

Southeast Asia as a Method: Engaging the Globe via a Multicultural Space

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Southeast Asian scholarship encounters several setbacks in producing and engaging with global scholarship. Engaging in global scholarship requires writing in the English language. Despite English being identified as a “global language,” English language scholarship is still dominated by those within ethnic centers: countries that are identified as primary English language speakers, such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Southeast Asia has around nine major languages (Malay, Kmer, Indonesian, Lao, Burmese, Filipino, Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese), and over a hundred more languages used in formal education within the Southeast Asian region, which engages in rich scholarship. This linguistic diversity creates difficulty in not only engaging the world, but even engaging in scholarship within the region. This was temporarily solved by intermediaries, such as university presses and local publishers whose business models included the translation of English-language scholarship into the major Southeast Asian languages and vice-versa.

Why engage with Southeast Asia? Sociologist Raewyn Connell (2007) challenges the academia to look at global events from the perspectives of what are considered countries of the Global South. Cultural studies scholar, Kuan-Hsin Chen (2010), on the other hand, challenges theory driven by “Western-oriented frameworks” with his proposal of Asia as a method, which relates to Global South theory but focuses primarily on “Asia.” The basic idea is to shift points of reference in cultural studies from the orthodox focus on the “West”, to that of “Asia.” However, the two proposals may not solve the problem of global engagement with Southeast Asian scholarship. They actively de-center privileged positions of the “Global North” or the “West,” but end up with scholarship that uses Southeast Asia as a site for a “case study,” arguing for the “unique” nature of the region.

Rather than crafting a new theory, this paper strives to present scholarship, which attempt to have true engagement between global centers and global peripheries through a recognition that the peripheries can problematize issues forgotten by the center. Cultural Anthropologist, Thomas Baudinette studies Filipino consumption of Thai Boy’s Love (BL) drama which effectively de-centers Japan as the cultural source, and at the same time re-engages the global space through an awareness of the hybridization of cultural products.

References

Connell, Raewyn W. (2007) *Southern Theory: Social Science and the Global Dynamics of Knowledge*, United Kingdom: Polity.

Chen Kuan-Hsing. (2010) *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*. Durham: Duke University Press.