



Notes on a Discussion with Young Southeast Asian Intellectuals*

By Patricio N. ABINALES**

From May 7–8, 2004, the staff of the Bangkok Liaison Office of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies and Asian Scholarship Foundation held a joint workshop on “Intellectual Discourses of Southeast Asia,” inviting a group of young Southeast Asian academics and graduate students distinguished by one commonly-shared interest: they study countries in the region other than their own. In their respective keynote addresses, Dr. Lourdes G. Salvador (executive director of the Asian Scholarship Foundation), Dr. Cynthia Banzon-Bautista (Dean of the University of the Philippines’ College of Social Sciences and Philosophy) and Dr. Donna J. Amoroso (editor, *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*) highlighted the fact that there now exists a critical mass of young potential Asianists within Asia, thanks in part to the programs of American and Japanese foundations that prodded recipients to think comparatively when preparing their research or activities report.

The question then is what next? The existence of a critical mass is still a far cry from developing a core of Southeast Asianists within Asia. For to develop such a mass means not only exposing those who constitute that core to the extensive knowledge base of the region. It also means nurturing their talent by exposing them to the various perspectives on Southeast Asian studies. This critical core, in short, must possess the training to engage both in theory

and in research capacity their peers in the other regions, but more importantly those that preceded them.

For it is not enough to simply just sit back and admire the growing mass of Southeast Asian students of Southeast Asia. It is equally imperative that we go to the next phase, i.e., the intellectual deepening of those who have shown the potential to be the next generation of Southeast Asian intellectuals in Southeast Asia.

The contours of this next phase appear to be forming, and this was most evident in the participants’ energetic involvement in the discussions that ranged from the issue of language training, to the meaning of “area studies” and the continuing validity of “Southeast Asia” as an intellectual frame of reference.

Language Training

The participants noted that developing a critical core of Asianists-in-Asia means that there must be sustained support to the language training of fellows. Six-month fellowships are not sufficient for someone to learn a language other than his/her own. While the six-month term may be good in terms of introducing a fellow to a “new world,” some of the participants also noted that that knowledge will remain superficial if the fellow could not communicate with the people in that society in their own language.

Those trained in the West who became prominent Southeast Asianists achieved that stature because they were trained in or exposed to intensive language training. The suggestion by the participants then is for the funding agencies to perhaps once more consider the question of language train-

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ing.

The participants likewise mentioned the paucity of dictionaries that do translations between two Southeast Asian languages as compared to English-Southeast Asian dictionaries. More importantly, there is a need to be sensitive to difference in meaning in the same language group (Bahasa Malaysia and Bahasa Indonesia, being prominent).

Institutional Linkages

Some participants cited the existence of programs by groups like the ASEAN that have not been tapped considerably by those interested in fellowship programs. ASEAN, for example, could represent not only a substantial source of support, especially in the light of the decline in funding by certain foundations (see below), but also as possible stable framework within which some of the possible projects towards building that this critical core of Southeast Asianists could be based upon.

Another option was to tap graduate centers in well-endowed universities like the National University of Singapore (NUS) to assist the development of this core by accepting fellows into the MA or PhD programs. The NUS was especially cited for its Southeast Asia Program that could compete with similar programs and departments in the West. Several participants argued that it would be a waste if funding agencies steer away from training potential PhDs just because their concern is the “public intellectual” or the “civil society.” A real core of Southeast Asianists must necessarily consist of people with advance graduate training, with PhD better preferred. It is a folly to simply rely on “local knowledge” or “popular knowledge” in building this core. The importance of the elder generation of Southeast Asianists (mostly trained in the West) lies in the training that they received as graduate students.

This necessity is fairly obvious. The development of a critical core of Southeast Asianists cannot be sustained without an adequate information base. A project that would stock up strategic libraries (not necessarily those simply in the capitals of the country) with the “principal texts”—both in English and

in the local languages—on Southeast Asian studies is an imperative. This may be an ambitious project, but the long-term positive result would more than compensate for the cost. In short, the issue that the workshop participants are positing to foundations and other institutions interested in developing a critical intellectual core of Southeast Asianists revolves around sustainability. How can one sustain this dream given limited resources, and shifting individual and institutional priorities?

