Review essays

VICTOR T. KING

The problem with areas
Asia and Area studies


White Rose East Asia Centre, University of Leeds
v.t.king@leeds.ac.uk

Terence Wesley-Smith and Jon Goss introduce Remaking Area studies by saying ‘It is widely acknowledged that Area studies, the dominant academic institution in the United States for research and teaching on America’s overseas “others” is in the thralls of a fiscal and epistemological crisis’ (Goss and Wesley-Smith, 2010:iix). Goh Beng Lan agrees: ‘[t]he attack on Area studies has spread across the globe... [and]... the spread of this critique has led to a common view that Area studies is in a state of “crisis”’ (p. 1). If the problems are now undeniable, Goss and Wesley-Smith say they are not exactly new: ‘The dramatic shifts in the global political landscape of the late 1980s revealed the intellectual and economic vulnerability of the Area studies establishment’ (p. xiii). In different ways, these three edited books address dimensions of this crisis that has been a problem in some, but not all Western countries, and
much less of an issue in ‘Asia’, the ‘Asian Pacific’, or its constituent parts (East, Southeast, South, Central). The overall picture is decidedly patchy: for example, in the European academy such fields as Chinese and Japanese Studies have fared much better than Southeast Asian Studies and studies of the Indian subcontinent. Furthermore, debates about the appropriateness of a regionally defined unit of study in conceptual, analytical, empirical, and geographical terms date back several decades, particularly with regard to Southeast Asian Studies. Discussion and disagreement that took off in the late 1980s already referred to Benedict Anderson’s observations on Thai Studies and Russell Field’s excursion into the origins, development, and future of Southeast Asian Studies – both published in the 1970s.

Nevertheless, in response to this perceived crisis we have seen a recent spate of books, primarily edited volumes, which have been engaged in either ‘locating’ Asia (or parts of it) or in attempting to ‘rethink’ or ‘re-conceptualize’ the region or its sub-regions. The three edited books under review are engaged in a similar exercise, although the terminologies have changed, and their shared objective is to bring new ideas, approaches, and energies to the study of ‘region’ and to bring to our notice some of the more recent developments in research and teaching which have either been neglected or ignored. Goh Beng Lan and her contributors have sought to ‘decentre’ and ‘diversify’ Southeast Asian Studies, and one assumes that their endeavours might well apply to other areas of Asia as well. They argue for the importance and vitality of scholarship within the region and of the contribution of local scholars to understanding the region within which they live. But they don’t define what constitutes local versus non-local scholarship, nor fully address the complexity of distinguishing between ‘local’ and ‘foreign’ scholars, though the introduction touches on these issues. Goh Beng Lan’s book provides the ‘afterlives’ of Asian Studies (in Miyoshi and Harootunian terms), which identify ‘regionally located scholarships as alternative sites from which Euro-American-centric visions could be denaturalized’ (pp. 1-4). This demands that we develop and deploy regional perspectives, ‘local dimensions’, and provide the stage for ‘local’, ‘native’, or ‘indigenous voices’ which are based, not on the interests and priorities of those outside the region, but ‘on local priorities’ (p. 1). One of the main coordinating locations for this process of decentring and diversifying is Singapore, where the editor is based, along with two other senior contributors, Wang Gungwu and Reynaldo Ileto.

By contrast with this localist approach, Wesley-Smith’s and Goss’s volume is an exercise in ‘remaking’ Area studies to create ‘more empowering forms of Area studies’ (p. x). This task of remaking was in fact undertaken in an American outlier in the School of Hawaiian, Asian, and Pacific Studies at the University of Hawai‘i, Manoa, though with important outreach, dialogic and student-centred teaching and learning programmes in partnership with insti-
tutions in New Zealand, Fiji, the Philippines, Singapore and Japan. Singapore has also played an important part both in this exercise and in contributions to the book. This volume advocates the development of innovative and collaborative pedagogical practices across countries and cultures in the Asia Pacific region in order ‘to bring Area studies to the areas studied’ through the use in the classroom of interactive technologies (e-mails, websites, videoconferencing) (p. xviii).

