

Southeast Asia as a Litmus Test for Grounded Area Studies

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Abstract

Using Southeast Asia as an example, this paper is a plea for a reconciliation of diverging epistemologies in Area Studies. The argument is for a moderate realism that conceptualises areas as socially constructed but based on empirical research. The southeastern part of Asia, being extremely diverse – historically a mixing zone with no hegemonic dominant civilisation and currently lacking a truly regional power – provides us with a litmus test for area methodology. In reclaiming a spatial reality this contribution systematically develops steps towards a realist approach to Area Studies. This is done by demonstrating that the core of Area Studies should be seen in a theory and methodology of socio-spatial relations. With regard to theoretical approaches and methods it is argued that the notion of family resemblance and the method of social network analysis are especially fruitful by allowing for a critically reflected and yet empirically oriented study of areas in Asia.

Keywords: Critiques of Area Studies, realism in Area Studies, space, network analysis, family resemblance, Southeast Asia

The task is to render space autonomous
without making it a natural object.
(Strandsbjerg 2010: 49)

Area Studies is a spatially-oriented science or it is nothing

Taking the standard critique against Area Studies, which argues that areas are merely constructed, this paper aims at a constructive answer with a plea for a moderate realism in Area Studies. Area Studies as conceptualised here for Southeast Asia would not replace the disciplines but complement them (cf. Bowen 2010; Derichs 2013, 2017). Southeast Asia is a suitable laboratory for area approaches and, thanks to its extreme cultural diversity, provides a true “litmus test” for the potentials and limits of Area Studies. Space is both a result

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of socio-cultural production while at the same time a universal condition for social practice. The challenge is to theorise area in a way that avoids the spatial determinism of the geopolitical tradition without rendering area an overtly socially constructed phenomenon (Strandsbjerg 2010: 49). Thus the conceptual core of an area study (or even an area science) may be seen in a theory and methodology of socio-spatial relations. This may be useful as an antidote to conceptualisations that completely lack any spatial notion, such as the following example: “In this text, region is defined as an ongoing process involving the communicative construction of social relations” (Holbig 2015: 1). Areas may be conceived as an amalgam of material landscapes plus spatial relations plus mental concepts of spatial features. Exemplified by Southeast Asia it is argued that two concepts – networks and Wittgensteinian family resemblance – are the two most fruitful venues, allowing for an area science which conceives areas as entities with a characteristic profile but not as neatly circumscribed territories.

Taking into account globalisation, especially transnational and multicultural flows of people, materials and cash, as well as ideas, the potential of Area Studies is to go beyond the older West-versus-the-rest and newer methodological nationalism as well as extreme localism or relativism (Thompson 2012, Sidaway 2013: 985–988, Duara 2015). Area Studies can provide a middle ground between localised studies and all too often overly generalised Global Studies. How can we make globalisation theories more empirical and infuse them with a “deeper engagement with societies and cultures” (van Schendel 2012: 498)? Methodologically, Area Studies could inform the project of decolonising methodology (Chilisa 2020) and could also contribute to the project of a global ethnography, to make accounts of globalisation more ethnographic. But it would retain the regional perspective and thus not end in an ethnography unbounded. Related is its potential to change mainstream theory, for example to inform universal concepts of democracy with regional or localised middle-range concepts (Houben 2013, Orta 2013, Huotari et al. 2014, Antweiler 2019). Thus area studies may be useful as a crucial remedy against panglossian globalism or empirically ungrounded cosmopolitanisms as well as an unbounded cultural relativism.

A danger lurking always in spatial conceptualisations is the territorial trap – linking spatial entities in the geographical surface uncritically or even automatically with an assumed spatially confined unit of causes, effects or interests. But the well-known critique against thinking in “containers” itself entails the danger of overlooking distance and scale as key elements in almost any human reality (van Schendel 2002). Thus we should make use of scientific disciplines or interdisciplinary research fields that explicitly deal with spatial entities. It is remarkable that such disciplines and fields dealing explicitly with areal issues but in a critical way are practically neglected in Southeast Asian Studies. Exam-

ples of spatial theorising almost unaddressed in Southeast Asian Studies are theoretical geography and inter-disciplinary regional science. These approaches take space, distance, proximity and vicinity explicitly into account.

In many of these fields there are useful approaches that bridge essentialist and realist with constructivist orientations, such as in the fields of international relations or geography (e.g. Jessop et al. 2008). An explicit area orientation would entail cognised spaces or “psychic geographies” but would reduce space neither to imagined space nor to power-driven spatialisation. To develop Southeast Asian Area Studies more scientifically I argue that area, if conceived as societal space, can be more than merely (a) a heuristic device to reduce complexity, (b) a pedagogical means useful for organising the curriculum, (c) a means useful for political solidarity, (d) a way to secure funds in competition with greedy neighbour disciplines, (e) a means to rescue otherwise dying disciplines or (f) a forum, a cosy zone or comfort box, where we can feel a sense of belonging in academia. Surely, area can provide all these functions but the concept might also be useful as an explicit scientific conceptual tool. Exemplified by Southeast Asia, network and family resemblance might arguably be the two most fruitful methodologies to allow for an empirically oriented yet critically reflected Area Studies in general.

