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After a brief hiatus the CSEAS newsletter returns in a new digital-only format. In order to evolve and meet the challenges of reaching out to the global Southeast Asian academic community, our newsletter will bring more topical research initiatives from our Center, and faculty, as well as fellows and researchers from institutions in our network. Since CSEAS's reorganization last year, faculty have been working together on new projects and initiatives both within and outside of Japan.

As of the end of March 2018, Prof. Kono Yasuyuki completed his four-year tenure as director. During this time, he oversaw the transition of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) and the Center for Integrated Area Studies (CIAS) merge together to create a stronger more internationally outward looking institution. As of April 2018, we welcome Prof. Hayami Yoko as our new director. Along with our vice directors, Mieno Fumiharu and Koizumi Junko, we look forward to deepening our commitments to multi-disciplinary research within Southeast Asia and other regions where our researchers work.

In this issue, we introduce a series of articles from recent fellows. Robert Taylor, writes about the military in Southeast Asian politics and takes a deeper historical look at civil-military relations in the region to question to role of military forces that have presided over nations in the region during the 20th – 21st century. Amporn Jirattikorn (Chiang Mai University), introduces us to the production, consumption and sharing of Thai television dramas within Southeast Asia and China. In recent years a huge fan industry has developed for Thai dramas and this article looks over recent trends in their circulation and consumption in China.

On 16 – 17 December 2017, CSEAS was one of the co-organizers of the second Consortium for Southeast Asian Studies in Asia (SEASIA), held at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand. A resounding success, over 450 participants attended the conference from 29 nations, further cementing SEASIA's reputation as a regional and global hub for scholars to come together. Christina Warning and Michiko Yoshida (Chulalongkorn University) offer a detailed overview of this successful event. Prof. Chaiwat Satha-Anand (Department of Political Science, Thammasat University), was honored as one of the keynote speakers at this conference and gave a deeply thought-provoking talk on the politics of naming and the power embodied within names themselves. His address is carried in this newsletter.

Miles Kenney-Lazar, a Hakubi Researcher based at CSEAS, is currently conducting research in Laos and provides us with an introduction to his work on politics and power relations among foreign investors, the Lao state, and Lao peasants shaping access to land and driving agrarian-environmental change. Kevin Hewison (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), discusses current debates concerning businessification and the varying processes of managerialism, commodification, privatization and customerization that play out influence civil society and businesses. Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi (LIPI) has been conducting long-term research on Muslim women political leaders; in her article she provides us with a detailed overview of her current project on women's leadership in Indonesia examining notions people hold of female politicians.

Finally, Nishaant Chokshi (JSPS Postdoctoral Fellow) introduces us to some unique observations from a recent fieldtrip to Luang Namtha province, Laos with Associate Prof. Nathan Badenoch. Nishaant is a scholar who primarily works in India, however he shares with us how Laotian villagers consume a Thai-dubbed version of an Indian drama and the broader media circulations taking place between South and Southeast Asia.

The Editor
Mario Lopez



The Military in Southeast Asian Politics: Playing or Controlling?

Robert Taylor

Former Fellow, CSEAS

In the early years of the Cold War, the role of the military in politics became a subject much discussed in the political science literature of the day. This was the result of several factors. One was the enormous growth of the military power of the victorious states, particularly the United States and the Soviet Union, as a result of the Second World War. A second factor was the spate of military coup d'états which led to the toppling of many fragile governments in post-colonial states in the 1950s and the 1960s. A third was the emergence of military regimes, particularly in Latin America and southern Europe, who were convinced they could govern more effectively than the allegedly corrupt civilian regimes that they replaced. Given the anti-Communist foreign policy proclivities of most liberal capitalist states at that time, and the rightist political stance of most armies, military governments were seen by many political scientists, particularly in the United States, as a good thing as long as they were not in the country where they lived.

The literature on military-civil relations at that time very much concentrated on how and why armies intervened in politics, from constitutionally legitimate persuasion of their civilian masters, through to various degrees of assuming control of the state apparatus, to the ultimate, a government run solely by the armed forces of a given country. These phenomena were all widely found in Southeast Asia. Burma experienced its first coup in 1958. That was in part at least semi-consensual, and the military kept to its promise to hand power back to a civilian government 18 months later, thus winning much praise for its maintenance of constitutional norms. However, two years later, the army under General Ne Win seized power

in its own name and remained in power, under various guises, until 2011. Thailand, on the other hand, has experienced a near cascade of coups and constitutions since 1932, at least 20 at last count, and is under military control today. The Indonesian army long played the role after independence of propping up civilian governments until it finally removed the nationalist leader Sukarno and then governed for many years, directly and then indirectly, until it ousted former General Suharto in 1998. The army in the Philippines, long held as a paragon of virtue for its strict adherence to the doctrine of civilian control, became politicized and highly factionalized during the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos and subsequently attempted at least 13 coups, all of which failed.

Militaries in other Southeast Asian states have also been involved in politics but in different ways from those of the four states mentioned above. Before its defeat in 1975, the military controlled the government of the former South Vietnam and in neighboring Cambodia and Laos right-wing military forces were deeply involved in politics until their defeat at the hands of revolutionary nationalist and leftist forces. Under the current governments of these three countries, the army is clearly a major prop of the ruling party. In contrast, the armies of Singapore and Malaysia have apparently appeared to be without political ambitions. This perception merely obscures the reality that the military leadership is deeply embedded in the ruling parties of those countries as well as their dominant ethnic communities and civilian bureaucracies. And, of course, monarchical Brunei's armed forces are exclusively Malay, but the Sultan maintains a 2,000 man Gurkha unit for his own

protection.

After the end of the Cold War, the big research money was into the processes of so-called democratization as military governments fell out of favor to be replaced with civilian-led constitutional regimes. Reflecting back on the literature on civil-military relations in general and the specific situations in the various countries of Southeast Asia based on an examination of the most recent relevant academic literature, I have reached the conclusion that there is not much new to be learned about the political role of the military from what was known in 1962 when Samuel Finer published his path finding *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics*. Despite many excellent empirical studies of the political role of the military in Thailand, Myanmar, the Philippines and Indonesia, usually couched in terms of the goal of “democratization,” in conceptual terms, despite valiant efforts by some political scientists to launch into theoretical discussions about structure and agency, elaborate statistical models, or other ventures into jargon, comparative political studies have not much more to tell us about civil-military relations in Southeast Asia or elsewhere now than it did six decades back.

However, perhaps comparative historical studies might be more useful for elucidating the different kinds of civil-military relations we see in the region today. While reading round some of the literature on the role of the military in European history, I came across this quotation from Sir John Wheeler-Bennett’s masterful *The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics 1918–1945*. Wheeler-Bennett wrote in his introduction that one of the purposes of his book was, among other things, to show how the German army “... when it was mistaken enough to come down into the arena and to play politics instead of controlling them, it began a descent which ended in abject defeat — militarily, politically and spiritually” ([1953] 2005, xxxii). What he was alluding to was the different relationships that senior German military officers had with the dominant civilian political figures of their day in the period between the ends of the First and Second World Wars.

After the First World War, in 1919, after Kaiser Wilhelm II had gone into exile in the Netherlands, and the German army was near collapse, Friedrich Ebert, the first president of the new Weimar republican government, was besieged in his offices in Berlin by Communists and other radical leftist political forces which threatened to overthrow the new Social Democratic Party regime almost before it could begin to govern. He turned for support against the mobs in the streets surrounding his office to General Wilhelm Groener who ordered the elite Freikorps to rescue

President Ebert and suppress the demonstrators. Groener and the army thus became a silent partner of successive civilian governments, holding various ministerial positions until Groener was forced out of the government in 1932 by General Kurt von Schleicher. Von Schleicher, like Groener, was not a democratic and sought to rebuild Germany’s military power and its army’s badly damaged prestige. However, rather than standing aloof from party politics, von Schleicher sought to do a deal with members of the Nazi Party in order to defeat what he perceived as its radical faction. Adolph Hitler, however, having promised to make the army with the Nazi Party twin pillars of the state, gradually brought the army under Nazi Party control, including in its oath of loyalty not only a pledge to defend the German state but also the army’s allegiance to Hitler as the Führer in his personal capacity. From then on, Hitler, who appointed himself commander-in-chief in 1941, led the German army to its destruction in a war many of the officer corps believed they could not win.

Wheeler-Bennett does not define what he meant by his dichotomy of controlling as opposed to playing politics but the account he gives of Groener’s 12 years of political success as opposed to von Schleicher’s and his successors’ failure to control a man they saw as an incompetent Austrian corporal makes clear his meaning, though one must concede that there is no clear line between one form of behavior and the other. So how does this help us understand the political role of the military in the four states noted above? On the basis of a number of indicators, both historical and contemporaneous, it is easy to argue that the Burmese and Indonesian armies have largely been controlling politics while the armies of Thailand and the Philippines have been playing politics.

The frequency of coups or coup attempts and the number of constitutions the respective states have experienced is one obvious indicator. Since independence, Myanmar has experienced two half coups, in 1958 and 1988, and one full coup, 1962, and three constitutions. Indonesia has experienced one coup, the ouster of Sukarno in the mid-1960s, and one withdrawal of support from the head of state, when General Wiranto refused the order of President Suharto to suppress student demonstrations in 1998. Suharto resigned the next day. In Thailand, on the other hand, the army has repeatedly intervened in politics, often in coalition with other political actors including the civilian bureaucracy, the Democratic Party, the judiciary, big business, and the monarchy, ousting governments which it felt were not governing in its interest. The frequency of these interventions suggests an army leadership which is very much

involved in the day-to-day management of the state, despite the perception on the part of most observers that coups were no longer feasible after the debacle of the 1991 coup.

Similarly, coup attempts in the Philippines following the collapse of the Marcos dictatorship have often been in collusion with other political actors, mainly members of the factionalized political elite which has dominated the country's politics since before independence. The ability of President Marcos to involve the army in his regime undermined its institutional autonomy and its distance from party politics. Though there have been no coup attempts in recent years, rumors of coups and discontent in the officer corps with the behavior of various presidents in recent years has had an unsettling effect on Philippine politics.

The Indonesian army no longer occupies the positions in government it held both before and after the 1960s. By the time that General Wiranto refused President Suharto's order in 1998, the army's position as a central pillar of the President's government had been undermined by Suharto's sultanistic government based on his family and business cronies. However, now in many ways, the army is stronger as an institution and as a political actor outside the government today, with its regional commands and economic interests in place, and its hold over foreign and defense policies, than in the final years of the Suharto era. Moreover, as the army has redefined its role in the Indonesian state, as Jun Honna (2003) and others have shown, it still maintains the ability to serve as a politically stabilizing force, controlling quietly from the shadows but with direct access to the President.

In Myanmar, the army, following more than two decades of direct rule, put in place a constitution which now allows Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) that she heads to govern the country. However, that constitution cannot be altered without the consent of the army; the army has a lock on political change. Most clearly, it controls politics and it maintains the position of being able to intervene in politics in the future should whatever civilian government comes to power threaten its interests or the country's political stability.

Today, on the other hand, the Thai army is in power

and has been so for the past four years. Its most recent coup was in coalition with the monarchy and the death of the popular King Bhumipol and his replacement with the unpopular Vajiralongkorn, and the apparently continuing political popularity of politics of the kind exemplified by Thaksin Shinawatra, and his elected successors which the army ousted from power not once but twice, poses a great dilemma. Can the Thai army once more establish a constitutional order that will satisfy both the monarchy and the majority of the population? The way forward is far from clear.

So what can we conclude from this effort to examine the question of civil-military relations in Southeast Asia and elsewhere from Wheeler-Bennett's dichotomous example? Perhaps it is that armies, like kings of old, as central pillars of their respective states should learn the lesson that successful constitutional monarchies learned in order to ensure their longevity. As summarized by Lord Castlereagh in 1815:

Tyrants may poison or murder an obnoxious character, but the surest and only means a constitutional sovereign [or army] has to restrain such a character is to employ him ... the essence of a free state is to manage the party warfare, so to reconcile it with the safety of the sovereign ... to do this, the King [or army] must give contending parties facilities against each other, and not embark himself too deeply in any way. (Bew 2011, 397)

Playing politics or controlling politics may be a matter of degree as to "not embark ... too deeply" but that degree may spell success for both the army and the state it exists to serve and protect.

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Thai series shown on website Bilibili whose “bullet-screen” mechanism allows real-time user comments to scroll across the screen.

Thai Popular Culture: A New Player in Asia Media Circulation and Chinese Censorship

Amporn Jirattikorn

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Thai television dramas, which have been a staple of the nation's TV landscape for over four decades, tend to be what Thai people call “*lakorn nam nao*” (polluted soaps). The *namnao* or polluted characteristic lies in their portrayal of unreal life, presenting a visual grammar of lavish and luxurious settings, over-exaggerated acting, and melodramatic plots. In the late 2000s, Thai television dramas gradually started to gain popularity in Asia. Beginning in 2003, Thai dramas entered Chinese television channels, followed by the success of many drama series in the following years. For example, *Battle of Angels*, broadcast on Anhui Satellite TV in 2009, achieved the tenth highest audience rating of all programs in the first week it was released and was re-run four times between 2009–10 (Danaithan 2012). Following the success in China's television market, the past decade saw the outward flows of Thai television dramas expanded to Vietnam, Indonesia, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Besides being exported for telecast, the phenomenon of subtitles created by fans in many countries has also made Thai dramas more widely accessible.

