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Front Cover: Segment of the *Doctrina Christina* (1593) including Spanish and *Babayin* Script with a stone that was recently unearthed in the south of the Philippines with the script.

# What Are Vietnam's Indigenous Religions?

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Vietnam is sometimes described as a primarily Buddhist country (current government statistics estimate that there are 10 million Buddhists out of 78 million people) with a sizeable Catholic minority (6 million). In addition to these two "world faiths" with foreign origins, there are also three increasingly institutionalized "indigenous religions," which have a long and troubled relationship with the state. The use of this term is itself problematic in many ways, and the story behind this new category is an interesting one. It is now used to apply to three specific groups, all of which have recently re-emerged into the national arena. Caodaism, founded in colonial Saigon in 1926, has 3.2 million followers and 1,300 temples, Hoa Hao Buddhism, founded in southwestern Vietnam in 1939, has 1.5 million followers (according to statistics at <http://www.vietnambossy.com>), but leaders of these faiths estimate their real numbers at closer to 6 million and 3 million respectively. *Dao Mau* ("Mother Goddess religion") is considered a "distinct subculture with cultural nuances varying locally," so there is no official documentation of its followers [Ngô Đức Thịnh 2010], but recent ethnographic reports indicate it is expanding in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. It builds on traditional veneration of female divinities and heroes going back many centuries, but many specific ritual practices have developed more recently [Endres 2011; Phạm Quỳnh Phương 2009; Fjelstad and Nguyễn 2006; 2011].

Caodaism is a syncretistic religion that seeks to bring "the gods of Europe" and the "gods of Asia" together in a conversation that can serve to heal the wounds of colonialism and establish a basis for mutual respect and dialogue. Officially called *Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do*, "The Great Way of the Third Age of Redemption," Caodaism combines millenarian teachings with an Asian fusion of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism and Roman Catholicism, an Asia-centric millenarian movement which developed in the context of anti-colonial resistance. Established in 1926, its earliest members were members of the urban educated elite in Saigon. In just a few years, Caodaism grew dramatically to become the largest mass movement in the French colony of Cochinchina, with 20-25% of the people of South Vietnam converting to this new faith in the period from 1930-75 [Werner 1981].

Hoa Hao is a reformist, millenarian form of Buddhism established in 1937, which is now the fourth largest religion in Vietnam (after Buddhism, Catholicism and Caodaism). It has several temples in California and, like Caodaism, has also established a series of websites and now publishes histories and commentaries in Vietnamese in the United States. Founded by a young prophet who preached simplicity and egalitarianism, this new religion is, like Islam, opposed to the use of religious icons, and renounces the use of ancestral tablets and even images of the Buddha in its altars [Taylor 2001]. It developed in western Vietnam, perhaps influenced by minority communities of Cham

Muslims and Khmer Theravada Buddhists.

The "indigenous religions" of Vietnam incorporate many occult aspects (spirit mediums, spirit possession, divination, talismanic blessings, etc.) which make them seem "exotic" to outsiders. Some ceremonies involve elaborate costumes, pageantry and music (for the Caodai liturgical mass or Mother Goddess performances), while others – like Hoa Hao chanting of prayers – are conducted without instrumental accompaniments and even without devotional decorations aside from the ubiquitous flowers and incense. Spirit communications are important in all these indigenous religions: Caodaism receives its scriptures from a literary form of spirit mediumship, in which teachings are spoken (usually in verse) or written with a phoenix headed basket. The "Mother Goddess" religion is performative, with spirit mediums embodying the spirits of great generals, ladies of the court, princesses and young princes and distributing gifts that carry blessings to the participants. Hoa Hao Buddhism has its own scriptures received by the prophet Huynh Phu So, which provide Buddhist teachings in simplified language, making it more accessible to peasants and small scale merchants.

## State Efforts at Secularization

After 1954 in northern Vietnam and after 1975 in southern Vietnam, the socialist government tried to "modernize" the country by stripping the traditional social order of its sacred character. Following Marxist-Leninist theory, the regime leaders believed that religion would naturally disappear once the means of production were nationalized and modernized. Many religious practices were considered "superstitious" and blamed for wasting the time and money of the masses, who should turn their attention to nation building, education and increasing agricultural and industrial production. The general goal of secularization was intensified in relation to religions like Caodaism and Hoa Hao Buddhism, which were considered "reactionary groups with some religious trappings" because of their history of clashes with communist forces in the past [Blagov 2001].

For a quarter century (1975-2000), most temples built by the followers of indigenous religions were closed. Few services were held, sometimes a few older women were allowed to guard the temple grounds, and the schools, clinics, orphanages and workshops associated with these groups were nationalized. People who had *Dao Mau* home temples could have their statues and altars taken away if the sounds of ritual music were heard, so many people said they "worshipped in silence and in darkness." Caodai religious leaders suggested a more introspective, meditative practice, "turning in" rather than seeking to recruit new members or hold large ceremonies.





Spirit mediums cross gender lines, with men embodying female spirits like this princess in white, and women embodying fierce mandarins and warriors.

Vietnam was listed as a “country of particular concern” for reasons of religious freedom by Amnesty International (in 2000) and the US State Department (in 2004), but since that time there has been substantial change. The reformation era “opening up” of Vietnam to the market economy (starting in 1986), and the normalization of relations with the US (in 1995) paved the way for new contact between exiled religious followers and the homeland. In 2007, Vietnam joined the World Trade organization and took various steps to show how religion was being re-integrated into public life.

### Becoming “Indigenous”: A New View from the Vietnamese State

In 2007, the official Religious Press of Hanoi published a book by Phạm Bích Hợp [2007] titled *The People of the Southern Region and Indigenous Religions*, with a combination of interviews, surveys and ethnographic research concerning the southern millenarian religious movements known as Buu Son Ky Huong (“Strange Fragrance from the Precious Mountain”), Cao Dai (“the highest tower”) and Hoa Hao Buddhism (designating its village of origin). This new study expressed a more conciliatory government attitude towards groups once designated as practicing “superstition” and “reactionary politics,” sanctioning them under the new and increasingly common description of these groups as “indigenous religions” (*tôn giáo bản địa*). But the nature of this new sanction and its history raises a series of questions about what exactly could be meant by “indigenous,” and how it is being used in today’s Vietnam.

The term “indigenous” has the general meaning of native, originating in and characterized by a particular region or country, and the Vietnamese term (*bản địa*) means quite literally “emerging from the land.” A second sense given to the English term is innate, inherent, natural, which is rendered by another Vietnamese term often used in the book—*bản sắc*, which could be translated literally as the “true original colors,” and has taken on the modern meaning of “identity.” This characterization is often used to designate the religious practices of ethnic minorities, who once inhabited the region but have now been displaced by

larger groups who have migrated to the area.

All these “indigenous religions” are practiced primarily by ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh), who migrated to the region now known as southern Vietnam in the past 300 years. They are not, therefore, the people who have the earliest historical connection to the land. The southern region had been a part of the kingdom of Cambodia, inhabited by Khmer speaking people and various highland groups, many of them speakers of Austronesian languages. Highland ethnic groups live primarily from hunting and swidden gardening, and so are often described as “indigenous minorities,” but it would be hard to use this label for the followers of “indigenous religions,” who are primarily agriculturalists, and include many traders, city residents, intellectuals and members of the professional class. Caodaism in particular originated among colonial civil servants, many of them of high rank, and was led by a number of wealthy landowners, businessmen and journalists. The Caodai pantheon is both syncretistic and cosmopolitan, involving as it does the veneration of historical personages not only from Vietnam, China and India (Trang Trinh, Lao Tzu, Confucius, Buddha) but also from France, Russia and Palestine (Victor Hugo, Vladimir Lenin, Jesus Christ). So how could these belief systems come to be described as “indigenous”?

I think the labeling of these practices as “indigenous” religions is primarily a strategic one, which combines a recognition of regional traditions and a perception that the 1975 “reunification” of Vietnam also had elements of an annexation and even subjugation of the peoples of the south who were supposedly “liberated.” As part of an effort to normalize relations between religions and the state, this term revises earlier policies which had condemned Caodaism and Hoa Hao as “superstitious” or “heterodox” practices (*mê tín*), and allows their adherents to be seen as “mainstream” (*chánh tín*) religious believers. Scholars now speak of “folk beliefs” (*tín ngưỡng dân gian*) which were never fully absorbed into elite or official culture, what Philip Taylor calls “an unofficial counterculture that reflects the priorities of groups who have been excluded from state power” [Taylor 2006: 10].

These more narrow definitions of the term suggest that

the relation between the Hanoi government and the “indigenous people of the south” might have been excluded from the dominant culture of the northern nation state. These are claims sometimes made by southern leaders, even those who were themselves active in the National Liberation Front, who felt that reunification in 1975 did not in fact place the two formerly separated halves of Vietnam on an equal footing but resulted in a period during which all southerners, whatever their political convictions, were viewed as unreliable, and were not allowed to share evenly in their own new government.

The situation is somewhat different with *Dao Mau*, since it is a modern version of spirit medium rituals long practiced in rural northern Vietnam. In the early 1990s, a number of Communist party leaders began to promote the idea of using cultural activities to foster traditional values, allowing practices once considered “superstition” to become “folk culture.” Scholars associated with Ngô Đức Thịnh’s Folklore Institute began to document the songs and dances of what was then known as the Four Palaces cult. By highlighting the kinship between these practices and shamanism in other societies, these scholars were able to allow *Dao Mau* to be considered an indigenous folk religion (Đạo) and a “living museum” of Vietnamese culture. The resurgence of popular religion was sanctioned by scholarly efforts to gain recognition for once suppressed traditional practices [Phạm Quỳnh Phương 2009; Endres 2011]. In the new market economy, these practices also became more attractive because they were said to promote health, confidence and entrepreneurial success.

### Contrasting Narratives of Religion and Diaspora

In an introduction to the edited volume *Modernity and Re-Enchantment: Religion in Post-revolutionary Vietnam*, Philip Taylor outlines several ways in which contemporary religions can be understood in Vietnam [2006: 10-15]. While acknowledging the many conflicts between religious leaders and the current government, he concludes that it is wrong to overemphasize the

role of the state, even if its control over publications means it can keep the “court transcript”: “From time to time the official record is tactfully re-edited to find aspects of formerly censored or un-noticed popular practice to be in conformity with state policy” [*ibid.* 2006: 14].

Two contrasting narratives have appeared in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to make sense of the resurgence of popular religion in Vietnam and in the diaspora. In Caodai communities in California, leaders of the religion have argued that they were fated to leave the country in order to globalize their faith [Hoskins 2006; 2009; 2010; 2011]. In today’s Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), scholars and intellectuals argue that the “indigenous religions” of Vietnam should be recognized and reintegrated into the national fabric by emphasizing their ties to the regional culture of the South. There is a paradox in the contrast between these two narratives: In one, a local religious movement becomes “international” and assumes the mission of a universalizing belief. In the other, a syncretistic ideology is refocused on its local antecedents and becomes “indigenous” in order to neutralize the political controversies in which it was once entangled and tie it to the “traditional psychology” of southern Vietnam (Nam Bo) as the meeting place of a diverse and distinctive mix of cultures.

Caodaism presents an Asian perspective on universal religion, and yet in many respects it is a very specifically Vietnamese perspective. It deliberately evokes themes of exile, exodus and long distance nationalism, and uses a number of Biblical idioms to argue for the significance of Eastern religious philosophies in a world threatened by western domination. I often heard, for instance, that the last time God spoke so directly to humanity before 1925 was when Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Vietnamese refugees, who often spent several years “sponsored” by Bible Belt Protestant families, explicitly compare their experiences to those of the Jews cast out of Palestine, and inscribe their exile in a theological discourse with a strong millennial component. This model is also adopted to some extent



Mediums can also be possessed by the *ky lan*, a chimerical dragon horse who is attended by masked servants.





The Caodai pantheon includes Lao Tzu, Buddha and Confucius in the top row, Quan Am (Kuan Yin), Li Pei and Quan Cong (Guan Yu) in the second row, followed by Jesus Christ in the third row and a figure of Vietnamese ancestor worship.



A woman prays in the Caodai great temple at Tay Ninh, in front of images of the three mediums who first received teachings from the Jade Emperor (Cao Dai) in 1925-26.



Caodai dignitaries in red, yellow and turquoise robes kneel before the image of the left eye of God on a giant globe at the main altar in Tay Ninh.

by the leaders of Hoa Hao Buddhism, who also seek legitimacy by identifying with global Buddhist ideals.

Followers of *Dao Mau* use a different narrative strategy, since their origins in the north allow them to stress a less controversial “patriotic loyalty to the fatherland.” In the diaspora, many Vietnamese see themselves as exiled, and travel on pilgrimages to famous Mother Goddess temples in *Nam Dinh*. They say that “Vietnam dances inside them” when they are possessed by the spirits. Through embodied rituals, they conceptualize, map, inscribe and document their history. Their worship of ancestors, heroes and saints is a way of practicing and developing a historical consciousness. It is a selective history, and notably one which cuts out the conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century entirely, but it is a particular method of re-connecting to a glorious past which they believe can provide guidance for living in a new homeland and navigating the generational divide [Fjelstad and Nguyễn 2006; 2011; Hoskins in press].

