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Southeast Asian Studies and the Reality of Southeast Asia

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[*Abstract*]

Southeast Asianists have a perennial tendency to question the reality of the region in which they are specialized. Yet while scholars have doubted, Southeast Asians at large have become increasingly sure that Southeast Asia does exist, and increasingly inclined to identify with it. This article summarizes a range of evidence to that effect, from opinion poll research and from the history of ASEAN and other pan-Southeast Asian institutions, and uses it to construct a critique of the relativistic view that Southeast Asia is a fluid and ill-defined concept. Southeast Asians today tend to see Southeast Asia as a cultural as well as a geographical and institutional unit. The nature of the perceived cultural unity remains unclear, and further research is called for in this area. There are reasons to think, however, that it reflects real inheritances from a shared past, as well as shared aspirations for the future.

Keywords: Southeast Asian Studies, Southeast Asia, ASEAN, Region, Identity, Culture, Community, Institutions, Imagination, Zomia.

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Ⅰ. Introduction

Southeast Asianists have spent a striking amount of time and effort "problematizing" Southeast Asia. Classic publications with tentative titles, like the much-used history textbook *In search of Southeast Asia* edited by David Joel Steinberg (1971, 1987), or Donald Emmerson's meticulous definitional survey "'Southeast Asia': What's in a name?" (1984), are testimony to this introspective tendency. So too, in a different way, is the present issue of *Suvannabhumi*, and the research project and conference in which it originated.

There are understandable reasons for this tendency to disciplinary self-doubt. In part it reflects a general hesitancy about categorization of peoples and cultures that has affected scholars of Asia and the "non-Western" world since the publication of Edward Said's seminal work on Orientalism (1978). Area Studies, by its name and nature, is also rightly sensitive to the problems involved in mapping the complex and intangible geographies of human culture, and this predisposes its practitioners to hesitancy when it comes to defining their own academic territory.

Yet in the twenty-first century such soul-searching is actually less justified, as far as Southeast Asianists are concerned, than it ever was in the past, and risks causing them to lose touch with a reality in which their knowledge and perspectives are more relevant than ever. In what follows I would like to argue that Southeast Asia today can and does define itself, and that if academics want to understand the region's identity, they should listen in the first place to the voices of its inhabitants, a great many of whom currently see Southeast Asia as a cultural as well as a political reality.

To avoid misunderstandings, a few disclaimers are in order at the outset. First, I am not trying to argue here that the existence of Southeast Asia is simply an objective geographical fact, independent of people's perceptions of it. Neither am I arguing that its existence has always been perceived, or even that it is a particularly old concept. Although prefigured in, and to some extent influenced by, the writings of nineteenth-century European academics and sojourners in the region, an indigenous sense of unambiguously Southeast

Asian identity did not really begin to emerge until the 1960s. Toward the end of the twentieth century, nevertheless, Southeast Asia rapidly became both familiar and significant to very many of its inhabitants as a result of its institutionalization in the form of ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and many other organizations bearing the Southeast Asian label; its incorporation into educational curricula; and its representation in national and international communications media.

A large part of my article describes this process of regional identity formation and uses empirical evidence from attitude surveys to show that Southeast Asia is now firmly anchored in the consciousness of very large numbers of Southeast Asians, with geographical boundaries that are clearly defined and not in doubt. Toward the end of the piece, I also highlight the fact that most of those polled in the surveys believe that a degree of cultural unity exists among all Southeast Asian nations. This, I suggest, helps to explain why Southeast Asia has so quickly become such a popular and apparently self-explanatory concept. Like all self-identifying groups that are too large for all of their members to know each other personally, Southeast Asia, however strongly institutionalized, remains at some level an 'imagined community', to borrow Benedict Anderson's immortal phrase. But some communities are intrinsically easier to imagine than others. The shared cultural traits, rooted in shared history, which various scholars have identified as characteristically Southeast Asian did not *predestine* the region to emerge in our time as a political unit and a focus of subjective identity. Nevertheless, they are almost certainly part of the reason why it has done so.

Ⅱ. Destructive fantasies: Zomia and the postmodern attack on Southeast Asian Studies

In its most aggravated form, the perennial academic “search for Southeast Asia” leads researchers to conclude that even in recent times there is simply no entity that is commonly, consistently, and persistently identified as Southeast Asia. Its location, extent, and

identity are up for grabs, its very existence in doubt. As the editors (all of them established Southeast Asia scholars) of a 2005 volume entitled *Locating Southeast Asia* put it in their introduction:

> Efforts to define an entity to match the term "Southeast Asia" have been inconclusive, and the term persists as little more than a way to identify a certain portion of the earth's surface. [...]. Whether Southeast Asia will acquire greater coherence in the future, or become increasingly irrelevant, is a question that cannot be answered. [...] The value of "Southeast Asia" lies in the way it frames and juxtaposes people and events, but to be of any value it must be understood as a fluid concept, representing a variable collection of states, of terrains and ecological zones, and of peoples. It must be used with caution [...] (Kratoska, Raben and Schulte Nordholt 2005: 14-15)

Locating Southeast Asia is notable for including a uniquely influential critical reflection on Southeast Asia as a region, and on area studies in general: Willem van Schendel's "Geographies of knowledge, geographies of ignorance: jumping scale in Southeast Asia". In this contribution, originally presented as a paper at the 2001 Amsterdam workshop in which the volume had its origins, and also published elsewhere as a journal article (2002), Van Schendel begins by inviting his readers to sit down, in their mind's eye, at a food stall in a town where both Mon-Khmer and Tibeto-Burman languages are spoken, and where a "bamboo-shoot lunch" is on the menu. The town turns out to be Shillong, in northeastern India. "Is this Southeast Asia?", Van Schendel (2005: 275) then asks rhetorically. "If so, why? And does it matter?".

There follows an ambitious attempt to deconstruct, indeed demolish, Southeast Asia as a concept. The so-called Southeast Asian region, the author argues, lacks the "geographical obviousness of other areas". More importantly, the cultural commonalities that allegedly make it a human unit are at best "vague", and almost always shared with groups located outside its conventional borders.