The reasons for the new outward flow of Thai television dramas in the region vary. As many scholars have argued, broadcasters in Asia now operate under the assumption of greater market fragmenta-

tion and the need to cater to niche audiences, as they exhibit less consumption loyalty (Lim 2008). Growing economies on the receiving end also contribute greatly to the increasing outward flows of Thai dramas. In Vietnam, for example, the growing cable television market has fostered a high demand for television content. Likewise, the government's privatization of television channels (in Myanmar), the growth of cable television networks (in Cambodia), and the advance of mobile technology, combined with the ebb of Korean dramas, have contributed to the increased growth in Thai television dramas in these countries' broadcasting scenes. More importantly, the notion of cultural proximity contributes greatly to the success of Thai dramas in these neighboring countries. As for China, nationalistic fear over dominant Korean popular culture has led the Chinese censorship board to limit Korean television imports. This in turn gave way to more Thai imports (Danaithan 2012). In addition, the higher quality of Thai television dramas over the past decade, and the low price of Thai drama exports, have enabled them to compete with the more expensive Korean television dramas. Danaithan (*ibid.*) points out that between 2009–11, some satellite televisions in China broadcasted about 8–10 Thai television dramas series per year.

This short essay focuses particularly on China, exploring the aspects of consumption among Chinese audience who watch Thai television dramas through streaming sites and the fan-subtitle groups who translated Thai dramas into Chinese language. After making its successful entry into China's television market in the late 2000s, the past decade has seen the ebb and flow of Thai television dramas in China. The tightening state controls on broadcasting foreign media, including limiting the number of foreign imports, tight censorship, and viewers being able to identify clichéd elements in Thai dramas, have led to a decline in the popularity of Thai dramas in China (Chan 2012). While the first wave which began with *Battle of Angels* waned around 2011, Chan has argued that Chinese interest in Thai television dramas was renewed through Chinese streaming sites. This recent decade has seen the phenomenon of enthusiastic fans who obtain foreign cultural products, translate the text, then release subtitles for viewing, without asking for permission from the copyright holders. Recently, there are more than 10 subtitling groups of Thai dramas on Chinese video-sharing websites. Of these, the most popular one is *Tianfutaiju* whose translation focuses on Thai boys' love series, a point I return to later.

It should be noted that the present generation of Chinese audiences that watch Thai television dramas on the internet today differ from those of the previous decade who consumed Thai dramas from television. While audiences of the previous decade tended to be housewives who may passively receive what media industry offered to them, the audience of the new generation are millennials who are young, relatively well-educated and live in urban areas. They do

not passively watch whatever has been broadcasted but constantly search for global media content not available at home. The content which these different generations prefer also differs. The older generation tends to like Thai television dramas whose stories revolved around family relationships with melodramatic plot twists and over exaggerated acting while the younger generation prefers teen dramas whose stories are more related to their everyday life. However, it is not uncommon to find young audience who like the melodramatic stories of the Thai dramas. The younger audience are also drawn to Thai television dramas for the beauty and attractiveness of Thai actors and actresses who tend to be of mixed races.

One of the most popular genres of Thai television dramas among the new generation of Chinese audience is "boys' love" series. Boys' love (BL) has typically been identified with Japanese *manga* whose stories portray two young men as the focus of a love interest. Most BL fans are heterosexual women, though it is not uncommon for BL to draw gay men or bisexual audience. Japanese BL *manga* became popular in Thailand around the beginning of the 2000s. Following the popularity of Japanese BL *manga*, Thai BL literature in the forms of short stories or novels has been written and shared both online and offline. Until recently, television companies began to pick up this trend by producing BL television series. Fostered by a community of enthusiastic fans who work to provide subtitles of BL content in many different language communities, BL series from Thailand have increasingly become popular throughout Asia, particularly in Vietnam, Indonesia, and China. As BL is considered illegal in China for it poses a challenge to heterosexual hegemony, BL series from



Fig. 1 Thai TV dramas that been translated into Vietnamese language and sold as DVDs.

Fig. 2 Chinese fan showing a screenshot of how she watches Thai TV dramas from the fansub version on their phone.



Fig. 3 *2Moons the Series* is one of Thai BL series which has become popular throughout Asia.

Thailand have become the main channel for young audience starved of content which has been banned at home.

While internet provides a virtual space for a variety of youthful interest groups in China, the control over what citizen can see on the website has always been exercised by the Chinese state. The latest development happened in July 2017 when the State Press and Publication Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) ordered the removal of foreign movies and TV shows from the two most popular video-sharing websites, Bilibili and AcFun. Bilibili is a hugely popular site, originating as a video-sharing site for Japanese *anime* but gradually became home to all kinds of TV shows. Featuring more youthful content, Bilibili and AcFun have looser restrictions on the content uploaded and shared by users. They have also helped foster a community of Chinese fansubbers who voluntarily translated and subtitled most overseas content. These websites have thus attracted more fans than official websites such as Youku, Tudou, Sohu, and iQiyi. Bilibili also offers features that tend to appeal to a younger audience, such as a “bullet-curtain” mechanism to allow real-time user comments to scroll across the screen (He 2017). After the sudden ban, Thai dramas, along with Korean series, Japanese *anime*, and American TV shows, were pulled from websites. Thai drama fans expressed their disappointment: a vast collection of Thai dramas were wiped out from the websites and the most famous fan-subtitle group, *Tianfutaiju* which solely translated boys’ love series from Thailand, also decided to stop subtitled. Some fans were devastated that “without Thai dramas, without *Tianfutaiju*, what would life be like?”

The recent ban reportedly came for two reasons. Some maintain that the ban was part of official efforts

to tackle piracy (*ibid.*). Recently, many official websites such as Youku, Tudou, Sohu, and iQiyi started to obtain copyright for online foreign movies and TV shows. This may be the reason as to why the Chinese government had to act upon those that violated copyright claims. The second reason has to do with censorship. The absence of domestic copyright means those videos shared in Bilibili and AcFun did not pass the government’s content censorship. Right before the removal of foreign content in these two websites, in June 2017, the Chinese government issued new guidelines for online broadcasting, prohibiting unpatriotic and vulgar content. The latter specifically refers to “abnormal sexual behaviors” (Yin 2017) which include homosexuality, adultery, one-night stands, prostitution, sexual violence, or kissing and bathing scenes. One of the fansubbers of Thai dramas lamented that “from now on, we will have nothing to watch but war movies as everything else is banned.” As boys’ love series were the most popular genre of Thai dramas on Bilibili, they became the main target of the ban.

The recent disappearance of foreign media content on these two video-sharing sites signifies the continuing struggle over what citizens can see on the websites. In China, as well as elsewhere, technology is changing rapidly, state and businesses also quickly respond to the transforming conditions. China’s ban on the amateur creation by fan communities begs the question: when the state and businesses are in alliance, can and will netizens, with the help of technology, find ways to escape control?

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SEASIA 2017 “Unity in Diversity: Transgressive Southeast Asia”

December 16–17, 2017 Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand

**Christina Warning
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The Consortium for Southeast Asian Studies in Asia (or SEASIA, pronounced “see-Asia”) was established in Kyoto, Japan, in 2013 as a joint effort of 10 leading Asian scholarly institutions. Following the successful inaugural conference hosted by Kyoto University in 2015, the second of its biennial conferences (SEASIA 2017) was hosted by Chulalongkorn University in close collaboration with the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), Kyoto University.

SEASIA 2017 explored new directions in re-contextualizing and re-conceptualizing Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian Studies. Given the decline of Area Studies in many Western universities, this international conference helped establish an alternative academic environment for the study of this highly dynamic region. It offered a platform to discuss a

broad spectrum of topics featuring the latest developments in our region and for further exchange and cooperation among scholars and others to serve the betterment of our societies.

Over 450 registered participants from Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand attended the conference, representing 29 countries and 166 institutions. They ranged from Masters and PhD students to professors and well-known scholars in various fields. Participants presented 290 papers that covered a staggering range of topics discussed in 58 regular panels and six special programs. These panels and programs spurred energetic and fruitful discussions and exchanges that advance research and sow the seeds of new approaches to cross-national and



cross-disciplinary issues.

Hosting the conference was particularly meaningful for Chulalongkorn University, since 2017 marked the centenary of its establishment. Speaking of the importance of hosting SEASIA 2017, Associate Professor Dr. Nualnoi Treerat, Director of the Institute of Asian Studies and the Chair of the Chulalongkorn University Conference Committee (CUCC) remarked, “as Thailand’s first institution of higher learning, Chulalongkorn University’s mission has been to serve the public and in this increasingly connected, vibrant, and evolving world, we have inevitably elevated our aspirations and endeavors to include international collaboration and service to the public in a much larger sense.”

The conference was organized by the CUCC for SEASIA 2017, which was formed as a collaborative effort among three key entities on campus: the Institute of Asian Studies (one of SEASIA’s founding members), the Faculty of Arts, and the Faculty of Political Science. The committee worked closely with the SEASIA Consortium Secretariat at the CSEAS at Kyoto University and SEASIA Conference Committee.

The SEASIA 2017 Conference also received considerable support and cooperation from various institutions and funders, including the Japan Foundation Asia Center (JFAC), the ASEAN Studies Center of Chulalongkorn University, CH. Karnchang Public Company Limited, Kyoto University, Chula Global

Network, the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB), and PTT Public Company Limited.

Opening Ceremony

The Opening Ceremony was presided over by the Guest of Honor, Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. Her Royal Highness reaffirmed in her speech that the Conference was “essential and meaningful to both academic circles and the development of Southeast Asian countries.” While she recognized that “Southeast Asians can trace our backgrounds to different historical roots while we live in different geographic and political contexts” and “we have been reared quite differently in terms of our culture and beliefs,” she stressed that the SEASIA



Fig. 1 Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn

Conference was an opportunity for all to learn from other societies, especially within the region. She concluded that such learning and close cooperation is needed in order to achieve mutual sustainable progress: “to achieve successful collaboration, we need to know each other well and to understand our strength and weaknesses. With this meaningful collaboration, we will be able to join hands in growing up development plans that will result in unity in diversity.”

Professor Chaiwat Satha-Anand, Director of the Thai Peace Information Center at Thammasat University delivered a keynote address on the power and politics of naming. From Confucius, the Bible, and the Qu’ran to anti-Communist campaigns and immigration procedures, he spanned history and contemporary experience to illustrate how naming, and resistance to being named, lay at the heart of power. The address highlighted the importance that naming has had to state interventions in Thailand’s politically troubled southern provinces. In offering a final example of how one government official owned his own name, Professor Chaiwat reminded the audience of the brave and clever ways that one can resist control.

The ceremony ended with an official announcement that the next SEASIA Conference will be held in Tai-

conference in 2021.

Participants had an opportunity to casually mingle and get to know each other better at a welcome dinner reception following the ceremony. The reception showcased Thai hospitality with various local delicacies and music. Performances by schoolchildren from the Chula Demonstration School added a special charm to the evening.

Conference Panels and Special Programs

Under the umbrella theme of “Unity in Diversity: Transgressive Southeast Asia,” panels were clustered in 11 sub-themes encompassing a range of disciplines and topics, including history, law, economics, the environment, politics, innovation and technology, social transformation, literature, media, arts, development work, linguistics and language, religion, archeology, and so on. The panels were organized with an eye toward the socio-economic and political situations relevant in the various countries of Southeast Asia, but without limiting panels to country-specific themes. On the contrary, SEASIA 2017 encouraged and promoted scholars to question boundaries of all types in their presentations, and participants addressed various issues and topics keeping regional diversity in mind.

One panel, entitled “Regionalization and Globalization of ASEAN — Opportunities and Challenges,” was comprised of senior scholars and specialists who gathered in memory of the late Professor Seiji Naya, a key protagonist of ASEAN integration. The panel discussed the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), mega-regionalism, Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), investment flows, internal and external migration, and the powerful role that international trade has played in ASEAN.

Another panel “New Perspectives on Southeast Asian Pasts,” brought together speakers and participants to discuss a wide range of approaches to history in an attempt to disentangle the history of ancient Southeast Asia from that of the Southeast Asian nation-states of the present day. Histories in Southeast Asia are often characterized chronologically in terms of linear historical evidence, or structured military and political achievements by their respective rulers, dynasties or political entities. In this context, Professor Sunait Chutintaranond reminded participants that it is important to carefully identify a historical narrative and its respective interpretations. He referred to the differences of “colonial centralist historical writing,” “nationalist historical ideology,” and “local historical writing.” Professor Michael S.H. Heng argued that academic research papers produced by Asian scholars rely too much on ideas originating in



Fig. 2 Chaiwat Sahta-Anand giving a Keynote Speech

wan in 2019, and will be hosted by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at National Chengchi University in partnership with two other SEASIA consortium members: the Center for Asia-Pacific Studies (CAPAS) at Academia Sinica, and the Taiwan Association of Southeast Asian Studies (TASEAS). The Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) will host the



Fig. 3 Performance given by the Chula Demonstration School

the West and draw too little from the cultural-intellectual resources of their own history, cultures, and traditions. He also warned that emphasis on publication in “quality” scholarly journals, which are inherently biased towards the West, and the pressure to publish do not contribute to works of enduring intellectual quality and that “quantity works against quality.”

