

The Southeast Asian Region and the Academe in Turbulent Times*

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I AM HUGELY HONORED by the invitation to give this keynote. I wish to congratulate everyone who has helped to create this event. I salute its historical significance. I confess, I am also terrified by the responsibility.

The organizers asked me to reflect on what we do. By “we” I mean academics working on Southeast Asia, wherever we were born, wherever we now live, whatever disciplines we choose. But I mean especially those who research, write, argue, attend conferences like these, and sometimes *shout* about our concerns because we care about the region, its people, and its future.

I plan to do this in three phases. First, I will revisit the time when I was starting my academic career. Looking around this hall, I see some old friends and familiar faces of my own generation. I want to remind them of how much has changed over our academic lifetimes. For younger friends, I want to hint how much change they can expect—far more than in my generation. Second, I will sketch a few major changes over the past thirty years—economic, political, and intellectual—that have transformed how we think and work. Finally, I will outline some issues that would frame my thinking if I were embarking on my academic career right now.



In my own education, from the 1950s to the 1970s, I went from a small Thai village, to the big city of Bangkok, and then to universities in the wide world, in Australia and the UK. Looking back, I realize this was

an extraordinary journey. I believe others of my generation here today went through something similar. Before our time, this journey had been confined to a very few—the very rich and the very royal. But we were lucky—partly because our own societies were becoming a little richer, and more ready to invest in education; but also because some advanced countries were enjoying the great post-war boom, and were inspired by ideas of international cooperation and universal values.

What were the ideas shaping the academic environment at that time for those in the humanities and social sciences?

Perhaps the single most important was “development,” at heart a very optimistic idea that we could engineer a better future. “Development economics” had been invented as a branch of the discipline, and was being taught in universities all over the world. “Developing countries” had become a new classification. Agencies from the UN and World Bank were telling governments how to “develop.” And it seemed to be working. With few exceptions, developing countries were reporting positive growth rates, often spectacularly fast. They were carried along by the stable international economy under the Bretton Woods system, the recovery boom after the Second World War, and the liberation of energies following the collapse of colonialism.

Related to development, was the idea of “social science,” which carried a belief that we could engineer better societies too. The pioneers of social anthropology were a product of the late colonial era, but the subject took off as a university discipline from the late 1950s, and reached us a decade later. At the university where I work, the subject was first taught by a former French-Canadian Jesuit, who helped set up a social research institute, and trained its first generation of researchers.

A third inspiration was the idea of democracy. The idea had arrived in the region with the anti-colonial movements. Looking around this region in the 1960s and 70s, we saw mostly dictators and oligarchs, yet, what arrived in this era was a faith in the possibility of popular action.

This was inspired in part by the student-worker movements in Europe and Australia in the late 1960s, by the anti-Vietnam War movement in the US, and by the explosion of New Left writing by people reinterpreting Marx for a new era. Through people power, we could look forward to a “democratic transition.” These thoughts inspired the multiplication of NGOs, and other forms of public activism. From this period, scholar-activists have become a feature of our region, more so than in most areas of the world.

Finally, what strikes me about this period is the conviction that *knowledge* was a force for good, and that hence the accumulation of knowledge—by research, analysis, theorizing, debate, conferences—was a noble pursuit. Of course this thought was especially appealing to those who could suddenly find a place in the academe.

The one complicating and confusing fact amidst all this optimism was America’s war in Vietnam and Cambodia. America dominated our perception of the world because America completely dominated cultural production at the international level, from Superman to Hollywood, from Elvis to Jonathan Livingston Seagull. America symbolized the modern package of rights, liberties, democracy, and prosperity—the holy grail of “development.” But America was fighting an ugly war in our backyard, pitting its wealth and technology against a society of poor peasants. And as part of this war effort, America was supporting governments in our region that represented the very opposite of the modern package of rights, liberties, and democracy.