Constraints

The workshop allotted one afternoon discussing the possible constraints to the above possibilities. AFS invited Dr. Alan Feinstein, consultant of the Rockefeller Foundation to give the participants an overview of the concerns of Japanese and American Foundations in relation to Southeast Asian Studies. Dr. Feinstein noted with regret the decision of Japan Foundation and Toyota Foundation to scale down its interests on Southeast Asia. This decline in interest comes at a time when the beginnings of a community of Southeast Asian scholars and public intellectuals studying the region are becoming more evident (Toyota Foundation has agreed to fund its pioneering SEASREP for another five years and then terminate its support thereafter).

Rockefeller Foundation and Ford Foundation however remain active in the region and he suggests that the participants continue contacts with these foundations.

Dr. Feinstein then gave an overview of the state of Southeast Asian Studies in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Of the three countries, Vietnam is far more ahead; Cambodia and Laos are still struggling in building their university infrastructure. This overview was vital to give participants a sense of the unevenness of Southeast Asian studies in the region.

Suggested Concrete Projects

The participants, however, were also aware that the issues they raised are not exactly new ones. The

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need was to try to go beyond the discussion by working on a concrete project (or projects) to see whether their shared views can lead to something concrete.

The participants agreed to work on two projects. First, is to set up an e-group that would continue to discuss the issues raised in the workshop, act as a forum where participants can share their works, debate ideas, plan additional project, and simply remain in touch with each other.

The participants also took up the proposal of Dr. Amoroso, editor of the *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia* for them to be working editors for one issue of the web-based journal. The proposed theme of the issue is "From Local to Regional." In this issue, the participants will be encouraged to write in their own languages and to do the translation of their works in cooperation with one another. This would be one tangible way in which they could determine whether they can work together, and, more importantly, a means by which the questions "Can we talk to each other?" and "How can we talk to each other?" be answered. Editing of the issue will also be a way of broadening the circle by inviting others outside in and outside their networks to join in the endeavor.

These two projects are expected to be completed by the end of this year. Their outcome will also determine whether the participants of the workshop will be able to work on a more long-term project: the engagement of this generation of budding Southeast Asianists with the elder generation and their works.

This entails entering into a dialogue with some of the leading Southeast Asianists in the West as well as in the region. This will be an annual workshop where the "younger generation" is given the opportunity to study, critique, discuss the major works of their "elders," and allow the latter to respond to their younger discussants. The results of such workshops would be published either in the web or in book form, to be disseminated throughout the region.

The participants of the workshop, their country of origins, fellowship affiliation and respective

research topics were as follows:

Rommel Curaming (Philippines)
Asian Scholarship Foundation Fellow
Topic: The Construction and Transmission of Nationalist Historical Discourse in Post-Colonial Indonesia and the Philippines, with emphasis on the Suharto and Marcos Years

Dr. Hanneman Samuel (Indonesia)
Asian Scholarship Foundation Fellow
Topic: Intellectual Activist Alliances and Protection of Human Rights in the Philippines

Dr. Matthew Santamaria (Philippines)
Asian Scholarship Foundation Fellow
Topic: Traditional Khmer Dance: A Study of National Memory and Continuity

Dr. Umaiya Binti Haji Umar (Malaysia)
Asian Scholarship Foundation Fellow
Topic: A Malay Cultural and Dialect Loss in Concentrated Muslim Communities of the Bangkok Metropolis

Dr. Krisadawan Hongladarom (Thailand)
Asian Scholarship Foundation Fellow
Topic: Kham Tibetan: A Linguistic and Anthropological Study

Dr. Thanyathip Sripana (Thailand)
Asian Scholarship Foundation Fellow
Topic: New Concept of Vietnamese Foreign Policy towards Thailand after "Doi Moi"

Mr. Alden Lauzon (Philippines)
Asian Scholarship Foundation Fellow
Topic: Tourism, the State and Local Culture in Identity Formation

Ms. Sri Nuryanti (Indonesia)
Asian Scholarship Foundation Fellow
Topic: The Role of the Young Moslem Intellectuals in Moslem Minority Resistance in Pattani, Thailand

Mr. Danilo Reyes (Philippines)

Asian Scholarship Foundation Fellow

Topic: An Almanac of the Southeast Asian Imagi-

nation: The Territorial Symbols and Foundational

Myths of Indonesia and Thailand

Mr. Davisakd Puaksom (Thailand)

National University of Singapore/Wallalaik Univer-

sity

Topic: Javanese History