The panel on “Environment and Society” covered a considerable variety of socio-political and cultural aspects related to the change, deterioration, and transformation of the environment, including, but not limited to: food and energy security, the concept of private vs. public properties, and heritage conservation. One panel discussed the various challenges to the future of rural livelihoods in Cambodia, including labor migration, microfinance, and Chinese agricultural investments. According to Serey Sok, a PhD candidate at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, while agricultural development is essential for the country, it has also led to wide economic discrepancies, environmental deterioration, and increasing conflicts between rural communities and the state revolving around land-grabbing and the granting of economic land concessions. Such patterns are seen across the region.

SEASIA 2017 organized special programs that consisted of a wide variety of academic talks and more accessible public presentations beyond the regular panel sessions in order to maximize contributions from both the presenters and the audience. The roundtable sessions included discussions on timely and urgent matters of extremism, human trafficking

(via a film screening and panel discussion), the rise of Chinese hegemony, and alternative modes of knowledge production and dissemination in the post-democratic era.

In a roundtable entitled “Beyond Extremism in Southeast Asia,” the discussion explored the concept of religious moderation and the implications of trends of extremism evident in both Buddhist and Muslim communities in the region today. In the context of the terrorist attacks experienced in a number of ASEAN countries over recent years, the panel provided an overview of different types of extremism, which have become more multi-dimensional, and the development of terminology related to attempts to confront extremism and promote peaceful coexistence. All speakers confirmed that the issue of extremism is one that is very complex, and cannot be seen solely along religious, ethnic, or political lines. It is necessary to understand the respective contexts and reasons for the formation of extremist groups and the use of violence. Panelists also agreed that it is not sufficient to simply understand the phenomenon — we must also provide a solution. In order to identify solutions, the structures of violence within a society leading to oppression — the social and economic powers which can lead to further acts of violence — must be addressed. The difficulty of how to deal with former members of extremist groups, currently a challenge in several Southeast Asian countries, was also discussed.

Reflection

The enthusiastic response to the Call for Proposals and the diverse range of participants in SEASIA 2017 demonstrated that scholars are eager for, and appreciative of, opportunities to exchange and network across disciplines at international conferences in the region. Area studies remain robust. However, do we have a broader vision of where Southeast Asia, and the study of it, as a region, is heading within broader contemporary contexts of globalization? What are the roles of academics in steering the direction of our societies? The collaborative efforts of SEASIA initiatives will continue to drive forward interdisciplinary approaches to such inquiry and, in the words of one participant, “produce works that have enduring value in the service to humankind.”

Comments from Participants

“This conference is a great opportunity for sharing, learning and discussion, to create a development dialogue for a better ASEAN community.”

Sok Serey, Cambodia

“This conference expanded my horizon of Southeast Asia. I learned a lot of new academic information about this emerging area in the world.”

Cui Feng, China

“SEASIA is a great platform to learn about new ideas and approaches of a diverse spectrum of Southeast Asian topics.”

Linda Kencana, Indonesia

“I like the concept of the SEASIA Conference because there are many diverse research topics and it is a tremendous place for networking.”

Chansatith Chaleunsinh, Laos

“I love attending Southeast Asian conferences because I want to know how Southeast Asians talk about themselves.”

Maria Florendo, Philippines

“The SEASIA 2017 Conference offered a great platform for people among or outside ASEAN to share their professional perspectives in all fields.”

Yan Ting Huang, Taiwan

“It is a fantastic forum to update oneself on what is going on in different disciplines and the players working on them.”

Cam Tu, Vietnam



Fig. 4 SEASIA participants listening to the Keynote speech.

Celestial Axe: On the Politics of Naming

Chaiwat Satha-Anand

Peace Information Center, Faculty of Political Science,
Thammasat University



A Chinese Woman with Two Names¹⁾

When she left Swataw in Southern China, she was with her first child and so very happy to travel to the Golden Khersonese at the behest of her beloved husband. Upon arrival, the twenty something young Chinese woman encountered the Thai state in human form. She was asked a most common question by an immigration officer: “what is your name?” Most people could imagine the atmosphere of being asked a question by a representative of the state when h/she sets foot in a foreign land for the very first time. The name of the woman was “Khow Nuang Cheng.” Her husband’s name was “Ung Kia Siew.” In the presumably confusing exchange that followed the question, her name was bureaucratically changed in an instance at the powerful hand of the Siamese state into “Ung Khow See.” The sovereign power of the state could be seen on a peron’s identity in the act of naming despite the fact that both “Ung” and “Khow” are family names, and that a Chinese person should have only one family name. And so the “new” Chinese woman with two family names was magically born in a land she would call home for the rest of her life at the hand of the Thai state.

I wonder what Confucius would have said, had he miraculously witnessed the destiny of this Chinese woman? Let’s read his *Analects* together.

Confucius

When a student asked the Master: if a state ruler asked Confucius to help rule a dominion, what would be the very first thing that should be done? Confucius said the state had to deal with “names” first. *The Analects* (Book 13, 3) reports this unusual conversation as followed:

Zilu said: “if the Lord of Wei were waiting for you to run the government, what would you give priority to?” The Master said: “What is necessary is to rectify names, is it not?” Zilu said: “if this were to take place, it would surely be an aberration of yours. Why should they be rectified?” The Master said: “How uncivilized you are. With regard to what he does not understand the gentleman is surely somewhat reluctant to offer an opinion. If names are not rectified, then words are not appropriate. If words are not appropriate, then deeds are not accomplished. If deeds are not accomplished, then the rites and music do not flourish. If the rites and music do not flourish, then punishments do not hit the mark. If punishments do not hit the mark, then the people have nowhere to put hand or foot. So when a gentleman names something, the name can definitely be used in speech; and when he says something, it can definitely be put into practice. In his utterances the gentleman is definitely not casual about anything.”²⁾

For Confucius, names and naming are the most important aspects of governance because this is where all political orders begin. He explained that without attending to “names,” communication is not possible (“Words are not appropriate.”). If communication fails, then affairs of the state cannot be carried out. Virtues, civilized practices, and justice will soon vanish (“Punishment does not hit the mark.”). Without justice, a polis can no longer be a home for citizens because no one would know how to live as one. In short, with naming flows power and political society was born. But is this merely a Chinese story? I wonder?

This keynote address is an attempt to understand the power of naming things/phenomena/people and argues that the politics of naming is earthshakingly powerful not unlike the notion of a “celestial axe” once proclaimed in Thai legal history. I begin by briefly discussing the academic landscape on “name” and “naming.” To illustrate how changes in names engender political reality in terms of the state and its power/governability, recent research on Southern Thailand about a seemingly bland government labor project; the present peace process operation; and a local shaman’s ritual of communicating with the dead locally practiced in Pattani, will be examined. Ancient wisdom namely: the *Bible*’s narrative of exorcism, and the *Qur’an*’s creation story will then be used to illuminate how the power of naming works. This address ends with two stories: the notion of a “celestial axe” as a description of the state’s naming power and a story of resistance as a critique of the seemingly omnipotent politics of naming.

Dictionary

Ashis Nandy is a most prominent intellectual in contemporary India.³ When we met some ten years ago, I asked him what he was doing. He answered: “I am writing a dictionary.” I found his strange answer perplexing.⁴ Then in 2012 while attending another academic conference in Boston, I went to visit another old friend, the late Gene Sharp, the world-renowned pioneer of nonviolent struggle studies. In our luncheon conversation, I asked him casually what he was doing at the time. Sharp answered with a smile: “I am writing a dictionary.” His answer stopped my other questions.⁵ Why is it that these noted world academics have been producing books containing words called “dictionary”?

When the famous author Jhumpa Lahiri was 20 years old, she went to visit the magnificent Uffizi Museum in Florence, Italy. When her sister lost a hat there, she tried to communicate with an Italian guard to help retrieve the hat using the only book she had

at the time, an English-Italian dictionary. When the hat was finally found, she felt as if she had successfully ventured into an uncharted territory. She was grateful because the dictionary had become her guide. It protected and explained everything for her. It was both authoritative and indispensable, not unlike holy books full of mystery and revelations.⁶

Perhaps one of the reasons why these intellectuals spent their valuable time “writing” dictionaries is because the twenty-first century world is different from its predecessor. While the twentieth century world framed life struggles clearly as the battle between the colonizers and the colonized, the superior “race” and those who were dominated, the exploitative elites and those exploited, or even the developed against the underdeveloped, the present world faces much more ambiguous conflicts. Often it is the tension between those who speak the languages of law and rights to show their caring for the world and those who cannot or will not accept such languages. As a result, the right to punish and destroy the whole state identified as “rogue,” “evil,” or “outlawed” sometimes comes from a judgment made by something called: “the international community.” These languages are used to convey how one cares for the world.⁷

Kasian Tejapira, a prominent political scientist from Thammasat, gives a most succinct rationale why it is important to produce a “definitive” book of words. He explains that a society has a way to put a spell around some discourse demons as *lexica non grata* because it is believed that by controlling words, meanings, and thoughts, people will also be duly controlled and in that order. In this sense, writing a dictionary can be construed as an attempt to fix the words with meanings endowed by its author, believing that these words dictate people’s thoughts.⁸

But there are two other important points. First, that a word is present or absent in a dictionary is by itself a marker of its power. A word that is absent from an established dictionary seems to be weaker in terms of its legitimation function, defined as a right to traditionally exist in such a language, than the one that is present. Second, controlling people’s thoughts with words is different from using laws or force to perform similar functions. Laws and force with instruments of violence are both visible and not unrelated, because law exists under the spectre of punishment. Failure to follow laws warrants punishment, oftentimes through various instruments of violence. Thought control through words, on the other hand, is both difficult to see and easier to accept, sometimes unconsciously. Through the popular use of words, a new normality can emerge with little or no possibility of questioning.

This address is not exactly about “words,” but “names.” Although names are words, they are not exactly the same. In the classic philosophical text on the issue, *Naming and Necessity*, Saul Kripke developed a theory of reference that significantly distinguished rigid and non-rigid designators, which also means separating the actual (and the singular) from the possible (and many) worlds. To say, for example, that the military stages a successful coup in Thailand is not necessarily true because there are possible worlds in which it could be unsuccessful. But Kripke would argue that a rigid designator or name, such as the statement “General Prayuth staged a successful coup in Thailand” inflexibly connects to the same referent in all possible worlds.⁹⁾ However, here is not the place to follow Kripke into some metaphysical arguments resuscitating the notion of essence. Let me follow Hun Sen instead.

Hun Sen

In May 2016, the Cambodian government announced that all media in the country must call Prime Minister Hun Sen by his official name: “Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen.”¹⁰⁾ The Cambodian Ministry of Information issued an order in early July 2016 that it would revoke work permits of any journalist who failed to follow its order, and did not call the Prime Minister by his official name especially when first referred to him in the news. However, on July 8, 2016, Hun Sen wrote in his personal Facebook that journalists were not required to write the official name of the government leaders in full.¹¹⁾

Hun Sen must have thought that the “name” he wanted to be called is significant precisely because he might want to be far more than a common Cambodian Prime Minister. The preferred official name consists of four words including the Prime Minister’s proper name. The three prefixes connect the name Hun Sen to three sources of power in Cambodian society, namely: court power (*Samdech*), bureaucratic power (*Akka Moha Sena Padei*), and elemental or supernatural (*Techo* meaning heat from fire) power. The question in this keynote address is not why “names” are important, but what kinds of power hide behind names used, such that an already powerful country leader would dictate that his/her chosen name be used among the state citizens and foreign media?

Necronominalism

William Godwin was an atheist who believed that a human’s death is final with no heaven or hell waiting for anyone in the beyond. But when his wife, Mary

Wollstonecraft¹²⁾ died, he wrote in *Essay on Sepulchres: Or, a Proposal for Erecting Some Memorial of the Illustrious Dead in All Ages on the Spot Where Their Remains Have Been Interred* (1809) that the burial place of the dead should be identified by names and located in a map not unlike places of famous battles, something like an “Atlas of those who Have Lived, for the Use of Men Hereafter to be Born.”¹³⁾

Godwin wrote this at the beginning of the nineteenth century. That century saw an enormous loss of life in the American Civil War (1861–65), claiming more than 620,000 lives, a number approximately equal to the total American fatalities in the Revolution, the 1812 War, the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and the Korean War combined. Twice as many Civil War soldiers died of diseases such as measles, mumps, and small pox, among others.¹⁴⁾

But what is important besides the number of dead soldiers was the manner of their deaths. They were thrown into burial trenches, stripped of every identifying object, blown to pieces by artillery shells, and their bodies or what left of them, were devoured by beasts or time. These soldiers perished without names and could be identified only with the word “unknown.” During the war, there were efforts by groups such as the Christian Commission and the Sanitary Commission in the North, the Louisiana Soldier Relief Association in the South, as well as individuals who had worked tirelessly to provide information as to whether a soldier was alive or dead. Such information served as a consoling certainty for families caught in endless bereavement. They felt the unrecognized loss intolerable in an age when family ties were celebrated. Faust writes, “At war’s end, the United States would embark on a program of identification and reburial that redefined the nation’s obligation to its fallen, as well as the meaning of both names and bodies as enduring repositories of the human self.”¹⁵⁾

With the atrocities of the nineteenth century and two World Wars in the twentieth, as well as deaths at the hands of governments during the Nazi and other regimes, the world has entered into a new age some called the age of necronominalism. It is an age where people feel the need to know the names of the fallen to preserve the memories of the once living. I believe that the age of necronominalism is closely related to the growing academic interest in memory studies.