I studied economics, and returned to teach development economics, but I was lucky to be exposed to political economy in both Australia and the UK. By “political economy” I mean the broad proposition that economics makes more sense when politics is taken into account. I was struck that designing development policies for well-being, equity and justice that truly helped the disadvantaged was not so difficult, but getting such policies adopted, implemented, and enforced seemed impossible. Economics could not properly be separated from politics. This conviction

led me to concentrate my research on the political economy of labor, the sex industry, the illegal economy, corruption, and inequality, but also to study the social forces that can bring about change, including labor unions, social movements, and political parties. Unfortunately, political economy has now become an endangered discipline. The faculty where I studied in Australia was then called the faculty of economics and politics, but it changed first to economics alone, then to economics and business, and is now the faculty of business and economics.



Now let me move to the second part. I am going to outline four changes. These are changes both in the world around us, and how we think about that world. I don't pretend that these four are comprehensive. This is a personal choice. They have strongly affected me.

The first is the ending of the Cold War. This had the enormous benefit of returning peace to our region, but it had knock-on effects which have been less benign, in two ways. First, it led to the collapse of leftist thinking on a world scale, which opened the way for the triumph of neoliberalism, meaning an extreme belief in the importance of the market. This has had a devastating effect on economics. Development economics has almost disappeared. The Cambridge-Korean economist Ha-Joon Chang¹ has described this brilliantly as “kicking away the ladder,” cancelling the optimism that societies can engineer their own growth, and graduate to first-world levels of prosperity and quality-of-life. Jayati Ghosh has recently observed that the aim of the whole international development apparatus has shifted from “development,” meaning the transformation of a society, to “poverty alleviation,”²—cleaning up the worst mess of an unequal and unfair world, not trying to change it.

The second knock-on effect of the end of the Cold War has been the staggering growth of global business and finance dominated by huge companies, shrinking space for government and community institutions to influence the way we live.

The expansion of global finance as a result of financial deregulation from the late 1970s has reproduced exactly the same conditions of instability and international conflict that prevailed in the last era when finance capital was so strong, namely the run-up to the First World War. At that time, measures to control finance were imposed only after a disastrous period for humanity. The smaller and weaker economies are the most vulnerable to this instability. After each crisis, here most obviously after the Asian financial crisis of 1997–98, there is some discussion of controlling finance. But while countries have installed better methods to defend themselves, very little has been done to address the problem at its root, at the global level, because big financial conglomerates are so politically powerful.³



My second big change is very different. This is the impact of the postmodern revolution in philosophy on the study of the humanities and social sciences. This is a massive subject but here I will mention just one aspect, which is the greater awareness of, and sensitivity to, the relationship between knowledge and power. This has produced some very exciting scholarship, especially in the areas of history and literature.

But in the study of society, the impact has been two-edged. It has been easy to deconstruct the approaches of structuralism and structural functionalism, to point out the essentialism and the capture by grand narratives. But I have the impression that postmodernism has been better at knocking down than at rebuilding. The very terms, *postmodernism* and *postcolonialism* and *postwhatever* all look to the past and not to the future. Sociology and social anthropology seem to have become much less attractive as fields of study, and also much less productive of radical ideas for bringing about change.



In my third big change, I want to put several things together in a group. They are: the disappointment with democracy; the rise of inequality; and the return of violence. I will first use Thailand as an example, because it may have wider implications for the region, before broadening it out.

Fifteen years ago, Thailand was seen as a beacon of democracy in Southeast Asia. It figured strongly in the studies of “democratic transition” that mushroomed after the end of the Cold War. It had a working electoral parliament, a rather free press, an active civil society. The army seemed to be in retreat. But now, the results of four national elections have been overturned. Political parties have been dissolved and politicians banned. The army has made a coup twice. Thailand is now the only country in the world with a military government installed by a coup. Many people have been jailed for long periods for thought crimes. The media and civil society are cowed by threats. The country has plummeted down every ranking for political modernity. Though I am sorry to say it, I think the country’s stock in the world is at its lowest ever.

How did this happen, so quickly, and rather unexpectedly? Let me sketch it in very simple terms. Thailand’s rather successful economic development—tripling average real per capita income in one generation—has led to big social changes. The rural mass, with more income, more knowledge of the world, and soaring aspirations, has become aware of the great inequality in power, status, and the distribution of public goods. And has challenged for power to bring about change. The old bureaucratic elite and the new urban middle class are frightened by this challenge because they will lose power and privilege. This conflict is damaging the economy and obstructing progress in many areas.

