

BOOK

**Methodology Research Practice in Southeast Asian Studies**

Edited by Mikko Huotari, Jürgen Rüländ, and Edith Schlehe

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This book proceeds from a series of methodology workshops organized by the University of Freiburg's Southeast Asian Studies Program titled "Grounding Area Studies in Social Practice". It contains 13 articles and critical essays on "new" methods, mainstream but divergent disciplines and methodological schools, discourses, and approaches to the study of Southeast Asian cultures and societies. Workshop participants, students and scholars, were to be trained in new, recently obtained or acquired research methodologies and practices. It also emphasizes individual researchers' backgrounds (ix-xiv), indicating in the process individual research experience, training, and disciplinal education in sociology, anthropology, politics, and economics. The historical discipline, however, is glaringly underrepresented with York A. Wiese's primarily historically-oriented, including archival, researches on China and Thailand, and his article on print media as: recorders of political events; the press as source of knowledge generation; and newspaper archives as indispensable tools in reconstructing chains of events (144–146).

Indeed, the methodological implications of researchers' biographies/ backgrounds are worthy of careful thought and consideration. Quoting France W. Twine ("Racial Ideologies and Racial Methodologies, 2000), Deasy Simandjuntak and Michaela Haug, invites us to recognize the importance of reflecting upon the effect of ideologies and position on our research paradigm. Gender, age, religion, and "(non-)nativeness" are to them the four decisive factors that most significantly influence and shape a researcher's choice of methods and practice (67-90).

Discussions in those workshops were also intended to promote the production and dissemination of knowledge among the participants by means of "mixing methods", or enhancing research efforts to advance area studies knowledge built on "an intricate intermingling of area expertise and disciplinary research" (3). Questions and matters arising from those workshops were meant to guide researchers who intend to pursue area studies but at the same satisfy the rigors of research imposed by their respective academic disciplines—political science, economics, sociology, anthropology, and history—in terms of methodology and knowledge formation.

A question is worth-asking. How does the tension (if it does exist at all) between universal and particular forms of knowledge bear on methodology and how do we adjust research practice in accordance with the particular political and social settings we study? This question demands careful thought, and answers

would require an enlightened (methodological) dialogue and debate among scholars in this volume.

Mikko Huotari's introductory article summarizes the important points of the book. The main point derives from David Ludden's "The Territoriality of Knowledge and the History of Area Studies" (1998) and Jean-Baptiste Duroselle's "Area Studies: Problems of Method" (1952). According to Huotari: "The starting point... is the often evoked tension between universal disciplinary knowledge and area-specific, interdisciplinary knowledge" (1). The tension in effect still awaits resolution because of the tendency to emphasize and simplify binary distinctions/opposites and definite restrictions on method. This is further complicated by thoughts that seemingly claim attention such as the "belief" that "area studies scholars... will have to learn all the necessary social science theory and methods", and retain their disciplinary commitments at the same time (3). Binary opposition, in addition, maintains that area studies on the one hand is multi-disciplinary, emphasizing field research and "above all, life-long devotion to studying a nation or region" (3). The disciplinary approach, by contrast, seemingly reflects imprecision of thought, aimed at seeking to identify "lawful regularities, which, by definition, must not be context bound" (3).

A broader methodological-cum-epistemological reflection and tolerance should lead students and scholars to consider "context-sensitive" or "situated or contextualized methodology in Southeast Asian studies" (2), to avoid a decontextualized or an overly theoretical rule or mind-set or simply to dispel parochial attitudes. A question again is worth-asking: isn't this similar to a historically-oriented methodology? If so and if indeed "questions of method arise in context" (2), would it then be possible to consider the discipline of history as the single most encompassing framework for area studies in terms of methodology and knowledge formation, where both empirical and conceptual worlds meet, clash, and are reconciled depending on their relevance, use, and functionality. Citing Benedict Anderson, Huotari agrees that: "The academic balance between area studies and social science is embedded in historical processes in which knowledge is produced under different political circumstances" (3). Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff's observations on historical research and writing also offers ample evidence and reflection:

The pervasiveness of factuality and history connects the research, whatever his or her purpose, with nearly every branch of learning. For there is no telling what a report of world events may call for. Not only politics but geography, economics, military science, technology, and religion at any time become relevant... Researchers of all kinds are at one with the public in taking it for granted that to understand the state of a question or subject fully something must be known about its antecedents... Every speech, report, inquiry, or application begins with "the background". (2004, 8–10)

The various disciplines or branches of knowledge are indeed undisputedly interrelated; their methodologies, types of evidence, and types of knowledge overlap. They evolve, changing into different and usually more complex or better forms in various but often related contexts, or in “grounded” research practices in a particular area-specific setting such as Southeast Asia. The development of a “dynamic, creative zone of area-discipline overlap” (1–2) is the main concern of the authors. Emphasized is the “cross-disciplinary character of area studies,” (2) in relation to research practices in the “mainstream” social science disciplines and in the humanities where “the relationship of *truth* and *method* and the quest for appropriate hermeneutic strategies is a key field of contestation” (3).

