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Afterword: Meditation on Regions

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Abstract

This afterword meditates on the idea of Southeast Asia as a "region" which, despite its fuzziness and its lack of geographical unity and cultural identity, has been with us for decades. Despite valiant efforts, no justifications and qualifications of a regional identity has succeeded more than partially, and no solution has been without problems and limitations. Even so, as these engagements with "entangled areas" vividly show, Southeast Asia remains a useful intellectual device that defies essentialism (with the possible exception of durian!)

Keywords

region: definition; region: changes; Southeast Asia

Myths of the "Region"

In the late 1990s, area studies were shaken by the argument that the world areas, or regions, which had generally been taken for granted, were arbitrary, ill-defined, and problematic subjects of credible knowledge. "Asia," for example, is an Orientalist construct that is too broad, too eclectic, and too misleading as a spatial entity for any rigorous methodology (Dirlik 1998; Miyoshi and Harootunian 2002). Hence, *The Myth of Continents*, the title of an influential book by two Asianists, Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen (1997). However, the question of what meaning might be given to such areas has lingered on. There have been many suggestions for how to deal with this conundrum (e.g. Acharya 2009, 2013; Duara 2013).

As a matter of fact, scholars in Southeast Asian studies had already raised similar questions about the consistency of the region. And this was not particularly surprising, given the well-known diversity of languages, religions, and of ancient and modern histories among the countries that constitute the region. In 1984, Donald K. Emmerson demonstrated that Southeast Asia region was a militarized geo-political construct that emerged during WWII (Emmerson 1984). The arbitrariness is indeed conspicuous, as the early definition of the region during the war included Sri Lanka and excluded the Philippines, a situation that was reversed with the establishment of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1957. As if unsure of

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the validity of Southeast Asia as a region, scholars in the field, from time to time, produce works that buttress it by showing that there are similarities despite the diversity or by emphasizing overarching conditions that affect the entire region (e. g. Reid 1988; Wolters [1982] 1999).[1] Besides, even before the late 1990s, there were probably many more meetings dedicated to critical self-examinations of Southeast Asian studies than to any other part of area studies. There have been even more examinations of the validity, rationale of the field, and its direction, after the critical interrogations (for examples, see the references to the introduction).

Recently, these doubts appeared to have subsided. That is probably not because the validity of, or rationale for, the area has changed, or even due to the discovery of any convincing new justifications. It might, rather, have to do with the development of more flexible frameworks and understandings of every world region as a consequence of the previous rounds of critique. Increasing reflexive awareness has created new agendas and concepts, as well as methodologies that can accommodate transregional issues.

After all, the survival of most area studies, including SEA studies, their ongoing shaping by new ideas and their movements in new directions is thus due in part to contributions by the critics. Among other important contexts is the change of geo-politics since the end of the last century (for example, the break-up of the former USSR). There has also been a growing attention to areas previously overlooked due to rigid definitions and a focus on major regions. Among these new areas are oceanic ones, upland regions (Zomia), and border and trans- or inter-regions (e. g. Andaya 2006; Chou in Kratoska, Raben, and Nordholt 2005, 234-249; van Schendel in Kratoska, Raben, and Nordholt 2005, 275-307). However, area studies also keep going strong because scholars and practitioners now deploy the notion of "regions" as a "contingent device" (Sutherland in Kratoska, Raben, and Nordholt 2005, 20-59); that is, as an approximate conception that are useful for exploring particular intellectual or practical agendas.

In the age of post-structuralism and deconstruction, when all languages and terms must be taken with caution, the awareness of the arbitrariness of them and of any definitions, labels, and so on, becomes quite common. As we have seen, areas and regions have been thoroughly demystified as artificial construct made for certain purposes, that might be either good, bad or neither. Despite that, they are still useful.

Southeast Asia that is Always in Question

The idea of "Southeast Asia" was initially concocted for military purposes during WWII, less than a century ago. After the war, the idea survived and was modified as a critical part of the militarized, geo-politics of the world during the cold war period of US dominance. The idea was solidified thanks partly to "area studies." These academic programs created in the US then proliferated across the globe, and influenced the creation of regional organizations such as ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, that, recursively

[1] I am not implying that these similarities or overarching conditions are false but pointing to how they support the validity of the idea of Southeast Asia.

helped solidify and validate the idea of Southeast Asia. Perhaps needless to say, the idea of Southeast Asia as a region primarily designates the composition of units of territorial sovereignty—the nation-states. After all, the world's geo-politics over the past three centuries is primarily the power relations (and unrelations) among such states.