Behind this conflict in Thailand is a high level of inequality—not just in incomes and wealth, but in access to power and rights of all kinds. On a world scale, there has been a big rise of interest in inequality over the last few years. Every major international agency has written a report about it. President Obama made it the theme of his State of the Union

address last year. The Pope tweets about it. And there has been a flood of books by economists, political scientists, philosophers and doctors. There are two reasons for this surge. First, inequality has been getting worse in many countries, particularly in the US, and possibly on a world scale. Second, many believe inequality lies behind rises in violence and conflict, including the clashes of the Arab Spring, riots in European cities, and even (perhaps) the Syrian crisis.

There is now a major industry on the analysis of inequality. Joseph Stiglitz and others have blamed neoliberalism, especially for destroying welfare systems and promoting corporate wealth. Thomas Piketty claims there is an inbuilt tendency towards inequality within capitalism. These analyses come from the advanced economies of the west. In Asia, too, inequality has been rising, but I think the causal factors are different here. In the development era, economists promoted unbalanced growth in the belief that inequality stimulated entrepreneurship, and those policies have never really been revised. Weak judicial regimes give scope to the ruthless. Old ideas of social privilege have never been properly challenged. And most governments have paid very little attention to issues of distribution.

The relationship between inequality and conflict is not straightforward. High or rising inequality does not necessarily lead to conflict. Indeed, over the period of rising conflict in Thailand since around 2000, inequality has actually been improving. But in the past, it was very high for quite a long time. This seems to be the danger. In such periods, people at the top of the pyramid get used to the benefits and privileges of an unequal society. When the fundamentals of the society then begin to shift, there is a risk of conflict as these benefits and privileges are at risk.

In many countries of the region, inequality has been rising over the past decade. I fear we can expect increased conflict in some of these countries in the future.



My last big change is about the future of the planet. This issue has come from nowhere over the past generation, and is now arguably the biggest, because it is deadly. Concern over the environment was just beginning in the 1970s. We started to worry about the ozone layer in the 1980s. Global warming came into the picture in the 1990s, and climate change by the 2000s. In this region, awareness has lagged behind the world because we don't see and feel the changes. In Europe, people understood global warming when they could see the plants, birds, and insects around them changing. In the US, more extreme weather disasters has begun to convert many. But here in tropical Asia, our sensitivity is lower. We are used to tropical heat, so a little extra is hardly noticed. We are used to the battering of typhoons, and the drought and flood that result from the unreliable monsoon, so more extreme events are not so shocking. But it's a global issue that we cannot ignore.

There are two frightening aspects of the climate issue. First, though the scientists have found out a lot, there is a lot they do not know. Will the arctic ice sheets melt, exactly how much might the sea levels rise, and when? Second, we seem incapable of doing anything about it. The Kyoto Protocol was agreed in this building eighteen years ago this week.⁴ It has had little impact on the trend of emissions, because the bigger countries were not committed. President Obama—the most powerful man in the world—made a strong commitment to action on climate change, and achieved some reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in the US, but has not affected the worldwide trend. The current conference in Paris is an important step, but its outcome remains very uncertain.

Behind this failure of commitment lies the power of big global business, and its influence over states—and especially the power of the power industry, something which people in Japan are very aware of, especially after the Fukushima incident. Other countries are not so aware, yet.

I became aware of this some years ago. At a conference in Thailand, I wondered aloud why a cool and damp country like Germany derived a much larger proportion of its power from solar than a hot, sunny country like

Thailand. A representative from the electricity-generating monopoly replied that the quality of the sun in Germany was very high, while the quality of our sun in Thailand was very low. He said it with a straight face. I thought we had only one sun in our universe. Some time later, a green activist calculated that Thailand could provide for all its additional power needs by installing solar panels over an area of semi-desert. The power experts went bananas explaining why this was impossible. More recently, the electricity monopoly has come up with the idea that our grid cannot accommodate more than a small supply of solar-generated energy. This is very clever, because it makes the barrier a technical issue in a facility over which they have total control.

