TRaNS: Trans –Regional and –National Studies of Southeast Asia Vol. 1, No. 2 (July) 2013: 137–143.
 doi:10.1017/trn.2013.11

Introduction to the Issue

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On behalf of the editorial and advisory boards of *TRaNS* and Sogang University's Institute for East Asian Studies (SIEAS), I wish to extend my sincere thanks to all of those who made valuable contributions in different ways to the publication in January of this year of the inaugural issue of *TRaNS*. I hope the journal will be an important addition to the proud tradition in Southeast Asian studies of creating new ideas and critical views that pose constructive challenges to established orthodoxies and impose valuable corrections on hegemonic discourses. I also wish that this new initiative from Korea will play a part in our concerted efforts to save and reinvigorate Southeast Asian studies in an environment increasingly adverse to area studies. *TRaNS* will keep itself committed to both the scientific enquiry and the empathetic understanding of Southeast Asia, not only in its internal dynamics but also in its broad and deep interactions with the external world. In so doing, the editorial board of the journal and SIEAS will make every effort to keep *TRaNS* authored and read as widely as possible.

Theory and Cases

As a relatively young region, Southeast Asia has served as a fertile terrain for research. It has never stopped supplying new facts and phenomena to be identified, intriguing puzzles and questions to be answered, and crucial issues and themes to be explored. In addition, as one of the world's fastest growing and changing regions, Southeast Asia continues to add to the already long list of items on the research agenda. Since its birth – or invention – as a region, Southeast Asia has produced many outstanding scholars and specialists in response to the demands for research, despite the decline in Southeast Asian studies that began after the end of the Vietnam-American War and accelerated with the end of the Cold War. For all the respectable accomplishments in these fields, however, Southeast Asian studies in particular and area studies in general have increasingly been criticized – mainly by social and human science disciplines – for their strong predilection for country-specific, case-oriented approaches as well as descriptive methods and the consequent neglect of theoretical and methodological considerations.

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All eight papers presented in this issue of *TRaNS* repudiate, in unison and effectively, the gross criticisms levied against area specialists engaged in social and political research. True, no author seems to be interested in simply describing what he has found in the country he has observed. Three papers are explicitly comparative, with the number of cases ranging from two (Vedi Hadiz, Paul Hutchcroft) to five (Tuong Vu). The other five papers, though all handling a single case or country, are nevertheless either implicitly comparative in their attempts to conceptualise new phenomena (Mark Beeson, Kevin Hewison, Allen Hicken) and to re-contextualise existing concepts (Khoo Boo Teik), with references to comparable cases when necessary, or explicitly theoretical by combatting conceptual problems, fallacious inferences, and unempirical grounds (Eric Thompson). Their common, great cause of theory development emerges more clearly when they also support, with nearly one voice, a more historically-oriented approach, or combine this with their major method of analysis. Along their journeys, either direct or with detours, towards theory-building, the authors do not forget their other mission as area or country specialists, by looking deep into the specific context where the problems lie.

In the paragraphs that follow, I will summarise the findings and arguments of each paper. As the title of this issue suggests, *TRaNS* editors selected eight papers that deal with politics, specifically on such diverse research questions as nationalism (Vu), religion (Hadiz), ethnicity (Khoo), democracy and political change (Hutchcroft, Hewison), party system and partisan identity (Hicken, Hewison), regionalism (Beeson, Thompson), and methodology (Thompson). Diverse as they are, their concerns converge on addressing underlying, and often controversial, issues that have long been studied and discussed in Southeast Asian studies. Topically, then, we can place these papers in one of four major issues in Southeast Asian studies: regional autonomy; continuity and/or change; re-contextualisation; and conceptualising politics.

Regional *Autonomy*

The first issue addressed is whether Southeast Asia's individual countries, the region as a whole, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are recognised to have, and sometimes to exercise, a certain degree of sovereignty with their own power, ability, and identity in relation to the external forces and factors that attempt to influence them. Are Southeast Asian countries in control of their own destiny? Does ASEAN and the imagined region of Southeast Asia enjoy sufficient legitimacy and authority to mobilise and bind their individual countries and their citizens internally as well as to defend their collective interests externally? To relate this question to one of the unending polemics in Southeast Asian studies: is Southeast Asia, or its history and politics, *autonomous*? Eric Thompson and Mark Beeson answer the questions in slightly different tones.

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2013.11 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Thompson "defends" the notion that "ASEAN as well as Southeast Asia is a social, political and economic fact" and that both entities have even made "progressive efforts to resist both dividing forces of nationalism, and homogenising and hegemonic forces of globalism." From these observations, Thompson proposes methodological regionalism as "a valuable part of the analytical tool kit along with other [local, national, and global] scales of analysis as well as disciplinary approaches." To him, Southeast Asia is as much an autonomous region as any other region; ASEAN has grown into an independent player in regional and international relations; and "thinking regionally" is as sensible as thinking locally, nationally, or globally.