Finally, in their co-edited book, Jacob Edmond, Henry Johnson, and Jacqueline Leckie direct their efforts at ‘recentring’ Asia by asserting its ‘centrality’ and rethinking both the concept of ‘centre’ as a zone of ‘[trans-national] encounter, exchange, and contestation’ as well as the very notion (or notions) of Asia itself (p. 1). This presentation and confirmation of Asia’s ‘renewed centrality’ emerged from the New Zealand Asian Studies Society’s deliberations at its conference at the University of Otago. Yet in each of these volumes, the concepts of ‘centre’ and ‘Asia’ seem to be rather difficult to pin down.

These three volumes contain valuable and significant contributions to debates and discussions about the problems faced by the field of Area studies and Asian studies particularly, and the difficulties of defining regions and using regional definition for analytical purposes in an increasingly globalized, mobile, and unbounded world. However, two of the three books have taken a rather long time to emerge, (which is often the case with edited volumes), so they may seem less fresh, relevant, or influential. And confusingly for books questioning the very notion of Area studies, there is a tendency to take for granted definitions of Asia, Asia Pacific, and Southeast Asia. Only a few of the contributors debate what these terms denote and how we might profit in our research and teaching by continuing to use them. Furthermore, all three books focus on a somewhat restricted part of Asia, the Asia-Pacific or its sub-regions and perhaps do not consider carefully enough where some boundaries, zones, frontiers, locations, and sites end and others begin, nor how the designated units or areas might remain useful to academic theory and practice.

The Edmond, Johnson, and Leckie collection appeared first, but even if they were late to these debates, it doesn’t much matter because many of the chapters are literary and historical. The conference which served as the main forum for the book was held at Otago, New Zealand in 2007 and supported by the New Zealand Asian Studies Society, the Asia: New Zealand Foundation, and the Division of Humanities and the Asia-New Zealand Research Cluster at the University of Otago. It demonstrates again the process of refashioning New Zealand as an important player in the Asia Pacific region. Of the 15 contributions, seven are from New Zealand-based scholars (Otago, Victoria University of Wellington, Auckland, Massey), four hail from Australia (Australian National University, La Trobe, Sydney), three from Japan (University of the Ryukyus (Okinawa), the Tokyo Institute of Technology,
Hiroshima Shudo University), and one from the USA (Hawai’i (Manoa)). In disciplinary terms the focus of the volume is in the arts and humanities (literature, language, cultural studies, history, and ethnomusicology) with a sprinkling of interest in the social sciences (mainly anthropology). Issues to do with identities and ethnicity and their transformations are also prominent. The main regions of interest are East Asia (Japan, China, and Korea), with a few excursions into Southeast Asia, the South Pacific, and South Asia, though the volume’s emphasis on diasporas and migration blurs regional definitions. In my view, overall this is the most loosely organized of the three volumes and has a rather disparate, ‘conference proceedings’ character about it.

Goh Beng Lan’s collection goes as far back as a 2002 workshop, which she organized through the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the National University of Singapore under the sponsorship of the American Social Science Research Council and the Ford Foundation. It brought together scholars from across disciplines and generations and from five Southeast Asian countries ‘in order to plan for a research-cum-retooling project for junior researchers from the region’ (p. viii). There followed a two-year workshop series in 2004–05 funded by the Toyota Foundation and co-organized by Goh Beng-Lan and Reynaldo Ileto under the title Local scholarship and the study of Southeast Asia: Bridging the past and the present. The series attracted 25 active researchers who were charged with exploring ‘continuities and changes between past and present scholarship on and in Southeast Asia, with the aim of identifying agendas for the future’ (p. viii). The volume is dominated by the reflections of senior local scholars (Wang Gungwu, Taufik Abdullah and Reynaldo Ileto) and those of the middle generation (Wong Soak Koon, Yunita Winarto, Melani Budianta, Paritta Chalermpow Koanantakool, Patricio Abinales and Goh Beng Lan) with only two younger scholars (Abidin Kusno and Fadjar Thufail) contributing their thoughts and experiences. Shared themes which cut across the individual concerns of the senior scholars comprised their experience of colonialism, war, and conflict; their engagement with the state in their production and exchange of knowledge; and their identification of the broader interrelationships between the construction and acquisition of knowledge on the one hand and relations of power and domination in post-colonial societies on the other. The representation of nation-states in the Southeast Asian region is also confined to scholars from Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines; as the editor notes, the contributing scholars ‘are privileged by their location in the relatively more developed Southeast Asian countries’ (p. 16). Their academic backgrounds cover history, literary studies, and anthropology, though several of them work or have worked in multidisciplinary Area studies programmes. The volume gives us much food for thought in revealing the intellectual biographies of a range of prominent local scholars who have been active in developing our under-
standing of Southeast Asian history, culture, and identities.

