

Methodology and Research Practice in Southeast Asian Studies.
Edited by Mikko Huotari, Jürgen Rüländ and Judith Schlehe.
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Over the past decade, the discipline of Southeast Asian Studies has grappled with the tension — real or perceived — between universalistic disciplinary knowledge and area-specific inter-disciplinary knowledge production. What is the function and future of area studies, and Southeast Asian Studies in particular, in the process of knowledge accumulation? Is it a coherent research method, research agenda or simply a scholarly identity? Is it still relevant and useful as a field of studies and/or an institutional foundation? If so, how can scholars and students of Southeast Asian Studies come to terms with, and reconcile, this tension in order to make a contribution to knowledge accumulation and dissemination that is more broadly relevant? In particular, are there any practical methodologies that area experts could deploy to generate “context-sensitive practices of social science knowledge”? (p. 1) What do these methods look like?

This volume, edited by three German scholars, is an effort to answer these pressing questions which are relevant to Southeast Asian scholars around the world. Fourteen chapters (including Mikko Huotari’s introduction), contributed by nineteen scholars primarily based or trained in Germany and Southeast Asia, seek to advance and advocate different methodologies, approaches and strategies based on their own research and teaching experiences to generate “context-sensitive practices of social science knowledge” in Southeast Asian Studies, and possibly to overcome the aforementioned tension between disciplinary and area-studies boundaries. In short, it is a collective enterprise among those who care about the region to reinvigorate and re-emphasize the utility and meaning of Southeast Asian Studies as a field of study, and to search and invent workable methodologies to this end. According to Huotari, this volume intends to cultivate and advocate a “middle-ground” position (p. 11), and what can be characterized as “situated methodologies” (p. 4) that bridge universalizing and particularizing tendencies within the field of Southeast Asian Studies.

Although the overall goal and sentiment is commonly shared among all the contributing authors, differences and disagreements are evident in terms of how to achieve this goal, and what purposes area-specific empirical knowledge should serve, depending on their respective disciplinary and pedagogical background, geopolitical

position, and probably generational difference. On the whole, anthropologists, including Eric Haanstad, Michaela Haug, Sita Hidayah, Victor T. King and Kathryn Robinson, appear at ease with the tension derived from disciplinary and area-specific knowledge production. For them, searching and analysing unique and specific cultural features and practices — gender relations, performance arts, tribes or rituals — are *inter alia* their research and profession. Methodologies in anthropology, most obviously ethnographic research, are largely established, widely practised and contribute to disciplinary knowledge. Moreover, as exemplified in Haanstad's and Robinson's chapters, local specific practices in Southeast Asia that those scholars have studied — the role of women and dance performances — have contributed not only to the accumulation of local specific empirical knowledge, but more importantly, to the innovation of methodological techniques, conceptual tools and theoretical knowledge. Against the backdrop of such scholarly tradition, a younger generation of scholars from Southeast Asia, such as Deasy Dimandjuntak and Michaela Haug (Indonesia), Paruedee Nguitragool (Thailand) and Sita Hidayah (Indonesia) co-authored with her German colleague, Judith Schlehe, appear comfortable and confident in *strategically* adopting ethnographic and other social science approaches to tackle their respective research questions. In a similar vein, economists do not see the division between disciplinary and area knowledge to be irreconcilable or problematic. The chapter by Krisztina Kis-Katos and Günther G. Schulze, for example, demonstrates that area specific empirical research on corruption has made an indispensable contribution to our general theoretical knowledge about why particular types of corruption occur in particular places and in particular manners.

Huotari, a political scientist, indicates that the tension in regard to the area studies and discipline divide — and onslaught against area studies within the discipline — is most pronounced in Political Science (p. 10). Area experts in the field may justifiably be more defensive about their research practices and methods than other disciplinary traditions as a result. According to his categorization, the epistemological divide between universalistic disciplinary/theoretical research tradition and particularistic area-specific empirical research tradition (that is, area studies) are broadly converted into, and based on, a methodological divide between quantitative research techniques and qualitative research techniques. Political Science is situated in the middle of those conflicting research traditions (p. 8).