It goes without saying that there are several methods of studying names.¹⁶⁾ In the twenty-first century, the internet world has turned out to be an extraordinary social space. Studying names used in cyberspace found that they are markedly different from

those used in the non-cyber world. Importantly, the names used in cyberspace are chosen by their owners while most people's names are given by their parents. It is also important to note that since people in cyberspace are virtually connected, communications among them are not face-to-face. Instead, their online names become their "faces" in place of identity. Internet name connection works as a medium that at once conceals the person's self while allowing connection to be possible.¹⁷⁾ Importantly, those who study cyberspace names believe that a name does not merely function as a superficial word which has very little to do with the qualitative existence of the thing/person the name refers to. On the contrary, recent studies on the subject maintain that names represent profound identities of people and things. A name works as an object of connection and dependence while reflecting communal values and traditions. Oftentimes names in cyberspace work to identify who are the "in-group" or "outsiders." In this sense, a name is not merely a referential sign, but the social appearance endowed with cultural and linguistic legacy.¹⁸⁾

Since a name represents the user's identity, naming or erasing a name in a particular context could profoundly reflect cultural politics of the time. Naming a person or a place is not an innocent labeling act. Instead, it contains complicated power relations often times born out of fierce spatial and ethnic identity contestations. For example, while there are more than 800 streets named after Martin Luther King Jr. in the US, mostly in Southern states with a sizable African American population, there has been a vigorous debate about who has the power to name a street and whose name is entitled to become a street name in Kenya? The governor of Mombasa, Hassan Joho who is an opposition leader, named a street after his son. The government was furious. It claimed that the opposition has no right to name a street after the governor's relatives. But this debate took place in the context of a political society that saw its first modern president Jomo Kenyatta named an important street, a university, a building, a hospital, and an airport after him. Some were even named after Kenyatta's favorite wife's name. But then the fact that an opposition leader could name a street after his son's could mean that the country's power relations have indeed shifted.¹⁹⁾

What would the politics of name changing look like in the context of violence such as contemporary Southern Thailand?

Labor Graduate²⁰⁾

Two years after the new round of violence exploded in the Deep South, governments tried to find ways to deal with it. General Surayud Julanont's government approved a special economic development zone in the five border provinces: Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, Satun, and four districts of Songkhla (Jana, Tebha, Sabayoi, and Na thavi). The Ministry of Labor has been given a role to care for local people's wellbeing by improving human potential among the working age population. The government has come up with specific measures both to motivate people to continue living, working, doing business in the restive areas, and to provide employment assurance to ensure steady income for the locals.

The Ministry of Labor has devised a program to create jobs and fast track employment in the area. On April 25, 2007, the cabinet approved a project to hire university graduates to become "Volunteer Buddy Labor Graduates."²¹⁾ Four years later, the project's name was changed into "Labor Graduates." The Ministry explained that the name change was necessary for the sake of organizational clarity and to be different from other agencies. In 2013, the area covered by the project expanded to establish labor centers in every district. There were "Labor Graduates" working in all 37 districts while the number of the graduates increased. Another project to improve labor service efficiency was also created.

The "Labor Graduate" project exists in accordance with government policies as well as national strategy. Government policy at the time followed the Government Administration Plan (2012–15). One of the urgent policies (no. 1.5) is to best try to bring about peace and safety in human life and property back to the restive area. One of the national strategies (no. 4) is to create balance and adjust government sector's administration. This is done following principle number 29 on solving the security problems in the local area as well as in ASEAN. Item 29.1 then directs all government agencies to integrate security and development operations in the border provinces as directed by the National Security Policy (2012–16).

To simplify this complex chain of command, I would say that the name "Labor Graduates" is used to call a project designed to improve labor services in the restive area in accordance with national strategy. The Ministry of Labor has been assigned to oversee the project and implement these policies and strategies using the offices of provincial labor in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. But when the name "Labor Graduate" appears on the administrative lines bureaucratically linking plans, policies, and strategies (ministerial and national), it was magically transformed into a

Prime Ministerial Order 230/2014 dated November 26, 2014 on “Establishing driving mechanism for the Southern Border Happy Peace Talk Process.” This PM Order, together with the Southern Border Provinces Administrative and Development Policy (2015–17) are considered important policy instruments giving direction to the talk process with those who “hold different views” from the state.

There were all kinds of explanations about this peace talk process name change. The Internal Security Operation Command (ISOC) spokesperson explained that this change of name from “peace” to “happy peace” was done so that it would fit with the common understanding of locals.²⁵⁾ A member of the southern civil society groups maintained that this change of name was necessary for the state “to resume control of the talk so that it won’t fall into the separatists’ game plan, and turn the local people to talk about their genuine happy peace.”²⁶⁾ But the official explanation for this name change first came 10 days later from a high ranking officer attached to ISOC, Col. Wicharn Suksong. He said the government changed the name of the talk process into “happy peace” because “Some argue that Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) wishes to escalate the issue. We want to de-escalate both the problem and the level of the talk. We maintain that this is our domestic problem. There are no warring parties in the area. There is no country at war. The soldiers who came to the South, they are doing their jobs in enforcing the law, and not to wage war. Therefore, we call it ‘happy peace talk.’ But whatever name it takes is unimportant. Moving the process forward is more crucial.”²⁷⁾

If there is anyone who would truly disagree with the above official briefing, and maintain to the contrary that “name is so very important,” that person would be General Prayuth Chan-ocha. The NCPO leader prohibited people from using the name “peace.” In an interview with the press on January 28, 2015, he said:

“... please do not use this issue to pressure the officials or the state... it will only put us in a disadvantageous position. We have to solve this problem step by step, leading military measures with politics. The government formulates policy and the whole process. The government must be firm and show sincerity in creating happy peace. Don’t use the word ‘peace’ (*santiparb*) because there was no armed fighting. This is only about (people) breaking the laws and (the government) enforcing the laws. If there is an armed fighting, that’s between two parties... using forces to take over towns to fight each other. Then it is ‘peace

talking’. Using forces from here and there to put down (the enemy), to stop the violence. But I don’t want us to go there. We don’t want foreign involvement... so do not mix them up.”²⁸⁾

For General Prayuth, and perhaps for the military in general, the word “peace” is the exact opposite of “war and (armed) fighting.” For the military, “peace” is understood as a state of no war. If southern violence is treated as war, the chance of containing it as internal conflict will be undermined. Most important is that this change of name of the talk process into “happy peace” is to limit the problem within the control of the Thai government. Understood from within the military sector, the exact opposite of “happy peace” is the state of no laws (and order). Working towards “happy peace” enables the military to deal with illegal acts by enforcing the law. The name change from “peace talk” to “happy peace talk” is not only a measure to ward off foreign influence on the conflict, but also to systemically solve the problems, reconceptualized militarily, from the policy level to the operational, and tactical levels. This is perhaps his understanding of the once famous “leading military measures with politics” method of conducting conflict that will put “us” in an advantageous position as understood by the general. However, I do not see what currently happens to mitigate deadly conflict in the South as the “leading military measures with politics” method. I would call the present government’s way of conducting this deadly conflict as: “leading military measures with governance using laws as the main instrument.”

What General Prayuth has done was to officially rename the peace talk process. This official renaming indicates a certain amount of symbolic capital alongside hegemonic power to force the advent of symbolic process. His official naming effort is possible because his support comes from different corners in Thai society. But then normally such name changing will be possible when the effort is collectively supported, backed by some levels of consensus. Moreover, the new name should be in line with people’s common sense. In this case, the renaming effort came from someone who many believe to speak on behalf of the state, the entity that monopolizes legitimate symbolic violence.²⁹⁾

I am curious about the level of legitimation required to change the name of the talk process in pursuit of peace amidst southern violence. The present government suffers from legitimation deficit, both in terms of its authority to manage the precarious southern space, and its legitimate source of origin because the government was born from a coup d’etat. Conversely, this name change was done on

the basis of bureaucratic legitimation since the problem of southern violence has long been left in the iron hand of military bureaucracy, with or without a coup, by governments both civilian and military. It would be interesting to see how far reaching this bureaucratic power over names and naming could penetrate into the socio-cultural fabric of the Deep South. To wrestle with this question, I believe we have to examine the dark world of spirits.

Name of a Ghost³⁰⁾

To study Malay Muslim ethnicity in Southern Thailand in the context of Islamization and the Thai state power, an anthropologist chose a 150 year-old fishing community some 50 km from the center of Pattani as his research site. Among his treasure trove of data, I find a most fascinating episode where he recounted what he saw in the rite to connect the living with the dead performed by a Malay Muslim shaman, Bomoh. He told the story of a woman named A-isha whose father just passed away. One night her father came to her in her dream and told her that he was suffering and could not join Allah because of his unsettled debt with a friend. A-isha wanted to settle the debt with this friend to appease her dead father, but she didn't know the name of this friend. So she went to see a Bomoh to ask for help in communicating with the dead.

The 60-year old Bomoh asked A-isha about her father's life story and his name, as well as his favorite local folk arts. With the information from A-isha, the Bomoh began his rite. His body shook. Then he turned himself into a shadow master. After a while, he was tired and the spirit did not come to be in communion with him. People witnessing the rite began to talk. Some were worried about what could have gone wrong since normally the rite did not take this long. Then the Bomoh concluded that A-isha gave him a piece of wrong information. She told him the Malay (Muslim) name of her father. A-isha was asked to write down the name of her father again, but this time it was his Thai name exactly as in the official house registration. With the "correct name," the exact same rite was performed. This time, the spirit came to the Bomoh very quickly. In the daughter's conversation with her father, whose spirit was now in Bomoh's body, she asked him why he used the Thai name. The spirit answered: "Ayah (Father) already changed my name. Ayah must be Thai. I did not come at first because the name in Malay was not mine."³¹⁾

The anthropologist's explanation about the strange behavior of the Malay Muslim ghost who preferred to be called by his Thai name is that in this case the

Thai name, according to official house registration, represents state's power. The state's power in this case is flexible enough to accommodate traditional Islamic teachings that eventually would make it possible for A-isha to know the name of her father's creditor, paid the debt, and presumably sent her father into his preferred state in the beyond.

For me, this fascinating story of spirit possession reflects how the hegemonic power of the Thai state and its presence are represented in the official Thai name insisted by a ghost. That the official name must be used in life transaction, economic and otherwise is not surprising. Some would even assess the success of state power by looking into the degree to which state power could penetrate into the socio-cultural fabric of a community. But in this case, I would say that the long arm of the state is so ghostly powerful that it stretched into the world after death, and made its presence felt within the consciousness of a ghost whose identity as a Malay Muslim has all but gone, and the official consciousness of being a Thai was burned deep into his self. Even the power of death could not render the Thai official name void to allow his original Malay Muslim name to take control. This is an amazing feat of state power in recognizing a name that is without limit, certainly not only in the life of its citizen, but also in death by the dead himself.

Believing that the "correct" name of the spirit is the primary condition for a successful communication with those who live beyond the realm of the living is not a specific case prevalent only in the Malay world. I would say that such practice has thousands of years of history of the occults behind it not only in Southeast Asia.

"My name is 'Legion'"

Since the middle of the third century, the Catholic Church allowed some priests to perform the rite of exorcism. The possessed, with an evil spirit inside, curled their bodies violently, exhibited uncontrollable rage, or vomited profusely because it was/is believed that the evil spirit entered the human body through natural body holes, and needs to be expelled through them. In some medieval paintings depicting the rite, the possession ended when the saints or the priests successfully performed the rite and "black demon" can be seen disgorged from the mouth of the possessed.³²⁾ In modern times, most people believe that these unusual bodily performances are symptoms of epilepsy. The rite, if carried out, could therefore be appreciated for its symbolic function, which could help the possessed/sick feel contented. The rite would sometimes be followed with modern medicinal

treatments.³³⁾

But my interest here is not to ask “what causes demonic possession? Is it because the evil spirit is at work, or a result of epilepsy?” I am interested, however, in the ways in which exorcism has been carried out in Christianity? And how does it work?

To deal with this question, it is important to invoke the authority of the *Bible*, specifically the New Testament. In his short life, Jesus’ miracles included how he healed the paralyzed (Matthew 4, 24–25); the blinded (John 9, 2–11); the leper (Matthew 8, 2–4), or resurrected the dead (John 11, 37–44). But there were times when he exorcised the demons possessing humans (Matthew 4, 24; Mark 9, 17–27). What follows is a case which appears in the gospels.³⁴⁾

When Jesus and his disciples crossed the lake to the territory of Gerasenes, a man possessed with “an unclean spirit” came towards him. This man lived in the tombs, and could no longer be controlled by chains since he snapped out of them, and no man had the strength to hold him down. He would howl all night and day and gashed his body with stones.