In some respects, Wesley-Smith’s and Goss’s book is much more specific in its focus and intention. It gathers together contributions from those involved in a Ford Foundation-funded project in the School of Hawaiian, Asian, and Pacific Studies at the University of Hawai‘i, Manoa entitled *Moving cultures: Remaking Asia-Pacific studies*. The programme, which operated over two phases from 1997 to 2002 and comprised collaborative research and an interactive learning programme, was in turn part of the Ford Foundation’s general programme *Crossing borders: Revitalizing Area studies*. It included a range of institutions comprising the University of Hawai‘i, Kapi‘olani Community College, University of the South Pacific, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, National University of Singapore, Victoria University of Wellington, Canterbury University, Ateneo de Zamboanga University, and Palau Community College. Although there are more general contemplations in this volume on Area studies, Asia Pacific Studies, and their future orientations which I shall return to shortly, considerable attention is devoted to the evaluation of the *Moving cultures* programme and the technical and practical issues involved in developing, delivering, and managing Area studies programmes. These contain: Jeremy Eades’s chapter on the building of an Asia Pacific Studies programme at the Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University; Lonny Carlile’s interesting examination of the different trajectory which Area studies has taken in Japan in that the ‘institutional environment… overwhelmingly favoured discipline-based and applied knowledge over interdisciplinary area-specific knowledge’ (p. 89); Teresia Teaiwa’s views on the characteristics of Pacific Studies and the problematical relationship between Pacific Studies and Asian Studies in the development of academic programmes; Lily Kong’s evaluation of different kinds of institutional collaboration, particularly between the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa (UHM); the chapter by T.C. Chang, Jon Goss, and Christine Yano on the collaborative learning experiences of students in the virtual tourism studies classroom project between NUS and UHM; Lisa Law’s and Jon Goss’s exploration of another strand in the NUS-UHM collaboration with a comparative project on the Chinatowns of Singapore and Honolulu; Conrado Balatbat, Hezekiah Concepcion, Gerard Finin, and Ricardo Trimillos’s work on the collaboration between Ateneo de Zamboanga and UHM in a course on *Identity, self-determination and conflict in the Asia Pacific region: Mindanao and Hawai‘i*; Peter Hempenstall, Robert Nicole, and Terence Wesley-Smith on yet another collaborative interactive learning and teaching project, this time between institutions in Hawai‘i, Fiji, and New Zealand, entitled *Oceania on the move*, comprising comparative work on the flows of capital, people, and ideas across these three island sites; and finally in an *Epilogue*, Ricardo Trimillos, provides some thoughts on what he calls ‘working definitions’ and ‘workable definitions’ in
constructing a region, using his own institution in Hawai’i as case-material, and presenting an overview and evaluation of the *Moving cultures* programme.

With regard to regional definition, the volume says very little about what constitutes Asia, except for Edmond, Johnson, and Leckie’s attempt to ‘recentre’ it or aspects of it. Asia appears to be in one sense something concrete and graspable. Asian places, histories, and cultures, we are told, ‘increasingly resonate around the globe and affect the lives of many far removed from its regional geographies’ in a ‘new Asian century’ (Edmond, Johnson, and Leckie, p. 1). We can guess from the contributions what Asia might comprise, but we remain unsure about what are the elements of Asianness that are being recentred (other than that they derive from places, peoples, and cultures usually associated with Asia (China, Japan, India, the Malay-Indonesian world, and those of mobile Anglo-Indians, Okinawans, and Japanese who carry with them something rooted in Asian history, culture, and geography)).

At one point, Asia is conceived of as a centre (or centres) in the context of a ‘historical recentring of Asia through movements of people and changing conceptions of space and heritage’ (p. 3); in this discussion we have a sense of location and definition, though one which is subject to change. But then the editors shift their ground and recentring appears merely to be the process of highlighting some areas of Asian history, cultures, and politics which have been ‘overlooked’ (p. 1) which in turn involves a shift in emphasis to other disciplines or fields of study beyond ‘the narrow framing of Asia around geopolitical or economic interests’ (pp. 2-3).