> Southeast Asianists [...] share [...] a concern to present Southeast Asia as a well-bounded geographical place with a certain internal

> consistency and a *regional je ne sais quoi*, an essence that even area specialists find hard to put into words. As a result, the geographical boundaries of the region remain highly problematic: civilisations, languages and religions have never coincided with each other, nor with the contemporary political boundaries that most Southeast Asianists accept as the spatial limits to their quest for knowledge. (Van Schendel 2005: 277-278).

The only reason why such a weakly defined region became widely recognized as such, in this view, is that the "post-World War II academic division of the world" was shaped by the "geopolitics of the Cold War", and by the legacy of colonial Orientalist scholarship.

To illustrate the supposed arbitrariness of the course of events which led Southeast Asia to become an "institutional space", Van Schendel imagines a counterfactual region that did not become institutionalized in the same way: the subsequently (and somewhat ironically) well-known Zomia (from *zomi*, a term for "highlander" in a number of languages of Myanmar, India and Bangladesh), consisting of upland central and southeastern Asia. The reason why this "Region of No Concern" did not become recognized or institutionalized, Van Schendel (2005: 284-287) proposes, was not because it was objectively or intrinsically any less coherent than Southeast Asia, but rather because, unlike Southeast Asia, it "straddled the communist and capitalist spheres of influence" and encompassed only the peripheries, not their cores, of either historic civilizations or modern nation-states.

The subsequent popularization of Zomia in the academic world was due mainly to the fact that the term was picked up and expanded upon by veteran Southeast Asianist James C. Scott in his polemical book *The art of not being governed: an anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia* (2009). Citing Van Schendel's original 2001 conference paper, Scott borrowed Zomia as a convenient name for the "zone of refuge" which, according to his central argument in *The art of not being governed*, the mountain massif of mainland Southeast Asia had offered throughout history to non-state peoples fleeing from, or simply avoiding, the violence and taxation of lowland power centers (Scott 2009: 13-22, 340). Scott's book generated great interest in the scholarly community both within and

beyond Southeast Asian Studies, spawning a whole academic industry under the Zomian label. In 2010, for example, the *Journal of Global History* devoted a theme issue (5-2) entitled "Zomia and Beyond" to eight pieces debating Scott's ideas. Up to the present the term continues to be widely used, even giving rise to the derivative concept of a "maritime Zomia" (Hong 2016). In this way, one of the most influential contributions of Southeast Asian Studies to wider scholarly debate can ironically be said to have emerged as an accidental by-product of the persistent crisis of identity within the discipline.

That contribution, however, is a highly controversial one. Leaving aside the controversy generated by Scott's specific interpretation of Zomia as a historic zone of refuge and benevolent anarchy, Van Schendel's original formulation, in terms of the potential (but unrealized) equivalence of Zomia and Southeast Asia, and the implications of that equivalence, is itself open to obvious objections.

In the first place, Van Schendel's concrete criticisms of Southeast Asia as a concept mostly boil down to the observation that the region's cultural geography, however defined, does not correspond perfectly with its political borders. The importance of this point, however, should not be exaggerated. That the town of Shillong, for instance, appears culturally cognate with Southeast Asia is hardly surprising given that it lies less than 300 kilometers from the Indian-Burmese border. Southeast Asia as a whole, by comparison, extends over more than ten times that distance both from west to east and from north to south. Van Schendel's counterfactual argument regarding Zomia would be stronger if his alternative region had the effect of splitting up Southeast Asia - or South Asia, or East Asia, or any other "conventional" region - in a radical new way. But it does not: with respect to the existing Area Studies communities, Zomia does not amount to much more than a minor border dispute - and all academic disciplines, even the most rigorous, are subject to those.

In relation to Southeast Asia, Van Schendel (2005: 275) tries to suggest a more radical critique by declaring that Shillong, his epitome of a Southeast Asian place that defies Southeast Asian

borders, “may stand for towns as dispersed as Antananarivo, Trincomalee, Merauke and Kunming”. In the cases of Merauke, in Indonesian Papua, and Kunming, less than 300 kilometers from the China-Vietnam border in Yunnan, it is hard to disagree. But whether a Southeast Asian would really feel so much at home in Antananarivo, capital of Madagascar, or in the Sri Lankan Tamil town of Trincomalee, is actually a much more open question.

This brings us to the second and more profound weakness of Van Schendel's critique (and, by extension, many other critiques) of Southeast Asia as an object of academic enquiry: his insistence on treating it *only* as an object of academic enquiry, and his indifference to the opinions of the people who live there as to what it does and does not consist of. In “Jumping scale in Southeast Asia”, the region of that name is dismissed as a self-serving conspiracy of Western Orientalists, “colonial experts”, and Cold War strategists, an external category imposed on “distant places” that “needed to be better understood in the world centres of power” (Van Schendel 2005: 290). In a later, even more polemical essay entitled “Southeast Asia: an idea whose time is past?”, Van Schendel (2012: 500) does at last call for attention to changing indigenous geographies of identity.

> We have to rethink space. But who are 'we'? The more important rethinking is going on, not among scholars, but among inhabitants of the regions confronting the wider world. Area thinking has become a significant resource in identity construction for some - to the extent that the 'area' in area studies has turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Yet after this promising start, Van Schendel immediately reverts to dismissing Southeast Asia as an externally imposed category, relevant at most to diasporic immigrant groups in Western countries.

> For many others in the region, however, 'Southeast Asia' still means little or nothing. Furthermore, the claims of area studies have been received differently by inhabitants of the region and by people originating from it but living elsewhere. Who has adopted the self-identification of 'Southeast Asian', and why? It can be argued

> that it is mainly, and increasingly, outside the area that the label has practical relevance. The idea of Southeast Asia is more influential beyond the region - on campuses and in boardrooms, foreign ministries and control rooms - than within it. Indonesians, Vietnamese and Burmese who live in the United States, Europe or Australia find themselves categorized as 'Southeast Asians' [...]. (Van Schendel 2012: 500).

Fifty years ago, such rhetoric might still have been credible. In the twenty-first century, it can no longer be taken seriously. Southeast Asia today is neither an academic abstraction nor a strategic project, but a concrete, everyday reality, institutionalized by every Southeast Asian state and directly experienced by millions of Southeast Asian people.