Catching sight of Jesus from a distance, he ran up and fell at his feet and shouted at the top of his voice: “What do you want with me, Jesus, son of the Most High God? In God’s name do not torture me!” For Jesus had been saying to him, “Come out of the man, unclean spirit”. Then he asked, “What is your name?” He answered, “My name is Legion, for there are many of us”. And he begged him earnestly not to send them out of the district. Now on the mountainside there was a great herd of pigs feeding and the unclean spirits begged him, “Send us to the pigs, let us go into them”. So he gave them leave. With that, the unclean spirits came out and went into the pigs, and the herd of about two thousand pigs charged down the cliff into the lake, and they were drowned. (Mark 5, 2–14; Luke 8, 26–34)

I am interested in the exchange between Jesus and the possessed during the rite. Jesus told the unclean spirit to come out of the man. Then he asked the possessed: “What is your name?” The possessed man answered: “My name is Legion, for there are many of us.”³⁵⁾ It is obvious that Jesus’ question is most relevant to the present discussion. Why did Jesus ask for “the name” of the evil spirits? What does knowing the spirits’ names have anything to do with exorcism?

In a number of cultures, the connection between the person and his/her name is profound. Perhaps this is because a name is a part of the self and needs

to be kept in secret to protect the person from dark and dangerous magic. A traditional song of the Hausa tribe contains the words: “Dear God, please forgive me. I have said things in my husband’s name....” In other cultures, especially in families that have lost many children in childbirths, parents decided to name their newborns with ugly names to prevent the demons from taking the children’s lives. In the Grimm Brothers’ *Rumpelstiltskin*, the tale deals with the power of name. When the evil sorcerer’s name is known, he could be called out and his power evaporated. In other stories, calling out names can bring about spirits from the dark world lies beyond.³⁶⁾ In several Hollywood film renditions on exorcism, the priests who perform the rite must find ways to get the evil spirits to reveal their names. Once successful, the power of possession declines or simply vanishes. The question is why is (revealing) “name” that powerful?

Adam

“Naming/known name/erasing name/changing name” are the ways by which power relations could be established. In sacred books of the past, “knowing names” is important. But because names may not specifically relate to the person/thing at the time it comes into being, it is difficult to guess the correct name of a person.³⁷⁾ At the founding moment when someone or something is named, it is done with despotic authority because the person named is not in symmetric power relations with the one who gives him/her the name. In this sense, a “name” is an esoteric knowledge that “others” do not know unless being told by the name giver directly, or traces of information about the name left as clues for the named themselves or to those interested to explore.

In *Al-Qur’an*,³⁸⁾ when God created human, He told all his angels that “I am putting a successor on earth,” they said, “How can You put someone there who will cause damage and bloodshed when we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your holiness?” but He said, “I know things you do not” (2, 30). He taught Adam the names of all things, then He showed them to the angels and said, “Tell me the names of these if you truly think you can” (2, 31).

When the angels could not because they “have knowledge only of what You have taught us.” God said to Adam: “Adam, tell them the names of these.” When he told them their names, God said, “Did I not tell you that I know what is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and that I know what you reveal and what you conceal?” (2, 33)

The verses from *Al-Qur’an* show that Adam is superior to other beings God created because Adam

has “knowledge.” Adam’s knowledge is to know “the names of all things.” Knowing names is important and powerful for two reasons. First, these names are not known to anyone but God, the Name Giver. In Islam, God is the culmination of all knowledge Himself. Second, that God chose to tell/teach Adam this knowledge through revelation is to establish human’s hegemonic power over all angels. The Adam who knows “the names of all things” is a different Adam. Adam has been changed by the power to know the names of all things, a power bestowed upon him by the Name Giver who is believed to be the Sole Creator of the universe.

Celestial Axe

I began this keynote address with the story of how the state used the power of naming to alter the life of an individual who might belong to a different cultural tradition of naming, giving her a new name to begin a new life. But not only does the state have the power to alter a person’s life, its naming power could also be a deadly blow to many.

During the 1970s, there were a series of brutal violent incidents perpetrated by state officials against communist insurgents in Southern Thailand especially in the province of Pattalung. The most notorious is widely known as the “red barrel” incident. Government officials would arrest those they accused of being communist insurgents or sympathizers. They would be interrogated, then knocked unconscious and thrown into 200-liter oil barrels. These barrels were generally red in color. Then they would be burned inside. Those who were already dead would naturally burn quietly, but those who were still alive would howl with excruciating pain into the night. The soldiers in charge would drown the victims’ voice with the noise of their truck engines. The bodies would later be dumped into a nearby canal.³⁹⁾

There are two groups of victims inside these red barrels. There were the insurgents’ relatives, friends or acquaintances. These people were interrogated to find out the whereabouts of those hidden in the jungles. Then there were those whose names appeared in official lists, oftentimes provided by government informers. There were two problems with this group of victims. First, the names which appeared on the list could belong to insurgents who did take up arms to fight the government at the time. But there were also names which appeared on the list because of personal conflicts with the informers. Second, and this is most relevant here, there were those who were interrogated, tortured, and later killed because their names were the same as, or sound similar to, the

insurgents’ on the list. Sometimes there appeared the same names but with different family names. Those with these “wrong” names were also rounded up and ended up dead by being burnt in the red barrels for a crime they did not commit.⁴⁰⁾

Put another way, an act of naming by the state could engender life or death over its citizens. How could one describe such deadly naming power? There is an apt description hidden in the legal history of Ayutthaya.

During the reign of King Borommkot or Borommachathirat III of Ayutthaya (1733–58), there was a royal edict with the following description of its power:

... Somdej Phramaha Kasatriya rules the Land because he is the assumed god (deva) with the power to turn the world upside down.⁴¹⁾ If Somdej Phramaha Kasatriya passes an edict on any affair, it is as if a Celestial Axe is thrown. If touched by its might, trees and mountains will no longer stand, but destroyed. If an edict proclaimed to prohibit anything, such will come to pass...⁴²⁾

We are told that the King’s edict in this law should be thought of as the mighty “celestial axe” with enormous destructive power. The “celestial axe” is the sovereign power which could create and destroy, make something-anything- appear as well as vanish.

A Man Named “Puey”

When Puey Ungpakorn (1916–99), the respected former governor of the Bank of Thailand and Rector of Thammasat University, finished his Ph.D. from the London School of Economics (LSE), he returned home to serve then as a Financial Ministry civil servant. That was under the government of Field Marshal Pibunsongkhram who became a Prime Minister after the 1947 coup d’etat. One day the Field Marshal asked him:

“Khun Puey, you are now a high ranking government official, when will you change your name into Thai?”

The respected economist answered: “My name was given to me by my father. My father was already dead so I could not ask him to give me a new name. Moreover, Your Excellency must have been to Lam-pang (a province in the North). When you travel by train, you must have remembered that there is a train station there named ‘Paeng Puey.’ So (Puey) must be a Thai name.” Hearing Puey’s answer, the Field Marshal fell silent.⁴³⁾

As a matter of fact, the name “Puey” is Chinese and was given to him by his father. It means “earth at the base of a tree.” But I think there are many issues one could reflect on Puey’s response to the absolute power at the time.

First, Puey’s answer fixes the power of naming within a familial relationship, and does not allow outside sovereign power to penetrate, let alone to change it. That’s why he told the Field Marshal that it was his father who named him and he was no more. Second, Puey certainly knew what language his name was and his answer about the name of a train station in Lampang named “Paeng Puey” does not in any sense mean that “Puey” is a Thai word as the Field Marshal might have wondered. Puey’s answer in fact shows that one does not need to think or see the word “Puey” only as a Chinese word. But one could accept that the name “Puey” is a language that has long been in existence in Thai society, though it might not be the central Thai language preferred by the state. Third, it could be argued that the reason why Puey refused to change his name is because he wished to retain his self autonomy rather than allowing the person with state power to have his wish. To insist on retaining the “name” given to him by his father rather than changing it before the seemingly limitless power of someone holding state power is an act of resistance of a gentleman who longed for freedom and peace within himself.

In this sense, the politics of naming has to include resistance to the naming power sometimes issued by the seemingly mighty *celestial axe*.

Notes

* An earlier version of this paper was given in Thai as the keynote address for the 2016 Social Science-Humanities Conference for the Puey Ungpakorn’s birth centenary, at Thammasat University, July 28, 2016. I also gave a keynote speech based on the idea from this paper at the Asia Pacific Society of Public Affairs 2016 Annual Conference-International Conference on Public Organization VI, at Thammasat University, August 10–11, 2016.

- 1) This is the true story of my mother-in-law.
- 2) Confucius, *The Analects*, Raymond Dawson (trans.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 49.
- 3) There are several interesting works studying the man and his thoughts. See for example, Christine Dettores, *Ashis Nandy and the Cultural Politics of Selfhood* (New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, and Singapore: SAGE, 2013); Vinay Lal (ed.), *Dissenting Knowledge, Open Futures: The Multiple Selves and Strange Destinations of Ashis Nandy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 4) The work he was writing was later published as: Vinay Lal and Ashis Nandy (eds.), *The Future of Knowledge and Culture: A Dictionary for the 21st Century* (New Delhi and New York: Penguin Viking, 2005).
- 5) This was later published as *Sharp’s Dictionary of Power and*

Struggle: Language of Civil Resistance in Conflicts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

- 6) See Tim Parks, *L’Aventura*, a review of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *In Other Words* (2016) translated from the Italian by Ann Goldstein (New York: Knopf) *New York Review of Books* Vol. LXIII, No. 5 (Mar. 24–April 6, 2016), pp. 20–22.
- 7) Lal and Nandy, *The Future of Knowledge and Culture*, 2001, p. xvi.
- 8) Kasian Tejapira, “Phrai kab Ammat: Peesaj Wathakarma” [The Proletarians and the Elites: Demonic Discourse], *Matichon Daily*, April 2, 2010, p. 6. (In Thai)
- 9) Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).
- 10) In the Thai rendition this name should be: “Somdej Akkra Maha Senabodi Decho Hun Sen.”
- 11) *Bangkok Post*, July 9, 2016.
- 12) She is the mother of Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*.
- 13) Cited in John Gray, “They Won’t Rest in Peace,” *The New York Review of Books* Vol. LXIII, No. 11 (June 23–July 13, 2016), p. 71.
- 14) Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), p. xi.
- 15) Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*: chapter 4 on “Naming: The Significant Word Unknown,” pp. 102–136. The quote appears on p. 136.
- 16) Studying names appears to be popular as evident from the journal *Names: A Journal of Onomastics*—published by the American Name Society, established in 1951. <http://www.americannamesociety.org/>
- 17) Katarzyna Leksiejuk, “Internet Personal Naming Practices and Trends in Scholarly Approaches,” in Guy Puzey and Laura Kostanski (eds.), *Names and Naming: People, Places, Perceptions and Power* (Bristol, Buffalo, and Toronto: Multilingual Matters, 2016), pp. 3–17.
- 18) Puzey and Kostanski, *Names and Naming*, p. xiii.
- 19) George Kegoro, “A Timely Debate on the Cultural Politics of Naming,” *Daily Nation*, February 14, 2016. <http://www.nation.co.ke/oped/Opinion/A-timely-debate-on-the-cultural-politics-of-naming/-/440808/3075636/-/ktnagx/-/index.html> (Accessed on July 26, 2016).
- 20) Data on “Labor Graduates” used here come from a research on “The Role of Labor Graduates in Creating Trust among People in the Southern Border Provinces” by Warunee Na Nakorn under the project Malaysia: Implications for Thailand (2016) funded by Thailand Research Funds which I have served as a research advisor. Permission for the data used has been granted by the researcher.
- 21) In Thai it is: “บัณฑิตที่เลี้ยงอาสาสมัครแรงงาน” (*Bundit Pi Liang Asa Samak Rang-ngarn*).
- 22) This graphic was prepared by my research assistant, Mr. Chaowat Moolpakdi. I am grateful for his assistance on this as well as in collecting some data for this research paper.
- 23) Data on this comes from Romadon Panjor, “Politics of Words in Pa(t)tani: Constructing ‘Peace’ in Ethnopolitical Conflict.” Master’s Thesis, Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, 2015. This thesis will soon be published by Thammasat University Press. (In Thai)
- 24) “NCPO moves ahead-negotiating southern violence,” *Khao Sod*, July 1, 2014, p. 15.
- 25) *Ibid*.
- 26) Issara News Team, “Why ‘peace talk’ has to change to ‘happy peace talk’,” August 7, 2014. http://www.isranews.org/south-news/documentary/item/31925-talk_31925.html (Accessed on December 2, 2017).