Be that as it may the discovery of ‘new’, ‘overlooked’, ‘unexpected’, or ‘alternative’ Asian centres in Part 1 of the volume (Melaka (the chapter by Barbara Watson Andaya), the Korean peninsula (by Tessa Morris-Suzuki), South Asians in Fiji, New Zealand and Australia [by Jacqueline Leckie], Ryukyu/Okinawa and Japanese history (by Itō Yūshi)) in the context of newly emphasized fields of scholarly enquiry (historical, literary, and cultural studies, as well as sociological and anthropological approaches) seems not particularly ‘new’, and the notion of centre (in terms of shifting subjects, disciplines, zones [places], populations, cultures, histories) becomes exceedingly slippery. It may also have been a flexible and elastic device to create some coherence in what is, for me at least, a rather loosely organized volume.

In the second part of the book, we return to familiar territory in the study of Asia: identities (ambiguous, shifting, multi-layered, relative, re-configured) in the context of the movement of people and their cultural encounters. These issues are explored in the chapter by Jacob Edmond on the work of the Chinese poet Yang Lian in exile in New Zealand; Hasegawa Eiko’s study of the cross-cultural encounters of Japanese women in Shanghai; Roman Rosenbaum’s examination of Japanese populations outside Japan and ‘outcast communities’ and minorities within Japan (the Ainu, Ryukyuans,
Japanese residents of Korean and Chinese descent, Vietnamese) in terms of their negative conceptualization by the Japanese majority as kimin (abandoned people, outcasts, inferior, disenfranchised, lower class people); a related chapter by Nanami Akiko lends weight to Rosenbaum’s contribution by showing the problems which NGO advocacy experiences in supporting ‘foreigners’ in Japan; Anthony Shome’s contribution demonstrates the ambiguity in identity of the diasporic Anglo-Indians or Eurasians in India, and their situation in Malaysia and Singapore. Then part 3 of the book entitled *Representations and identities* continues some of the themes explored in part 2. Kathy Ooi looks at the relatively common device of stereotyping and ‘democratizing’ immigrant populations, in this case Chinese male immigrants to New Zealand from the 1920s characterized in the English literature of the time as sexual predators on white women. Elise Foxworth investigates the characterization of diasporic Korean identity and hybridity by the Korean novelist, Kim Sok Pom, a second-generation Korean resident in Japan. Leith Morton re-evaluates wartime Japanese tanka poetry as a literary form with artistic and emotionally expressive merit, some examples of which demonstrate sympathy for the enemy, though this chapter strains against the identity theme and seems much more preoccupied with the literary and expressive dimensions of the poetry rather than its sociological and symbolic outcomes; Miyahira Katsuyuki and Peter R. Petrucci discuss the expression of identity in terms of a unity of ‘spirit’ or ‘heart’ by overseas people of Okinawan ancestry (Uchinānchu) participating in the Fourth Worldwide Uchinānchu Festival (WUF) held in Okinawa in 2006. And Henry Johnson’s chapter on the impact of Japanese *taiko* drumming reveals discourses on the complexities of Japanese identity in New Zealand.

We also come away from Goh Beng Lan’s book, with its very welcome locally-grounded intellectual biographies of Southeast Asian scholars, with only the haziest notion of what the major defining characteristics of Southeast Asia as a region are from local perspectives, what the local emergent models and alternative perceptions and visions of Area studies generated by these biographies might look like, and whether or not Southeast Asian Studies as a language-based multi- or interdisciplinary field of scholarly endeavour focused on a socio-culturally, symbolically, historically, geographically, or politically defined region of the globe is a useful and viable mode of enquiry to help address the issues which the contributors to the volume raise. In her editorial introduction, Goh appears to reject undue emphasis on the nation-state as a unit of analysis and on ‘the possibility of any bounded geographical and identity conceptions’ (p. 2). Yet insofar as I can detect, any analytical and definitional boundaries which are drawn in this volume, we still appear to be operating with the nation-state-based, ASEAN-defined Southeast Asia and the intra-regional networks which sustain ‘the lived reality of [constructed]
regional identity and geography’ (p. 39). It would seem that the Western construction of Southeast Asia is being embraced, filled in, elaborated and developed by local scholars but with the hope that this endeavour can be founded on local perspectives and priorities. What is clear is that aside from the editor, the contributors do not really address the issue of regional identity or identities, cross-national and trans-ethnic comparative studies, nor the crucial features of Area studies programmes designed to understand Southeast Asia as a region. Indeed, most of the personal reflections focus on a particular nation-state and specific issues within that territorially bounded unit, though the collection’s discussion of research problems across disciplinary boundaries seems especially relevant from Area studies perspectives.

