel (University of Warwick)** presented her paper, ‘The Political Economy of Islamic Finance in Malaysia’. She started by recalling a debate in the earlier session on whether it was useful to question definitions (e.g. what was Southeast Asia or finance in her case). She argued it was indeed useful insofar as questioning destabilises discourses. She argued that what constituted Islamic finance had been historically constituted and that it remained a project under construction. In Malaysia, the market oriented approach of Islamic finance had become part of a state led elite project within its capitalist development. This cultural political economy challenged the idea of finance itself. In his paper, ‘Global halal between Islam: States and markets in Malaysia and Singapore’, **Dr Johan Fischer (Roskilde University)** presented the results of ethnographic fieldwork over the past 3 years in Malaysia and Singapore (the only two sites of state-regulated halal logos in the world) and beyond. The global market for halal products had led to major consequences for multi-national companies around the world, particularly since a scandal in Indonesia in 2001. This had extended beyond food into processes of production for products as diverse as vaccines. He thus posited a ‘Global Halal Zone’ in which markets and regulatory institutions could interact and diverge. The last paper was ‘Thailand’s Provincial Poverty and its Determinants: Before and after the 1997 Crisis’ by **Suphannada Limpanonda (SOAS)**. Limpanonda noted that poverty was normally only analysed in terms of spread over income groups, rather than geographical patterns. Her paper instead sought to examine patterns of provincial disparities in GPP per capita and poverty rates, to explore growth-poverty relationship at provincial level and to investigate provincial poverty determinants. Her findings suggested that provincial disparities across Thailand had been on a long-term upward trend. Coupled with the fact that national plans for economic development and poverty reduction had been centrally concentrated, this indicated that centralised policy implementation was not working.

Panel IV: Culture

Discussant: Professor Victor T. King (University of Leeds)

The last panel for Saturday was on ‘Culture’. The discussant **Professor King** started the session by declaring he would be avoiding the controversial issue of Southeast Asian studies due to his long involvement in the debates. He then introduced ‘The Burmese in Vernacular School History Textbook’ by **Dr Myo Oo (Busan University of Foreign Studies)**, who was unfortunately unable to attend the Symposium due to funding issues. Prof King summarised the paper analyzing a Burmese vernacular text first published in 1930, and subsequently republished in nine editions till 1991. Myo Oo argued that this text played an important role in shaping Burman identity. **Dr Awang Azman Awang Pawi**

(Universiti Malaysia Sarawak) then presented his paper entitled ‘Bornean Post-colonial Dilemma: Between Indigenous Right, Identity and Outsider’. He examined “Voices from Jungle”, a novel written by Jong Chian Lai from Sarawak, Borneo, to analyse Penan ethnicity and logging issues. He demonstrated that the quagmire this indigenous group was in was due to crucial issues such as uncontrolled logging and other environmental changes affecting their lives. **Ofita Purwani (University of Edinburgh)**’s paper, ‘Redefinition of Javanese tradition in Yogyakarta and Surakarta’ examined how political situations and appropriations hold importance in the process of redefinition and activation of ‘tradition’. She looked at two case studies, Yogyakarta and Surakarta. Both places are popularly referred as the centres of Javanese culture due to the presence of the king of the royal court (kraton), but had developed differently after the Indonesian independence. Yogyakarta remains kraton-centred in tourism development. Surakarta, in contrast, marginalises the role of the kraton of Surakarta in the traditions selected. The position of local stakeholders has determined this outcome. **Professor King** then presented his paper on ‘UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Southeast Asia: a Comparative and Critical Commentary’, which was part of an on-going broader project. His comparative project looks at World Heritage Sites across the region. King suggested that there were great variation in the character and pressures on these world heritage sites, with both national and global dimensions. He highlighted a current common confusion in terms of management and an absence of UNESCO control at times that begged greater scrutiny of applications. He concluded by questioning whether global heritage was needed or whether this might create more problems than it solved.

Day 2 (11 March 2012)

Panel V: Marginalized Communities

Discussant: Dr Liana Chua (Brunel University / University of Cambridge)

Dr Gwenola Ricordeau (Universite Lille-I) first presented, ‘Bringing home exotic women: The “mail-order brides” industry and Southeast Asian women’. Ricordeau looks at the agency of female ‘mail-order brides’ through five types of sources ranging from advertising material to in-depth interviews with such brides. She discovered that such marriages could also be seen as a strategy of self-enhancement; a risky strategy that women might still venture. Rather than losing their cultural heritage, this became an avenue through which they could construct a form of social and cultural status. **Dr Sascha Helbardt and Dr Dagmar Hellman (University of Passau)** then presented a paper on, ‘Deciphering Southern Thailand’s violence: Organization and insurgent practices of Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Coordinate (BRN-C)’. Looking at the causes of Southern Thailand’s insurgency, Helbardt argued that a high degree of re-organisation and strong networks had facilitated a resurgence of violence in the region. Hellman then commented that one needed to look beyond the perpetrator and victim in society to understand how the local networks interpreted violent acts. The communicative dimension was especially important in the construction of the borders of imagined collectives. The third paper was **Narae Choi’s (University of Oxford)** ‘Urban Informality and Neoliberalism: Formalisation versus Demolition of Informal Settlements in the Philippines’. Choi examined the relationship between neoliberalism and urban development through the case-study of forced eviction in the North-South Rail linkage project in Manila. She critically assessed whether informal settlements could be compatible with the vision of urban spaces as markets. In the