Ⅲ. Southeast Asia in Southeast Asia: beyond deconstruction

The most obvious and important institutional basis for Southeast Asian regional identity today is ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) founded in 1967 and generally recognized as the most successful regional organization in the developing world. In all of its member countries ASEAN has a high and positive public profile, especially among educated young people. In 2014 and 2015, Eric Thompson, Chulanee Thianthai and Moe Thuzar organized a survey in which more than 4,600 undergraduate students at 22 universities across all ten ASEAN states were quizzed on their knowledge of, and attitudes to, ASEAN and the Southeast Asian region. Presented with the statement: “I feel I am a citizen of ASEAN”, fully 82 per cent agreed, 36 per cent “strongly” so. An even higher proportion responded positively to the question of whether membership in ASEAN is beneficial to their country, and almost three-quarters also believed that their country's membership was beneficial to them personally.

	strongly agree (%)	some-what agree (%)	some-what disagree (%)	strongly disagree (%)	total agree (%)	total disagree (%)
I feel that I am a citizen of ASEAN	37.2	45.5	13.1	4.2	82.7	17.3
Membership in ASEAN is beneficial to my country	36.8	52.4	8.4	2.4	89.2	10.8
Membership in ASEAN is beneficial to me personally	22.0	52.3	19.1	6.6	74.3	25.7

Adapted from Thompson, Thianthai and Thuzar (2016: 38, 41, 43)

The same survey also revealed that good fundamental knowledge of the organization, and of the Southeast Asian region which it encompasses, is very widespread. When asked to list the member countries of ASEAN, for example, most respondents correctly named, without any prompts or clues other than an outline map, at least nine out of the actual ten.

Number of ASEAN member countries correctly named, average	9.1 / 10
ASEAN member countries correctly identified on map, average	6.7 / 10
ASEAN flag correct (choice of six)	81.5 %
Date of ASEAN foundation correct (choice of six, one per decade 1960-2000)	43.0 %

Adapted from Thompson, Thianthai and Thuzar (2016: 58)

Asked whether they favored integration and cooperation among the ASEAN countries in various fields, more than half answered “strongly agree” with respect to economic cooperation, educational exchanges, security cooperation, and sports competitions (Thompson, Thianthai and Thuzar 2016: 82).

These results closely mirror those of an earlier, somewhat less extensive survey carried out in 2007 among 2,170 students at ten universities, one in each ASEAN country, by two of the same authors (Thompson and Thianthai 2008). Both the 2007 and 2015 findings by Thompson and colleagues are also in line with the results of an unrelated poll conducted in 2005 by the Singapore newspaper *The Straits Times*, together with allied English-language

newspapers in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. In this survey over 1,000 English-speaking, urban respondents were polled in one-to-one interviews, via e-mail and telephone, with over 400 questioned in Singapore and about 100 in each of the other countries involved. Nearly half of those polled were of the opinion that the "pace of ASEAN integration" was too slow, and only 2.6 per cent found it too fast. The idea that ASEAN should have a single currency was backed by fully 45 per cent of respondents, with 38 per cent against. Most importantly in our context, when asked "Do people in ASEAN identify with one another?", six out of ten (60.3 per cent) answered "yes" (Rekhi 2005).

A limitation of the three surveys just discussed is that they are all restricted to the most highly educated part of the Southeast Asian population. In this context a fourth piece of research on Southeast Asian views of Southeast Asia, conducted around the same period for a doctoral thesis on ASEAN's "security community project" by Christopher Roberts (2008), provides valuable confirmation that high levels of knowledge regarding regional cooperation are not limited to intellectual elites. A random sample of more than 800 people, distributed over all Southeast Asian countries except Myanmar, was quizzed on its knowledge of ASEAN and the region. This too was a highly urban sample: all interviews took place in capital cities, and over 90 per cent of the respondents came from a town of 20,000 or more people (Roberts 2011: 381). However, it was also explicitly and intentionally a *grassroots* poll, directed at ordinary people, conducted in vernacular languages by native speakers, and designed to complement a separate in-depth interview survey, by Roberts himself, of 100 members of Southeast Asia's political and academic elites (Roberts 2008: 40-42).

Asked how familiar they were with ASEAN as an organization, more than 50 per cent of those questioned as part of Roberts' grassroots survey reported that they knew it either "very well" or "reasonably well"; only 8 per cent had never heard of it.

	proportion of respondents (%)
I know it very well	7.5
I know it reasonably well	44.6
I know of it but don't really know what it does	38.4
I had never heard of it before this survey	8.3

Adapted from Roberts (2012: 171)

Another question in the grassroots survey was designed to investigate the ability of those polled "to differentiate between the Southeast Asian countries and the countries outside the region" (Roberts 2008: 361). Respondents were presented with a list of Asian and Australasian countries, and asked: "Which of the following countries form a part of your region?". The result was that all ten ASEAN countries - Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar, and the Philippines - were identified as such far more often (in all cases by more than 40 per cent of respondents) than were any of the others on the list. The non-ASEAN country most frequently identified by respondents as belonging to their own region, China, was named by 25 per cent. None of the remaining countries listed - India, South Korea, North Korea, Pakistan, Australia, and New Zealand - was named by more than 10 per cent of those surveyed (Roberts 2008: 362; 2012: 170).

Of course, data from opinion polls and attitute surveys only tell us what participants say momentarily about a fragment of their views, and only in response to prepared questions from the researchers. The answers given are inevitably situational, the connection with everyday behavior often tenuous. Reported appreciation for the benefits of ASEAN, for instance, is no doubt partly formulaic, echoing public and official discourse. But for all that, the clarity and decidedness of the results just cited, and the impressive levels of geographical knowledge which they reveal, stand in striking contrast to the dismissive relativism of much of the academic literature. And while the urban and elite bias of the data cannot be denied, it should be remembered that the days when the vast majority of Southeast Asians were uneducated peasants are long past. One half of Southeast Asia's population now lives in urban areas, and only in Cambodia and Laos is the secondary school

enrolment rate below 50 per cent (ASEAN 2018: 7, 13).