Beeson does not seem as convinced of ASEAN's future as Thompson. While acknowledging that ASEAN has survived longer than expected and made modest achievements in security and economic cooperation and that many opportunities are open to it in the future, Beeson cautions that equally tough challenges may also be in store before the loose-knit ASEAN matures into a robust regional body. Its weak material foundation, the continued influence of "more powerful external actors," the rise of China, and indecisive organisational principles and easy-going diplomatic styles epitomised in the ASEAN Way may continue to test the autonomy and vitality of ASEAN and Southeast Asia in the future. Though less sanguine than Thompson, Beeson nonetheless remains optimistic about ASEAN's future when he says, "ASEAN has the potential to play off one regional great power against another and skilfully exploit the competition between its more powerful neighbours."

Continuity and *Change* in Southeast Asian Politics

The second question posed by two authors in this issue is, have changes in Southeast Asian politics been real and substantial enough to be characterised as fundamental or to qualify as a watershed transformation in the region's modern history? Again, to put this question in the discursive context and to borrow words from Donald Emmerson: which term, 'continuity' or 'change', prevails more and characterises better the contemporary politics of the region and individual countries? Paul Hutchcroft and Kevin Hewison appear to find mutually contradictory trends in two countries that have recently experienced a series of turbulent political crises: the Philippines and Thailand.

According to Hutchcroft, the persistent elite or oligarchic control and manipulation of politics in the Philippines and Thailand has defeated the pressure and hope of newly mobilised political masses. The tendency has also failed to impose popular accountability on the ruling elite and to improve the quality of democracy in both countries, whose political systems are unable to consolidate beyond "at-risk democracies" (in Larry Diamond's terminology). Hutchcroft lays the blame on the "deductive and generally ahistorical" transition

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paradigm, to which Huntingtonesque minimalist, electoral notions of democracy subscribe in order to justify the idea that the at-risk democracies so widely found in today's developing world have already reached an acceptable stage of democracy. Instead, he proposes that "deeper and more substantive examination of *struggles for power among social forces within specific historical contexts*" be carried out, namely through "examination of *source* and *purpose* of democracy" (Hutchcroft's emphasis), not only to evaluate the quality of democracy but also to help improve it in reality.

Having read Hewison's piece, I wonder what he would think of Hutchcroft's firmly held views on the faulty democracies of the two countries. By contrast, Hewison finds in post-1997 Thai politics at least three ruptures that have loomed large in the otherwise continuous tradition of the elitist bureaucratic polity, either democratic or authoritarian: the die-hard popularity of, and "real and long-standing…political loyalty" towards, the populist Thai Rak Thai Party and its successor parties; its contemporaneous erosion of the sacred and symbolic "myths," "aura," and "honour" of the kingship status; and the emergence of a class identity and solidarity – *phrai* against *amart* – among the rural sectors and the urban working class. These strata used to be kept out of "real politics" which was considered the exclusive domain of "a conservative elite drawn from the hierarchical extra-parliamentary institutions" such as the military, the bureaucracy, and the royal family. All these ruptures combine to create a historical watershed that is on a par with a "critical juncture" (after Collier and Collier). Hewison reports that "[the populist pro-Thaksin] parties have won every election since 2000" despite all the efforts the conservative parties exerted and all the means – "unmatched in modern times" – the state used in order to suppress and demobilise the supporters of those parties. He then asserts that "a turning point or watershed in Thai politics has been reached."

I believe that the difference between these two scholars lies more in their foci than in their overall evaluations of the two political systems and thus should not be exaggerated. Hutchcroft focuses on the continuity of the oligarchical elite rule, which has survived regime changes, while Hewison turns his attention to the changing political attitudes and behaviour of the underprivileged. The old system, like Benedict Anderson's "old state" in a "new society," remains tenacious while the people begin to stir. Which will prevail?

(Re-)Contextualising Old Politics

The third major issue raised by the contributors is methodological. Eric Thompson's straightforward proposal of "methodological regionalism" as an additional approach to Southeast Asian studies was already addressed in previous paragraphs. By methodological issues I mean here various ideas about what approach or method of analysis is most valid and useful in investigating particular problems.

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Although all the contributors are conscious of methodological significance, two scholars deserve special review here: Vedi Hadiz and Khoo Boo Teik. Interestingly, their methodological concerns are motivated by wanting not so much to test or build a theory better but to solve their puzzles or understand their problems better, by putting them in (new) context, that is, contextualising or re-contextualising them. More interestingly, the direction of (re-)contextualisation and thus the level or depth of the context is at opposite ends of the scale: Hadiz is more global and comparative, as opposed to the more country- and locality-specific, and historical Khoo. Despite such a contrast of contextualisation, both studies seem to have the common purpose of illustrating the "diverse," "complex," and "full" spectrum found in ethnic Chinese or Islamic politics in Malaysia and Southeast Asia, if not across the globe.