Recently one of my colleagues has been looking at Thailand's power industry.⁵ It is a closed world. It is enormously lucrative. The people controlling it have a shared interest in upholding the status quo. Their job is to make profit for shareholders. They may be neither for nor against solar. But they prefer to invest in centralizing large scale-systems that big firms can manage efficiently. Thus the idea of solar is a big threat to them.

My last point about climate is that the impact for most of us will not be the direct physical changes, such as the sea rising around us, but the social impact of changes happening elsewhere, in the most vulnerable spots. Moreover, these social impacts are already happening but are difficult to relate with certainty to climate change. Several experts have pointed out that the revolt in Syria began after a 4-year drought in the country's eastern region, induced by climate change, which sparked an exodus of 1.5 million farming families to the cities.⁶ Of course, we cannot gauge how much the drought was a cause of conflict. But the possibility that the unfolding social crisis in Europe is in part a result of an ecological crisis in the Middle East illustrates how complex, how difficult, and how *big* the consequences of climate change will be.



Now let me wind up. I have sketched the issues which influenced my work at the start of my academic career, and then those which are

shaping my thinking now, towards the end of that career. My first and simple point is that these issues have changed enormously. The world has changed, and our intellectual equipment for understanding the world has changed.

My second point is that the old ideas of “development,” “social science” and democracy may now be badly tarnished, yet they enshrined an optimism about the future that was a powerful motivation of both research and activism. These same ideas need to be reworked for a new era.

My third point is that the challenges facing the academe have become tougher as a result of the increasing complexity of our globalized world. The barriers to the use of solar energy in our sun-drenched region can serve an example. This is a problem that involves science and engineering to solve problems over storage and distribution, political economy to understand the role of the existing power industry, and law and politics to plot the course of change to a new power regime. Within the academe, this requires more interdisciplinary cooperation.

A model for such cooperation can be found right here at the University of Kyoto, in a project entitled *In Search of Sustainable Humansphere* (meaning living environment) in Asia and Africa, which brought together scientists, social scientists, and historians to think about the planet in a new way.⁷

This need for interdisciplinary work and “big thinking” is equally true for the other issues I have mentioned—inequality, the domination of finance—and many more.

My fourth concluding point is that knowledge matters, that academic research and debate needs to be protected, and that we should never be discouraged. Very few politicians will admit to being influenced by something that an academic has said or written. But somehow, whenever politics take an authoritarian turn, academics are among the first to be threatened. That has happened since the last Thai coup. Several academics have been called in for “attitude adjustment,” some on several occasions.

The junta announced it was going to cure inequality so we should stop talking about it because it might cause division. When we we're going to hold a seminar, they threatened to surround the building with soldiers so nobody could get in.

Earlier this year, the education minister in the current Japanese government sent a letter to Japan's 86 national universities, calling on them to take "active steps to abolish [social science and humanities] organizations or to convert them to serve areas that better meet society's needs". Prime minister Abe talked about promoting "more practical vocational education that better anticipates the needs of society." Apparently 26 universities agreed to make some reduction, but these decisions may be influenced by falling applications and financial constraints. You will be pleased to hear that Kyoto University informed the minister that it would simply not comply.



The issues that I have chosen to describe are those which appeal to a political economist. For a historian, or a political scientist, or a literature specialist, or an anthropologist, or a student of cultural studies, the issues will be different, but the message is the same. Be engaged. Be sensitive to the time and the place. Be prepared to explore new avenues and multidisciplinary researches. Maintain the optimism that change for the better is possible. Never be discouraged. Your innovative ideas, writing and agitation—as well as your courage—have never been so much in demand as they are right now!

Thank you.

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Notes

- 1 Chang (2002).
- 2 Ghosh (2015).
- 3 M. Lim and C. Lim (2010).
- 4 Nopanun (2016).
- 5 Femia and Werrell (2012).
- 6 *In Search of Sustainable Humansphere*, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, Japan.
- 7 Grove (2015).

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