Ⅳ. Demarcating ASEAN

The clarity with which individual Southeast Asians are able to define the geographical scope of Southeast Asia is matched by the clarity with which ASEAN as an institution does the same thing. Admittedly, neither the foundational ASEAN (Bangkok) Declaration of 1967 nor the more detailed ASEAN Charter of 2007 explicitly defines the "South-East Asian Region" (1967), or "recognised geographical region of Southeast Asia" (2007), within which they specify that member countries must be located. However, ASEAN documents of the 1990s relating to the accession of Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar (1997), and Cambodia (1999) refer explicitly to the Association expanding to encompass "all ten Southeast Asian countries" (Severino 2006: 42-43, 54-55). A protocol of 1998, ratified in the context of the opening up to non-member states of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation that had been an internal foundation of ASEAN since 1976, is likewise explicit as to what Southeast Asia as a region does and does not include.

> States outside Southeast Asia may also accede to this Treaty with the consent of all the States in Southeast Asia, namely, Brunei Darussalam, the Kingdom of Cambodia, the Republic of Indonesia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, the Union of Myanmar, the Republic of the Philippines, the Republic of Singapore, the Kingdom of Thailand and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. (reproduced in Severino 2006: 400-401).

Consistently with this position, repeated ASEAN membership overtures from Papua New Guinea have been rejected on geographical grounds (Thuzar 2017), and the periodically mooted idea of Australian membership must be treated with scepticism for the same reason, among others (Dobel 2015). By contrast East Timor, still under Indonesian control in 1998 but independent since 2002, formally applied for membership in 2011 and will almost certainly be admitted, as ASEAN's eleventh and final member, once a number of economic and political issues surrounding its accession

are resolved.

Of course, ASEAN did not always encompass (almost) the whole of "academic" Southeast Asia as it does today. Myanmar and the Indochinese countries, as noted, became part of it only in the 1990s. At its birth in 1967, ASEAN consisted of just five non-communist, and anti-communist, states: Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. But it is striking that the unity of Southeast Asia as a whole was already accurately foreseen, and adopted as a long-term goal, by ASEAN at its foundation. In 2007 retired diplomat Sompong Sucharitkul, who assisted Thai foreign minister Thanat Khoman with the drafting of the Bangkok Declaration in 1967, was interviewed by journalist Kavi Chongkittavorn about the decisions and intentions of the ASEAN founders regarding the scope of the organization.

> According to the 75-year-old law professor, [...] [t]he idea of including all 10 Southeast Asian countries was always in the minds of Asean's founders, even though at that time the region was literally divided into three different blocs: noncommunist Southeast Asia, communist Indochina and isolated Burma. "We knew in our hearts they would be part of Asean one day. That was why, towards the end of the Declaration, we invited all countries of Southeast Asia to [...] join", he reiterated. (Chongkittavorn 2007.)

As the new association was being organized, Indonesian foreign minister Adam Malik visited both Burma (Myanmar) and Cambodia in May 1967 in the hope of persuading their governments to be among the founding members. Concerned to preserve their non-aligned status (the Kingdom of Cambodia was then struggling to avoid involvement in the Vietnam conflict), and suspecting that ASEAN would essentially be a pro-Western grouping, both preferred at this stage to decline the invitation (Acharya 2012: 155-156; Severino 2006: 44-45). But a generation later they would quickly change their minds, and Vietnam and Laos with them, when the ending of the Cold War removed the great obstacles to regional unity formed by Myanmar's rigorous non-alignment, and Vietnam's Soviet alignment, in the mid-twentieth century superpower conflict. At that point ASEAN promptly expanded precisely up to, and not

beyond, the geographical limits envisaged by its founders.

The only country not belonging to "academic" Southeast Asia which has ever looked seriously likely to become an ASEAN member is Sri Lanka. Although not actively approached by the founders in 1967, the government of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) expressed spontaneous interest in the planned association immediately after it was mooted. According to Sucharitkul, Sri Lanka sent two ministerial-level representatives to the founding meeting at Bangsaen near Bangkok. Here however they were kept outside the doors of the meeting room after Singaporean foreign minister Rajaratnam (a Sri Lankan Tamil by birth) argued that Sri Lanka's unstable domestic situation would "not be good for a new organization". Thailand, nevertheless, would allegedly have welcomed "the membership of an additional Buddhist country", while Malaysia and the Philippines "did not have any objection" to Ceylon "because its location was not far from mainland Southeast Asia". Sucharitkul's account does not mention Indonesia's position (Chongkittavorn 2007). In another version of events based on a Sri Lankan source, Sri Lanka was actually accepted as a founding member, but had to back out at the last-minute following pressure from the political Left at home (Severino 2006: 46).

The most detailed account, however, comes from the memoirs of later Singaporean president S.R. Nathan, who was an assistant to Rajaratnam at Bangsaen in 1967. According to Nathan, the idea of Sri Lankan membership was sprung on the five founding countries as an unexpected "last-minute hitch" when the leader of the Malaysian delegation, deputy prime minister Tun Abdul Razak, announced that his prime minister had already made a promise to the prime minister of Ceylon regarding Ceylon's admission to the group.

> An undertaking had been made and he, Razak, could not retract it. [...] We were stunned. The geographical limits agreed and reflected in the Declaration did not extend to the west beyond Burma. Reluctantly, everybody decided to wait for the arrival of the application from Ceylon. Nothing happened. The clock was ticking and the Thais wanted the birth of the organization to take place within a certain auspicious time. Before that deadline the meeting

> was called to order. Thanat Khoman then announced that the ministers had decided to call the organisation 'ASEAN' (Association of South East Asian Nations) and thanked Adam Malik for coming up with the name, which was accepted and acclaimed. Thus a new regional organisation was born (Nathan 2011: 350-351).

Nathan's account agrees with Severino's that it was domestic political opposition in Sri Lanka, not Singaporean opposition in Bangsaen, that kept Sri Lanka out in 1967. But it differs from both Severino's and Sucharitkul's in its portrayal of the geographical debate, which according to Nathan had already been resolved, in principle, in favor of a conventional modern definition of Southeast Asia when the Sri Lankan issue suddenly arose to complicate it.

