

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE STATE OF SOUTH EAST ASIAN STUDIES

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Guest Editor

As the articles published in this 12th edition of *JATI* demonstrate South East Asian Studies and the disciplinary mix that inform it stand at something of a crossroads. On one side of the road are the more traditional, detailed ethnographic studies of distinctive local practices based on extensive fieldwork. On the other, there is the constant concern to link the understanding of the region to broader disciplinary concerns in the social and historical sciences. Sometimes the two sides of the road can usefully converge to produce a new insight into a traditional practice. At other times a new methodology generated in a very different academic environment and applied uncritically to a South East Asian context can obscure and even contribute to a collective misreading of distinctive social and political practices. This is most evidently the case when powerful methodological frameworks of a European, North American or generically western provenance are superimposed upon understandings and practices that have emerged under very different contingent historical circumstances.

Indeed, as the social sciences developed methodological frameworks of universal application that were linked to the project of modernity, they inexorably facilitated a process that dissected traditional practice in order both to understand it but also to reform it or render it malleable to the requirements of progress. In its South East Asian context, the social sciences necessarily sought to understand the region through a reductionist lens that ultimately ranked it according to purportedly universal economic, legal and political standards. Consequently, at various times in the evolution of the study of the region Southeast Asia's apparent failure to modernize or develop reflected traditional practices, what the second editor of *The Economist* termed in the 1860s the 'cake of custom'. Subsequently, the classic works in social science whether from a Weberian, liberal, Marxist or neo Marxist perspective attributed Southeast Asia's historic political weakness either to cultural factors that failed to generate a modernizing ethic, or as a function of institutional calcification the inability of potentially rich despotisms to generate the flexibility and dynamism of market capitalism.

This approach and the implicit cultural bias it assumed still continues to inform studies of the region. However, with the end of the Cold War and apparent end of ideology, the new critical, deconstructive and constructivist methodologies introduced into regional studies significantly challenged the rational and progressive assumptions informing the social sciences. Yet arguably, this putatively post modern approach with its renewed emphasis on culture, identity, and identity politics whilst constituting an important corrective to the secular universalism of the social sciences, has also obscured the manner in which traditional practices are interestingly adapted to the political and social requirements of developing social and political arrangements in the region.

Thus, not only do our sometimes problematic methodological assumptions affect how we approach issues of culture, history, sociology and politics in the region, the region itself has never been a static geopolitical or historical entity. Historically fragmented first by the era of European colonialism and subsequently its divisive Cold War aftermath, it has only relatively recently been possible to speak of anything like a cohesive South East Asian region. Even here, moreover, the impact of globalization, both in terms of the impact of the West and the rise of the new Asian giants of China and India is profoundly affecting the character of the region and local, state and regional modes of self understanding.

The papers in this current volume, therefore, reflect and engage with these philosophical, political and cultural concerns. Thematically, the range of papers presented here consider: issues either of inter state or regional politics; politics and political movements at the state level and developments at the substate level in culture and economics. We begin, therefore, with the problem of understanding in the social sciences. Ederson Tapia's paper draws our attention to the changing patterns of global interaction that forms both the methodological background and preoccupies the social constructivist approach to international and regional politics. Tapia's work rightly draws attention to the achievements and limitations of this approach. In a similar critical vein but dealing more directly with the political issues raised by globalization and its uncertainties, Kim Hyung Jung explores *The ASEAN Way* and its implications for greater regional integration. Kim draws attention to the difficulty the consensus based approach to decision making encounters in the context of enhancing regional cooperation. In terms of the challenges presented to regional integration at the state level, papers by Asmady Idris draws attention to the growing extra regional links between Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, whilst Ruhana Padzil explores the continuing and sometimes fractious debate over Singapore's access to water from neighbouring Johor. In a similar comparative vein, Hasmah Zanuddin considers the relationship between government and the media in Thailand and Malaysia, whilst in a different regional context Ramli Dollah and Ahmad Mosfi Mohamad examine the implications of the barter trade on relations between Tawau Sabah and Indonesia. Somewhat differently, but still concerned with the problem of inter-regional relations, Azrul Nor Fadzilah and Hanizah Idris consider the changing character of Malaysia's maritime security in an era of transnational crime.

Whilst the difficulty of marrying regionalism to national resilience has been a consistent problem in South East Asia's inter state relations, papers by Ku Hasnita and Lili Yulyadi examine instead the equally vexed problem of identity at the state level, considering the role of patriotism in the political socialization process and the implications of Islamic awakening in Indonesia for the process of democratization. Similarly concerned with the distinctive regional understanding of democracy Zaini Othman, Mohammad Mahadee Haji Ismail and Zaid Ahmad examine electoral politics and the evolution of political hegemony within a state by elucidating the Malaysian model.

Moving from the state level to that of the locality, Abdullah Rahman Roslan considers the socio economic impact of the growth of hypermarkets in a micro political study of the Klang Valley, whilst Hanafi Hussin explores the role of ritual in the formation of Kadazan identity in Sabah and with Wiwiek Anastasia explores the role of dance in the Riau between 1913-63. Somewhat differently Ismail Ali & Mohammad Raduan examine the marine eco system and its impact on the

distinctive socio-economic practice of fishing community in Sabah and also discussion on the problem facing by tradisional fishermen in Malaysia Peninsula by Mohammad Raduan, Mohammad Sharir and Zarina Aziz.

In our concern to engage with micro and macro level studies of the issues of interaction, development and identity formation this edition of *JATI* therefore illustrates the various challenges that currently confront both South East Asia and how we as students seek to understand and contextualize them. Whilst offering no solution to these issues their problematization in a distinctively Southeast Asian context enables us to move from the particular to the often universal concerns about state, region culture and identity formation in a globalized world that is interconnected but by no means integrated.