- 27) Southern Border Journalist School, "Southern soldiers announce radical moving 'happy peace talk' forward, dialogue platform challenges (the military about) opening political space," August 19, 2014. <http://www.deepsouthwatch.org/dsj/6063> (Accessed on December 2, 2017).
- 28) "The Prime Minister reveals 3 steps, hoping for successful happy peace talk." *Thai Rath* Online, January 28, 2015 <http://www.thairath.co.th/content/477689> (Accessed on December 2, 2017).
- 29) Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, J.B. Thompson (ed.) (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 239.
- 30) Data on exorcism comes from Sorayut Aim-Aur-Yut, "'Payah not jadi nayu' [It is difficult to be Nayu]: Ethnicity, Meanings, and Negotiations of Melayu Muslim in Everyday Life." Master's Thesis, Faculty of Anthropology and Sociology, Thammasat University, 2008.
- 31) *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- 32) I am thinking of Botticelli's "The Three Miracles of St. Zenobius" displayed at the National Gallery, London.
- 33) Venetia Newall, *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft & Magic* (New York: Dial Press, 1974), p. 81.
- 34) This story appears in three of the gospels: Matthew, Luke, and Mark but not in John. The account in Matthew is less detailed than what can be read from gospels according to Luke and Mark.
- 35) *The New Jerusalem Bible* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985), p. 1666. In Thai, the language used is incomparable: มีนตอบว่า "ชื่อกอง, เพราะว่าพวกข้าพเจ้าหลายตนด้วยกัน" (Mun torb wa "Chue Kong, proh wa puak kappachao lai ton duay gun"), *The Christian Bible Containing the Old Testament and the New Testament* (Bangkok: Thai Christianity Association, 1992), Part Two on The New Testament, p. 103.
- 36) Newall, *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft & Magic*, p. 124.
- 37) For example in Thailand a person named *Moo* (Piggy) needs not be fat. But because the word *Moo* (pig) is predetermined to refer to an animal which is generally fat. Naming fat people *Moo* therefore follows.
- 38) *The Qur'an*, M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (trans.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 7.
- 39) Jularat Damrongvithitham, *Red Barrels: Historical Reconstruction and Haunted Memory in Thai Society* (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 2016), p. 76. (In Thai)
- 40) *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- 41) Here the literal translation would be turning "the superiors into inferiors and vice versa."
- 42) Dr. Bradley's Thai Laws cited in Sombat Chantornvong, *Critique of Political Literature and History* (Bangkok: Kobfai, 1997), p. 326. (In Thai)
- 43) S. Sivaraksa, *Puey Ungpakorn: The Trustful Elder* (Bangkok: Komol Keemthong Foundation, 2014), p. 14. (In Thai)

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Excavating the Hidden Politics of Land Governance in Laos

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Villagers identify lands expropriated for a pulpwood plantation.

Over the past decade, rural areas of Laos have experienced rapid agrarian and environmental changes as the government has granted land and resource concessions to domestic and foreign investors. Over 1.1 million hectares (ha) of “state” land have been leased for agriculture, tree plantation, and mining projects (Schönweger *et al.* 2012),¹ equivalent to five percent of the national territory. Such land, despite being legally managed by the state, is customarily occupied, used, and managed by Lao peasants, especially ethnic minority groups (Dwyer 2007). Losing access to agricultural and forest lands, as well as the multitude of resources contained within, has threatened the viability of their rural livelihoods (Baird 2010; Barney 2011; Kenney-Lazar 2012; Laungaramsri 2012; Suhardiman *et al.* 2015).

Development organizations and the popular media often contend that a lack of state sovereignty or weak governance enables such transformations as the Lao government is unable to control its politically and economically dominant Chinese and Vietnamese neighbors. For example, in a recent video from *Al Jazeera* (Le Gouil *et al.* 2017) on the impacts of Chinese investments in northern Laos, the narrator authoritatively states that Laos is “fast becoming a Chinese province, an unofficial colony.” Similarly, the watchdog NGO Global Witness (2013, 13) argues that Vietnamese “rubber barons” establishing plantations in southern Laos operate in a “chaotic and

opaque ‘free-for-all’ due to lack of political will and weak rule of law.” While such accounts contain an element of truth, they are blind to the multitude of internal and often contradictory politics and power relations among foreign investors, the Lao state, and Lao peasants that actually shape access to land and drive agrarian-environmental change.

Hidden Land Politics in Laos

In my doctoral dissertation and ongoing research at CSEAS, I seek to *excavate* these politics. Excavation is necessary as Lao politics are oftentimes not readily observable but lie beneath the surface and must be unearthed with time, patience, and ongoing engagement. Lao peasants and government officials are in no way apolitical. Instead, their reticence reflects a deep understanding of the sensitivity and danger of talking and engaging in politics and thus they do so with caution. In order to reveal these hidden politics, I employed a painstaking and oftentimes politically uncomfortable approach of simultaneously working and engaging with potentially antagonistic groups, including government agencies at multiple administrative levels, NGOs and land rights activists, impacted villages and households, and industrial tree plantation companies.

Over the course of 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork, I analyzed the ways in which Quasa-

Geruco, a Vietnamese state-owned rubber plantation enterprise, and Sun Paper, a private Chinese pulp-wood plantation company, sought to acquire land for their projects in eastern Savannakhet, Southern Laos (see Fig. 1) and how this was resisted by some communities and mediated by the state. I immediately learned that there were significant variations in each company's ability to acquire land, especially across different types of village territories, due to uneven power relations among peasant, state, and capital actors. The remainder of the research was concerned with revealing of what exactly these political relations were comprised. In the rest of this short essay, I cover three sites of land politics in Laos: a fragmented and contradictory state, the friction of state-capital relations, and the blurred boundaries between village and state land ownership.

is between the central and local (provincial, district, and village) administrative scales of government. While the central government approves and grants large-scale concessions, like the 8,650 ha awarded to Quasa-Geruco and the 7,324 ha for Sun Paper, this is done largely absent of meaningful consultation or land use and ownership surveys with local government agencies who are most knowledgeable of the situation on the ground. Yet, such local authorities, especially at the district level, are the ones responsible for actually finding and securing the land granted to the concessionaires as well as convincing or coercing villagers to concede parts of their community territories to such projects. Although district government officials are under orders to fulfill concession contracts, they are also sympathetic to the concerns of the villagers for whose well-being they are partly



Fig. 1 Map of granted concession areas to Quasa-Geruco and Sun Paper. Source: Author's drawing.

Internal Politics of a Fragmented State

It is a truism of social theory that the state cannot be assumed to be a black box or a unified actor, but that it must be understood in all of its internal fragmentation and contradictions, external ties, and embeddedness within society (Marinetti 2007). A Gramscian-inspired approach further views the state as a social relation and thus also as a site of strategic action, where class struggles play out (Jessop 1990). Thus, the state is a site of politics, even in one-party states like Laos.

One such contradictory relation within the Lao state

responsible. Thus, they often find themselves stuck in the middle of political pressures from central level ministries, plantation companies, and wary villagers, embodying how the state operates as a site of strategic action among multiple actors.

The Friction of State-capital Relations

Plantation companies can either exploit these internal state politics to their advantage or be burdened by them. Quasa-Geruco expertly achieved the former by developing close relations with the district government, understanding the importance of mobilizing

local state power to coercively separate peasants from their land. While bribery was essential to such mobilization, more important was how they used corruption to develop personal relationships of reciprocity, such as by establishing a small rubber plantation on the district governor's land for free and financially supporting a land official's daughter's studies in Vietnam.

Sun Paper, on the other hand, was caught by the friction of an awkward relationship with the district government, the importance of which it failed to value. Assuming that the contract they signed with the central-level government guaranteed their access to land, they let government officials take the lead in acquiring land for them. When villagers resisted, the company was surprised that district officials would do little to resolve the issue in their favor. As a district official aptly summed up, this was partly due to how they treated local officials. He remarked that "they don't take care of us like Quasa does" and that they are "stingy, they don't give anything to villagers or district officials, beyond what is required by the regulations." Out of frustration, the district government asked Sun Paper to arrange their own land deals with communities or enter into contract farming arrangements with individual households. However, neither of these approaches were attractive to most villagers as they lacked the ideological and coercive weight of state power. Ultimately, Sun Paper could only plant trees on less than half of the land initially granted to them.

Blurred State-village Boundaries

Villagers also engage with the internal politics of the state when they wish to defend access to land. Despite the coercive pressure placed upon villages that drove many of them to concede their lands, few if any villages were convinced that it was a good idea to do so and many sought to resist the expropriation of their lands as much as possible. One avenue available for villagers to engage in a politics of control over land is to debate the meanings and boundaries of "state" versus "village" land. The common understanding that all land in Laos is owned by the state (e.g. Lund 2011) misreads the complexity of land relations in the country. The legal framework states that land is owned by the "national community" but is managed by the state. While many interpret this to mean that the state effectively owns all land within the country, it can also be interpreted in other ways on the ground to argue that villagers are part of that national community and that because the village is the lowest level of government authority, villagers have the right to play a role in owning and managing such lands. One village leader cogently summarized

this complex situation of joint village/state land ownership and its accompanying ambiguities by noting that "This isn't only village land, it also belongs to the state, but we live here, we protect it (*pok pak hak sa* in Lao language), we are the owners (*hao pen chao*)."

The Lao legal framework provides that the state allocates land use rights to individuals, which are fully protected when a permanent land title is issued but can also be partially recognized by other forms of documentation like temporary land use certificates or even land tax receipts. Thus, demonstrating that village territory is occupied and in use by households for agricultural production — and is on a path towards private ownership — can wrest such land away from the ambiguous boundaries of state/village land ownership. While villagers interviewed did not have formal title to their lands, several villages effectively applied a strategy of discursively framing land communal/state lands as individual plots to be used by the next generation. This type of reserved land (*din chap chong*) is a customary form of land management that, although not formally documented, can act as a powerful mechanism for demonstrating a village's drive to expand agricultural production in ways amenable to state concepts of modern development (see Fig. 2).

Politics permeate these three sites — within, between, and at the boundaries of the state, the company, and the village — and play a decisive role in shaping access to land in the face of large-scale plantation development. They demonstrate that the structural forces of capitalist expansion via coercive dispossession, otherwise known as land grabbing, are contingent upon the grounded politics over land among a variety of involved actors. Unearthing such politics of land is critically important for understanding contemporary processes of agrarian and environmental change across Southeast Asia. It is also essential for identifying pressure points for action and change that puts greater control over land in the hands of the rural people who live and work there.

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Fig. 2 Agro-forestry lands defended from clearance by the plantation company

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Note

- 1) This figure only accounts for the land granted, not all of which is actually developed.

The Businessification of Civil Society

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A vibrant civil society is usually considered a measure of democratization. In assessing democratization and civil society, it is often the nature of the relationship between civil society and the state that is considered vital. Authoritarian states limit the space where civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can operate and democratically-inclined governments are considered more receptive of demands from civil society actors and allow CSOs considerable space to operate. The very notion of an NGO suggests both a relationship with the state and a distance from the state and its controls. In terms of politics, in both democratic and authoritarian states, civil society and NGOs have often been seen as contesting the state's control of political space (see Whaites 2000).

Yet, by focusing on state and civil society, we are neglecting another struggle that involves a contest *for the control* of the organizations of civil society. This contest involves civil society and business.

Business firms are not simply a means to accumulate capital. Rather, they are a "concentration of power" that is economic, ideological and political (Crouch 2004, 30, 43). As such, like civil society, business exists in a relationship with the state. In recent decades, business has come to dominate the state to such an extent that its interests are paramount in shaping the state and its affairs. As states have confronted declining revenue bases there has been a "commercialization" of the state and its services. Promoted as "reform" and bringing commercial principles to the "business" of state, the result is a commodification of state intervention in critical areas such as education, health and welfare. Such "reforms" are broadly neoliberal, and fundamentally

imbued with anti-democratic and technocratic notions of managerialism. Firms don't just dominate the economy but have become deeply involved in the "running of government" (*ibid.*, 44). The result is state services contracted out, a loss of competencies in government, more private sector involvement, advice and contracts, and the dominance of business models. Business power comes to dominate government in a broad process of "businessification." This corporate makeover is complete when businessification results in the combination of processes of managerialism, commodification, privatization and customerization (Wolin 2008, 146–147).

The Struggle for the Organizations of Civil Society

Civil society is undergoing a businessification that mirrors the processes seen in the state's relationship with business. Just as that process has been conflicted and contested, so it is in civil society.

The struggle for civil society has at least two significant resonances with the contest for the state. First, the neoliberal and anti-politics claim that citizens no longer need the state is echoed in civil society discourses about the threat the state poses to the "grassroots." And, second, the businessification of the state is also a part of a process of extending "deep marketization" into the space of civil society through the control of ideology and the organizations in that space (see Carroll 2012).

The anti-state/anti-politics rhetoric rings loud in civil society. Recently, Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah, the Secretary-General of CIVICUS, a global alliance of CSOs and activists from 165 countries, claimed that

there is a “renewed period of contestation about the acceptable bounds of civil society, the latest manifestation of the battle to protect citizens against *state power*” (CIVICUS 2015, 5, emphasis added). Such claims fit neatly with neoliberal exhortations that government is best when operating as a combination of “stakeholder participation” augmented by “problem-solving efficiency” (see Mair 2013, 15). Calls for “participatory governance,” often a kind of anti-politics declaration, have been widely taken up in CSOs. Yet, participation is usually defined in terms of “appropriate” decision-making. In authoritarian regimes, this might be progressive, but in democratizing regimes, decision-making facilitated by quasi-technocratic NGOs has the potential to undermine elections, representation, delegated power, politicians and political parties. Notions of technocratic decision-making suggest that it is not just states and politicians that cannot be trusted, but voters themselves.

Interestingly, business is neglected in the civil society fight to protect citizens from state power and venal politicians. To be sure, there has been an anti-business rhetoric among NGOs, yet criticism of business is declining as NGOs cooperate with business (and government) on a vast scale and themselves become more business-like.