For immigrants and exiles, diaspora can be constructed as a narrative of “crossing and dwelling” [Tweed 2006], in which movement through space is given meaning by ideas of a transcendent connection to “home,” making the longed for land of origin into a “holy land” (*thánh địa*) of universal importance. This fusing of religious discourse and nationalist political goals is in fact not unusual in a post Cold War era in which the resurgence of religious politics has challenged the predicted triumph of secular nationalism. As scholars rethink earlier trajectories that predicted that the “imagined community” of the faithful would inevitably be replaced by the nation state, we may come to see new diasporic formations as crucial to understanding the competing ideologies of order of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While it seems ironic that the so-called “indigenous religions” have been revitalized in part because of diasporic communities, this is an emerging characteristic of a globalized world.

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# Does Popular Culture Matter to the Southeast Asian Region? Possible Implications and Methodological Challenges

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Southeast Asia of the last two decades has experienced a cultural renaissance rooted in the growth of its economies and booming urban consumerism, and manifested in the massive circulation of popular culture products, such as movies, pop music, animation, comics, television programs, and fashion magazines, and their derivative products such as games, food, toys, accessories, etc. While many of these popular culture confluences and “waves” originated in Europe and the United States, a significant proportion is produced and disseminated locally or regionally. Confluences of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean popular cultures, in particular, have not only intensified in recent decades reaching consumers of different national and linguistic boundaries, but have substantially decentralized this region’s popular culture market. The result is that in virtually every big city in Southeast Asia, it is possible to find a variety of imported popular cultural products, which are regularly disseminated, indigenized, hybridized, and consumed.

These dramatic developments in Southeast Asia’s popular culture market have been well documented and analyzed in the existing literature, especially in anthropology and cultural studies. This literature provides substantial testimony for the proliferation of the various popular culture confluences and contains rich information and analysis relating to the practice and “meaning” of popular culture in an age of globalization. The focus is almost exclusively on the representational and ideological aspects of popular culture, in particular the consumption/reception and identification of, say, Asian TV dramas, anime or film. The overwhelming majority of the studies, many of them employing a close reading of media-as-texts, are in fact of this kind.

Curiously, however, the study of popular culture has been relatively neglected within political science and economic disciplines, especially in relation to the processes of regionalization. Very few studies have actually looked at the networks and mechanisms of distribution and consumption of popular culture in Southeast Asia, or examined the proximity they facilitate among companies and communities across this region. Given the dissemination of popular culture practices and products across the region, years before states began to take notice and media alliances began to be formed in order to take advantage of this, why has culture barely figured in the critical discussion on region-making? While ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) has emerged as a hub of Southeast Asia community-building and to some extent norm-setting, its cultural impact as far as popular culture is concerned, has been far less visible. Why so?

## Popular Culture and Region-Making

Looking at the regional flow of popular culture in Southeast Asia, especially in cities, may advance our empirical and theoretical understanding of how regionalization actually works and more basically of what constitutes a “region.”<sup>1</sup> First, it overturns conventional wisdom on who the driving forces and actors of regionalization are. Such investigation redirects one’s attention away from the state and highly-institutionalized arrangements and looks instead on the agency involved in the creation and marketing of culturally oriented commodities. Examining the actual operations and networks which drive the dissemination and consumption of popular culture, not only reveals the bottom-up logic of regionalization, but also illuminates the actual practices and processes of regionalization—the collaboration and interlinking of companies, the creation of transnational cultural platforms, the distribution of products, and the (belated) policy initiatives of governments.

Secondly, popular culture may also play a constructive role in pulling people closer together by providing them with a shared experience invigorated by the consumption of cultural commodities. The commodification, production, marketing, pirating, and consumption of popular culture do not only encourage collaborations between companies and individuals involved in these processes, but also constructs new frameworks for delivering images, ideas, and emotions, which can invigorate feelings of proximity and belonging.

There is very little doubt that popular culture creates a special bond or a special relationship and a shared experience between consumers. Given that a large number of people in Southeast Asia spend many hours every day in front of their television screens, go to movies, listen to music, and generally spend more than before on cultural consumption, can we assume

Cosplay is a practice where youngsters gather dressed with the costumes of their favorite anime characters. These gatherings take place in every big city in East and Southeast Asia.





## Does Popular Culture Matter to the Southeast Asian Region?

that these practices have an impact on their lives and perceptions? Perhaps they introduce new images and options and create new social and symbolic references? To use international relations scholar Andrew Hurrell's term,<sup>2</sup> can we think of popular culture, including practices and discourses over popular culture, as creating a sense of "we-ness"?

In the case of Southeast Asia, it is possible that the circulation of popular culture plays a constructive role in the process of region-making. This circulation has an impact not only on the institutional aspect of regional formation, e.g. the creation of transnational markets and the consequential collaboration between all those involved in this process (companies, agents, promoters, distributors, retailers, etc.), but also on the dissemination of lifestyle communalities and conceptions, which are based on the experience of consuming the same cultural products by different people in different places. In other words, the circulation of popular culture puts Southeast Asians, especially city residents, into a new cultural realm and invigorates a feeling of common-ness. The spread of popular culture may help people in Southeast Asia to develop a common language made up of the same sounds, images, and texts available through music and DVD players, TV and movie screens, in comic publications, on commercial billboards, or via the Internet. These commodities and images do not have to be *uniquely* Southeast Asian, as long as they are *shared* by wide segments of the Southeast Asian population. Let us look at Southeast Asia's popular culture market more closely.

### The Regionalization of Taste

In Southeast Asia, as in other parts of the world, American popular culture continues to loom over the markets and its products are successfully marketed in places where local income levels have reached a certain standard. However, in spite of America's strong position, regional popular culture confluences have developed and intensified, substantially decentralizing the world's cultural structure and refuting the notion that Southeast Asia's popular culture scene should continue to be dominated by American culture. Most visible are Chinese, Japanese, and Korean popular cultures, which have reached global audiences in Europe, North and South America, and even the Middle East, but their greatest visibility and impact still remains within the cultural geography of East Asia (both Northeast and Southeast Asia).

In Chinese popular culture, Beijing and Shanghai of the last two decades have evolved as incubator sites for Chinese cultural production, especially in animation, digital television, and video games, in spite of the state censorship that sometimes interferes. Chinese pop music, in both Mandarin and Cantonese, is increasingly popular among young Chinese audiences throughout Southeast Asia. Taiwan has recently replaced Hong Kong as the regional hub of Mandarin-language pop and is the source of approximately 80 percent of sales of Mandarin music worldwide. The culture and entertainment sections of local newspapers in Singapore, Bangkok, and Manila, constantly depict Chinese music artists from across Asia making Pan-Asian Chinese pop culture a reality.

During the past two decades, Japanese music, television programs, animation, and comics have carved out an integral position in Southeast Asian markets, introducing young consumers to a variety of new consumption opportunities and



The Korean TV drama *Winter Sonata* is perhaps the best representative of the popularity of the so-called Korean Wave in East and Southeast Asia.

lifestyles. Japanese music artists, such as Hamasaki Ayumi and Utada Hikaru are widely known in the region. (Utada Hikaru has sold more than one million copies of her three albums over the last six years in Thailand alone!) Japanese television programs and animation series such as *Doraemon*, *Tiger Mask*, and *Detective Conan* have been constantly broadcast on public television and cable channels in Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and Japanese comic publications (manga) are routinely translated into Thai, Bahasa, and Tagalog.

Korean popular culture is also leaving a strong mark on Southeast Asia's cultural scene, creating the *Korean Wave*, or *Han-ryu*, as it is known among fans. In less than a decade, South Korean television dramas, movies, music, and fashion have gained immense popularity throughout the region, adding a variety of new images and consumption opportunities. With a marketing strategy that mixes television exposure, commercials, and music, South Korean idols have become phenomenally popular throughout the region. Won Bin and Song Seung-hun for example, are widely known to young audiences for their parts in the hit television drama *Autumn Fairy Tale* (2000). Other famous South Korean idols that have become well known in the same way include Jang Dong-gun (*Friend*), Cha Tae-hyun (*My Sassy Girl*), Lee Jung-jae (*Il Mare*), Kyon Sang-woo (*My Tutor Friend*) and Bae Yong Jun (*Winter Sonata*).

India's Bollywood is another industry that successfully exports its movies to Southeast Asia, especially to rural areas.<sup>3</sup> Bollywood produces over 800 new movies every year (that is more than double the number of feature films produced in the United States!), and together with its innovated music and fashion styles, exports massively to Southeast Asia. Theaters featuring Bollywood movies have become community foci for South Asians and a way for them to stay in touch with their culture. Bollywood movies and music are routinely offered in retail outlets in places like Singapore, Malaysia, and rural Indonesia. Otherwise, the diffusion of Indian popular culture in Southeast Asia is based on the reproduction and distribution of pirated Indian movies and music on CD, VCD, and DVD.

A few inner-Southeast Asian popular culture collaborations have been taking place, although still on a small scale. A good example is the recent success of the Singapore-made Mandarin drama serial *The Little Nyonya* (November 2008 - January 2009), which has been bought up and screened in Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. Another example is Filipino movies that reach cities in other parts of the region, especially in places where Filipinos are working (Hong Kong, Singapore,





Japanese Music CDs in Singapore

Taiwan, etc.) To further complicate this movement of popular culture, there are Malaysian-born actors, directors and musicians who shoot to stardom in Taiwan and Hong Kong before they are recognized at home (actress Michelle Yeoh, singer Aniu, and director Tsai Mingliang being three examples).

These popular culture confluences and developments create a new economy of products shared by a selective section of the population—especially young urban residents with an elevated standard of life. Increasingly for these people, cultural consumerism has become an integral way of life, which creates a bond with other people who share the same urban lifestyle. In this way, for a selected segment of the population consumerism of popular culture has become an important factor in value production—not only in the economic sense but also in the social and cultural sense.

As a result, Southeast Asian urban consumers today may have multiple popular culture preferences, deriving from multiple centers. Millions of youth in places like Singapore, Hanoi, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, and Jakarta might covet the latest fashions from Tokyo, listen to the same genre of American pop music, watch Chinese dramas on television or DVD, read Japanese comic books, and go with friends to watch the latest Korean movies. Through the dissemination of popular culture, people from different places can, for example, watch a certain genre of animation program throughout their childhood and listen to the same genre of music as teenagers. They might then have a lot more in common than if these products were not available.

### Implications for the Southeast Asian Region

A few important questions arise from the relations between popular culture and the regionalization process in Southeast Asia: Is popular culture a significant enough phenomenon to advance our understanding of a “region” in Southeast Asia? Is

popular culture important enough to make people both within and outside of Southeast Asia feel distinct? Can we develop an alternative concept of a region based on the proliferation and acceptance of popular culture in Southeast Asia?

The available literature on popular culture only partly addresses these questions. While cognizant of the region-specific cultural resonance and asymmetry of intra-Asian flow, the literature on popular culture in Southeast Asia was not able to offer adequate theorization of “region” as a unit of study and analysis or systematically explore the implications of popular culture for regionalization. However, the statistics on the export of Japanese and Korean TV programs, for example, suggest that there is a geographical reach, scope and limit to the networking and patterns of popular culture flow and consumption, but the geographical field tends to vary from one product to another, as does the density and directionality of this flow. The “region” is thus a convenient but notoriously slippery term, since Japanese and Korean popular culture flows have arguably less visibility in, say, the Indian market, than they do in Taiwan, China, and the major cities of Southeast Asia.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, a few conspicuous features can be discerned from looking at the dissemination and acceptance of popular culture across Southeast Asia. First, market forces (and not governmental policies or institutional arrangements) are at the heart of the process, promoting and spurring the construction of new cultural linkages. The dissemination of popular culture in Southeast Asia is essentially the result of bottom-up processes not directly guided by the state—and at times even taking place in spite of it. Second, the dissemination of popular culture is centered on cities and their middle class residents rather than encompassing the entire population as a whole. In this sense, the regionalization process in Southeast Asia is fragmented: only a certain part of the population (overwhelmingly urban middle

## Does Popular Culture Matter to the Southeast Asian Region?



Fashion magazines are one of the ways cultural influences and style spread across the region.



*Mao* and *Doraemon* — historical dramas are also a part of the growing popular culture market.



Japanese film festival in Bangkok.

classes) are more “regionalized” than those who live in rural areas as they are more exposed to the transnational flow of popular culture. Insofar, the arising connective-ness between cities and people is not an equal process, but a socially selective one. Third, given the cross-regional flow of popular culture, the Southeast Asian region is not isolated from the economic and cultural developments in the wider East Asian region and in global markets. Nevertheless, there is a concentration of certain popular culture flows and influences found only in the cultural geography of East and Southeast Asia.

The “region,” as seen from the perspective of popular culture, is thus not simply a convenient, delimiting marker or a geographical field of inquiry. It cuts across the boundaries that separate “East Asia” (i.e., Northeast Asia) from “Southeast Asia.” Moreover, it is not merely a collection of nation states as a whole but essentially the product of the economic, societal, and cultural inter-penetration among Southeast Asia’s big cities and their consumer-oriented middle class population. The dissemination and acceptance of popular culture may also introduce a new meaning to the concept of “community” as not only a group of people living under the banner of the nation state or belonging to a certain ethnicity or religion, but also urban residents living in different cities in different countries bound by certain behaviors and practices encouraged by the inflow and practice of popular culture. This definition, however, is far from consensual because it implies that this process creates large swathes of excluded populations that are not a part of the emerging urban popular-culture consumer culture.