Whatever ambiguity existed on that point in 1967, it was to disappear in subsequent years. In 1981 a renewed bid for membership from Sri Lanka, although once again sympathetically received by Thailand and the Philippines (no longer by Malaysia), was formally rejected by the ASEAN Standing Committee on the grounds that Sri Lanka lay “outside the geographical area” (Indorf 1987: 97). Another twenty years on and the Sri Lankan question was all but forgotten, with even ASEAN's founding fathers reportedly denying they had ever doubted where Southeast Asia's boundaries lay.

> When I mentioned this episode to some personalities involved in ASEAN's founding, including Thanat Khoman, they dismissed it by pointing out that Sri Lanka is in South Asia and not in Southeast Asia, as if the idea of Sri Lankan membership had never been considered. (Severino 2006: 47.)

So much, then, for Southeast Asia being an “inconclusive” and “fluid” concept (Kratoska, Raben and Schulte Nordholt), with boundaries that “remain highly problematic” (Van Schendel). In the twenty-first century its boundaries, at least as far as Southeast Asians themselves are concerned, are in fact clear, fixed, and virtually undisputed.

Ⅴ. Socializing Southeast Asia: communications and institutions

If Southeast Asia was really a "Cold War construct", as Van Schendel (2005), Glassman (2005) and others allege, then we might expect it to have become less significant since the end of that conflict. But in fact, as Cynthia Chou and Vincent Houben already observed in 2006, the reverse is true.

> From the Western perspective, the definition of Southeast Asia as a region has been problematic. [...] For those in Asia, however, the existence of a region called "Southeast Asia" has been becoming more and more self-evident. The end of the Cold War has created a multilateral world in which supra-national regions have acquired new strategic importance. With the rise of ASEAN, a new and stronger regional identity has emerged [...]. (Chou and Houben 2006: 10-11)

At the level of the individual ASEAN "citizen", the immediate reasons why the existence of Southeast Asia has become "more and more self-evident" in the period after 1990 have to do above all with the prominence of ASEAN in the mass media, and in the classroom. Throughout Southeast Asia the media report extensively on ASEAN's summits, treaties, forums, slogans ("One ASEAN", "Visit ASEAN", "The ASEAN Way", "One Vision, One Identity, One Community"), and projects (for example: ASEAN Charter, ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, ASEAN Economic Community). Meanwhile schoolteachers across the region incorporate material on ASEAN explicitly into their lessons, always using appropriate maps, and usually in the very idealistic way promoted by official publications such as the *ASEAN curriculum sourcebook*, subtitled "a teaching resource for primary and secondary schools to foster an outward-looking, stable, peaceful and prosperous Asean community" (ASEAN 2012).

In the survey of over 4,600 undergraduate students from all ASEAN countries carried out by Thompson, Thiantai and Thuzar in 2014/15, the top four reported sources of information on ASEAN were television, school, internet, and newspapers. School was the single most important source in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore, while television topped the list in Brunei, Cambodia,

Laos, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Books, radio, personal contacts, sports, and advertising were also significant.

Percentage of all respondents mentioning [X] as a source of information about ASEAN

X	%
television	72.2
school	71.1
internet	66.6
newspaper	60.0
books	56.5
radio	34.5
friends	34.3
advertising	31.5
sports	26.0
family	21.5
travel	19.3
movies	15.8
music	12.0
work experience	8.7

Adapted from Thompson, Thianthai and Thuzar (2016: 82)

The visibility and tangibility of ASEAN proper are complemented and enhanced by a host of related organizations that bear its name. An appendix to the ASEAN Charter of 2007 lists no fewer than 72 “entities associated with ASEAN”, ranging from the ASEAN Inter Parliamentary Assembly and the ASEAN Bankers Association to the ASEAN Chess Confederation and the ASEAN Kite Council (ASEAN 2007, Annex 2). One of the most familiar to the public at large is the ASEAN Football Federation (AFF), which organizes a popular biennial football competition between national teams from all ASEAN countries, plus East Timor. Although Australia has also been an AFF member since 2013 (the AFF is a subdivision of the Asian Football Confederation of which Australia is a part), it does not compete in the AFF international tournament, and there is considerable Southeast Asian resistance to the idea of it doing so in the future (Deurden 2019).

Not all of the high-profile regional institutions originate in, or are directly associated with, ASEAN. The largest regional sporting event in terms of cumulative participant numbers, the biennial Southeast Asian Games, has a separate lineage and an in some ways opposite evolution. This event originated in 1959, almost a decade before ASEAN, in the form of the Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games, with as participating countries Burma, Thailand, Malaya, Singapore, Laos, and Vietnam. Cambodia made its debut at the second SEAP Games in 1961. Like ASEAN, the Games were to expand - but in the opposite direction, from the mainland to the islands - to encompass the whole of (and again not more than) "academic" Southeast Asia, with Indonesia, Brunei and the Philippines joining in 1977, and East Timor too in 2003 (Creak 2017). There are many other explicitly Southeast Asian institutions that are not directly connected with ASEAN. They range from critical civil society groups like the Southeast Asian Press Alliance (Bangkok, since 1998) to commercial and media organizations like the music video channel MTV Southeast Asia (Singapore, since 1992).

Clearly, then, Southeast Asia today is far from being just a bureaucratic project. Still less is it an academic abstraction. Nevertheless, academia too has done its bit in the process of institutionalizing the region from the inside, with research institutes and university programs bearing the Southeast Asian label proliferating throughout ASEAN since the establishment of Singapore's iconic Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in 1968. Local academic publications dealing with Southeast Asia have multiplied correspondingly. Major long-running periodicals focusing explicitly on the region and published within the region today include: *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (Singapore, since 1960), *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* (Singapore, since 1968), *Southeast Asian Journal of Tropical Medicine and Public Health* (Bangkok, since 1970), *Contemporary Southeast Asia* (Singapore, since 1979), *Journal of Southeast Asian Economies* (Singapore, since 1984), *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* (Singapore, since 1986), and *Biotropia: The Southeast Asian Journal of Tropical Biology* (Bogor, Indonesia, since 1987).