In her lengthy, informative, and incisive editorial introduction, Goh covers familiar terrain. She identifies the nature and origins of the crisis in Area studies and how ‘revisionist’ approaches (either disciplinary, anti-disciplinary [as in cultural studies] or globally oriented) have attempted to address it, while identifying the need ‘to create a platform to speak about Southeast Asian perspectives’ so that local scholars who ‘share the same convictions can come together to discuss issues that may not be of concern to those outside of the region’ (p. 15). In contemplating the autobiographical commentaries of the contributors to her volume, she emphasizes the importance of contextualizing knowledge production on the future of Southeast Asian Studies and, in arguing for the continued relevance of ‘Area studies’ and the need to explore its ‘afterlives’, she and her contributors address the distinctions and mutually enriching interactions between locally generated (‘insider’) and Euro-American-derived (‘outsider’) perspectives on Southeast Asia and examine the opportunities provided by cross-disciplinary understanding. Of the 14 original participants in the 2002 planning workshop, 11 (including Goh and Ileto) are represented in this volume (those missing are Kasian Tejapira, Diana Wong, and Liu Hong). As the book’s blurb indicates (and which I endorse), the value of the collection resides in the absorbing personal records of the intellectual journeys taken by eminent Southeast Asian scholars, which traverse geographical and disciplinary boundaries. Yet we might have anticipated more attention to the influence of national citizenship, ethnic identity, and social class membership on the scholarly trajectories of the contributors. It is interesting that most of them in ethnic terms are of Chinese or mixed Chinese-local ancestry (Abidin Kusno, Melani Budianta, Goh Beng Lan, Reynaldo Ileto, Paritta Chalermpow Koananatakool, Wang Gungwu, Yunita Winarto, Wong Soak Koon), or are in some other way, marginal to or are ‘other than’ the national mainstream (Taufik Abdullah, born in Minangkabau; Patricio Abinales, born in Mindanao). Perhaps the issue of identities (ethnic or otherwise), returning to the theme pursued in Edmond, Johnson, and Leckie’s volume, and their influence on scholarly perceptions, research top-
ics, and the choice of career pathways and institutional affiliations might have merited more detailed attention as well as their relevance for what Goh refers to as ‘ethical/progressive intervention’ (p. 17). In this connection, Goh and Budianta draw attention to issues of Chinese-non-Chinese antipathies.

Some final comments are required. In this ambitious venture, and one which Goh is hoping to build for the future, she advises that the scholarly practices revealed in her book are not meant to represent all such practices in Southeast Asia, nor do they provide ‘an integrated totality of viewpoints from the region’ (p. 16). Apart from enjoying ‘privileged locations’ in Southeast Asia, many of her contributors are also what Goh describes as ‘public intellectuals’ who are activists, applying their knowledge and expertise to real-world problems and issues, and who also write for wider non-academic audiences. Furthermore, these autobiographies suggest that Euro-American perspectives (in concepts, methods, and subject matter) has been more influential than what one might expect from a volume which seeks to make a case for ‘local priorities’. The founders of Western social science and philosophy have clearly shaped the thought and direction of local voices in this volume, as have outsiders who have made major contributions to our understanding of Southeast Asian realities (Anderson, Emerson, Freedman, Furnivall, Geertz, Hall, Kahin, Van Leur, Purcell, Pye, Reid, Resink, Schrieke, Siegel, Skinner, Smail, Wertheim, Wolters, among many others). I am not disputing the value of these individual intellectual biographies. They are full of interest and I learned much from reading them, particularly in the way in which the contributors discuss their approach to disciplines, their involvement with the state, and their activism in using their knowledge for practical, policy, and social reform purposes.