In sum, conceptualizing a region in Southeast Asia based on popular culture requires going beyond the conventional tools provided by geographers and scholars of international relations and requires a methodologically pluralistic approach open to considering a variety of socially and culturally embedded prac-

tices and behaviors which may affect regional formation. It may also require some amount of imagination and courage to define regions in new ways.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In “regionalization,” I refer to an indirect and bottom-up process that increases the proximity between markets, institutions, and communities, in geographical and conceptual domains wider than two states.

<sup>2</sup> Hurrell, Andrew. Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective, in Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell (eds.) *Regionalism in World Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> Bollywood, it should be noted, does not only refer to the Mumbai-based movie industry but is also a common name given to a wider cultural phenomenon including a range of production and consumption activities including music, dance, and fashion.

<sup>4</sup> I thank Caroline Hau for raising this point.



# Seeing Genocide and Reconciliation in Cambodia through a Village

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Cambodia in the 1970s witnessed one of the most turbulent periods of its history. In March 1970, the country was plunged into civil war and was ruled by Democratic Kampuchea, also known as the Pol Pot regime, between 1975-79. The regime declared the destruction of existing society and culture and implemented policies that decimated the population. Its revolutionary policies were based on a totalitarian ideology, which aimed to improve the existence condition of its people. Yet, the aftermath of the revolution was misery, resulting in the sacrifice and loss of over 1.5 million lives.

At the end of the 1990s, preparations began for the trial of the leaders of the Pol Pot regime, twenty years after its fall. It was the international community, and not the Cambodian government, that took the initiative to charge its remaining leaders. From the outset of the trials, the present government, led by the former cadres of the Khmer Rouge of Cambodian People's Party, emphasized the sensitivity of the issue. According to what was repeatedly heard by the government in discussions with the UN and donor countries, the trial held the risk of severely disrupting Cambodian society's political reconciliation, initiated after the national election in 1993, one that marked the end of a two-decade conflict. Negotiations at various levels consumed a lot of time and money, yet finally in July 2010 the international tribunal in Phnom Penh handed down a 35-year sentence to the former director of the political criminal relocation center that claimed 14,000 lives during the Pol Pot period. Presently, a second trial of four suspects is being fought over in court.

However, after conducting fieldwork in a Cambodian village for two years in 2000-02, I have doubts about the way past trials handed down their judgments. In this article, I would briefly like to make clear that there were problems with the way in which those accused of perpetrating crimes against humanity were labeled through the dichotomies of "good" and "evil," "victims" and "victimizers." We must understand the significance of these trials in popularizing the judiciary system in contemporary Cambodian society and also recognize the important role these played in "excavating" and bringing to light facts on the leadership of the Pol Pot regime. Yet, what needs to be made clear is that we need to be conscious that the trials alone will not help us understand the crucial issues that affect the lives of Cambodian people after the turmoil. The Cambodian government's propaganda, which has focused on the weakness of so-called reconciliation, one based on the dichotomy of "victims" and "victimizers," is absurd for it is nothing more than political rhetoric, and does little to uncover what really took place in society at the time.

## A Village Situation

In December 2000, I started to live in a village located in Kampong Thum province, a central part of Cambodia, and it was there that I found plenty of evidence of the tragedy that took place in the recent past. In interviews with villagers, the memory of the departed who were taken away by the revolutionary organization was a topic that people often discussed. The ruins of Buddhist buildings in rural temple compounds remained in a state of disrepair. It was impossible to estimate the influence of the effects of the Pol Pot regime on the villagers just by looking at them. However, there was no doubt that the effects of that regime had been an extraordinary experience and were instrumental in bringing about various changes to Cambodian society.

During fieldwork interviews in every household in the village, I uncovered concrete examples of that victims experienced at the hands of totalitarian rule. For example, there was a skinny but cheerful man near the house where I lived. Born in the village in 1945, he had six siblings, five brothers and one sister. During the period of the regime he lost his father, four brothers and one sister. Apart from himself, only one younger brother survived. According to him, his father, who lived with him in 1975, had been taken away and killed by the revolutionary organization in 1977 without any explanation or charge. Before 1975, the eldest brother was a teacher at a school in the provincial capital, while the second was a medical doctor and working in Phnom Penh, and the fourth was studying in Phnom Penh. All three were relocated to the province located in the western part of the country after 1975 and then killed. In addition, the younger sister who was in the village was stricken with fever and died in 1978 without any medical treatment. He told me his "Stomach was boiling" (*"kdav poh"* in Khmer, literally meaning extremely angry) when he thought of the family that he lost during this period.

However, although the life story of this man may remind us of the familiar image of the regime that ruled its society through fear, one of his neighbors had a very different life history from this period. One woman, born in the village in 1945, three doors down from the man's house, related that she had joined the communist movement in 1972 and married a male comrade in 1974. During the Pol Pot period she had lived in Phnom Penh. After she moved there in 1975, she asked the revolutionary organization to relocate her parents and three brothers in the village to the city. Then, she escaped to a western part of the country by boat after the fall of the regime in January 1979 and divorced her comrade in June 1979. At first, she moved to her mother's home village in Kampong Cham, and finally returned to the village in 1980. She lost contact with all three of her young brothers who had worked in the city in 1979.



Wedding ceremony in the village. Young people born after 1979 accounted for the majority of the village population when the author started fieldwork (Taken by author in Kampong Thum province, December 2000).

Such contrasting life stories could be found in the vicinity of the village and point to the real situation of village society in Cambodia where people shared a diversity of experiences under the then regime. However, more interestingly and importantly, as far as I observed during fieldwork in the villages, there was no case of ostracism through criticism of others for their behavior under the regime. What I want to be clear on is that the difference in people's experiences during this period did not become a source of division in the community. This has led me to ask serious questions about the efficacy of using dichotomies to refer to the roles that people had during the period.

### The "Communists" and the Dead

Ultimately, how many villagers did join the communist movement initiated by Khmer Rouge in the first half of the 1970s? The communist activities had surely reached the locality in the 1960s, and the area had come under the control of communists since March 1970. These communists initiated propaganda activities in the region in 1972, sending their young cadres to every village to sing and dance in front of villagers. By then, a group of young villagers, who became enthralled by the seductive message, decided to leave villages and join the movement.

At the time of my research in the early 2000s, there were 189 couples in 149 households in the village. 79 couples had married before 1979. From this sample, I extracted 87 nuclear family units who had lived in the village before 1975 by examining the information from 79 couples' close relatives. And finally, by reviewing the information of all the family members of 87 nuclear family units, I found that 28 of 87 units had members who had joined the revolution in the beginning of the 1970s. 10 out of 28 cases had two family members who had joined the movement. This indicates that 32 percent of village households at that time had members who participated in the revolution as "communists." The assessment of this result is open to dispute, but I believe it may illustrate, to a certain degree, the general characteristic of Cambodian rural communities; the everyday life of local residents at the time had very close relations with the "communists."

On the other hand, there were a number of villagers who died due to starvation, disease and murder. I estimated the number of those who disappeared using the same procedure as mentioned above. Firstly, I examined the information of family members from 87 nuclear family units and extracted from them 79 village couples who lived in the village before 1975. Then, I checked the number of units that had family members who had



A personal ad on a wall. Searching for a sister who went missing during the Pol Pot period (Taken by author at a photocopy shop in Pursat provincial town, September 2011).

disappeared during the time. What was clear was that 59 of 87 units were relevant (68 percent). In short, nearly 70 percent of village families who lived in the village in the 1970s had members who were killed during the Pol Pot period. It is not possible to offer more detail in this short article; however, from the village study, it was clear that most residents had both "victims" (the dead) and "victimizers" ("communists") as close relatives and friends.

### Going Beyond Dichotomies

Outsiders tend to assume and emphasize dichotomies such as "victims" and "victimizers" when they attempt to grasp the difference of experiences that may exist in one village. And this perception has, for sometime, formed the major framework for understanding Cambodian society. However, it is important to note that the label "victimizer" is not familiar to villagers. Today, the people recall their relatives and friends who participated in the communist activities without any sense of criticizing them as collaborators in the genocide.

Certainty, there is the current presumption that local people do not express any criticism of individuals' past behavior because very specific conditions in the research area produced a group of collaborators in the communist movement in the first half of the 1970s. This is armchair theory and does not hold any truth because it is much rarer to encounter vocal criticisms of others' behavior during the Pol Pot period, although I did hear a few cases of collective killing of local cadres of Khmer Rouge which had occurred in the community just after the fall of the regime.

In regards to village life, Cambodian people do not view the multiple experiences they had during the Pol Pot regime as having a fatal impact on social life. In interviews, there was no one who focused only on stories from this period. Instead, they dwelt on their lives before and after this time. This period forms only one part of the full spectrum of their lives. They decided to coexist and live together in a community for over 30 years as a way of keeping communication with different Others/others as either neighbors or as friends. Therefore, we need to address people's attitudes in terms of coexistence as a crucial part of the reconciliation process in Cambodian society, instead of employing dichotomies that greatly simplify situations that are quite complex and complicated. Analyzing the features of reconciliation of Cambodian villagers in regards to their everyday attitudes will yield insights into multiple experiences of coexistence, which in turn can expand our understanding of our human world.



# Exploring Urban Transformation of Hanoi in the French Colonial Period: An Area Informatics Approach

Shibayama Mamoru

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When looking at present day urbanization in Hanoi and comparing it to its past incarnation an question arises. How was urbanization of Hanoi, Vietnam encouraged by France between 1873 to 1936? Answering this question and exploring urban transformation in Hanoi during the French colonial period (hereafter, Hanoi Project) has been a core research pillar in the area informatics project which we started in 2004. This project has aimed to create a new discipline called "area informatics," (AI) an approach that integrates the interdisciplinary field of informatics with Area Studies, encompassing all academic disciplines. The Hanoi Project (FY2005-09 and FY2011-13) aims to explain the history of urban development in Hanoi - the capital of Vietnam for more than 1,000 years -, and digitize the research process and results for publication. Through this project we are trying to explain the process of Hanoi's urban development and transformation based on the following hypothesis put forward by Sakurai Yumio: "Through the continual filling in of lakes and ponds formed by the riverbed of the old Red River, Hanoi achieved significant urban development and transformation during the Nguyen Dynasty period" [Sakurai and Shibayama 2007: 37]. We have conducted further research in this area through a spatial analyses of various data gathered during the project. This has included maps, satellite images, cadastral maps, historic ruins and remains through using Geographical Information Systems (GIS) and Remote Sensing (RS) technologies. Sub topics in our project, which made up 21 in total, are shown in Fig. 1. Based on our AI approach, we have shed light on 10, three of which I would like to introduce below.

## Putting Forward New Hypothesis: Urban Road Planning on the Isosceles Triangle

A practical development plan spanning approximately 15 years from the start of the French colonial period can be understood when we compare the 1890, 1898, and 1902 digital maps with a digital map taken in 2005. Looking carefully at the 1890 and 1898 maps, the existing streets at that time and the planned streets are distinguished from each other and marked. Through employing GIS technologies to extract only the existing streets of that time and the planned routes, we were able to extract the development plan of the period and compare it on a timeline. Comparison between 1890 and 1898 reveals that several plans for street development on the south side of Thang Long citadel changed, and some streets planned disappeared by 1898, which can be considered to have been aborted. Moreover, the 1898 map shows a plan for a straight street running diagonally from the west side of the citadel toward the south of Hoan Kiem lake along Dien Bien Phu Str., but this does not match the current streets on the 2005 digital map, as shown in Fig. 2. Eventually, the planned street running obliquely downward from left to

