

Some Comments on South-East Asian Studies in Australia

by

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Australia has shared only a slight part of its slight history with the islands and mainland to the north. It shared only in the earliest southward migrations. The contacts with the Malay peoples were few. The Dutch named New Holland and New Zealand, but their real concern was with their monopoly in the Moluccas. In the late eighteenth century, a more positive connexion between Asia and "Austral-Asia" seemed possible. But commercial links with China were impeded by the East India Company monopoly, and subsequent migrations produced a severance rather than a development of contacts with Asia. Contacts with Europe, or rather with Britain, predominated, and it was in relation to them, or in reaction from them, that Australia sought individuality and gained self-consciousness. The assignment of South-east Asia to a number of colonial powers further insulated Australia from Asia.

In the early twentieth century, changes were in preparation. A measure of industrialisation in Australia contributed to economic connexions with the Netherlands Indies and North Borneo, just as Japan's industrialisation brought some commercial connexions with Australia. But the revolution came only with the second world war. The decline of British preponderance, the independence of India, the Communist triumph in China, created, in the context of a world struggle for power, a new

context for relations between Australia and South-east Asia. Within South-east Asia, the colonial régimes were displaced by independent régimes, which had to face crucial economic, social and political problems. Australia now had quite different and apparently unstable neighbours and, with the resolution of the West Irian question, a common frontier with the most populous and powerful of them. A reappraisal of her policies seemed essential: a reappraisal, too, of popular attitudes and educational programmes, designed to bridge a long-standing intellectual and emotional gap.

Yet it might be argued that Australians were not without certain advantages in this attempt at reappraisal. South-east Asian historiography, for instance, has recently been bedevilled by a controversy over the European-centric" and "Asia-centric" points of view. Both seem likely to lead to mistaken emphasis in the interpretation of the past, to the perpetuation or unqualified reversal of colonial viewpoints. It might be that Australians are able to free themselves of European terminologies and chronologies without flying to the other extreme, and so contribute to a better all-round understanding of South-east Asian history. If, on the other hand, the shortness of their history and the tightness of their British connexion commits Australians to some

sort of love-hate relationship with European influences, this itself may help them to understand the attitudes say of Indonesian intellectuals to the Dutch legacy. Australians, too, may give warning by example of the way such a relationship may produce a violent reaction and extreme nationalist interpretations of the past - a historiography that in fact is the more "colonial" for being so determinedly nationalist. If Australians may share apprehensions of China with some South-east Asian countries, they might, on the other hand, in view of their own background, be in a position to understand the nature of the Chinese community in South-east Asia, a community drawn not from the upper classes of the homeland, but not the less loyal to its culture. It may be, therefore, that Australians in some ways are equipped, and not only in the historiographical field, to make a special contribution to South-east Asian studies. It seems more important that they should in that in some ex-colonial countries South-east Asian studies are declining.

It is one thing to recognise the importance of South-east Asian studies, or even to see that there may be special advantages in undertaking them in Australia. It is another thing to introduce them into the universities, even though their introduction at undergraduate level seems fundamental both to the general development of knowledge about South-east Asia and to the expansion of postgraduate research. The universities traditionally have been concerned more with Europe and Australia itself, and they and their departments have, as it were, a life of their own, animated by traditions and by the ambitions of the permanent departmental heads. It was in a somewhat similar context that in 1961 a conference was convened in Wellington by Professor Leslie Palmier to consider the introduction of

Asian studies in New Zealand universities. He favoured their introduction into the traditional departments, ensuring a disciplinary critique of the staff concerned, and a contact with and a chance of interesting a large body of students. The alternative was an area study course, which meant that Asian studies would still be rather exotic, rather "colonial", rather in the manner of "Oriental Studies" in some universities, an exacting language course with trimmings from other disciplines. Given the structure of the universities, it is sometimes hard to pursue the former, more advantageous, course.

In England South-east Asian studies have made little progress at the undergraduate level and, as a corollary, at the post-graduate level. The well-provided School of Oriental and African Studies in London draws its graduate students, at least in this field, largely from overseas universities, which in turn it supplies with trained personnel. The structure of English university teaching means that there is little scope for area studies; the conservatism of university departments leaves little room for Asian specialists; and there is little outside pressure on the universities. the Hayter report did indeed recognise a gap which it sought to fill by its programme for Asian studies in Yorkshire universities, with South-east Asian studies at Hull.

In America one is struck by the rapidity with which universities adapt themselves to the current needs-even fashions-of public policy and ideology. One factor is, of course, outside pressure, outside finance, while the universities are endowed with a more "democratic" course structure and perhaps less academic conservatism than those in Britain. This has facilitated the introduction of a multiplicity of Asia-oriented courses at undergraduate level, and of Asian studies at the postgraduate level,

modified with experience by a disciplinary bias, especially, for instance at Cornell, the major centre for South-east Asian studies. Postgraduate work is the concern of more students than in differently structured English universities, goes on longer, and is less involved with a single thesis and more with class work and language-learning. In consequence relatively large numbers of students may find it possible to integrate Southeast Asian studies with concentrated work in a discipline and acquisition of a language.

In the British and American "systems" there are many anomalies, and the Australian "system" might be described as an anomalous combination of both with special factors of its own. The undergraduate system bears some resemblance to the American: the objective is a general degree for a large number of students. At the same time there also exists an undergraduate Honours degree, which requires greater concentration on a particular discipline than even a major in the pass course. It may be easier than in England for a disciplinary department to introduce alternative Asian courses, and individuals may be more interested in doing so and be subject to greater public pressure to do so. But the disciplinary emphasis is stronger than in the U.S. and outside pressure or support inducing the creation of boards and centres weaker. Much depends on the personal views of the permanent departmental heads. At the postgraduate level-reached by Honours students already grounded in a discipline, though more likely to be familiar with something Asian than those in England -there is in fact relatively little activity in state universities in Australia, at least outside scientific and technical subjects, while there is rather more in the federal university in Canberra, the not unsound tradition is to "go overseas". But there are difficulties even here.