Philippines, informal settlers mobilised themselves to resist such actions and attempted to formalise their tenure. However displacement still occurred, and Choi argued that a new approach would be needed to deal with urban informality in line with the growing inequality in many Southeast Asian countries. The concluding paper was **Thaatchayini Kananatu's (Monash University Sunway Malaysia)** 'Legal mobilisation in post-colonial Malaysia: The law as a political tool for marginalised communities'. Kananatu examined the legal mobilisation of Malaysian Indians, she looked at how this ethnic minority group had used a legally constructed identity to strengthen their strategic litigation in court. She focused on plantation eviction cases to demonstrate how the law had become instrumental to framing grievances.

Dr Liana Chua connected the common themes within the different papers by highlighting the processes through which marginalization was constructed and produced (either by the state or by individuals themselves). In particular, an examination of the discourses of marginalization was critical. On the topic of marginality and power, Chua suggested that the marginalized did not lack power, and that the differentiation between the marginalized and non-marginalized might just be perpetuating an endless cycle of retaliation without changing the status quo.

Panel VI: Environment

Discussant: Dr Roger Montgomery (University of Oxford)

Dr Peter Larsen (Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies) opened the panel on 'Environment' with his paper on 'Biodiversity, liberalization and wildlife trade in Vietnam: Exploring the failure of command and control policies'. He looked at the rampant wildlife trade in Vietnam, closely linked to the biodiversity situation, as an extremely potent phenomenon to understand a range of state-society relationships and in particular policy formation. Larsen argued there was a strong regional dynamic behind developments, and that regulation was not external to wildlife trade dynamics but rather constituted it. He suggested that examining the function of enforcement system was critical to understanding state- society issues. **Dr Lee Jones (Queen Mary, University of London)** presented his paper entitled, 'Hazy Governance: The politics of environmental securitization'. Suggesting that the governance of the haze simply does not correspond to traditional models of regulatory regionalism, Jones argued that what had taken place was rather ASEAN having sought regulatory multi-level governance and power having been partially rescaled. This rescaling of power had been according to the differing interests and ideologies that the different scales privileged. The Indonesian apparatus, powerful corporate interests and entrenched relations had resisted a full rescaling, leading to an uneven, conflict-ridden governance system, which fails adequately to tackle transboundary pollution. **Li-Kheng Poh's (Brighton University)** paper 'In search of environmental accountability: Mobilization, the politics of risk and inclusive citizenship' examined the politics of risk and the construction of citizenship. Using two case studies, the contrasting results of the Broga (2003-2006) anti-incinerator and the Bukit Merah (1984-1993) anti-toxic waste disposal campaigns in Malaysia, Poh demonstrates how citizen campaigners resist the labels of 'not in my backyards' assigned by state and business interests. She argued such a label was not an accurate assessment of why the risk of the projects was not taken on, and that responses to risk are diverse and socially located in culture. **Laur Kiik (Columbia University)** then presented his paper on 'Environmentalism and the ethno-national struggle in Kachin land, northern Burma'. He

examined how Kachin social leaders and educated youth navigate and cultivate landscapes of fear, injustice, resistance, and religious belief, as they combine ethno-nationalist, biblical, and social activist idioms to develop a native environmentalism. As one entry-point into these landscapes, he studies the recently emerged Kachin environmentalist rock music. These popular songs continue to be voiced and work to create new national-environmental subjectivity.

Panel VII: Local Governance and Decentralisation

Discussant: Dr PJ Thum (University of Oxford)