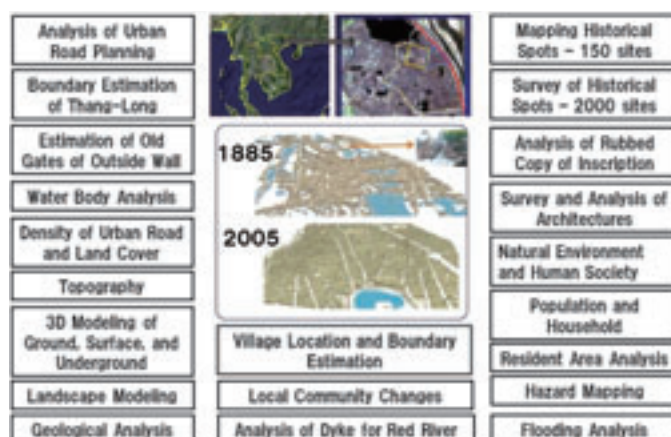
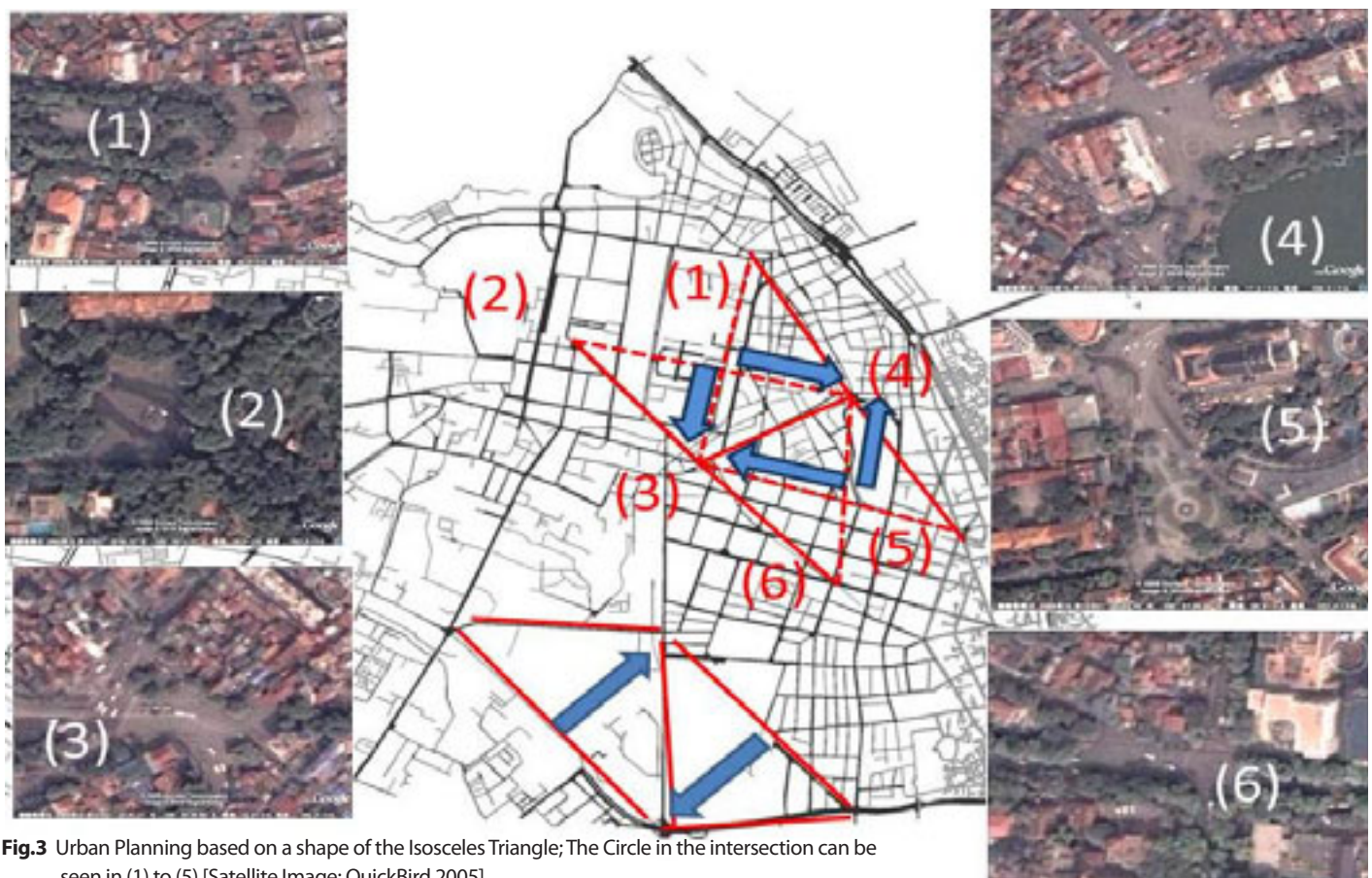


Fig.1 Sub Topics in Hanoi Project; Center: Target Area and Landscape Change from 1885 to 2005 by 3D Modeling



Fig.2 Comparison of Planned Road in 1898 with Current Road in 2005  
[Source: *Southeast Asian Studies* 46(4): 501]



**Fig.3** Urban Planning based on a shape of the Isosceles Triangle; The Circle in the intersection can be seen in (1) to (5) [Satellite Image: QuickBird 2005]

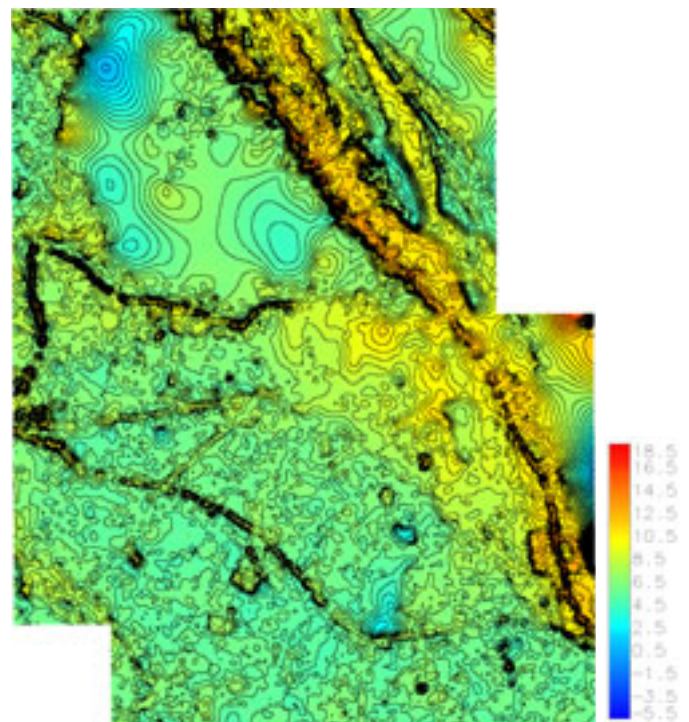
right in the citadel in 1898 disappeared in 1902. This is suggestive of another aborted plan.

The question that arises here is why was the above plan in 1898 aborted in 1902? It might be possible to suggest that France was intending to urbanize Hanoi based on the shape of Paris, which was planned around the shape of star. The intersection with circles can be seen in points from (1) to (5) and two large isosceles triangles composed of (2)-(4)-(6) and (1)-(3)-(5) are clearly recognizable (Fig.3). As a result, the road plan between (2) and (3) as shown in 1890 was modified into Dien Bien Phu Str in order to be in symmetry with (3) to (4). The same plan can be seen in the southern center of Hanoi near the Bay Mau Lake and Kim Lien district (Fig.3). Such new findings were obtained through the layer's overlaying function for the historical maps using GIS.

### New Findings on an Analysis of Micro-topographical Change

Thang Long - Hanoi was established after moving the capital from Hoa Lu to Dai La in 1010. The wall of the citadel in Dai La can be considered as an enclosed area (in black) and is recognized by its steep gradient (Fig.4). This result coincides with the hypothesis explained by historians so far. A birds-eye view of the landscape using 3D modeling is shown in Fig.5.

What is clear is that an analysis of micro-topographical change has introduced a difference of topographical change between 1950 and 2005 [See Yonezawa 2009]. Looking at Fig.6, we can upheaval and land subsidence visible in the orange, yel-



**Fig.4** Micro-topographical Map with DEM (Digital Elevation Model) [Source: Yonezawa 2009]



low, and green-shaded areas; higher in 2005 than in 1950. Two remarkable points emerge from what we can see in Fig. 6. One is that the elevation of the Great Dike is about 2 meter higher in 2005 than 1950 and the average height of the dike in 2005 is about 12 meters, compared to 10 in 1950. This difference shows that the dike has been raised since 1950 [See Yonezawa 2009].

### Significant Urban Development and Transformation

From the results of various observations, this ongoing project suggests that “significant urban development” took place between 1890 and 1900 and our conclusion rests on the following points. Firstly, changes took place in Thang Long citadel: there was an increase of military plants and barracks that can be seen by comparing the digital maps of 1885, 1890, and 1902. This result supports the hypothesis generated by Sakurai. Second is the transformations that took place in the old quarter: the continual filling in of ponds and marshes expanded in the same period. In particular, the citadel walls and moat were clearly destroyed by French and a railway line was constructed along with the east side of the citadel. The third is urbanization on the southern side of the citadel: Observations and comparisons of the three maps of 1885, 1898, and 1902 revealed that the French tried to initiate several urban development plans. Such developments rapidly progressed westward from the west bank of the Red River to the south side of Hoan Kiem lake and Thang Long citadel, together with the settlement of new villages on the river bank. These developments also continued during the same period. Concurrently, the area near Bay Mau lake and Kim Lien district were developed after the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, because the 1902 map shows no development plans there. Finally, there are changes to the gates positioned at the border of Thang Long area: All 15 shown in the historical map in 1873 and the map of 1885 had clearly disappeared by 1902. We conclude that the disappearance was caused by the development of new roads and residential areas in the same period.

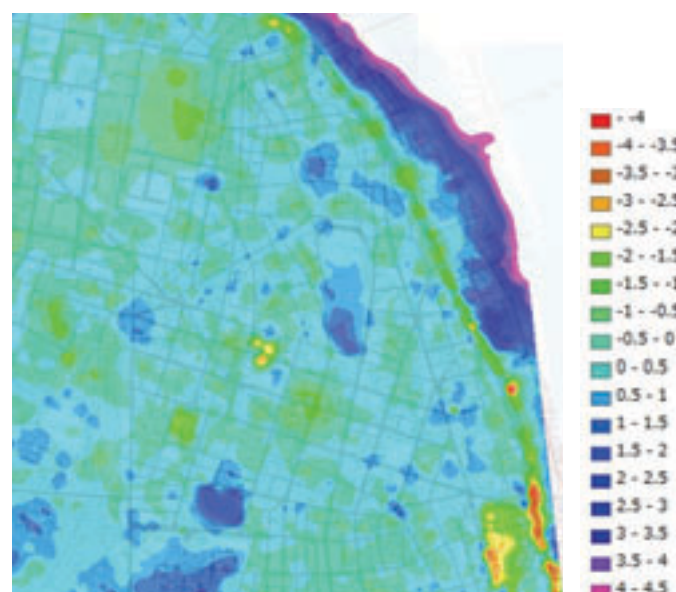
Our remaining task is to investigate the village transition in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the transformation of Hanoi including local communities and human behavior after the year 1900 by means of an AI approach. With our future research we hope to use our innovative methods to explore new paradigms in interdisciplinary Areas Studies.

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**Fig.5** 3D Modeling based on DEM [Source: Yonezawa 2009]



**Fig.6** Difference of DEM (2005 and 1950) [Source: Yonezawa 2009]  
Map (1:2,000) overlaid with difference of DEM. The darker-shaded area is lower in 2005 than 1950.



# THE (NON) CITIZENS OF KOMTAR

## Reflections on Migrant Worker Spaces and Expressions of Community and Agency

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A Komtar food spot, popular among for foreign workers from Burma, showcases posters of famous icons including Pantera, the Beatles and Aung Saan Suu Kyi

*It can be said that the spaces that migrants roam in somehow reflect the state of foreign workers in a given area, the conditions they face, and how they contend with these despite their limitations. Places such as Kota Raya in Malaysia, Lucky Plaza in Singapore and Victoria Park in Hong Kong provide an evolving spatial metaphor that captures everyday negotiated practices carried out by migrant workers as they make room for themselves in their host locales, straddle transnational realities and navigate through global disparities. In Penang, Malaysia, Kompleks Tun Abdul Razak (KOMTAR) accommodates a neatly compartmentalized tapestry of different worlds, converging in a shared, borrowed space. This space is shaped by local impetus, a national policy of containment and regulation, and localized transnational activity that speaks of family ties, nurturing communities, and relations across borders. It also consists of small, segmented pockets of 'deterritorialized nations,' annexes of home, transplanted and tucked away in designated corners that migrants claim and maintain for their own uses.*

Once envisioned as the premier shopping district in Penang, Komtar remains a landmark even after losing its luster as the local hub for leisure, entertainment and shopping. Over the years, as Malaysians opted for other more upscale shopping centers such as Gurney or Queensbay, the area evolved as a popular hangout for migrant workers from the Philippines, Burma, Indonesia, Nepal, Bangladesh, among other nationalities working in the state. Still a central location, which also contains government offices, a bus terminal, and the tallest building in Penang, Komtar today is also emerging as a globalized, ghettoized arena that provides space for non-Malaysian segments of the population living and working in the area.

A destination frequented by foreigners, but certainly not your typical tourist spot, this part of Komtar reveals a grimier side of the global, highlights the distinction between Malaysians and foreign workers, and demonstrates a general attitude towards migrant labor. There's a pronounced difference between local residents and migrant workers, even in the way they view Komtar. While foreign workers would say, "See you in Komtar, where else?" some Malaysians would ask me, "why do you keep going to Komtar? It's dangerous and dirty."

For sure, Komtar today hardly represents the gleaming, sprawling image flaunted by soaring structures that we would

associate with things global. The rundown main building has seen better days, where the corridors of shops that used to thrive with local business now sit empty and idle. Along some of these same aisles of previously abandoned commercial spaces, migrants have now set up shops, food stalls and other enterprises patronized by their growing communities. A deserted complex, revived and appropriated by migrants, Komtar now functions more than just a space for local commerce; it has gradually and inadvertently transformed into a transnational, multiethnic shared space with economic, social, cultural and political dimensions.