In the U.S. the student will have to contend with elaborate course-work, entering a system that may be uncongenial to him after a four-year Honours B.A. course approximating an English standard. In England, on the other hand, he will be limited in choice of subject, not by lack of a general Asian or disciplinary training, but perhaps by lack of an Asian language, for the teaching of which Australia makes little provision. A major problem of the disciplinarily-structured universities is the setting-up of new language departments. This organisational difficulty an "Asian Studies" or "Oriental Studies" department can overcome, but at a cost. The logical objective must perhaps be a Department of Asian Languages.

What is the current position of South-east Asian Studies in Australia? the slow pace of universities, the faster pace of world events, induced the federal government in 1956 to support the establishment in Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra of Departments of Indonesian Studies, now generally called Departments of Indonesian and Malaysian Studies. Thus one of the major steps in South-east Asian studies in Australian universities has followed rather the example of Oriental Studies-set up, for instance, in Sydney in 1918-in not providing a purely disciplinary training. At Melbourne, for instance, the course centres on language in the first year with politics and other aspects of the area-study in the following years. Each year would form a unit in an undergraduate pass degree requiring a number of units in a number of fields. As yet there is no Honours course, though one is contemplated. The Department is headed by J.A.C. Mackie, an authority on contemporary Indonesian politics; an Indonesian, Mr. Sarumpaet, teaches Bahasa and another member of staff covers Malaysian politics. In Sydney the department is headed by Dr. F.H. van Naerssen, and in Canberra,

the head, Dr. A.H. Johns, an authority on Indonesian literature, and has recently been given a chair.

Otherwise South-east Asian Studies is largely a departmental, even a personal matter. In a number of departments in a number of universities, members of staff specialise in Southeast Asia. Perhaps Monash, the second university in Melbourne, occupies a foremost position. Herb Feith is in the Politics Department. The History Department is headed by J.D. Legge, and there are specialists also in the Geography and Anthropology departments. A Chair in Indonesian Language has recently been filled by C. Skinner from Kuala Lumpur and there are plans to introduce the Thai language. These developments are partly fortuitous—partly the result, for instance, of the appointment of Dr. Legge to the Chair of History—and are also aided by the newness of the university and its enjoying substantial financial support from its inception. A Board of Asian Studies coordinates undergraduate courses in the various disciplines, so that a student may obtain a B.A. or B. Econ. with an Asian emphasis, East Asian or South-east Asian. There are plans, or hopes, for a Centre of South-east Asian Studies, concerned with postgraduate work and enjoying a budget of its own.

In the other state universities the History and Politics departments have perhaps led in the development of South-east Asian Studies. In Perth, Adelaide and Sydney, these departments, and also Anthropology in Sydney, have given some attention to Asia, even to South-east Asia. In Armidale, a number of staff members are particularly interested in North Borneo, and there is an interdisciplinary seminar. In Queensland—my own University—parts of various pass courses are concerned with Asia and Southeast Asia. In Anthropology, Dr. Donald Tugby has worked in Sumatra, and

his wife, in the Geography Department, in southern Thailand. Dr. D. P. Singhal lectures on South-east Asian politics, and a year of the Honours work in History is normally devoted to South-east Asia mostly since 1800. By these measures some History and Politics Honours students have been given an interest in South-east Asia, and some have gone or are going to Britain or to Malaya for postgraduate work. The postgraduate facilities at Canberra—where Dr. Emily Sadka specialises on Malayan history—have trained some students from South-east Asian universities. Notable overall is the concentration on Indonesia and Malaya and the relative neglect of other South-east Asian countries. The Philippines at least would, one might think, offer attractive prospects in a number of disciplines, less hampered by language difficulties than some other cases.

Outside the universities a number of organisations provide a limited financial support which may foster, but hardly develop or generate interest in South-east Asian Studies. The Australian Social Science Research Council, for instance, has over the past few years facilitated visits to South-east Asia by Australian academics, and contributed to the publication of research on Southeast Asian topics. The Australian Institute of International Affairs, aided, indeed, by Ford Foundation help, is supporting a number of research projects on Australian foreign policy, largely being undertaken within the universities. One of these involves a study by Mackie of the Malaysian idea and of the development of the Malaysian-Indonesian conflict during 1963-4. The effect of this sort of support is, in fact, to buttress individual efforts in the universities rather than to induce any new departures.

There is, I fear, something of a gap between the actuality and the broader possibilities indicated at the beginning of this paper. If

this exists in the universities, some of the possibilities and certainly the gap exists also in the community at large. Universities in Australia are generally conscious-some would say over-conscious-of their relationship to the community and their practical responsibilities towards it. In some states the universities administer adult education. In Queensland, on the other hand, the university sponsors courses of public lectures, widely attended, some of them on Asian or South-east Asian topics, and its Institute of Modern Languages offers Malay, Indonesian and other Asian languages as non-degree courses. The university staff is sometimes in demand on other media, the press, radio, T.V., but their scope here is relatively

limited. Nor, in general, do they possess substantial control over the content of education in schools; yet here, too, Asian studies have made some progress, though hampered by the pressure on teaching resources and lack of material. Publishing, of course, is largely controlled by English firms. But Australian publishers have shown some readiness to publish research work in the South-east Asian field, as do a number of learned journals, for instance the *Australian Journal of Politics and History*. In all this we can discern some progress. Indeed, compared with the situation pre-war, it might almost be called a revolutionary advance.