Ⅵ. Imagining Southeast Asia

Like all communities too large for all of their members to know each other personally, Southeast Asia, however strongly institutionalized and however much reinforced in recent years by air travel, budget tourism, and educational exchanges, remains partly an "imagined community". In this respect, however, it does not differ fundamentally from the individual nations that make it up. ASEAN regionalism has in fact been described as "a form of collective nationalism" (Vatikiotis 1999: 77). Its resemblance to Indonesian nationalism in particular is obvious, to the extent that Indonesia's national motto Unity in Diversity (Bhinneka Tunggal Ika) is often also cited in relation to ASEAN. Like ASEAN, Indonesia encompasses a large and culturally diverse population which it has sought to unify on a pluralistic basis. Initially this involved a leap of imagination among a small elite, but ultimately it resulted in a widely perceived and endorsed common identity supported by multiple mutually reinforcing institutions.

As an imagined community, it is also worth noting, Indonesia is only a few decades older than Southeast Asia. Like most other Southeast Asian nations, Indonesia experienced its "national awakening", an important part of which was the rise of a territorially demarcated identity, only in the first decade of the twentieth century. Its modern name, moreover, was not widely used until the 1920s. The first institutions to bear the Southeast Asian name, by comparison, appeared in the 1940s, beginning in 1943 with the Allied Forces South-East Asia Command (headquartered, interestingly, in Sri Lanka). At the close of the Second World War, the prospect of decolonization immediately ignited interest in regional cooperation among Southeast Asians themselves. In 1946, Burmese nationalist leader Aung San already looked forward to the creation of "something like the United States of Indo-China comprising French Indo-China, Thailand, Malaya, Indonesia and our country", and in 1947 a short-lived "Southeast Asia League" was founded in Bangkok by left-wing nationalist groups from Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia (Reid 1999: 17-18). In 1961, Thailand, the Philippines and the then Federation of Malaya formed the

Association of Southeast Asia, a direct precursor to ASEAN (Pollard 1970).

The rapid postcolonial rise of impulses toward regional cooperation, even in the face of deep ideological differences, suggests that if at that stage Southeast Asia was still very much an imagined community, it was nevertheless a community that was somehow easy and attractive to imagine. It is interesting to note that for the architects of ASEAN, Europe, and the contemporary movement toward European unity, have been direct sources of inspiration. In the words of Thanat Khoman, who had studied in France:

> It should be put on record that, for many of us and for me in particular, our model has been and still is, the European Community, not because I was trained there, but because it is the most suitable form for us living in this part of the world - in spite of our parallel economies which are quite different from the European ones. (Khoman 1992: xix)

Here, significantly, it is specifically the idea of Europe as a *community*, not Europe as a common market, that is identified as a model. And indeed, although trade policy has subsequently become an important area of ASEAN cooperation, the economies of the Southeast Asian countries, as Khoman rightly notes, show much less natural complementarity with each other than do those of Europe. Even today only about a quarter of Southeast Asia's international trade is conducted between countries within the region, compared with over 60 per cent in Europe (Chen and Intal 2017: 19).

Southeast Asia, of course, lacks Europe's rather coherent civilizational heritage, not to mention its time-honored geographical name. Nevertheless, the idea of Southeast Asia as a coherent region predates the birth of its modern label, at least in the eyes of outsiders. Western publications dealing with what was effectively the Southeast Asian region existed well before some German and Austrian scholars, less constrained in their thinking by colonial boundaries than their British, French, and Dutch counterparts, started using that explicit term in their writings at the end of the

nineteenth century (Reid 1999: 10-12). Examples of major books on Southeast Asia *avant la lettre* include J.H. Moor's *Notices of the Indian Archipelago and adjacent countries* (1837) and John Crawfurd's *Descriptive dictionary of the Indian islands and adjacent countries* (1856), both written by British authors based in Singapore. European cartographic representations of Southeast Asia as a whole have a longer history still. A notable early example is Jan Jansson's map of *Indiae Orientalis* (The East Indies), published in Amsterdam in 1630:

A rose, by any other name....
Source: National Library of Australia http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-232492036/view

Of course, the fact that Westerners sometimes saw Southeast Asia as a geographical unit before they gave it its modern name does not mean that Southeast Asians themselves also perceived it as such. In this context, however, it is important to note that while *modern* Southeast Asians clearly do perceive their region as a unit, the unity which they ascribe to it is seldom a *historical* unity: that

is, they do not generally try to project it back into the distant past. As part of the in-depth opinion survey of 100 members of Southeast Asia's political and intellectual elite, carried out alongside his previously discussed mass survey, Roberts (2011: 368) asked his informants: “Do you believe that the notion of Southeast Asia is a centuries old phenomenon?”. To this, 65 per cent answered “no”, 13 per cent had no opinion, and only 22 per cent said “yes”.

On the other hand, Southeast Asians mostly do believe that their region possesses a certain *cultural* unity. In the large international survey of ASEAN university students carried out by Thompson and his colleagues in 2014 and 2015, respondents were asked whether they agreed with the statement: “ASEAN countries are similar culturally”. Fully 70 per cent were in agreement, albeit most of them mildly so, and only eight per cent responded with “strongly disagree”. In Indonesia, agreement was as high as 81 per cent; only in Singapore was it less than 50 per cent (Thompson, Thianthai and Thuzar 2016: 46). Respondents were also clear that in their eyes, the ASEAN countries are much more similar to each other in cultural terms than they are in either economic or political terms.

“ASEAN countries are similar [X]” (percentage of all students' responses)

X	strongly agree	somewhat agree	somewhat disagree	strongly disagree	total agree	total disagree
culturally	10.5	59.5	21.5	8.5	70.0	30.0
economically	7.2	40.9	35.9	16.0	48.1	51.9
politically	7.2	32.4	41.6	18.7	38.7	60.3

Adapted from Thompson, Thianthai and Thuzar 2016: 46-48

For most external and academic observers, the most striking aspect of the cultural diversity of modern Southeast Asia is the division of the region into four more or less discrete domains of religious and (traditional) literary culture: Islamic in Indonesia and Malaysia, Catholic in the Philippines, Theravada Buddhist in Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, and Confucian in Vietnam. Perhaps the sharpest of the fault lines in this great cultural mosaic is the land border between Sinicized Vietnam and its

Buddhist (Indianized) Southeast Asian neighbors, marking what Hugh Toye (1968: xiv) memorably called “the yawning gulf that lies between the austere and self-contained civilisation of China and the tolerant earthiness of Hindu cultures”. Yet it is striking that in the Thompson survey the responses by Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian students on the question of ASEAN cultural similarity are if anything more, not less, in agreement with the proposition than are those of their counterparts elsewhere in the region.