### **A Transnational Space for Globalization's Rank and File**

Contrary to its reputation, a depiction blown up by reports of petty crime and theft, police busts and crackdowns, inside Komtar there is an implicit, well-organized order, where the zoning and containment stance toward migrant workers can somehow be gleaned from the placement of various sections that have been carved out by different migrant groupings. Hidden away in some awkward corners on the first level, the Nepalese canteen *Dewi Global Ganga* provides Nepalese utility workers and shop hands a place to meet, where they eat curry and momos, and enjoy drinks while listening to music from Kathmandu. Here, they





Nepalese utility workers and migrants frequent this small restaurant, which serves familiar dishes from “home.”

spend their breaks, lunches, or days off, talking to compatriots in their mother tongue, reading the paper or even exchanging news from home. Up in the main building on the second level, the Burma section of Komtar houses an internet café, several small canteens and dry goods stores, a travel agency and a volunteer office. Many signs along the corridors are written out in their script, while the shops hang posters of popular stars and important icons from Burma, including Aung San Suu Kyi and her father. On the third floor, you find an Indonesian nook of satays and batiks, and then, on the next level the Filipino area, where along the rows of empty commercial spaces you find LBC, a remittance center, karaoke and dining places, a Filipino products store, and a Filipino-run internet café.

While groups largely keep to themselves, they do have a sense where the others are, with the layout perhaps implying an acknowledged unspoken order. It's sort of a systematized smorgasbord of various things Asian—where one can find *batik*, *bagoong* and Burmese publications offering the latest news on Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, among other things, a hidden dimension of what makes “Malaysia truly Asia” as the country continues to draw in successive streams of migration. Although still not a widely recognized focal point such as the Chinatowns or Little Indias elsewhere, once you enter and walk around, it becomes more and more obvious you are stepping into a space that is not only regional but also clearly transnational, where interactions that traverse borders are carried out and sustained; where globalization's rank and file retreats and congregates.

### Malaysia's Migration Regime

Many of today's Komtar 'regulars' are minorities and transients—including the migrant laborer, as well as the occasional 'tourist' and 'overstay', the runaway, the UNHCR card holder, the undocumented, 'paperless' (*walang papel*) and 'illegals', among oth-

er subjects in the Malaysian migration milieu. All these people inhabit the in-between spaces that lie within those two poles, comprising of the citizen on one end, and the *non-citizen*, on the other.

In Malaysia, it is estimated that 1 out of 4 workers is *pekerja asing*, a migrant worker. According to the Immigration Office, 1.649 Million foreign workers were issued with working permits in 2010 (as of November). They work in manufacturing (39%), plantations (14.9%), in construction sites (13.9%), in services (9.5%), agriculture (9%) and households (13.8%). Documented foreign workers mainly come from various parts of Asia—Indonesia (43%), Bangladesh (18.2%), Nepal (13.7%) Myanmar (8.8%), India (5.2%), Vietnam (2.8%), Pakistan (1.6%), Philippines (1.8%), Cambodia (2.7%), and others (1.8%). On top of this huge number of registered workers, there are also an estimated 2 million irregular workers, in effect, doubling the size of the foreign worker population.

In Penang, data coming from the Immigration Department shows 126,135 registered foreign workers in 2010, flowing in from Indonesia, Nepal, Bangladesh, Philippines, Thailand, India, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, all primarily employed as laborers in factories, shop hands in the service sector and domestic workers in households.

### Undervalued, Neglected, Invisible

Despite their large, ever growing numbers, and Malaysia's apparent reliance on them, foreign laborers generally remain undervalued, neglected, and invisible. Marked as non-citizens of Malaysia, accorded limited rights and entitlements, and relegated to a transitory and peripheral location in a larger sociopolitical space, many of Malaysia's migrant workers are constructed as mere visiting, laboring bodies. They are tied to their employers and bound to their jobs by virtue of work permits that specifical-



A lorry for transporting arrested migrant workers in Kuala Lumpur presents a familiar and stark image associated with the Malaysian migration regime, known for its raids, check points and crack downs on undocumented foreigners.

ly indicate the name of their employer, their sector and industry, along with practically absolute discretion of employers to grant or cancel these documents. The unevenness of this scheme is pointed out by one worker who told me, “they can dictate and change the terms of employment, pick and sack workers as they please, but we cannot choose employers or simply leave even when we are clearly disadvantaged.”

Depicted as rigid and overly regulated, Malaysia’s migrant worker regime has been described as resembling conditions of indentured work, where foreign workers are essentially thrust into a form of bonded labor conveniently enshrined in law. For this multitude of ‘low-skilled’ foreign workers, their non-citizenship (that which limits their recognition and equal access to rights, protection, services and entitlements), prohibits them from having a say on the terms of their stay and work conditions, decrees their subjection to heavier regulation and also constitutes them as ‘valuable’ workers, justifying lower wages, longer work hours, restricted mobility, harsh working conditions and poor living situations.

While workers concede that they came to Malaysia “to work,” some will also express that their situation is “*parang walang laya*” (it’s like we don’t have freedom), working “as if we were slaves from old times”. Traveling far in search of employment, many foreign workers contend with restricted movement and freedoms upon arrival, confined to their workplaces and employer-managed living spaces, thrust into a position where they are practically isolated from others and heavily dependent on employers, many of whom would not hesitate to take their workers’ passports or threaten them with deportation to keep them passive and compliant. Disciplined to docility by a combination of intimidation, desperation and isolation, many workers consequently find themselves in a situation that also renders them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation within the workplace and beyond.

### An Agora for Workers in Diaspora

Contending with the restrictions and regulations of non-citizenship outside, in Komtar, migrants appear to reclaim a sense of citizenship and agency. Here, they are not mere workers stripped of their identities, treated as cogs in manufacturing assembly lines or servants in shops and households. In this space, they are also Filipinos or Burmese or Nepalese, and not simply the Other, an imposed categorization whereby Filipino means ‘maid’ and Burmese means ‘illegal’. Here, they are customers consuming their choice products; they are caring family members sending home their hard earned pay; they are compatriots and friends taking part in celebrating successes; extending sympathy and support; and exchanging opinions about their day-to-day travails or chronic “national issues”.

Within the vicinity of Komtar, workers come to send money back home through remittance centers. They purchase goods from shops that sell an assortment of medicine, food items, toiletries, reading materials and other products imported from their countries of origin. They come to eat in the small canteens that offer ‘home-style’ meals reminiscent of shared dishes from their own villages and towns. They surf the net and chat, link up with their families and friends left behind, through Facebook and Yahoo. They get their hair, brows and nails done, pamper themselves with foot and back massages, rejuvenating for another week of non-stop work. They take part in broad-daylight, 2 pm ‘disco’, squeezing in some fun before their 7 pm curfew. They throw parties to celebrate a birthday, or on days off, drink and listen to music or sing karaoke. They practice presentations for church, plan activities, prepare decorations and post announcements, updates and invitations, all of which bear the imprint of an emerging sense of community.

While migrant workers can be seen as appropriating unwanted spaces, which locals normally snub for being “dangerous and



dirty,” migrants are nonetheless constantly reminded of their place, even in this area. Komtar landscape is also associated with almost regular raids and a fixed police and surveillance presence; whereby migrant workers status and ‘place’ is essentially drilled in by crackdowns, round ups and other threats and disruptions posed. The message to migrants that they are only passing through, only here to work and not permitted to settle, still echoes in the halls of Komtar. As such, this side of town tends to resonate with some kind of underground tag, also coinciding with an almost-blanket construction of migrants as *undesirables and illegals*. This in turn is used to justify (and perpetuate) the treatment they receive and the limited rights and freedoms they are given.

Nonetheless, the shop owners, mostly long-time residents and foreign spouses, would allude to a greater rationale for their enterprises, imputing added meaning to the space while emphasizing the importance of remaining in business, because otherwise “where would they (migrant workers) go then?”

At a coffee place downstairs, two young men compare newly issued cards from the UNHCR, while waiting for another companion to take them to Alor Star where relatives and friends are detained. Upstairs, a makeshift table is set for a game of *tongits*, while in the next room, a Filipina domestic helper belts out a lively rendition of “*Top of the World*” by the Carpenters.

In Komtar, people linger on for hours and come even without the intention of buying anything. “I come here to see others and relate with people,” one Filipina domestic worker tells me. “When you come to Malaysia, you are alone, you have no one, in Komtar somehow you do not feel that way,” says another.

In this regard, Komtar somehow similarly functions as an agora for a polity in diaspora, where dispersed, atomized, individual workers, cut off from their homes, families and communities, are able to come together, meet and mingle. There is no encompassing migrant collective consciousness per se nor an explicitly ar-

ticulated notion of common projects and aspirations, but within the different communities, a level of solidarity seems to be shared, nurtured and exercised in ways that at least fill the gaps left by their condition of non-citizenship. Those who are active in this pursuit stress the importance of having a physical space that workers know they can use and run to. This is what prompted some young migrant workers to set up a small office on the second floor to offer “volunteer funeral services” and hospitalization support to foreigners in need, deciding to formalize their organization after countless ad hoc cases of collecting funds, processing documents, and arranging rites for migrants who do not have access to these basic services. Other self-organized support groups provide relief and assistance to workers in distress, at the same time mobilizing compatriots around social and cultural activities that allow them to come together in maintaining and honoring shared values, traditions and practices while overseas.

Komtar is constantly abuzz with a certain degree of dynamism and activity, teeming with possibility, even without yet posing any direct challenge to this existing status quo and other deeply embedded injustices migrant workers face. While enjoying and carving out their own tenuous nooks and crannies, migrant worker expressions underscore that they do not intend to threaten their employment and stay. They express a level of human agency, reclaim a sense of citizenship, and assert a sense of belonging, *a right to be here*. Even through some token symbolic presence and local imprint, these are nonetheless subtle articulations made in an uneven terrain that migrants carefully tread. For now, these everyday acts—seemingly mundane practices almost collectivized by common experience and amplified by sheer number—glare against conditions that would isolate or make migrant workers invisible and inconsequential. As these communities take root however, it will be exciting to observe how the spaces they engender will evolve and where deepening solidarities may lead.



A corridor of empty and vacated shops depicts a typical weekday at Komtar, which transforms into a bustling commercial center especially on Sundays, when most foreign workers take their day-off.

# Indonesian Female Migrant Workers and Their Narratives

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// Today is the *O-bon* holiday. Only the three of us are still working. Why [we] Cambodians have to work while the Japanese [may] have a holiday?" states an entry in a diary written by a 27 year old Cambodian male migrant worker in Japan.<sup>1</sup> He and his two country mates had been put to work as manual laborers in a supermarket chain in Fukuoka prefecture. This story only came to light after a police investigation and the subsequent crack down on what could be considered as human trafficking, as he and others were lured to work in Japan on the promise that they would be hired as IT staff.

His case may be understood as a typical situation faced by millions of illegal migrants in our contemporary globalised world, regardless of their citizenship and the host country. The above case will most likely be buried away in official statistics under the category "illegal migrant". However, his case marks a sharp contrast for general public, in particular for people in Japan who believe in the country's modernization project for the welfare of the individual over the course of industrialization. This belief can only be juxtaposed with this particular Cambodian migrant worker and the painstakingly detailed entries in his diary recording the miserable working condition he and his fellow workers had to face on a daily basis (even on the *O-bon* holiday) as an (illegal) migrant worker. That illegal migrants have been the pillars of modernizing Japan is not noteworthy, but the fact that he was keeping a diary is important not only as a sensational attention-grabbing headline for the sale of newspapers. It highlights the sentiment shared among Japanese readers whose society has been struggling to humanize working conditions since the postwar period.

Migrant workers have been actively writing and sharing their stories. The conventional form of migrants' written expression is letters to family members. Many Burmese and Laotian migrant workers in Thailand have used this form to convey their personal life stories of crisis, fear, hope and dreams [see Koetsawang 2001]. Filipino migrant workers also write letters to their family members to maintain personal communication, although mobile phones have now displaced the primacy of letter writing. Besides letters, some migrants take notes on things they see, hear, and experience during their time in abroad [See Ventura 2006; 2007]. And, as in the case of this particular Cambodian migrant, migrants keep diaries as they often find consolation in keeping track of the entries. Migrant communication is normally meant as a private record, or if it is for limited circulation, usually only amongst friends or relatives.

But migrants also write short stories. Wiset Sanmano [2006], a Laotian migrant working in a factory in Bangkok, has written an outstanding short story, not in his native tongue, but in very eloquent Thai<sup>2</sup> –as if he were consciously discussing the migrant situation for a Thai audience. Standing apart from letters and

diary, the short story as a form of literature contains the author's personal impressions, fantasy and worldview – elements that are part of our modern expression in creating a representation of social, political and personal realities.

It is in this literary context of migrants' writings that Indonesian migrants are seriously engaging themselves by writing short stories (some are novels) to narrate their personal lives and experiences as migrants, for the public to read. Between 2006 and 2010, there were more than a dozen collections of short stories and novels, as well as hundreds of poems published in national and local newspapers throughout Indonesia. Their writings document and raise issues on working conditions abroad from the perspective of a manual migrant worker working within a global capitalist world. As Sanmano's short story expresses, their works are sensible statements from migrants to the general public so that society can understand their vulnerability. Interestingly, all of these published narratives are written by women migrants who have worked in Hong Kong and Taiwan as domestic helpers. In this way, their narratives differ from Sanmano's writing which focuses on male characters (and are written from a male perspective). In a sense, their writing stems from their personal existence and experiences as female migrant workers.