Julien Labonne opened the panel by presenting his paper co-authored with **Professor Marcel Fafchamps (University of Oxford)**, ‘Neopotism and Punishment: The (Mis-)Performance of elected local officials in Philippines’. Labonne suggested that unlike the notion that political connections increased one’s profits, having wrong connections to politicians had a significant cost. Examining the data from over 46 000 households in the 2007 and 2010 local elections and tracing the connections via blood and marriage links, he found that those with connections to candidates who lost in 2007 were less likely to work in the public sector. This has a significant effect on the performance of politicians at the local levels. **Dr Patrick Ziegenhain (University of Trier)** then presented ‘Decentralisation and Democratisation in Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines’. Ziegenhain explored the question of whether a correlation or coincidence between the degree of decentralisation and quality of democracy could be found in cases of Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. Adopting the definition of democracy by the Freedom House, Ziegenhain asserted that Thailand had seen a slow implementation, Indonesia had adjusted its legal framework since 2004, and the Philippines achieved a medium level of autonomy. He argued that there was a coincidence between decentralisation and democracy at the national level, although the correlation was hard to assess. **Bambang Suharnoko Sjahrir (University of Freiburg)** presented his co-authored paper, ‘Does local governments’ responsiveness increase with decentralization and democratization? Evidence from sub-national budget allocation in Indonesia’. He looked at how decentralisation and democratisation had affected the fiscal responsiveness of local government to levels of public service coverage. Comparing the pre- and post-decentralisation fiscal responsiveness, he found its positive impacts on the level of local public service coverage for education, health and infrastructure. He suggested that responsiveness being not systematically related to local distribution of political power might be due to the loyalties of the local parliamentarians more to commissions in the parliament than to the parties. The last paper was **Thorn Pitidol’s (University of Oxford)** ‘The paradox of communitarian democracy in Thailand’. Pitidol examined the concept of communitarian democracy as propagated by NGOs and development agencies, particularly in the recent Thai democratic crisis of 2006. Exploring how the discourse of community participation shapes the practice of community development programmes, he argued that communitarian democracy should allow its adherents to assert the value of their collective identity and claim authenticity. This pointed to a paradoxical vision of democracy in which communitarian democracy was suggested as the real democracy but at the same time became a way to reinvent a limitation to democratic participation.

Panel VIII: Human Development

Discussant: Dr Philip Kreager (University of Oxford)

Matthew Tye (University of Oxford) started with a paper on ‘Population aging in Vietnam – An irreversible truth’. Through examining health, household living arrangements, and finances, his paper revealed that family structures have largely been maintained and the inter-generational contract remaining strong, despite changing economic and social paradigms over the last two decades. However, this was threatened and a huge and growing disparity existed between the elderly living in urban and rural areas. He argued that opportunities needed to be created for active aging communities, together with local government structures that could be used effectively in raising the elderly out of poverty or providing social care. **Sarah Mohaupt (LSE)** then presented her paper on, ‘Parental resources and children’s malnutrition over the life course and their consequences for cognitive outcomes – evidence from Indonesia.’ Mohaupt used data from the Indonesian Family Life Survey (IFLS) to examine the relationship between malnutrition and cognitive development via the severity of stunting. She looked at a cohort of children aged 0-5 in 1993 and followed them through. Cognitive development was tested using Raven’s Coloured Progressive Matrices assessments. Though the paper was a work in progress, preliminary results had suggested a link between stunting and cognitive development, which in turn could be linked to parental socio-economic resources. The last paper was **Rebecca Ye’s (University of Oxford)** ‘Mobility and Opportunities through lifelong learning in Singapore: Promise or trap?’. In Singapore lifelong learning has been said to increase social mobility. However, Ye questions if indicators at the aggregate and macro-level (e.g. economic growth, income distribution, or cohort educational attainment) are sufficient to demonstrate mobility and desired outcomes. Missing elements from the inquiry are publicly available datasets and a monitoring and evaluative culture that allows for a better assessment of impact. She also discussed how the supposed legitimacy of the learning systems in Singapore could compel society to interpret failures of an individual as a reflection of one’s personal inadequacies, not the systematic and institutional blockages that hamper their development.

Closing remarks

In his concluding remarks, Dr Kreager highlighted the immense promise of Project Southeast Asia in promoting links between Oxford and Southeast Asia. He then proceeded capture some of the key moments of the Symposium, starting with Rigg’s opening remarks that standard approaches to the region had to be recognised as deficient and Thum’s reminder that institutions could perpetuate assumptions and development approaches that needed to be escaped from. Using various papers as examples, he concluded that in general presented papers prove that development models from the West did not provide the answers and that Southeast Asia needed to find its own way.

The symposium was very well-received by all the participants with genuine compliments, among which highlights are:

“Thank you for inviting me to the symposium; I thought it was very valuable and I hope that it can be repeated.” – Professor Anne Booth (SOAS)

“Thank you all for organising such a successful symposium! I really enjoyed being part of it.” – Dr Liana Chua (Brunel University / University of Cambridge)

“Thanks for a very well run and stimulating conference” – Dr Lee Jones (Queen Mary, University of London)

“Sincere thanks for organising such an interesting symposium” – Prof Terry King

“Thank – and congratulate – you on an excellent symposium over the weekend. It was a real credit to you all that you managed to gather together such an interesting group of scholars and arrange things so well.” – Prof Jonathan Rigg (Durham University)