“ASEAN countries are similar culturally” - percentage of responses from sampled students

	strongly agree	somewhat agree	somewhat disagree	strongly disagree	total agree	total disagree
Hanoi	18.4	55.5	16.1	10.1	73.9	26.2
Ho Chi Minh City	15.5	67.1	14.1	3.3	82.6	17.4
Phnom Penh	12.9	64.2	16.3	6.7	77.1	23.0
Vientiane	10.0	65.0	23.2	1.8	75.0	25.0
SE Asia average	10.5	59.5	21.5	8.5	70.0	30.0

Sampled universities: Vietnam National University, Hanoi; Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City; Royal University of Phnom Penh; National University of Laos

Adapted from Thompson, Thianthai and Thuzar 2016: 46

Reid (1999) has argued that while the core areas of Southeast Asia - Malaysia, Singapore, western Indonesia, and Thailand - have endorsed the regional idea in a positive way as a result of their long history of largely peaceful maritime interaction and commerce, peripheral areas like Vietnam have endorsed it largely as a negative decision *not* to become “appendages of their larger and more threatening neighbours” - in Vietnam's case, China (Reid 1999: 7). Vietnamese testimonies, however, indicate that there was more to Vietnam's long-awaited embrace of ASEAN in 1995 than the need to “balance” the country against China after the collapse of its former ally, the Soviet Union. According to scholar-diplomat Luu Doan Huynh, joining ASEAN also signified “a return of Vietnam to its place of origin”, in “ethnic” as well as geographical terms, in the context of a national “crisis of identity”.

> Vietnam is located in Southeast Asia and its ethnic origins are similar to those of many other regional countries. [...]. After the end of the Cold War, [...] Vietnam was both free and without allies, with a deep sense of freedom coupled with something like 'a crisis of identity'. It was at that moment that ASEAN offered its hand of friendship, [...] replacing old alliances with a new one, where there is real mutual respect of independence and sovereignty [...]. Further, the new alliance is a Southeast Asian one, which would signify a return of Vietnam to its place of origin. (Luu Doan Huynh 2004: 23, 30)

Given what appears to most *outsiders* to be Southeast Asia's great cultural diversity, the fact that *insiders* tend to perceive an underlying ethnic or cultural unity is highly interesting. It almost certainly helps to explain why an overarching Southeast Asian community has apparently been so easy for Southeast Asians to imagine, even in times of political division, why the borders of that community have been so consensually established, and why the endeavor to translate it from the realm of imagination into lived reality has been so enthusiastically pursued.

Ⅶ. In search (again) of Southeast Asia

In what ways, exactly, do Southeast Asian perceive each other as culturally similar? Thompson's survey, unfortunately, did not include questions on that topic, empirical research on which would surely be very useful. The idea is a rather enigmatic one, and seems to be downright unfamiliar to many academic writers on international relations in the region. One well-known book on ASEAN, arguing that the organization has been successful precisely because it is premised on an assumption of Southeast Asian *disunity*, opens by quoting a “popular ASEAN saying” according to which the ASEAN states “have only three things in common: karaoke, durian, and golf” (Ba 2009: 1). The irony here is the greater in that only one of these three things, durian, is Southeast Asian in origin.

Where the idea of ASEAN as a cultural unit appears in existing literature, it is usually in relation to a supposedly shared value of

pluralism, or tolerance of diversity. Diversity itself, in other words, is portrayed as the basis for cultural unity, both within and between the ASEAN nations. This indeed is the official ASEAN line, and there is some truth in it. Certainly the “unity in diversity” formulation helps to explain why Indonesians, with their heritage of multicultural nationalism, tend to recognize themselves in ASEAN's pluralistic ideals, which they are consequently inclined to see as part of a regionally shared culture.

Yet in conversation many Southeast Asians, particularly those who have themselves travelled around the region and interacted with members of its other nationalities, also struggle to articulate a deeper, earthier sense of commonality. Sometimes they link this with features of Southeast Asia's physical environment. As José T. Almonte, a former Philippine presidential advisor, put it to Michael Vatikiotis in 1995:

> You have to understand the moorings of Southeast Asia. Lifeways were shaped by the same environment. The physical environment shapes a kind of behaviour that is homogeneous [...]. (Vatikiotis 1999: 81.)

Here Almonte echoes academic geographers of Southeast Asia like Charles Fisher (1964), and anthropologists like Robbins Burling (1965) and Ben Wallace (1971), who saw rice cultivation, tropical climate, and abundant water as central to Southeast Asia's “personality” (Fisher 1964: 3-10). Across the region, these writers argued, characteristic patterns of climate, topography, and agriculture have shaped traditional dress, architecture, daily habits and rhythms, and of course food and cookery, in parallel ways.

More recently, historian Anthony Reid has likewise noted the significance of environmental factors in making Southeast Asia a region that is still coherent at its cultural “grassroots”, even if the globalizing influences of the last millennium, and particularly of the precolonial “Age of Commerce” (1400-1650), have divided it at the level of court culture and scriptural religion.

> The common environment was responsible for a diet derived overwhelmingly from rice, fish, and various palms. [...] Wood, palm,

> and bamboo were the favoured building materials, seemingly inexhaustibly provided by the surrounding forest. By preference Southeast Asians lived in houses elevated on poles [...]. Much of the characteristic architecture, domestic pattern, and even sociopolitical structure [...] derived from the ease of building and rebuilding such elevated wood-and-thatch houses. (A. Reid 1988-93, Vol. I: 5.)

Yet as Reid also observes, not all of the common Southeast Asian cultural practices can be explained purely in environmental terms. Exceptions include the well-known pattern of relatively egalitarian gender relations that is found in all Southeast Asian countries, and which differentiates them quite sharply from the patriarchal societies of neighboring India and China. Shared musical traditions, featuring bronze gongs, likewise point to a common heritage which is not the result of environmental factors alone. The same is true of the traditional house designs of Southeast Asia, which, although their characteristic raised floor platforms have clear functionality in an environment of heavy rain and flooding, are also similar in too many other details to be accounted for solely by climate. One of the first academic writers to make this point was Vietnamese scholar Nguyen Van Huyen, a pioneer of Southeast Asian studies whose 1933 Paris doctoral dissertation is entitled *Introduction a l'étude de l'habitation sur pilotis dans l'Asie du sud-est*. In it, Nguyen documents an array of common features which he concludes can only be explained by "a certain influence emanating from one and the same civilization" (1933: 191).