Hadiz laments that historical-sociology and political-economy considerations have been missing from the literature of Islamic politics in Southeast Asia and suggests that a new approach accommodating those perspectives would be both useful and necessary to deconstruct and reconstruct this controversial issue. Hadiz is highly critical of existing studies on the subject that have been dominated and contaminated by a security-oriented approach. It is precisely this approach that is responsible for a stereotyped image of Islam with "a simple 'moderate' and 'radical' dichotomy'" as well as the naïve view that Islamic terrorists in Southeast Asia today are cultivated by outside forces and external influences, largely from the Middle East and North Africa. According to his "new 'angles' of analysis," then, "social animosities and frustrations took on Islamic characteristics" which sometimes translated into "radical and violently militant" actions because globalised neoliberal capitalism mass-produced a huge number of dislocated and displaced people, including "armies of educated lower middle class youths," who under the conservative authoritarianism had not been allowed to express themselves in class terms, as might have been the case in a liberal democracy.

Khoo Boo Teik reconstructs the history of Chinese politics in Southeast Asia in an exceptionally articulate fashion. He makes it clear in a humble disclaimer that his piece is not a comparative study but a single-country study. He also makes no commitment to any theory-oriented mission and does not put forward any strong argument of his own. In the end, however, Khoo's analysis turns out to carry rich theoretical and methodological implications. His findings of "a full spectrum of Chinese involvement in politics" experienced in Malaysia could be found in any country in the world, as "they [Chinese] were everywhere." His colonialism-nationalism and capitalism-communism axes may well be employed for any other post-colonial society for a case or comparative study of its ethnic Chinese politics. Moreover, his descriptive approach does not lack the "methodological rigor" required in scientific analysis. In sum, what he presents is indeed an exemplary in-depth historical analysis of ethnic Chinese politics.

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In sum, Khoo corrects common prejudiced, narrow perceptions of ethnic Chinese and their involvement in politics by putting them in long-term historical as well as deeply localised contexts, while Hadiz plays his part in helping us to overcome the over-simplistic dichotomous view of Islamic politics by approaching it in comparative-historical and political-economic perspectives.

Conceptualising New Politics

Last but not least, to discover something new or anomalous in the empirical world is in itself a valuable contribution to the development of science. A new discovery serves as an impetus to the subsequent process, and other scholars' pursuit, of scientific inquiry. Thus, fact-finding or accumulating empirical knowledge should be appreciated as a scholarly achievement in area studies as well. Tuong Vu and Allen Hicken highlight new phenomena and critical changes they have noticed from observations of the contemporary politics of Southeast Asia. Like the other contributors to this issue, this pair of political-scientists-cum-area-specialists go beyond simply displaying the facts they have uncovered. Both scholars attempt to identify and conceptualise anomalies – "new nationalism" and "partisan identity" – which they believe have emerged for the first time in Southeast Asia and Thailand respectively, and then to explain what has caused the emergence of these new trends.

However, despite having the same objective, Vu and Hicken – as with Hadiz and Khoo, and Hutchcroft and Hewison – reveal differences between them, in terms of the number of cases they handle and the method of analysis they rely on. Vu puts five cases in his comparative framework, while Hicken devotes himself to the analysis of a single country, Thailand. Both are explanatory, though Vu is more interested in explaining three independent variables – unfulfilled promises of earlier nationalism, the end of the Cold War and the rise of China, and the liberalisation and democratisation of domestic politics – while Hicken spends most of his energy clarifying and refining his dependent variable, the increase in political partisanship. In so doing, Vu goes "macro-causal" in Theda Skocpol's phrase, with his eyes on major structural and historical variables, while Hicken analyses fragmentary survey and election data meticulously to look for indications and patterns of voting behaviour that reflect and contradict the emergence of partisan identities.

We should wait and see how much longer the new trends they have found will last in Southeast Asian politics. If Vu's "new nationalism" turns out to be durable, its implications for democracy, peace, and stability in national politics and intraregional relations could be serious. With the caution of a scientist, Hicken seems to pause before concluding that the change in the voting behaviour of Thais is neither a "temporary shift" nor tied to the person of Thaksin Shinawatra, but is indeed tied to the parties, which would ultimately lead to the formation of a new party system in the country.

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In lieu of a conclusion, I wish to share with readers a more light-hearted reading of the papers. To me, it has always been fun to measure the level of anger emitted in the writing of a social scientist. I do not believe that showing one's emotions in academic writing necessarily violates the methodological norms of value-free social science. I hope that my mischief does not embarrass or displease anyone, as my scales are all nominal and thus not "value-laden." To place the eight contributors in the spectrum from "engaging anger" to "scientific composure": Thompson (on methodological nationalists and globalists), Hadiz (on security-oriented specialists of Islam), Hutchcroft (on advocates of oligarchical, at-risk democracies), and Hewison (on supporters of an anti-Thaksin coup d'état and royalists), as compared to Khoo (on a variety of ethnic Chinese politics), Beeson (on growing ASEAN regionalism), Vu (on new nationalism), and lastly Hicken (on emerging political partisanship). Not all the readers or even the authors might support or like my rough measurement.

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