Let me now return to the Remaking Area studies volume, which presents even more problems in defining regions because it wishes to conjoin Asia with the Pacific, an enterprise which I have always felt to be fraught with difficulties. In her chapter ‘For or before an Asia Pacific studies agenda’, Teresia Teaiwa seems equally troubled. She identifies some of the major issues which have been debated in Area studies, and which seem to take on a rather more extreme form in Pacific [Island] Studies. The region ‘is conceived of and practiced rather loosely’; [it] is not consistently defined by practitioners’; ‘[m]uch work published and presented under the rubric of Pacific Studies has a single national or ethnic focus, does little to extend the possibilities for comparative analysis within the region, and tends to rely on theoretical sources from outside the region as a point of reference. As for disciplinary or methodological consistency, there is none....’ (p. 111). If we accept this assessment of the problems, then how or why would we want to bring the disparate field of Pacific Studies into the equally disparate field of Asian Studies. We can then add to this Ricardo Trimillos’s brutally frank critique of regional definition where, in order to access funds from the National Resources Center (NRC)
of the United States Department of Education, the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa uses the NRC’s ‘definition of Area studies’ (p. 215). The move to create ‘a unitary area’ which brings together Asia and the Pacific, Trimillos concludes, ‘still remains to be achieved’ (p. 216).

In the same volume, the problems faced by Area studies are compounded when we read Arif Dirlik’s ‘Asia Pacific studies in an age of global modernity’. His masterful summary of the contending perspectives commences concretely: ‘I will take up below five overlapping but nevertheless distinguishable trends that are especially noteworthy in their direct relevance to Asia Pacific Studies, though others could no doubt be added to them’ [my emphasis]. He overlaps with Teaiwa and Trimillos: Area studies are primarily nation-state-based; so-called Area studies scholars are diverse in their scholarship and politics; their research, teaching, and approaches are politicized, and Area studies have been sites of conflict as much as they have been sites of common purpose (Area studies professionals also style their profile to take advantage of funding opportunities). Yet out of this decidedly unpromising set of scholarly characteristics, Dirlik finds something positive in Area studies which we could all sign up to: the need to have specialized linguistic and on-the-ground knowledge of other peoples and cultures, above all to avoid the stereotypes promoted in, for example, the ‘civilizational’ approach to understanding the world; and the realization that for all the talk about globalization and movement ‘[d]iasporic identities…are place-based, products of the dialectics of cultural identities in concrete places’ (p. 17). In his chapter on ‘Remapping Area Knowledge’, Neil Smith also pursues this tension between the globalized undermining and transcending of boundaries and spaces and ‘the far more complicated restructuring of scales, places, and borders’ (p. 37). Martin Lewis then reinforces this line of argument by proposing that, although regions and boundaries are constructs, not ‘natural givens’, nevertheless they are also not ‘unreal or even arbitrary’. There may be flows of people and ideas, cross-cultural encounters, ambiguities of identity and shifting boundaries, but geographical or regional divisions do have ‘a real cognitive existence’ (p. 56).

I would add three final points. First, regions clearly do have a cognitive existence and, with regard to Decentering & diversifying Southeast Asian studies and Goh Beng Lan’s apparent embracing of the ASEAN-nation-state definition of Southeast Asia, I am prepared to recognize that for certain political and academic purposes this delineation of the region is ‘a lived reality’. But it is also a ‘contingent device’ (in Heather Sutherland’s terms), and in that regard there are other ways of seeing Southeast Asia from different disciplinary perspectives, particularly anthropological and archaeological ones, and these need not be locally generated. In other words, there are several possible ‘Southeast Asias’. Second, the editors of Recentring Asia need to tell us
much more explicitly what they believe they are ‘recentring’ in Asia: places/zones, peoples, cultures, histories, concepts, neglected fields, and/or subjects of study? Even ‘contingent devices’ require definition. Finally, in Remaking Area studies, the ambitious programme appears to be attempting to give pedagogical substance to a ‘contingent device’. Although some of the teaching programmes enjoyed success, the ‘contingent device’, which in this case is the disputed concept of the Asia Pacific, seems not to work in analytical, conceptual, or empirical terms.