From the early days, the concept of the nation was regarded as a political community of people who share certain common traits such as religion, ethnicity, language, history, or was otherwise imbued with a national spirit. These common traits are often taken as natural too. Although the nation-state has increasingly become a legally determined identity, the idea of common traits and a national spirit usually persist. This is probably why geo-political units of a larger scale, like a region, is often assumed to share commonalities as well. Hence, the efforts to validate the idea of a region by looking for what is shared, or for overarching conditions. Conversely, the assumption of common traits also sometimes applies to units of smaller scale, like a sub-national region, a city, or a province. Although the assumption of commonality never survives a rigorous test, somehow geo-polity and "natural" traits tend to go hand in hand.

Belief in a shared or collective identity represented by a defined spatial unit is one of those human constructs that turn out to have such a powerful grip on human life, and how we think and behave collectively as social beings. But local cultures in most Southeast Asian countries are of course also familiar with the *non-human* power over human-beings. Thus, one of the traits said to be common to the region is the animistic view that human and more-than-human beings live side by side and interact. The belief in such beings is not at all more irrational or superstitious than the powerful grips by entities like Gods, ghost, nation, money, language, and many others in the rest of the world. Without some of those grips, human and nonhuman, individuals and social collectives could not live. In contrast, it is easier to survive and make do with a demystified idea of regions.

The Fuzzy Region (of Durian)

"Region" and "area" are fuzzy spatial entities, definable by various determinants. Different determinants, different identities too. Of course, these determinants do not usually quite manage to constitute the essence or trait of a region regardless of the efforts. ASEAN is one good example. However, I concur with Fadjar Thufail (2025) that the Durian might be unique in that its realm almost corresponds with the Southeast Asian region. In this light, it is surprising that so few people seem to take durian seriously. Nonetheless, the "king of fruits" is also an embodiment of dissonance (Tyler 2022)—its heavenly taste beyond describable, while its smell is devastatingly stinky. Even this candidate as the only truly Southeast Asian-wide king seems to have a double identity.

Whenever a spatial definition marks an inclusion, it simultaneously makes an exclusion. As James Scott (2009) argued, the histories of most Southeast Asian nations are predominantly of low-land areas and peoples. The upland and highland have been rendered marginalized, insignificant, backward, even non-existent. Only recently has Zomia and the border areas, as well as maritime regions and oceanic spaces deservedly grasped our attention (Andaya 2006; Chou in Kratoska, Raben, and Nordholt 2005, 234-249; Zahirah et al. 2025).

Alternative notions of the Southeast Asian region may take us even further beyond conventional perceptions of regional "identity." As shown in these engagements, material itineraries generate many other senses of region than those associated with geo-politics. While some are supplemental to the conventional identity of a region, others defy it or lead us to radically different conceptions: buoyant life (Siriwardane de-Zoysa and Gemilang 2025), atmospheric Zomia (Sangkhamanee 2025), or even a non-contiguous region like that enacted by the search for malaria-resistant drugs (Grant 2025).

It also becomes clear that a basis in nation-states, for some purposes, might be less helpful for understanding "area" than dietary preferences related to beef consumption (Laocharoenwong 2025). We see that the region of tsunami-affected areas hardly conforms to that of Southeast Asian nation-states but give rise to quite different perceptions and determinations (Rafliana 2025). We are, moreover, facing crises of climates, smokes, tsunami, other environmental issues, and human and animal epidemics that never stop at national boundaries. Increasingly, we must also deal with human smugglings, transnational and transregional geo-politics, and other human dangers and follies that always seem to proliferate across nations and regions. So, the utility of "Southeast Asia" even as a contingent device has limits.

An important point made repeatedly in these engagements is just how different regions may turn out to be when described from the perspective of entanglements that, moreover, become complexly interwoven and layered with regions as defined in classical geo-political terms.

No contingent device prevents us from flexibly modifying our thinking. For example, Southeast Asian studies served educational, political and objectives many of which were shaped by the Cold war, but regardless there were also other objectives it. But when dealing with Covid-19, for example, much of this conventional knowledge may not be terribly relevant. Meanwhile, our colleagues who studies Buddhism in Southeast Asia acted wisely by ignoring that Sri Lanka and India is not supposed to be part of the area. Our colleagues who study Southeast Asian pre-colonial maritime trades, similarly, never fail to take China into account. So on and so forth.

The Regimes

> "Regime"—the characteristic behavior or orderly procedure of a natural phenomenon or process (Merriam Webster Dictionary n.d.).