The feminization of labour is also a salient characteristic of migration from Indonesia to Hong Kong and Taiwan where the labor market is in need of cheap domestic workers and caregivers for elderly. More than 70 percent of the officially documented Indonesian migrant workers annually are women. It is assumed that increasing migration of women might be attributed to the lack of employment opportunities at home and the need to earn better incomes. Yet, migrants' narratives tell us different stories. Economic reason alone is not the only push factor for these women to take the risk of working abroad, given the nature of their domestic work, which is often characterized by a higher exposure to physical and sexual abuse from employers. Their written narratives provide an honest description of the complex and multifaceted reasons for migration, ranging from a passion for adventures, an escape from social duties in their society, forgetting past events (such as failed relationships and marital breakup), an aspiration for personal freedom, and so on. These in turn are all shaped by the conditions they have to face at home and the fantasy of having a problem-free life abroad. In that way, migrants' written expressions not only offer a clear window to the real world of migrants as they experience and understand it, but also serves as a narrative for a change.

Maria Bo Niok, for examples, has written two novels, i.e.: *Ranting Sakura* (*Sakura branches*) [2007a] and *Sumi: Jejak Cinta Perempuan Gila* (*Sumi: The Love Trail of A Mad Woman*) [2008a], and one collection of short stories, *Geliat Sang Kung Yan* (*Writhers of the Kung Yan*) [2007b]. Each takes its story from facts based



on her life and experience as a migrant worker. Maria Bo Niok is the nom de plume of Siti Mariam Ghozali. Born in 1966 in Wonosobo (Central Java), Ghozali had to do manual labour from an early age for a living. She used to run her own petty stall selling rice and birds in a traditional market in her hometown, and only after a painful divorce did she decide to try her luck to become a domestic worker in Hong Kong. Her first stint lasted for two years (1996-98), and after a short break, soon followed in Taiwan for two years (1998-2000), and once again in Hong Kong for four years (2001-05).

*Geliat Sang Kung Yan* offers a very fascinating view of life abroad in Hong Kong from the perspective of a female migrant worker. It challenges our understanding of the agency of female migrant workers who are often depicted as poor, weak, illiterate migrants, or defenseless victims of globalization – as in the case of the Cambodian migrant in Japan. Although working life as a domestic worker is hard and difficult, *Geliat Sang Kung Yan* provides a life that is full and yet complex, far from being pigeonholed into a single aberration. Its narratives are also entertaining with clear expression of her sense of wit, and studded with jokes, satire and self-mockery. As these short stories entertain their readers, they empower fellow migrant workers as its readers to find the courage to seek possibilities and to overcome any “problem” they face as woman-migrant-workers. And this quality holds an important key for migrant workers to read these short stories written by their own fellows.

A recent released movie, “*Minggu Pagi di Victoria Park*” (2010) also takes the life of a female migrant worker in Hong Kong as its storyline. The movie is a step forward by middle-class cinema artists attempting to bring up the situation of migrant workers before the Indonesian public – since migrants and their lives (amazingly and sadly!) have never entered the literary world as a subject or inspiration for middle-class writers in Indonesia. Nonetheless, it could never replace the significance of literary expression penned by the migrant workers themselves. And this leads us to acknowledge the political and cultural implications of their writings. The fact that migrant workers are now capable of speaking for and taking care of themselves, shows a mode of

independence; a capacity to articulate their interests as female migrants; and persistent efforts to defend themselves even though they are lacking support from many parts of their society.

Short stories and novels penned by Indonesian migrant workers may inform similar readings of other forms of written expressions by fellow migrants from other Southeast Asian countries. These let us know of the ways in which migrants keep track of their own records as a means of communication among themselves as authors and readers – setting a different mode from oral tradition, that intensively captures the meanings of their journey and work as a migrant worker. And more importantly, they show us migrant’s self-efforts in overcoming their work-problems abroad and how they can gain more autonomy over their own lives.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See: 「IT 不法就労-技術者名目のカンボジア人過酷労働と差別,日記に」. *Mainichi Shimbun*, 19 October 2010. Author’s translation.

<sup>2</sup>I thank Suphawut Laohachaiaboon for his patience in helping me to read and understand this story.



Left: Maria Bo Niok's *Ranting Sakura* Right: Maria Bo Niok's *Geliat Sang Kung Yan*

# The “*Baybayin* Stones” of Ticao, Masbate (Philippines)

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The recent sensational discovery of two stones inscribed in the ancient Philippine *baybayin* script on Ticao island in the Visayas has generated a flurry of questions and speculations among Philippine scholars and in the popular imagination. A major Philippine television station has even done a few segments on the discovery and is currently putting together a more substantial documentary. These are the first stones inscribed with the clearly identifiable *baybayin* script to have ever been found in the Philippines. One of the stones is a roughly triangular slab measuring approximately 57 cm long, 44 cm wide and 11 cm thick weighing around 30 kilos. The smaller stone is oblong in shape with dimensions of 20 x 18 cm and 6 cm thick. The larger slab has writing on both sides. The inscription on one side has 56 symbols while its opposite face has 86. The smaller stone has writing only on one side with a total of around 16 symbols. Some parts of the inscription on the large tablet have been damaged and it is possible that parts of the stone may have broken off on both the left and right sides.

The *baybayin* is a type of alphasyllabary or *abugida* writing system which ultimately traces its provenance, like the majority of Southeast Asian scripts, to Southern India. The word “baybay” for its part means “to spell” though it could also refer to “sea-shore.” Each symbol in the script stands for a consonant combined with a vowel with a default value of “a.” Depending on the position of a diacritical mark called “kudlit” above or below the symbol, it can be followed by an “e” or an “o.” The Tagalog *baybayin* has a total of 17 symbols. The first European chroniclers who arrived in the Philippines such as Pedro Chirino and Antonio de Morga recorded the popular use of this script among the inhabitants of the archipelago. Indeed, one of the first books printed in the Philippines in Tagalog, the *Doctrina Christiana* (1593) was printed with a xylographic press in both roman and *baybayin* scripts. An attempt in 1620 by the Spanish friar, Francisco Lopez, to add a cross-shaped “virama” symbol, or vowel killer, in order to

facilitate the writing of independent consonants and make the reading of the script easier did not prevent the roman alphabet from eventually gaining dominance. Very few fragments, letters and signatures written on paper have survived to the present day. Philippine nationalists and revolutionaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century evinced a fascination with these early writings systems as proof of an advanced “pre-colonial” Philippine civilization. Today, the *baybayin* system does not have any widespread contemporary use. Children are exposed to it only in the most perfunctory manner in schools and do not actually learn it. Perhaps its main use today is as a type of ornamental font used by various government and non-government organizations or even as logos for commercial enterprises. As part of a “cultural revivalism” of sorts in the digital domain, a “*baybayin* community” has sprung up in the Internet where mainly the artistic and cultural value



Close up of *Babayin* script on large stone that was unearthed





Principal Virgie Almodal with the Stones

of *baybayin* is celebrated by means of fonts, tattoos and other paraphernalia of interest to young Filipinos living in various parts of the world in search of their roots. Only the Mangyan and Tagbanua ethnic minorities continue to use their *baybayin*-type scripts as part of their persistent though increasingly endangered writing traditions.

The two stones had actually been dug up by elementary students within the grounds of the Rizal Elementary School located in the municipality of Monreal on Ticao Island, Masbate more than 10 years ago (2000). During the intervening period, the stones had just been placed near the entrance of a classroom and used to wipe the mud off the slippers and shoes of the students and teachers. It was only last April of this year that the new principal, Virgie Espares Almodal, realized the value of the stones for the community. She realized that these could be a source of pride among students who could be taught by means of these that their ancestors were not illiterates but possessed their own writings. Some grade school students were immediately put to work cleaning the stones. However, these untrained “restorers” unfortunately used a sharp metal implement (allegedly a nail), to make the symbols “clearer.” Almodal then had the stones exhibited on a specially built stand in front of the school for a few weeks. It was only after some members of the community had voiced concerns that the stones might be stolen were these taken down and deposited in a safer place.

Prof. Francisco Datar, a native of nearby Magallanes, Sorsogon, was then contacted by a relative on the island who thought he might be interested in taking a look at the stones. Prof. Datar, who teaches at the Department of Anthropology at the University of the Philippines at Diliman, Quezon City, made a preliminary survey and immediately informed the Philippine National Museum about the find. He then quickly formed the “UP Ticao, Masbate Anthropological Project Team” consisting mainly of his colleagues Prof. Ricardo Nolasco (Dept. of Linguistics, UP Diliman), Arnold Azurin (UP Archeological Studies Program), Ramon Guillermo (Department of Filipino and Philippine Literature, UP-Diliman) and Myfel Joseph Paluga (Department of Social Sciences, UP-Mindanao).

Due to the problematic circumstances of discovery, it is only right that the scientific community should be guarded about issues of authenticity surrounding the inscribed stones. However, it is still too early to make any definitive statement about these

questions in either a positive or negative direction. More detailed work still has to be done in order to clarify the various mysteries clouding the provenance of the stones and the nature of the actual inscriptions themselves. Very few artifacts have been discovered in the Philippines bearing evidence of the ancient scripts which were once said to have been widely used on the islands. Indeed, the lack of reliable information about another famous artifact with *baybayin* writing, the so-called Calatagan pot, which was discovered in 1961, has led to perennial and unresolved questions about its authenticity. Lingering doubts about the actual origin of the so-called Laguna Copperplate, dated 900 AD, in Sanskrit and Javanese language and written in the Kawi writing system but found in Laguna Province of Luzon island, continue to persist. A more recent discovery, this time excavated *in situ* in an archeological site in Intramuros, Manila, is another pot with an inscription on the shoulder which seems to be in yet another still unknown script. Other objects with short fragments of text have also been found but have never been read due to the lack of knowledge about their seemingly *sui generis* scripts. Due to the paucity of *baybayin* samples from the ancient past, the field of palaeography has never been as developed in the Philippines as it has been in Indonesia which possesses a much richer store of ancient inscriptions on copper, stone and other materials.

Fieldwork on Ticao island itself was conducted by the UP team a few weeks after Prof. Datar’s announcement of the discovery. Dozens of interviews were conducted among community members in order to cross-check and verify the accounts of the individuals directly involved in the discovery of the stones. Anthropological site mapping was done by Prof. Paluga of the vicinity where the stones were said to have been found in order to look for traces of where dwellings may have existed in the past.



A page from the *Doctrina Christiana* in Spanish and the *Babayin* script

## The “*Baybayin* Stones” of Ticao, Masbate (Philippines)



Prof. Datar (left) and Prof. Ricardo Nolasco (right)

Finally, the team also strove to get as accurate as possible images of the writing in order to develop faithful transcriptions of the inscriptions. Prof. Datar also brought in a group of physicists led by Prof. Maricor Soriano who did 3-D imaging of the inscriptions in order to help settle some unresolved problems in transcription and in order to make the most accurate possible record of the inscriptions.

The results of the fieldwork have not yet uncovered any *prima facie* evidence pointing to the possibility that the inscribed stones are a hoax or a deliberate forgery. Therefore, the most pressing question which the researchers currently face are the probable dates of provenance of the inscribed stones.

Some characteristics of the inscriptions such as the seeming presence of spaces between words, the lack of vertical bars usually separating phrases and sentences in *baybayin* text, and the presence of diacritical marks with an outwardly similar appearance to the cross-shaped “virama” symbol introduced during the Spanish era, seem to belie a pre-colonial origin.

However, it might still be prudent to not immediately foreclose such a possibility until the inscriptions themselves can be read and the ambiguous symbols and diacritical marks given more or less certain individual values. Several anomalous features such as the apparent lack of diacritical marks on one side of the large tablet and perceptible divergences in character sets used in the inscriptions on the opposite faces of the large tablet raise even more questions. Were the two sides of the large stone slab inscribed by different persons at different times? Is the inscription on the smaller stone contemporaneous with those on the large tablet or is it from another place and time? 20<sup>th</sup> or even 20<sup>th</sup> century dates of provenance for the inscriptions might also not be out of the question.

Though there is as yet no complete proposed reading of the stones, some word-forms have been identified which strongly indicate that the stones may be written in a Visayan language with probable traces of the local Ticaonon language. Some word-forms which seem to surface in the text are apparent borrowings from Malay and Javanese such as “*bahaya*” (danger) which in modern Visayan is “*baya*.” Other possible word-forms are “*batahala*” and “*balahala*” which are names for an ancient Vi-

sayan deity which in its original Javanese form is “*barahala*” but is rendered today as “*bathala*” in modern Visayan. Other possible word-forms in Visayan and the local language seem to point to a ritual or religious usage of the stones.

If the style of the inscriptions and some lexical traits are taken at face value, questions might be raised as to how a variant of the *baybayin* system very similar to the Tagalog system, with apparent spacings between words and “virama”-looking diacritical marks arrived on the island of Ticao, Masbate? Moreover, how is it possible that it should contain ostensibly archaic lexical items of a seemingly non-Christian derivation (if these are indeed valid readings)? A theory which might account for these questions is a possible connection to 18<sup>th</sup> century religious revivalisms and so-called “nativist revolts” in the Visayas. However, the anthropological and historical contextual frame of such a theory still has to be constructed, and this task must necessarily be accomplished around a plausible reading of the inscriptions that can overcome and explain their purported anomalous characteristics. Other promising research directions must also be identified and pursued in a collaborative and interdisciplinary manner.