As governments withdraw from service provision and delivery, it is often NGO “partners” that are contracted to deliver these, complete contract research and deliver other services required by donor and recipient governments. Often, these “projects” are not those that NGOs might have chosen if they had their own funding streams. Increasingly, NGOs find themselves engaged in competitive markets and wound up in the red tape of accountability required by businessified government agencies. This leads to another trend in businessification: working with private donors, perceived as easier to deal with than state agencies.

When CSOs link with businessified government agencies, businesses and foundations, they find themselves competing with the private sector on claims of who is better at implementing projects, delivering services and doing more for poverty alleviation. As state agencies engage in competitive bidding they become “a shopper for the cheapest means of delivery, indifferent about whether it contracts a CSO or a business, although businesses may be preferred because they are less likely to raise difficult questions” (CIVICUS 2015, 153). Yet business is not just a competing “supplier.” There is an emerging discourse that argues for the recognition of “the power of the private sector to transform the lives of poor people” (Mitchell 2011). Business executives proclaim their capacity for getting the development

job done. Business is claimed to be an efficient “developer,” having a critical role in poverty alleviation (Wales 2014).

Claims that firms and entrepreneurs can drive development are now widely accepted in government, international financial institutions and the development community. Even when faced with contrary evidence, state agencies have been reluctant to reconsider self-promoting private sector claims of efficiency (ICAI 2015). Norfund, the Norwegian Investment Fund for Developing Countries, established in 1997, had a portfolio of US\$1.7 billion by 2015, all for “business development.” Norfund is now the Norwegian government’s “main instrument for combatting poverty through private sector development” and seeks to invest in “profitable and sustainable” enterprises to “promote business development and contribute to economic growth and poverty alleviation” (Norfund 2015).

This businessification of development, welfare and other services has also seen the faddish growth of social businesses, sustainable markets, social innovation, microfinance, microbusinesses, micro-franchising, social incubators and more (see Wankel 2008). Indeed, in some accounts, it is “social business” that will “save” capitalism (Yunus 2007). In another take, such privatized ventures are seen as a logical outcomes of capitalism’s economic superiority and political victory (Bernstein 2010).

Social business and social enterprise are coupled with “social entrepreneurialism” and touted as bringing business and commercial strategies to bear in improving human and environmental well-being (Ridley-Duff and Bull 2011). Such claims see social enterprise as a voguish vehicle for philanthropists. Some of these rich “developers” describe themselves as “evangelists” for social enterprise, displaying can-do, personalized and individualistic approaches to the business of development (see, for example, Skoll Foundation 2015). Their wealth and resulting influence allow them to bring together governments, rock stars, venerable educational institutions and other celebrity developers to promote their not always successful “feel good” causes (see *The Economist* November 5, 2016). “Philantrocipitalism” is embraced by both businessified governments and business people (Hobbes 2014, 3). Anyone who has been through Bangkok’s international airport will have seen the Thai royal family’s social enterprise outlets hawking products from “villagers.” Such enterprises are commercial but do as much to propagandize for the world’s wealthiest monarchy. Meanwhile, the grassroots, remain oppressed and exploited by an alliance of tycoons, military and monarchy (Hewison 2014).

Businessification redefines the nature of civil society. The space of civil society comes to be conceptualized as composed of individuals rather than collections of organizations. Thus, those at the grassroots become “clients,” “customers,” “entrepreneurs” and “key stakeholders” to be surveyed, focus-grouped and developed. This turn to individuals reflects a view that there is a latent entrepreneurialism at the grassroots, waiting to be unleashed. States are required to contribute to this by providing an appropriate regulatory framework: granting property rights, making loans, providing seed capital and other commercial inputs. These projects often amount to forms of primitive accumulation meant to commodify the commons and increase productivity by smallholder farms producing for capitalist markets. It is then businesses or businessified NGOs that lead grassroots entrepreneurs to the market.

As the nature of civil society is redefined by businessification it changes funding. Some NGOs refuse government and corporate funding, but these are a small minority. Most now operate in an environment where funding has been converted to contracts for services and where philanthropy is coming to dominate. Some estimates are that private development assistance is now equal to about a third of the ODA from DAC members, and that it makes up about a quarter of all humanitarian funding (CIVICUS 2015, 167). While private donations are sometimes seen as coming with fewer strings attached, to access these funds NGOs must engage in corporate-style marketing, advertising and branding, and present an agenda that wealthy individuals and foundations find palatable, even “exciting.” In other words, agendas are shaped by the nature and ideology of donors.

What does businessification mean for CSOs seeking structural change and social justice? What are the ethics of accepting funds from the 1% who monopolize economic and political power? Certainly, where the money comes from is important. Yet funding independence is increasingly unlikely. As CIVICUS (2015, 170–173) observe, a small and powerful group of “private foundations commands most resources, with the 10 largest private foundations providing 60% of all international foundation giving, meaning that their decisions on resource allocation can be disproportionately influential.” The result is a convergence of CSOs and businesses and foundations and a dilution of attention to progressive social change.

The advocates for these processes of businessification argue that businesses and civil society appreciate a levelling of the playing field:

The rule of law is preferable to the rule of power.
Predictability trumps disorder. Fairness is better

than corruption. These statements ring as true for business as they do for civil society. Stable, balanced environments are better for everyone....

It is time that we acknowledge our similarities and start working together to achieve this, for the benefit of each sector, and for society as a whole (Kiai and Leissner 2015, 272).

Working together means competing with each other with “market logics” applied to NGOs. This often leads to calls for a “rationalization” of the multitude of NGOs in the interest of efficiency, evaluation, transparency and good governance; a kind of CSO mergers and acquisitions movement.

Conclusion

The struggle for civil society is a contest that has been seen before in the ways in which business has come to dominate states. At the same time, the successful businessification of the state means that civil society is faced with a two-pronged effort, by state and business, to businessify the organizations of civil society.

Businessified NGOs will pose few challenges to regimes, repressive or democratic. Businessification means that CSOs will tend to be supportive of the regimes of the day, leading to a narrowing of political space. Civil society representation and participation is now largely about regulation. Businesses and states understand that.

This is not an argument that civil society is lost or that all NGOs have sold out. Rather, this approach observes that, for the organizations of civil society, as businessification takes hold of them, there is a diminution of activism that contributes to the narrowing of political space, the rise of anti-politics and the domination of business elites. If the space of civil society is being businessified, political strategies need to be devised to challenge the trajectory of businessification.

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Research on Women's Leadership in Indonesia: Women as the Source of Knowledge, New Narrative, and Existing Limitations (2006–2017)

Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi

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Fig. 1 Interview. Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi with SM vice-district head of KL, 28 July 2016.

The democratized atmosphere of the post-Suharto era (after 1998) has provided wider room for Indonesian women to expand their political role in a number of ways, including participation in direct elections and securing leadership positions. Since the early 1990s, Muslim women activists in Indonesia have begun to embrace and spread ideas of Islamic feminism through publications and discussions. Subsequently, since the early 2000s, non-state actors from academia and women activists began to promote affirmative action regulations to increase the representation of women in parliament. Increasing discussions on gender equality in Indonesian Islam and civic consolidation to foster government's policy of pro-affirmative action, resulted in voluntarily affirmative action being adopted in the 2004 General Election. This was followed by firmer affirmative action rule combined with the *zipper* mechanism (male and female candidates who would appear alternately on party lists) which required at least one woman among the top three candidates in the 2009 General Election, and then in the 2014 General Election. In the forthcoming 2019 General Election, Law No. 7/2017 article 173, section 2 (e) set the requirement that only a political party that is able to fulfil the affirmative action rule, where women make up 30 per cent of the members of party's managing officers on the central board to compete in the General Election. Although the representation of women in the Indonesian parliament is still below 30 percent, the vibrant discourses surrounding it have provided comfortable spaces for greater political participation and the lead-

ership of women, including in Indonesian Islam.

Machrusah (2005) studied Muslimat Nahdlatul Ulama (Muslimat NU), the women's wing of NU, a traditionalist Muslim organization founded in 1926, to observe how it negotiated with its male dominated parent organization NU for greater gender equality. Machrusah concluded that the reinterpretation of religious texts is only one part of a discussion in talking about better gender relations within traditional Muslim societies as it also depends on external political forces. "Aisyiyah," the women's wing of Muhammadiyah (the Islamic modernism movement in Indonesia founded in 1912), also proposed women's leadership. Taking an interest in these changes in Indonesian society, in 2006, I begin research on women's leadership in Muhammadiyah. My work revealed that 'Aisyiyah have demanded for women to be included in the Muhammadiyah Central Board since the 40th "Aisyiyah Muktamar" in Surabaya 1978 (Dewi 2008, 166). Muhammadiyah's formal religious perspectives is in favor of women's leadership; in contrast to the majority of Muhammadiyah followers at *wilayah* (provincial) and *daerah* (district) level who oppose women's leadership as they are likely dominated by textual approaches in interpreting divine messages on women's leadership. This was the case with the 45th Muhammadiyah Muktamar held in July 2005, where no women were elected to the Central Board of Muhammadiyah (Dewi 2007; 2008). I concluded that 'Aisyiyah's demands for women's leadership in Muhammadiyah should consider the changing religious perspectives of Muham-

madiyah followers in favor of women's leadership, their ability to engage with obstacles from the gendered perspective of Muhammadiyah's development, and from within the context of Javanese culture (Dewi 2007; 2008).

Contemporary discourses and pressure for women's leadership in Indonesian Islam, namely NU and Muhammadiyah, coincides with the ongoing development of local politics. Direct local elections to elect heads of local government under the Law No. 32/2004, was initially implemented in 2005. I have argued that structural opportunities for women to be recruited into politics have increased under the new conditions for direct local elections (Dewi 2015, 8). Today, female politicians can move freely among voters without running into barriers set up by oligarchies and male-dominated political parties. This is because direct elections have lessened, if not removed, the institutional barriers of oligarchic, male-dominated political parties, including inside the regional People's Representative Council (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah*, DPRD), which had been the mechanism through which local government heads were elected. It is now the voters who decide who wins, and not male dominated political elites inside DPRD, who formerly elected local leaders. The number of female leaders elected via direct local election as governor/mayor/district heads, have increased significantly in which most of them are Muslims in Java, since the introduction of direct local elections in 2005. This new development is influenced by the increasing engagement of Indonesian Muslim women who hold Islamic principles. To put it another way, contemporary Indonesian Islam in the post-Suharto era shows a waning of political Islam, but a deepening of "social Islamization" (Ota *et al.* 2010, 3–5). Considering this context, I suggest that the increasing number of female Muslim leaders elected through direct elections indicates that important changes and developments have taken place in Indonesia in relation to Islam, gender and politics.

In 2008, I started new research on Muslim women political leaders focusing on three Muslim women political leaders who won direct local elections in Java. The majority of elected Muslim political leaders are in Java and Javanese. Observing Indonesia's local politics through the prism of gender, my ongoing research has revealed many positive, yet often neglected factors, namely the role of Islam, gender, and networks behind the success of Muslim women political leaders in direct local elections. Concurrently, I have been developing new perspectives on the agency of Muslim women in utilizing their individual capital (education, social background, gender) (Dewi 2012; 2015). In particular, I have highlighted two

mainstream Indonesian Islam organizations, namely Muhammadiyah and NU that have similar perspectives and attitudes in supporting women's leadership in local politics, where the three female Javanese Muslim political leaders exercise power (Dewi 2015, 63). Thus, Indonesian Islam provides a strong religious foundation for Muslim women political leaders to expand their leadership in politics and shape the growth of democratization in post-Suharto Indonesia.

Finishing my study, I was further driven by curiosity to uncover another two factors, piety and sexuality, which I did not deeply explore in my earlier research. In doing so, in 2016, I observed another four Muslim women political leaders' experiences and narratives, who resided in Yogyakarta Province and other surrounding provinces. Research showed that private lives and intimate relations, which are greatly shaped by Islamic norms, such as wearing the veil and husband-wife relationships, are deliberately brought into the public sphere to seek political sympathy. Their actions tell us that it is not only the agency of these four women that matter; the veil itself is a means of agency. The veil, rather than signifying oppression as often perceived by western feminist understanding, becomes a progressive socio-political tool because it gives them comfort in certain spaces to maneuver and participate in the public sphere which is highly patriarchal, given the increasing engagement of Indonesian people with Islamic principles and norms in the third wave of Islamization in Indonesia (Dewi 2017a, 344, 354). Wearing a veil, in this case, signifies freedom for Indonesian Muslim women to take active part in electoral politics. I also discovered that the piety and good sexuality of Muslim women political leaders may be only be a very superficial part of their attitude, being able to get wider approval and power. This finding confirms an earlier analysis of three Javanese Muslim women political leaders where ideas and norms of Islamic piety in public sphere were played upon or used in political campaigns, beyond a personal act of worshipping God



Photo: Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi



Photo: Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi

Fig. 2 Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi interviewing SW district head of BT (2010–2015), 31 July 2016.

(Dewi 2015, 182). This public piety is intermingled with sexuality. There are generally widespread norms of Indonesian society that perceive heterosexuality as the acceptable norm: the four female Javanese Muslim politicians are expected to behave with their spouses (husbands) as good wives and mothers, and this clearly played out in their political campaigns (Dewi 2017a, 354). Although we should be aware of the “conservative turn” (van Bruinessen 2013, 3) phenomenon of Indonesian Islam, research suggests that in local politics, gender is not a significant element of contestation that can be used as a primary point to attack or hinder Muslim women candidates.