Recent research in historical linguistics has confirmed that the various cultural similarities across the region are not coincidental, but reflect common origins. That almost all the languages of island Southeast Asia descend from a single common ancestor, "Proto-Austronesian", has long been understood. Mainland Southeast Asia, however, contains three major language groups - Tai-Kadai, Austroasiatic, and Sino-Tibetan - which until recently were usually held to be unrelated. Then in 1999, study of a previously undocumented Tai-Kadai language with very conservative features, spoken by a small population on the Chinese side of the China-Vietnam border, proved what some scholars had long suspected: that the mainland Tai-Kadai and insular Austronesian

groups, which today are geographically separated, either share a common ancestor, or were in intensive contact with each other at a very early point in their history, before the ancestral Austronesians left Taiwan to colonize the Philippines and Indonesia (Sagart 2004: 432-3). Evidence for similar high-level connections involving the other two mainland language families, although not yet conclusive, is also mounting (L.A. Reid 2005; Sagart 2005).

In addition, David Gil (2015) has identified 17 language features which he argues define a single 'Mekong-Mamberambo linguistic area' encompassing both the whole of mainland Southeast Asia, and all of island Southeast Asia except for the Philippines. In this case, Gil proposes, the features in question are not inherited from the ancestors of today's four big Southeast Asian language families, but rather acquired from a common 'substrate' of now extinct languages, the speakers of which occupied almost all of Southeast Asia *before* the region was colonized by speakers of languages belonging to the modern families. Recent archaeogenetic research seems to reinforce this picture by indicating unexpectedly close genetic similarity between the populations of - for instance - Indonesia and Thailand (Lipson *et al.* 2014).

The common prehistoric origins revealed by clues like these may seem remote from the present day and its concerns, and the similarities in rural 'lifeways' shaped by climate and agriculture are themselves increasingly remote from the experience of today's young urban Southeast Asians, raised in an age of globalization and air conditioning. Nevertheless, there are ways in which legacies of the past probably continue to inspire Southeast Asians, albeit largely at an unconscious level, to identify more with each other than with other groups. Likely areas for investigation here, I would suggest, include: (1) physical appearance (skin color, facial and body features); (2) food preferences and traditions; (3) social conventions and politeness forms; (4) body language and gesture. On this last point, it is interesting to note that two of Gil's 17 'Mekong-Mamberambo' features are nonverbal: the “passing geture” (stooping with the right arm extended when passing a seated person), and the use of repeated dental clicks to indicate amazement (not, as in the English-speaking countries, disapproval). It is probably also

significant that almost every Southeast Asian country, prosperous or poor, in peace or war, has at some point been described as a “land of smiles”.

Ⅷ. Concluding remarks

I have argued that while Southeast Asia may be in some sense an “imagined community”, it is nevertheless one that is today very widely imagined among its inhabitants. Some communities, moreover, are easier to imagine than others, and by the standards of international regions, Southeast Asia has proven a strikingly popular and consensual idea. It was envisaged indigenously, with its present extent and boundaries, as soon as its constituent nation-states - each of them a more or less novel imagined community in its own right (Henley 2013) - began to achieve independence after the Second World War. Its most important institutional manifestation, ASEAN, was founded immediately after the process of decolonization was completed in the 1960s, and expanded swiftly to encompass the whole of “academic” Southeast Asia - no more, and no less - as soon as this became politically feasible in the 1990s. Today it is part of the everyday experience of millions of Southeast Asians, who know what it consists of, identify with it, and endorse an ideal of regional cooperation within it. Although they recognize its historical novelty and the persistent political and economic contrasts between its member states, most of them believe that Southeast Asia possesses a degree of *cultural unity*. This helps to explain why it has so quickly become such a popular and apparently self-explanatory concept.

It is true that in political terms, a shadow has been cast over Southeast Asia in recent years by China's pursuit of expansive territorial claims in the South China Sea. This has effectively split ASEAN for some purposes between those member states which oppose China's claims, and others which - whether because they are not themselves claimants, or for reasons connected with their economic and financial relations with China - do not (O'Neill 2018). Constrained by its insistence that it can take no collective position

or action on which there is not unanimous consensus among its members, ASEAN has repeatedly proved unable to form a united Southeast Asian front for bilaterial, rather than multilateral, negotiations with its powerful northern neighbor.

To some extent, commentators who talk of ASEAN's “South China Sea ulcer” (Davies 2016) and lament its weakness in the face of “China's ‘divide and rule’ attitude in Southeast Asia” (Thim 2016) are actually being unfair: ASEAN was and is designed to promote internal security and commerce, not as an alliance against external aggression. As this article goes to press, there are in any case signs that perhaps Southeast Asia has at last found its collective voice on the South China Sea issue after all (Gomez 2020). A more important point to note in our context, however, is that the very language used in such critical commentary – “Southeast Asia's developing divide” (Cook 2014), “Southeast Asia refuses again to stand up to Beijing” (Daiss 2016) - continues to reaffirm the reality of Southeast Asia as a region, which may be united or divided, but either way does not cease to exist.

For scholars of any discipline to deny that reality now is a poor idea, not just because it threatens the interests of those involved in Southeast Asian Studies, but because it is misleading, unproductive, and likely to fuel the widespread belief that academics are given to irrelevant sophistry. Since Southeast Asia is now an indigenous project, and one moreover that involves genuine idealism, foreign academics who take a denialist position also risk appearing condescending and dismissive of local views. And indeed, however good their intentions, Western scholars today who insist on stressing that Southeast Asia is a Western construct are rather like those ex-colonial Dutchmen who, years after Indonesian independence, continued to reiterate that Indonesia was an arbitrary and artificial creation of Dutch colonialism. That is: not wholly mistaken, but blind to indigenous insights, ideals, and endeavors, as well as radically overtaken by events.

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