However one cannot discount the possibility that the authenticity of the “*Baybayin* Stones” of Ticao may never be resolved to the satisfaction of all parties. These may also turn out to be of a more recent origin than may be acceptable to those who wish for an earlier date in the distant past. Whatever may be the case, this discovery may jolt the Philippine scholarly community to give more attention to developing *baybayin* studies with greater historical and anthropological depth. These inscribed stones may also provide certain new and exciting perspectives on the study of Visayan history. Finally, it might provide a channel through which young people and schoolchildren might learn more about their own history and culture.

The UP Ticao-Masbate Anthropological Project Team, with some other invited speakers knowledgeable on the subject, discussed their preliminary results with a conference held on August 5-6, 2011 on the island itself. The other convenors of the conference are the Department of Education (Region 5), the Local Government of Monreal, Masbate, the Masbate Provincial Government, the National Museum and 170+ Talaytayan MLE Incorporated. Another conference will also be held in Manila in the coming months.



# Casinos in Border Towns in the Mekong Sub-Region

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The Mekong sub-region covers 2.6 million square km, and has a combined population of around 326 million. It covers Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar and southern China (Yunnan and Quang si). The region is rich with natural resources, such as timber, minerals, coal, oil and gas and abundant water resources support agriculture and fisheries providing energy in the form of hydropower. These resources remain relatively underused.

In the early of 1990's, no one envisaged that connectivity within the Mekong sub-region would become a reality. Yet, it did so after politic turbulence in Cambodia subsided with subsequent elections held in 1993. In no less than 10 years after the election, investment in infrastructure took place; roads, and in particular bridges, were gradually upgraded or built, leading to the realization of regional connectivity.

While connectivity means connecting one area or one country to another by mean of infrastructure (roads, bridges, transportation), it also means connecting economically, through trade, tourism and investment. It also means people in one area or country become linked to other areas in the Mekong sub-region, including those outside of it. This has led to a substantial cultural exchange among people within and outside the sub-region.

Infrastructure development is a key element in the overall development in the region and it has gradually seen improvement and expansion. In particular, it has been the transport corridors which have operated as the chief means of achieving connectivity. The overall objective of infrastructure development has been to transform these transport corridors into fully fledged economic corridors that invigorate trade, investment, tourism, etc. This brings about multiple benefits of improved transport linkages which are expected to reach remote, land-locked areas in the sub-region.

What is clear is that this infrastructure development has facilitated cross border trade, investment and tourism along the economic corridors. This has also spread along smaller routes in the sub-region, facilitating the development of border towns and other economic zones as well as encouraging the increasing mobility of people, as well as outward movement.

However, at the same time, infrastructure development has facilitated illicit or unethical activities in the sub-region, such as drugs trafficking, human trafficking, labor migration (illegal), the smuggling of goods, and prostitution along these newly opening roads. And some of these border towns have been witness to the rise of a new economic phenomenon: casinos. Though not illegal in some countries, they do pose a kind of threat to human security and safety as will be discussed shortly. Parallel to roads and transport development, border towns in some countries, such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, have undergone intense

development. Border towns in these countries (excluding Phnom Penh) such as Poipet, Bavet, Pailin, O Smach, Chrey Thum, Koh Kong, etc. have been selected as prime sites for the construction of casinos. In this article, I focus only on casinos located in some towns in Cambodia bordering with Vietnam.

In Cambodia, casinos have become one of the largest industries the country and are increasingly being seen as potential revenue generators for the State. The chief of casino management at the Ministry of Economy and Finance said that casinos in border towns located in Poipet, Banteay Meanchey Province near Thailand, and in Bavet near Vietnam had long proved profitable for Cambodia.<sup>1</sup> In 2008, Cambodia earned US\$19 million in tax from casinos yet there was a decline in 2009 and 2010 from US\$17 million and US\$16 million due to a drop in tourist arrivals and a border dispute with Thailand. Only Poipet border town, home to a number of casinos, located next to Aranyaprathet of Thailand, has a combined tax income of over US\$7.5 to US\$12.5 million (300 – 500 million baht) every year. This town is believed to be the largest gaming center in Asia.

Travelling from Phnom Penh through the Southern corridor<sup>2</sup> (Road no. 1) to Cambodia-Vietnam border, there are 32 casinos in the whole country. Interestingly, 9-10 small to large scale casinos are located in Bavet on this corridor. Bavet used to be one of the poorest provinces of Cambodia but casinos now form one of the most important sources of income for the town. This has seen Bavet transform into a fast growing entertainment centre, and is now the second largest casino center after Poipet.

Bavet is fast becoming the home of casinos in the region for the following reasons. First, Bavet, is around 90 km from Ho Chi Minh City, and located in the Southern Corridor (connecting Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City) where the movement of people, including tourists and gamblers is high. Its location as a border town makes it easy for Vietnamese to access, crossing the border with facilities offered by the casinos, such as comfortable vans. Secondly, the "Moc Bai Economic Zone," an area just across



Southern Corridor [Source: ADB]

## Casinos in Border Towns in the Mekong Sub-Region

the border to Vietnam from Bavet, has also been developed. A huge duty free hypermarket has sprung up with a variety of goods from many countries, such as the US, Thailand, Malaysia, Japan, etc., and it attracts a large number of Vietnamese from Ho Chi Minh City and other provinces in the Mekong Delta. Some gamblers can combine the trip to the casino and hypermarket at the same time, and tourists who mainly came for shopping, can try their luck in the casino as well. Finally, the casinos in Bavet and in other town bordering Vietnam attract Vietnamese gamblers who are prohibited from entering local casinos in their country as Vietnamese casinos are only open to foreigners and overseas Vietnamese. The Cambodian government has seen a great opportunity to attract Vietnamese gamblers whose economy is growing fast; these new consumers are ready to take risks to lose their money in gambling through their desire to win.

Kith Thieng, the owner of the US\$100 million Titan King Casino in Bavet said Vietnamese gamblers are their prime targets. The Titan King Casino, one of the largest casinos, opened in February 2010 and is less than 1 km from the Bavet border gate. Facilities offered by casinos are very attractive to the gamblers. Regular gamblers from Vietnam (mostly the Vietnamese) especially in Bavet area will get free pickups and VIP cards coming with free meals and, in some cases, gamblers will receive free accommodation. Moreover, in general, most casinos in Bavet as well as Cambodia offer private tables and VIP rooms for those wishing to bet large amounts of money.

Through observing some casinos in Bavet, I found out that almost all gamblers were Vietnamese and interestingly the majority of them women. Most of them come from Ho Chi Minh City, some from the province in Mekong Delta, such as Tay Ninh (a province sharing border with Cambodia), Can Tho which is located in the centre of the delta, and other provinces. In particular, Ho Chi Minh City and Can Tho are the provinces where the economy is growing the fastest.

The Vietnam-Cambodia border in the extreme south-west of Vietnam, also hosts the "Ha Tien Vegas Casino" which is Kampot's first casino with an impressive nine storeys. Opened in September 2010, it is now becoming increasingly popular, as more and more tourists use the Preak Chak-Xa Xia border gates to enter and exit Cambodia. It is conveniently located not far from Preak Chak border gate in Kampot province which is opposite the Xa Xia border gate in Ha Tien, Kien Giang province. These border gates are not far from the Vietnamese Phu Quoc Island, situated in the Gulf of Thailand, which has also become increasingly popular as the Vietnamese government tries to promote it as the most attractive tourist spot in the Gulf. A number of tourists who visit the island can cross the border to visit or participate in gambling at Ha Tien Vegas Casino.

The first US\$2 million casino, Top Diamond Casino, was also opened on 21 January 2010 in a special economic zone (SEZ)<sup>3</sup> which lies on the border between Cambodia and Vietnam, in Phnom Den, Takeo province in Cambodia. This area is bordering An Giang province of Vietnam. The casino has been constructed about 1 km from the international border check point of Vietnam 'Tinh Bien'. There is also a plan to build a new US\$4.5 million three-star hotel soon in Phnom Den SEZ. These facilities aim to increasingly attract potential Vietnamese gamblers.

An Giang, a populated province, connects to Can Tho which is considered as a centre of Mekong Delta where the economy



Duty free hypermarket at Moc Bai border gate,  
Tay Ninh province in Vietnam  
Photo by Thanyathip Sripana

is well developed. The chief of police at the Phnom Den International checkpoint, has said that the number of tourists who entered Cambodia through this crossing have remained stable despite the world financial crisis. Around 80 to 100 tourists (officially) crossed the border every day in 2010, a figure that remains unchanged from 2009. He hopes that it will increase due to the new casino that will open.

Another spot lying on the Cambodia-Vietnam border where we can find at least 2 casinos, is in Chrey Thum village in Koh Thum district in Kandal province, 80 km from Phnom Penh and 160 km from Ho Chi Minh City. This area is situated not far from Chrey Thum-Khanh Binh border gates<sup>4</sup> which is separated by a small Binh Di waterway and can be reached by road no. 21 in Cambodia. Opposite to the casino complex, Long Binh big market is situated in Vietnam. This market is in a village of the An Phu district of An Giang province and supplies goods and commodities to both Vietnamese and Cambodian local people, as well as goods and agricultural products to casinos. Situated in this area, the casino can attract Vietnamese traders and businessmen from Vietnam who form the majority of gamblers. As this area is only 80 km from Phnom Penh, gamblers from the capital can visit easily, mostly on weekends and holidays. The casinos are only a few hundred meters from the Khanh Binh border gate. More than 100 Vietnamese arrive there every day, according to the employee in Crown Casino (Chrey Thum).

### Impact on Human Security and Safety

However, one of the unfortunate side effects of gambling is that an uncountable number of gamblers have lost money and fallen into debt. This may include the forfeiture of properties, cars, homes and land leading to conflict within the family and divorce. The conflict has cost lives in some cases where a wife tried to kill her husband who refused to pay her debts brought about by the gambling. This is the case in Long An, southern Vietnam. Tran Thuy Lieu lost over 1 billion dong (US\$47,000) during 22 gambling trips to Cambodia at the end of December 2010. She urged Le Hoang Hung, her husband, to sell their house to pay her gambling debts, but he refused. So she set him on fire while he was asleep in his bed leading to his death 10 days later.<sup>5</sup>





Goods traveling from Vietnam to Cambodia. This is in the neutral zone between Bavet and Moc Bai border gates. Photo by Thanyathip Sripana

Gamblers who lose may be accompanied by staff of the casino to their residence in order to claim the debt from the gamblers' family. Some anecdotal stories say state that some Vietnamese who lost in a casino in Bavet were asked to give one kidney when they did not have money to pay back debts.<sup>6</sup> This information has yet to be verified. There is also information saying that the winners with a big sum of money face the risk of being murdered when they have already left casino. This has happened in the case of some casinos in Poipet in Cambodia,<sup>7</sup> Savannakhet<sup>8</sup> and Luangnamtha in the north of Laos.

While infrastructure development facilitates connectivity in the sub-region, improved transportation facilitates the mobility of gamblers as well. A long bridge connecting road no. 1 in Neak Luong is being built (funded by Japan) in 2012 and is projected to be completed by 2015. It is supposed to be the longest bridge in Cambodia and will certainly facilitate the mobility of people and goods, as well as investment and tourism. Furthermore, it will facilitate the travel of tourists who want to cross the border to Ho Chi Minh City and vice versa. Some of them may stop at casinos in Bavet and enjoy gambling. Moreover, it would certainly facilitate the trip of the gamblers from Phnom Penh or elsewhere to Bavet.

Infrastructure development, in particular that of roads and bridges, is one of the major factors that facilitates the movement of tourists and gamblers. In another part of the sub-region, another bridge is currently scheduled to open in November 2011 and will stretch across the Mekong River between Nakhon Phanom (Thailand) and Tha Khek (Laos) and a casino is supposed to open afterward in Tha Khek. It aims to attract Thai gamblers from many provinces in Thailand as in the case of Savan Vegas Casino in Savannakhet in Laos which was opened in 2008 after the opening of the bridge across Mekong river.

Though infrastructure development is not the prime cause of the spread of casino operations, it does facilitate easy access to these complexes. At the same time, this leads to attendant issues such as the mobility of various illicit activities, which can be considered a threat to human security and the livelihood of people in the areas. This requires further research to see how casinos

transform border zones in what is a rapidly transforming area.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bavet is the name of an international border gate and a border town in Svay Rieng province, Cambodia. Moc Bai Bavet is the name of an international border gate and a border town in Tay Ninh province, Vietnam.

<sup>2</sup> The Southern Corridor runs from Dawei on the Myanmar coast, then through Bangkok, then through the Thailand-Cambodia border at Aranyaprathet-Poipet. From this point, it separates into two routes. The first one goes eastward through Siem Reap, Stung Treng and then through the border with Viet Nam and onward to Quy Nhon. The second route is from Aranyaprathet-Poipet to Phnom Penh, to Ho Chi Minh City, and extends to Vung Tau.

<sup>3</sup> Construction in the Phnom Den SEZ is expected to finish in 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Khanh Binh border gate is in An Giang Province, Vietnam.

