The Poverty of Regionalism

Limits in the Study of Southeast Asia

The idea of Southeast Asia as an academic field has a European pedigree stretching back to the early twentieth century. The term arose partly for convenience – it was useful to have a concise name for the region lying between India and China – and partly from a sense that there was some form of identity in this part of the world, which transcended the cultural diversity of the region and the numerous international borders cutting across it. Since the term was coined, the borders of ‘Southeast Asia’ as a region have been remarkably flexible.

We achieve similar insights by slicing the geographical pie in different ways. In this respect, the institutionalization of Southeast Asia in the form of ASEAN has probably had the paradoxical effect of galvanizing scholars, in their usual, per- verse counter-intuitive way, to search for alternative geo- graphical frameworks. In recent years, important new insights have arisen from defining the Austronesian world, which stretches from Madagascar through maritime South- east Asia to Polynesia, as a region of study. Something sim- ilar has been done by looking at the world of the Tai, which straddles the borders of Southeast Asia, China, and India. New historical research, such as on the use of the Siamese twin of any conception of Southeast Asian identity has had the unfortunate effect of closing our eyes to many ways in which the experience of Southeast Asia can be considered part of the Pacific, rather than Asia. The short-lived short-lived

Perhaps the most ambitious revision of regional borders, however, has been the programme to annex southern China to Southeast Asia. This programme has not focused on the basically Southeast Asian ‘national minorities’ of the region but rather on the elements of mainstream Chinese culture in the South which have Southeast Asian origins, on coastal southern China’s long history of commercial integration with Southeast Asia, and the observation that the four southern provinces – Guangzhou, Guangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan – are individually comparable in population and economic strength to their Southeast Asian neighbours. From an aca- demic-political point of view, this campaign is risky. In the past, the much larger and more self-assured field of China Studies has been fully prepared to see Southeast Asia as part of China’s world – as ‘peripheral areas’ in the memorable words of Reischauer, Fairbank, and Craig – and there is thus a danger that Southeast Asia’s academic identity will be undermined rather than expanded. Nonetheless, the propo- nents of this approach should be congratulated for their daring.

All the same, such experimentation with new borders sug- gests that the old ones have exhausted some of their analyt- ical power. If this is the case, however, the way forward may not be to keep cutting the geographical cake in different ways but rather to range beyond the region in a new and aggres- sive comparative approach. The strength of awareness of diversity which is the Siamese twin of any conception of Southeast Asian identity has had the unfortunate effect of closing our eyes to comparisons further field. With such a rich variety of his- torical experience, social form, and cultural expression in Southeast Asia, it has seemed to many of us that there is no clear advantage to be found, at least no further afield than South and East Asia.

Yet for historians in particular, there is much to be learnt from looking at Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and North America. And, more important, there are many ways in which the experience of Southeast Asia can illuminate the rest of the world. Anderson’s Imagined Com- munities argument on the origins of nationalism is one of the rather few examples of an insight developed from an under- standing of Southeast Asian experience, but with global appli- cation. Similarly, important insights into the nature of geno- cide as a global phenomenon arise from examining the terrible history of mass killing in Cambodia and Indonesia. Good comparative work is difficult. The cases to be com- pared have to be selected carefully and the researcher needs either to develop serious competence in another region, or to find a congenial collaborator with such competence. For those who follow the new path, however, the intellectual rewards will be enormous.

Reference

Dr Robert Cribb is Senior Fellow in the Division of Pacific and Asian History, RASPA (Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies), Aus- tralian National University. His research areas are the Sinarmonde, the Siamese twin of any conception of Southeast Asian identity and includes issues of national identity, mass violence, environmen- tal politics, and historical geography.

robert.cribb@anu.edu.au

The Portrait of the

Chinese family

The Elder of the

Chi Minh looks down on a Chinese family in Batavia. Is southern China part of Southeast Asia? Or is Southeast Asia part of southern China?