Among the various scales of living spatial entity—neighborhood, city, province, nation, region, and so on, a nation-state is, in some sense, the most solid, fixed, and rigid, because its boundary, i.e. its territorial definition or "out-line," is most controlled and regulated, compared to the ones of other scalar entities (see also Saguin 2025). In other ways, they are either fuzzier, since the boundary cannot be regulated (e.g. region, continent), or more fluid, since the border is usually open (e.g. city, province). Thus, an area or region (internal or international) is always variably conceived and defined by heterogenous determinants, making the definitions (or the "out-lines") multiple and blurry. A city, a municipality, an urban area, and a district,

are legible, too, as defined by the state. But they are usually more malleable due to the open traffic of all kinds through their borders.

Speaking of control, definition, legibility, openness, or restriction, we are talking about a "regime"—the characteristics or order that regulates the existence, raison d`etre and the operations of such spatial entity, either with an explicit regulatory body or in its absence. Given these varieties, it is often the case that scalar entities different spatial regimes co-exist and interact with one another. And they change over time too. In studying a spatial entity, the scale changes within an area probably deserves more attention. As for myself, I am sometimes curious about the look, feel, and interactions of past spatial regimes (Christendom, Buddhist sangha, a feudal city, an empire, a mandala, a buffalo trade route, trans-regional or trans-oceanic maritime trades, piracy territories, etc.). Sometimes, I have fun imagining what Star Fleets, the Federation, the neutral zone and so on might look like in the twenty-fourth-century space. What will be our areas and regions of the future?

Even regimes with legal and political authority never succeed in total or absolute control over their spatial domains. Territorial sovereignty is never sufficient to stop border smuggling. Internet and communication signals often roam free across the national airspace. A totalitarian regime can only control or block the reception of unwanted messages. Regional regimes are even weaker than those of nation-states since their boundaries are never truly established or endowed with true authority, let alone regulated or controlled to the same degree.

Nonetheless, an even more important reason why a regime is never absolute is due to the simultaneous operations of many other spatial regimes at the same time. Not only are the territorial and spatial identities multiple and across numerous scales, but many other social and material factors, including geology, malaria and medicine, sediments and so on, become entangled with those spatial identities. These entangled determinants may serve various purposes but coming together, as suggested by the editors they turn area or region into a "layered composition" of spatial regimes being played at the same time (Jensen and Thufail 2025). Thus, the interactions (coexistence, mixing, clashing, etc.) of spatial regimes make any given space far more fluid than the notion of fixed definition of spatial identity to which we are accustomed.

Moving On

It has now been a few decades since that conventional idea of an area or a region, Southeast Asia in our case, was questioned. There are plenty of criticisms and demystifications. Many suggestions for where to go from here, and how to get there, have been made. In my opinion—and as shown in these engagements—it is probably time to move beyond debunking. Practically everyone can agree that the idea of a region is a functional construct to serve certain purposes, not a natural spatial entity with an absolutely fixed identity. As STS engages with area studies, Southeast Asia emerges as entangled in multiple dimensions.

We should still encourage one another to be aware of and examine the regimes of dynamic spatial constructs, including their rationales, regulations, forms of utility and limits, advantages and drawbacks, uses and abuses, fetishism, and so on. We should also encourage explorations and imaginations of alternative spatial

constructs that may either defy existing ideas of area or enrich them for practical purposes or for the sake of novel imagination.

Even if the days of debunking may be over, the job of rethinking of spatial regimes is still with us. Do not let any single regime of spatial identity dominate our thinking and imaginations to the extent that it becomes fixed or given. Every spatial definition and identity should be kept open and contingent.

The current attention to the Anthropocene, for example, may offer alternative determinants, or possibly even an alternative regime to the cartographic-militarized one. A new region may emerge and it may serve us better. However, it is just as likely that we will witness the return of geopolitics, far beyond the post-Cold War era. Perhaps we will see the emergence of a more chaotic but no less militarized form of area-based world politics.

The two trends seem contradictory. The former convinces us to look beyond the anthropocentric world and reminds us of non-human elements that are essential to our lives, while the latter reinforces an anthropocentric and militarized world, though probably in a new guise. Whether Southeast Asia as an area remains relevant or not, and in what ways, only time and our capacities for thinking forward can tell.

But Not Too Fast

For now, the cartographic-militarized regime of Southeast Asia remains in place as a heuristic, contingent device. Layered with its alternatives. During this "meantime," let our imaginations and visions of other kinds of space create fresh entanglements, including with the units of nation-states, to generate many other contingent devices that serve our differentiated and always changing purposes.

We should train our imaginations and those of the younger generations to accommodate far more flexible ideas of "region" than those based on nation-states which previous generations were able to imagine.

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