<sup>5</sup> Discussion with people from Ho Chi Minh City; and see, "Vietnam: wife set journalist husband on fire," *China Daily*, February 22, 2011, (Accessed 1 August, 2011), [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2011-02/23/content\\_12066912.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2011-02/23/content_12066912.htm); "Detention extended for journalist-torching wife," *Tuoi Tre News*, June 30, 2011, (Accessed 1 August, 2011) <http://tuoitrenews.vn/cmmlink/tuoitrenews/society/detention-extended-for-journalist-torching-wife-1.35639>.

<sup>6</sup> Discussion with people from Ho Chi Minh City; and see, Quoc Quang and Minh Dung, "Ladies and gambling tragedies," July 4, 2011, (Accessed 20 July, 2011) <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/en/special-report/5168/ladies-and-gambling-tragedies.html>.

<sup>7</sup> According to some people in Aranyaprathet district, Sakaeo province.

<sup>8</sup> According to some people in Mukdahan, Nakhon Phanom.



Participants listening to discussion at the Forum

## 8th Kyoto University Southeast Asian Forum and KU Japanese Alumni Association

Mario Lopez  
Assistant Professor CSEAS

On 11-12 February 2011, Kyoto University and the Kyoto Union Club (KUC) an alumni organization based in Thailand and made up of mainly Thai alumni who were at Kyoto University, held a joint Kyoto University Southeast Asian Forum at the Mandarin Hotel in central Bangkok. On the 11<sup>th</sup>, an annual party was held at the Bangkok Liaison Office for the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies whereby former alumni gathered to talk and exchange ideas. Former President of Kyoto University Oike Kazuo gave a toast and the present Executive Vice President Shiota Kohei offered greetings to all present. Also present were the President of the Japanese Alumni Association, Sonoda Mitsuhiro as well as the President of KUC, Sucharit Koontanakulvong.

On this occasion, the forum played host to an important theme “What to do and not to do during an Earthquake.” This theme was all the more salient considering that Japan was struck by one of the deadliest earthquakes in living history, the “Great East Japan Earthquake” on 11 March 2011. All presentations dealt with the topic of Earthquakes and how Thailand can be prepared for them. Former President Oike, gave a thought provoking discussion on the comparative severity of earthquake mechanisms focusing on Japan and Thailand. In his presenta-

tion he offered a detailed overview of the historical overviews of earthquakes in Japan and how the historical documentation of seismic activity has helped in reconstructing past seismic historical events. The message from this presentation was the importance of integrating disaster risk reduction in a coordinated manner to alleviate the threat of disasters, offer regional tsunami disaster risk assessment as well as mitigation strategies. Other presentations, focused on seismic resistant design overviews (Prof. Panitan Lukkunaprasit), underground structures under earthquake loading (Dr. Wanchai Teparaksa), the effects of earthquakes on underground structures (Suchatvee Suwansawat, President of Thailand Underground and Tunneling Group), the safety of Dams (Mr. Veerachai Cahaisrakaew, Assistant Director, Civil Maintenance Department), and the extension of the MRT Purple Line Project in Bangkok. The session was closed with final concluding remarks from Shimizu Hiromu, the Director of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University. Overall, the event was a success and will continue to play a role in strengthening ties between Kyoto University and institutions, networks and associations in Southeast Asia.



# International Visiting Scholars

CSEAS is accepting applicants semiannually for about 14 positions for scholars and researchers who work on South-east Asia, or any one of the countries in that region, to spend 3 to 12 months in Kyoto to conduct research, write, or pursue other scholarly activities in connection with their field of study. Since 1975, more than 270 distinguished scholars have availed themselves of the Center's considerable scholarly resources and enjoyed the invigorating atmosphere of scenic Kyoto, the ancient capital of Japan and the main repository of the country's cultural treasures, to pursue their interests in Southeast Asian Area Studies. The Center's multi-disciplinary character and the diverse research interests of its faculty offer visiting scholars an ideal opportunity for the exchange of ideas and the cultivation of comparative perspectives. The highly competitive selection process has brought to the Center in recent years researchers from Southeast Asian countries, Bangladesh, China, Korea, and western countries including the United States and France. The visiting fellows represent various basic disciplines in their study of Southeast Asia, and their official posts in their home institutions include teacher, researcher, librarian, journalist, and NGO worker. Information and Technology (IT) experts who conduct research on Southeast Asia are also joining the Center, not only to manage various database systems but also to construct academic networks for area study throughout the world. Successful applicants receive an appropriate stipend to cover international travel, housing, and living expenses in Kyoto. Research funds will also be provided to facilitate his/her work. Funds will also be allocated for domestic travel, subject to government regulations,

and a number of other facilities are available to visiting scholars. Fellows will be expected to reside in Kyoto for the duration of their fellowship period. Fellows are normally invited to deliver a public lecture during their term at the Center and encouraged to submit an article for possible publication in the Center's quarterly journal, *Southeast Asian Studies* and to contribute to the on-line journal *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*. CSEAS also received researchers, both Japanese and foreign, who visit on their own funds or on external fellowships.



Visiting Scholars with Faculty members at a get-together. Oct 2011

Name	Period	Affiliation/Position	Research Topic
Oo, Khin	04.01.2011~09.30.2011	Professor, Rice Specialization, Hmawbi Campus, Yezin Agricultural University	Concept and Practices of Agricultural Extension in Myanmar
Munprasit, Aussanee	05.01.2011~10.31.2011	Assistant Training Department Chief for Technical (ATDC/T), Training Department, Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center	Community-base Coastal Fisheries Management in Southeast Asia
Intarasiripong, Jirapan	06.01.2011~11.31.2011	Librarian (Head Circulation), Circulation Department, Central Library, King Mongkut's University of Technology	Study of Cataloging-in-Publication Data for Transliteration in Asian : Pilot Study in Thailand
Wibisono, Joannes	06.01.2011~11.31.2011	Editor, Indonesian Service of Radio Netherlands	Facism in Dutch East Indies and the Origin of Suharto's Dictatorship
Djawad, Muhammad Iqbal	07.01.2011~12.31.2011	Associate Professor, Faculty of Marine Science and Fisheries, Hasanuddin University	Climate Change Adaptation of Aquaculture In Eastern Part of Indonesia
Milner, Anthony Crothers	08.01.2011~11.30.2011	Professor of Asian History, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University	A Historical/Anthropological Study of 1890s Pahang

List of Visiting Research Fellows, Visiting Researchers, and Visiting Project Researchers at CSEAS

## Publications News



Kyoto Area Studies on Asia (in Japanese) No. 23

***Reconfiguring Cambodian Rural Villages*****Kobayashi Satoru, 2011. Kyoto University Press**

This book is a pioneering ethnographic study of Cambodian rural society after the rule of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-79). Based on long-term anthropological fieldwork in central Cambodia, the book uncovered the actual processes and conditions that informed socio-cultural reconfigurations of Cambodian rural villages after the turmoil of civil war and totalitarian state rule in the 1970s. The book describes, analyses and reconstructs regional history through local narratives which illustrate not only the unique characteristics of contemporary village lives but also the continuity and change of social structure and culture in Cambodia.



Kyoto Area Studies on Asia (in Japanese) No. 24

***Fishing and Subsistence Strategies in the Celebes Sea: Ethno-Archaeological Approach to Area Studies*****Ohno Rintaro, 2011. Kyoto University Press**

This book investigates the history of marine exploitation and the development of subsistence strategies in the Celebes Sea as one of the maritime worlds that exist in Insular Southeast Asia. The Celebes Sea is a conceptual zone based on a historical and ecological background which includes Borneo Island in Malaysia, Mindanao Island in Philippines, and Sulawesi Island in Indonesia, together with two small islands groups, the Sulu Islands in Philippines and Sangihe-Talaud Islands in Indonesia. The temporal framework of this book covers a period from the late Pleistocene to Holocene until present times (over 30,000 years), but mainly focuses after Neolithic times (about 4,000 years) corresponding to the history of the Austronesian speaking people who are currently the major population stretching across Insular Southeast Asia and Oceania.



Kyoto CSEAS Series on Asian Studies (In English)

***Traveling Nation-Makers: Transnational Flows and Movements in the Making of Modern Southeast Asia*****Caroline S. Hau and Kasian Tejapira, eds. 2011.**

Cross-border movements are often discussed as a high-level abstraction, but people cross borders as individuals. Their lives are reshaped by the experience, and in some cases they in turn reshape their own environment. For the ten individuals whose biographies appear in this volume, "travel" and its contingent and uneven processes of translation, circulation, and exchange helped forge patterns of political thought and action, and defined their contribution to the process of nation-making in Southeast Asia. The accounts in this book discuss how travel shaped their lives and careers, and explain the transformative effects it had on the intellectual, political, and cultural trajectories of nationalism, communism, Islamism, and other movements in the region. The volume illuminates some of the pathways by which people in this region worked to realize their intellectual, aesthetic and political visions and projects over the last tumultuous century.



Kyoto Area Studies on Asia (In English) No. 21

***Bangsa and Umma: Development of People-grouping Concepts in Islamized Southeast Asia*****Edited by Yamamoto Hiroyuki, Anthony Milner, Kawashima Midori and Arai Kazuhiro. 2011. Kyoto University Press**

Having experienced a large-scale reorganization of social order over the past decade, the people of the Malay world have struggled to position themselves. They have been classified - and have classified themselves - with categories as *bangsa* (nation/ethnic group) and *umma* (Islamic network). In connection with these key concepts, this study explores a variety of dimensions of these and other 'people-grouping' classifications, which also include Malayu, Jawi, and Paranakan. The book examines how these categories played a significant part in the colonial and post-colonial periods in areas ranging from Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. It demonstrates the extent to which shifting social conditions interact with the contours of group identity. This is a collaborative work by scholars based in the US, Japan, Malaysia, and Australia.



## Announcing the Renewal of *Southeast Asian Studies* (Kyoto University) Online Journal

The Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, would like to announce the renewal of its website for its quarterly bilingual journal *Southeast Asian Studies* (SEAS). Published since 1963 SEAS reflects the center's principle of dedicated fieldwork based, multidisciplinary, and contemporary approaches toward research. It publishes work from various fields of study on Southeast Asia, including the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities. The journal is rigorously peer-reviewed by a broad range of specialists, and also carries book reviews and special issues at least twice a year. Recent special issues have included one reconsidering relations between Vietnam and Korea. This focused on how relations between both nations highlight complex layers of dynamism in East and Southeast Asian regions from perspectives that cannot be solely reduced to China and U.S. contexts. Other issues have also focused on important land-use changes in the uplands of Southeast Asia, looking specifically at both the proximate and distant causes of change in Laos, including empirically based studies on forest policies, forest resource management, and agrarian transformations. We currently have a number of other special issues lined up. One looks at major socio-economic changes occurring during the last 40 years in Tamil Nadu, India. This special issue will contextualize

high economic growth, changes in food production in the state as well as look at technological changes in agriculture and their impact on people's livelihoods. Forthcoming issues for 2011 will deal with colonial transition in the Philippines and Indonesian and Filipino caregivers in Japan.

Always looking to stimulate interest and discussion on Southeast Asia, the journal has also recently introduced a new section, *Themes and Perspectives*, where leading scholars from their fields offer fresh, innovative and wide-ranging perspectives of long term interest for Southeast Asia Specialist. At present SEAS is also undergoing transition. As of 2012, SEAS will split into two versions: a Japanese version and a new English-language international journal aimed at an international audience. We are currently accepting papers, and suggestions for special issues for the upcoming issues that will inaugurate this split. For authors who are interested in submitting unpublished articles or book reviews, or have ideas for special issues for our new journal, please contact us via the website below. Submissions, ideas and inquiries are accepted all year round. Access to the journal is free of charge and all our back issues have been digitized. All articles as of 49(1) are searchable as PDFs.

<http://kyoto-seas.org/>

## Awards

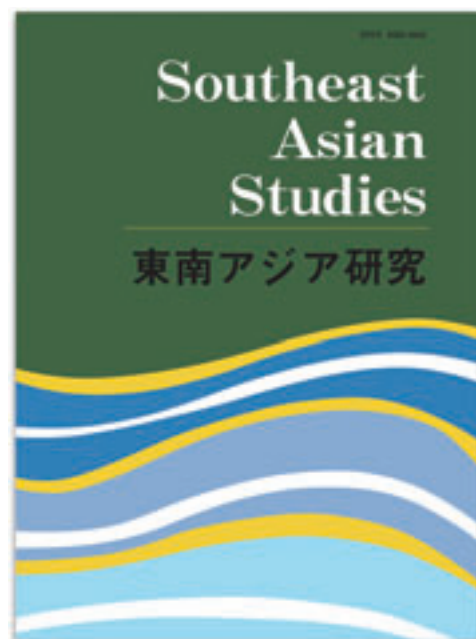
Earlier this year, a number of CSEAS faculty have won awards for research and works. Associate Professor Caroline Hau received the top prize in the Philippine Free Press Literary Awards for a short fictional work entitled *Recuerdos de Patay* (Memories of death). Assistant Professor Kobayashi Satoru also received the Daido Life Foundation Incentive Award for Area Studies for his contribution to Cambodian Studies.



Carolline Hau's trophy from the Philippine Free Press



A photo of the joint survey of temple-monasteries with young Cambodian researchers in Kampong Thum, Cambodia





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