In-depth research on women’s leadership in Indonesia (2006–2017) suggests the importance of updating previous notions regarding female leadership in Asia that rely heavily on the “familial ties” factor and notion of “moral capital” (Dewi 2017a, 343). I suggest that without neglecting the importance of personal capabilities, we should consider and pay attention to ideas and practices of Islamic piety and sexuality in the public sphere to analyze the rise of Muslim women’s political leadership in Asian popular democracy; in a milieu of Islamization and globalization in the twenty-first century where discourses of piety and sexuality are becoming increasingly dynamic.

Through years of research, I realize that a feminist research methodology, one that focuses on women’s

personal experiences in a specific context to gain knowledge based on their real-life experiences (Harding 1987, 30), has enabled me to capture not only their experiences, but much more. By positioning women as a source of knowledge, we can observe the correlation between Islam, gender, networks, piety, and sexuality in the public sphere of contemporary Indonesia. The agency of Muslim women political leaders is pivotal. Their thoughts and experiences have produced new narratives of Indonesian Muslim women’s roles and positions, namely those who actively create opportunities in politics with confidence to embrace and expand new meanings of Islamic piety into the public sphere. This is shaping the growth and direction of Indonesian democratization which was previously mainly dominated by men.

Nevertheless, academic efforts to promote women’s leadership or political research with gender or women’s perspectives faces contemporary challenges. Both the public and academia have higher expectations toward female political leaders’ commitment and achievement toward gender responsive policy. Careful analysis is needed in viewing this matter. Research has made clear that most female political leaders show low commitment or passive roles in promoting gender responsive policy, which has been influenced by a number of factors such as their personal experiences, their engagement with women’s groups during their quest for power, and their leader-

ship characteristics (Dewi 2015, 174, 183). Additionally, so far, the majority of female political leaders come from strong families ties and political dynasties which prevent them from performing progressively in a different fashion from male oligarchs (Dewi 2017b). Furthermore, there are an increasing number of female political leaders who have been jailed due to corruption cases (such as in Banyuwangi, Banten, Klaten, Tegal, Kutai Kertanegara). Although many male political leaders have also been jailed due to corruption cases, the public have paid special attention to the performance of female political leaders. This is due to their rise and it is still regarded as a new phenomenon which has disrupted a predominantly male dominated political landscape. This development indicates a disparity between academic efforts to promote women's leadership, as well as research on politics with a focus on gender and women on the actual situation of women's leaders in Indonesia.

This situation, if not paid enough attention, will result in a backlash against the efforts to promote women's leadership in Indonesian politics. Finally, one other challenge is to encourage more female political leaders from lower class groups to participate. To date, female political leaders in local politics have predominantly come from the middle-class. While lower class women usually do not have enough resources to compete in direct local election, middle class women have acquired better individual capital (in the form of education, finance, and skills), as well as social capital (networks). These are all requirements to compete in direct local elections. Certainly, there is still much to do to narrow the divide between normative expectations and the actual situation of women's leadership in Indonesia. Systematic and continuous effort needed to achieve substantive narrative women's leadership, beyond the symbolic narrative of women's leadership in Indonesia.

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A flyer for the third season of the popular Hindi TV drama "Nagin" (Snake Women), dubbed in Thai on Channel 3.

Fresh From the Field: Translated Media, Trans-regional Encounters: Experiencing India in the Lao Highlands

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As a JSPS Postdoctoral Fellow whose research primarily focuses on India, I have always felt as a slight outlier at the CSEAS, where most research focuses on Southeast Asia, which as broadly conceived stretches from the Philippines to the Bangladesh-Burma border. Although I am the only researcher at CSEAS as far as I know working primarily in India, my research focuses on India's Austroasiatic languages, minority languages which are closely related to the Mon-Khmer languages of mainland Southeast Asia. My postdoctoral counterpart at CSEAS, Nathan Badenoch, has worked for a number of years on Mon-Khmer languages, particularly in the Laos highlands, and also in Myanmar, and recently we together have begun joint projects in India as well.

Since Southeast Asia is not my area of study, I have not spent much time in the region. Yet one of the advantages of working at CSEAS has been the opportunity to explore regions different from my primary research site, and to explore the longstanding connections between different parts of Asia (Japan

included). Recently I had the opportunity to accompany Professor Badenoch on a trip to his field site in Luang Namtha province, Laos, a region far to the north of the country that shares a border with Yunnan in China. This region is both ethnically and linguistically diverse, home to several of Laos' ethnic minorities. In the villages around Luang Namtha, speakers of four major language families (Austro-Asiatic, Hmong-Mien, Tibeto-Burman, and Tai-Kadai) coexist together, and a type of stable multilingualism has emerged. Badenoch has been studying the languages and the linguistic and ethnic diversity of this region for over eight years, and is proficient to varying degrees in many of the languages spoken there.

Currently, Badenoch is working mostly with a settlement of speakers of a Mon-Khmer language known as Bit. As the language is under-documented, Badenoch is in the process of creating a dictionary and grammar of the language. I accompanied him to the Bit village in February 2018 for a brief visit. As the villagers could talk freely in their language (through Badenoch), they were very friendly and open with

me. They readily answered questions I had about their language, and I drew many comparisons between words and cultural concepts in their language and in the Austro-Asiatic languages spoken in India. They were equally surprised by the close similarities in languages spoken so far apart.

However, perhaps more interesting than my academic questions were the villagers' own questions for me, having for the first time seen a person of Indian descent in the flesh. "Do you see many snakes in India?" "Are you scared of snakes?" "Are snakes in India magical?" "Are India people's origins from snakes?" At first I was a bit confused why so many villagers, at most of the households we visited, kept asking me questions about snakes. I know India was famous for cobras and snake charmers, but it is also equally known for many other things, so I was curious why the intense curiosity of everyone on the subject of snakes. It soon emerged in conversation with the villagers that one of the most popular television shows in the village was a Thai-dubbed version of the Indian drama *Naagin* (นาจิน in Thai).

Naagin was a popular Indian television drama that first aired in India in 2015. The story is one of two-shapeshifting serpent cousin sisters (*icchadaari naagin*) who seek to avenge the death of their parents. Their parents possessed an ancient powerful jewel, and were murdered by a gang of thieves. The sisters were then raised in a Shiva temple (Shiva is a powerful Hindu God, and Lord of Serpents) by a holy man (a *rishi* or sage), and then as they grew older they left to kill the thieves and regain possession of the jewel. Subsequently a series of events take place, for instance the sisters both fall in love with one of the kind-hearted human sons of one of the murderers, and turn on each other, leading to family and romantic dramas and tensions between serpent and

human forms. Though the story has mythological and Puranic elements it is set in the modern world; the characters use mobile phones and drive cars, while at the same time using religious incantations, casting curses, etc.

The show was one of the first Indian television dramas to air on Thailand's Private Channel 3, and because, as is typical with many Indian television dramas, a large number of episodes were produced, it was available as a daily broadcast. As most people in Luang Namtha had satellite dishes they received Thai television channels, and as a general rule, most people in Luang Namtha (and in Laos in general) preferred watching Thai-language media. As we found out later, not only in the Bit village, but throughout Luang Namtha town and the surrounding cities, *Naagin* was extremely popular. Everybody either watched it, or expressed regret at not having time to watch it. On my way back from the Bit village to Luangnamtha city after a day of field work, I passed by an open window and peeked inside, and I saw a television show lighted up with two snakes fighting with a *Shiva linga* (a statue of the Lord Shiva) in the background, and one of the snakes quickly morphing into a beautiful woman. The show of course was *Naagin*.

As Badenoch took me around Luang Namtha and explained to me more in depth about the history and cultural diversity of the place, I started to see that the themes and characters of the Indian television show had a far deeper local resonance than simply as an exotic curiosity from a remote land. Communities like the Bit, and other larger ethnic groups in the region like the Khamu and Sida, were not Buddhist but practiced forms of animism in which animal spirits were important, including snakes, and spirits often took the forms of both animals and humans. Snake



Fig. 1 Associate Professor Nathan Badenoch discussing Bit history with village elder



Fig. 2 *Rishi* and the Buddha (Photo from Nathan Badenoch)

spirits, called *Naak* (from the Sanskrit *Naga*) often shape-shifted into women. Hence it was no surprise that among animist communities like the Bit, shows like *Naagin* were popular, and though they were “supernatural,” resonated with lived experience. The *Naga* of course, as a popular creature from ancient Indian mythology, also plays a special role in Buddhism, the dominant religion of Laos.

Yet though shape-shifting snakes have parallels in the Buddhist and animistic worldviews of the residents of Luang Namtha, there are also some other more obscure connections that came to light during my brief trip. For instance, *Naagin* features bearded ascetics, holy men who, in India, are often associated with the worship of Shiva. Anyone who has visited the Himalayas in India or Nepal, or any number of pilgrimage sites in South Asia, has seen these wandering ascetics, and thus they are not so exotic for the Indian viewer. They are however a rare sight in the Theravada Buddhist cultures of Southeast Asia, which does not encourage such type of renunciation. Yet, curiously, as Badenoch pointed out to me on a trip to Luang Namtha’s major Buddhist temple, Wat Samakhixay, one of the major features of the temple is a cave-like structure in the back of the main sanctuary at the end of which sits a bearded renunciate (a *rishi*, drawn from the Sanskrit word for sage or seer) surrounded by Buddhas. Badenoch’s analysis (in an article currently under preparation for the *Journal of*

Lao Studies) is that the sage represents the animistic, non-Buddhist cultures of the region, and that the cave itself with the Buddhas standing in subordination, reverses the traditional power relations between the highland animistic societies such as the Bit, Khamu, or Hmong, and the dominant Buddhist Lao and Tai cultures. This is also evidenced by the fact that many of the patrons of the temple are non-Buddhists.

In addition to the presence of bearded ascetics in the landscape of Luang Namtha, and its connection to the minority cultures of the region, there are also traces of the ancient worship of Shiva. Before arriving in Luang Namtha, I had seen evidence for the worship of Shiva only in the ancient royal centers of Southeast Asia, such as at Angkor or My Son. Hence, I was led to believe that this Puranic strata of worship was only an elite practice, and therefore easily replaced by Theravada Buddhism. While this may in some sense be true, I saw that at Luang Namtha, when the Buddhist Nyuan came from the Chien Mai region to settle the region they built a small structure to mark the founding of Luang Namtha town. There, they also placed a *lak-muang* (or city pillar) in the shape of what Badenoch considers to be a *Shiva linga*, a statue to Shiva. These monuments, in combination with the popularity of shows such as *Naagin* which related the stories of snakes and the power of bearded sages and inter-

ventions of the god Shiva on the snakes' behalf, formed a spectrum of Indic influence that spanned both the ancient and the modern, and revealed possible connections between the animistic life-ways of the region and Indic mytho-poetics that are not attributable to dominant Buddhist worldviews.

Finally, talk about *Naagin* also brought to light the larger history of Indian media in the region. For instance, during a long five-hour lunch at the Bit village, which included several bottles of Lao beer and some buffalo sashimi, Badenoch reminded his Bit friends how in one story he had recorded one of the older gentleman recalling the unbelievable beauty of the heroine as “the top beauty of all India.” Badenoch said he was surprised as to why the narrator brought up specifically “Indian” woman as a standard for beauty. However most of the villagers understood immediately that the narrator was referencing Indian film actresses. They said that in the 1980s and 1990s, before television sets or satellite dishes streamed Thai television into the homes of villagers (and Thai-dubbed Indian television) the only exposure to cinema was traveling film shows which showed primarily Indian movies. Villagers would spend hefty sums to go see the movies, and would recall songs and dance scenes and of course the “beauty” of the actresses who graced the screen. Thus Indian cinema itself has a longer history than one might expect in the Laos highlands, and for many, it was the first exposure to televisual media. In a time of satellite dishes, and endless television programming stream-



Fig. 4 The next generation in Bit cultural transmission

ing from the Bangkok-based channels, the popularity of the Indian show *Naagin* brings forth an interesting, little discussed history of cross-regional connections both old and new.

Fig. 3 *Shiva linga* in the monument about the founding of the valley (Photo from Nathan Badenoch)



Publications

<http://www.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/edit/>

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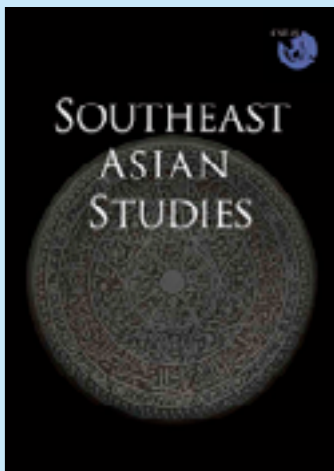


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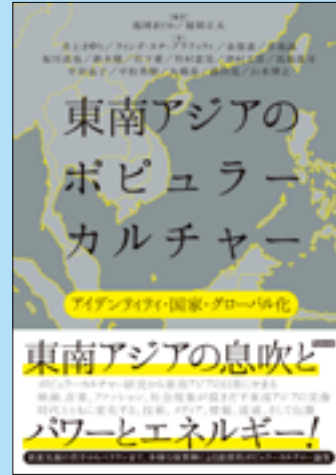
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