How do area experts in Germany deal with such dichotomous methodological divides to carry out their research if these divides

are true? Five chapters by Nguitrageol, Rüländ and Jarno S. Jian Hui Lang (co-authored with historian, York A. Wiese), Emma Masterson, Christian von Lübke, and Raul L. Cordenillo, show that political scientists flexibly and creatively adopt a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods which best answer their respective research questions, all of which are derived from exciting empirical realities in Southeast Asia. For them, it appears that differences among and within countries — and complex empirical realities — in the region offer valuable opportunities to carry out controlled comparative and within-case studies in the ways that other political scientists do, not only to understand and explain empirical cases thoroughly, but also to test and build theories. In other words, empirical complexities and diversities in the region are the advantages that area experts could make use of, *if* we are conscious of methodologies that we deploy to engage with theoretical questions, *and* we are equipped with first-hand skills, knowledge, and experiences that we gain from our respective fields in order to gather adequate empirical data and build solid analytical narratives. These empirical findings are all essential to answering theoretically relevant questions. Thus, as von Lübke in this volume and other political scientists elsewhere reiterate, methodological divides between disciplines and area studies are not irreconcilable (p. 213). In fact, theoretical knowledge and empirical knowledge formation should go hand in hand to resolve modern-day social science puzzles, as asserted by a similar volume compiled earlier by three US-based political scientists, Erik Kuhonta, Dan Slater, Tuong Vu, *Southeast Asia in Political Science: Theory, Region, and Qualitative Analysis* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008). Let me echo these three colleagues in emphasizing that qualitative comparative research traditions are part and parcel of social science research, on which classic Southeast Asia Studies scholars mentioned in the volume (such as Ben Anderson and James Scott to name just a prominent few) have had a lasting impact.

With this in mind, should we not perceive this disciplinary assault against area studies as a threat to what we do? Singapore-based scholars such as Goh Beng-Lan and Chua Beng Huat suggest that the threat is real and potent coming from the West, and that this threat carries an imperialistic and generalizing impulse. In order to fight the threat and to produce locally rooted knowledge, they advance an “Asian” perspective as a method and an analytical approach that is congruent with interdisciplinary Cultural Studies. King, on the other hand, is cautious about such a scholarly position.

He argues that “there is a danger in drawing too sharp a distinction between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ perspectives and interests, and a problem in determining what the alternative, emergent models of area studies from within the region comprise and whether or not they are sufficiently different from those that have been developed from outside Southeast Asia” (p. 58). Indeed, the major fault line in this debate is essentially derived within the Western (more specifically, North American) Social Sciences. Moreover, there is considerable variation within Euro-American (as well as Australian/Asian) countries in terms of the emphasis, position and resilience of studies of Southeast Asian nations and societies, according to their respective geopolitical and strategic locations in a given time.

In sum, the volume is a positive collective enterprise and calls scholars to bridge methodological and epistemological divides and build theoretical and empirical knowledge in order to keep the studies and expertise of Southeast Asia relevant and thriving in Social Science research. Studies of Southeast Asia may not offer a coherent methodology as a field, but continue to offer fascinating and complex empirical cases, trends, and materials that have yet to be adequately studied or explained in order to contribute productively to Social Science research. One unfortunate weakness of the volume is its excessive emphasis on methodological divides, dichotomies, and issues, thereby leading to a relative negligence of theoretical knowledge production that requires — and goes in tandem with — meticulous comparative empirical research that well-equipped area/country experts should and could aspire to achieve. As demonstrated in some of the chapters reviewed here, methods, both quantitative or qualitative, equip us with a set of tools to design and conduct research on paper, but whether and how we make use of them in practice to generate theoretically and practically valuable knowledge to answer real world problems also depends on our flexibility, sensitivity and innovativeness which we could only gain from our field experiences and empirical knowledge.

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