Contestations about terminologies, concepts, or ideas is a function of critical inquiry but what difference does it really make if some would prefer to exchange the label “interpretive-constructionist” with “relativist”, “reflexivist”, “reflectivist”, “(social) constructivist”, “postmodernist”, or “anti-positivist”? What is “methodological ventriloquism” (91), reductionism (12), gendered ideology (119), nomothetic vs idiographic research (8), reverse causality (193–196), “participatory fandom” (101), regression analysis (219–220), or “epistemological imperialism” (13)?

There is an abundance of concepts and ideas, old and new, translated or otherwise in this volume, and we might as well put them to good use, and as live readers, handle them critically since ideas are also verifiable facts, continually and persistently subject to interpretation and corroboration. For example, researchers using sources in a foreign language are required to translate not only simple sentences but often, complex ideas and concepts. Chua Beng-Huat in “Inter-Referencing Southeast Asia: Absence, Resonance and Provocation” (273–288) discusses the rise of *reformasi* (translation of the western construct Reformation?), an Indonesian term coined at the height of the regional financial crisis. Widely used and disseminated by the mass media, *reformasi* “became the most salient catch-word for the largely un-organized millions of Indonesians who demanded a change in government and a reversal of the deteriorating social conditions” (282). Among the reforms demanded would have been an end to “*Korupsi, Kolusi, Nepotisme*” (KKN), translated as “corruption, collusion, and nepotism”, practices rampant and in operation during the Suharto regime. Terms and acronyms in Indonesia’s political lexicon—*Konfrontasi*, *Dwi Fungsi*, *Supersemar*—show receptiveness to different ideas or opinions of others. Some, such as *Konfrontasi*, political analysts tell us disappeared from Indonesia’s political lexicon with the consolidation of the New Order. What about *korupsi*, *kolusi*, and *nepotisme*, are these terms quite likely to disappear as well in educated political writing?

To translate is to “carry over”, and if indeed attainable, “accurate translating requires, in addition to a transfer of the full contents, a transfer of their full

intention” (Barzun and Graff, 249). Goh Beng-Lan in “Moving Theory and Methods in Southeast Asian Studies” (27–43), translates the original *Tak Ada Beza* as “No Difference”, the title of one of the *Matabari* boys’s painting, in which a family of pigs is depicted to parody the problem of abortion common among unmarried mothers in Malaysia (39). In Eric Haanstad’s “Performative Ethnography: Observant Participation in Southeast Asia” (91–106), retains the literary, theatrical, and filmed manifestations of the Thai terms *khon* and *lakhon khon* in his ethnographic research projects on dances and ritualized dramas (94). Kathryn Robinson’s “What Does a Gender Relations Approach Bring to Southeast Asian Studies?” (107–127), informs us that the term “gender” has entered the Indonesian language and is translated as *jender* (relating to gender difference or gender relations), in contrast with *kodrat* (biological destiny ordained by God). Her study also reveals interesting data on the Tausug Muslim *gay/bantut* culture in Sulu and its “stunning similarity” to the Thai Buddhist *kathoey* (124). From Paruedee Nguitragool’s “Learning from Locals: Doing Interviews in Southeast Asia” (128–143), the use of *khun* in Thailand (Mr. or Mrs.) followed by the first name is more polite. *Khun* may also be combined with family relative forms such as *khun lung* and *khun paa* (“uncle” and “aunt,” *u* and *daw* in the Burmese language) to increase politeness in informal conversations (143).

The articles are substantially large in scope and content and include theories of truth, types of knowledge, use of research methods, methodological divides between disciplines and area studies, field observation, “sex/gender” distinction, interviews, “indigenous voices” and “indigenous methodologies”, “corruption environments”, governance research, and transcultural ethnography. Figures, illustrations, and tables are included to introduce readers to the different orientations and directions of research. Figures 11.1 to 11.4, for instance, illustrate the use of qualitative comparative analysis for Southeast Asia as “a diverse set of distinct geographical, political, economic, social, and cultural features and circumstances” (234). Broad in extent and content, the bibliography (289–321) lists sources and references on diverse topics. This varied research terrain results in different trends, directions, and perspectives on the broader field of Southeast Asian studies and “alternative perceptions of Southeast Asia” as a crucial point, a crossroads of “[trans-national] encounter, exchange and contestation” (3).

#### REFERENCES

Barzun, Jacques and Henry F. Graff (2004). *The Modern Researcher*. 6<sup>th</sup> edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.

#### REVIEWER

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