Thinking alternatively about areas

If the notion of Southeast Asian Area Studies is to be more than a convenient way of organising science and teaching, we should conceive Southeast Asian Studies as genuine area-focused studies albeit open to many disciplines. Thus we should not tie it only to social science, nor to philology or primarily to Cultural Studies (Clark 2006: 103–106). In general, areal thinking does not happily marry with any extreme constructivist notions or a consequent form of post-structuralism (contra Curaming 2006). If we want to discard territorial or other container-like concepts, we have to come up with an alternative that is useful for empirical research. We should develop conceptual tools for Area Studies; metaphors like “scape/landscape” or “rhizome” may be stimulating for thought, but heuristically are not enough for truly theory-oriented scientific work. Furthermore, these metaphors are not very productive if it comes to the task of conceiving empirically grounded studies.

Areas may be seen as an amalgam of material/physical surfaces, spatial relations and concepts with respect to imaginations of spatial features and thus are reduced neither to the former nor the latter. In regard to alternatives there are on the one hand concepts that allow for more cautious versions of areas. On the other hand there are alternatives to area notions as such. One useful

concept deriving from current geography and human ecology is the “functional region”. This concept goes beyond the received binarism of container versus floating constructs. The idea is to conceive areas differently, depending on the topic or issue studied. This approach is used mostly when referring to sub-national scales. A related conciliatory approach is to determine circumscribed regions that are nonetheless different from received areas with regard to their boundaries (Emmerson 1984).

Referring to Asia, older examples of such conciliatory approaches are “Southern Asia” or “Southeastern Asia” (combining South Asia and Southeast Asia). Physical geographers and bio-geographers often use notions such as “Monsoon Asia” and “Tropical East Asia” (e.g. Corlett 2019). More recent proposals, especially among economists, political scientists and decision-makers, are “Pacific Asia (Asia-Pacific)”, “Australasia” and “Chindia” (China plus India). More specifically pertaining to trans-border spaces in South Asia and Southeast Asia are the older calls – often politically framed – for “Maphilindo” (Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia), the sub-regional notions of “Sulu Archipelago”, “Golden Triangle” and “Mekong Region” and the transregional concepts of the “Southeast Asian Massif” or “Zomia” (van Schendel 2002, Lieberman 2010, Michaud / Forsyth 2011).

Currently the most popular alternative to the notion of area is the concept of “scape” as coined by Arjun Appadurai (1990). Taking the idea of landscapes, Appadurai proposes several scapes as continuous flows of things and ideas, which are distinct. The problem here is that Appadurai uses “scape” in a very metaphorical sense, which makes the idea quite diffuse, not to say fuzzy. In his work we do not find any clear discussion of the underlying concept of landscape. No wonder that scapes are far less frequently translated into concrete empirical research compared to network. If studies are making empirical inquiries for example into knowledge scapes, security scapes or sea-scapes, in most cases they use the term “scape” only metaphorically. Within geography – especially in German geography – there is a longstanding discussion about the concept of *Landschaft*, be it social-constructivist, discourse-oriented or from a system-theoretical stance. *Landschaft* would allow us to speak concretely about human connectedness as well as borders and frontiers (as an overview see Kühne et al. 2018: 11–27). Jonathan Rigg perceptively speaks of Southeast Asia as a “human landscape” (Rigg 2002).

In the search for other alternatives to the use of areas we could think of the concept of “field” (social field, cultural field). This concept of a field made of social relations lies behind the notion of “fieldwork” or “field research” in cultural anthropology and qualitatively oriented sociology. Referring to macro-spatial cultural realms this concept was most clearly developed in the Dutch concept of “field of anthropological study” (*ethnologisch studieveld*) developed

for the Malay realm in insular Southeast Asia. Such a field of study is a geographically circumscribed realm of similar cultures, which borders neighbouring cultures or an adjacent field of cultures. The classical source characterises such fields as areas sufficiently homogenous and unique to form a separate object of study and sufficiently local and varied to make internal comparative research worthwhile (Josselin de Jong 1935: xx–xxii). Comparison is used here to reveal a structural core. The argument is that prehistoric heritage lives on in cultures of the same origin, but the aim, for example pertaining to the “Indonesian Field of Anthropological Study”, is not to construct a hypothetical *Ur-situation*. An example pertaining to the Malay Archipelago is the existence of plural societies in otherwise quite different social formations. The idea of a field of study may be seen as the field of anthropological *fieldwork* writ large. A strength of the field concept is that it provides a remedy against Euro- or other nostro-centric typologies. On the other hand, the *studieveld* concept comes with its own problems. The “elasticity” criterion provides no basic model, because it provides no structural framework. In historical perspective the question is how to draw time periods and in spatial perspective the problem is how to delineate spatial borders, for example through historical connections. Another problem is the link of the concept to assumptions of the quite specific Dutch version of anthropological structuralism (Schefold 1994: 366).

A more recently proposed alternative option to the use of areas is the concept of “figuration” as used in the German Crossroads Asia project (Mielke / Hornidge 2014, Mielke 2017). Following Norbert Elias, “figurations” are configurations, constellations and especially inter-dependencies. The concept is quite open and allows relations of different content nature and also of scale to be conceived. An open question is what the scale implies and whether there are differences between small and large regions. What about change, e.g. due to migration? Another problem of this use of figuration is the focus on bi-directional dependence in multiply-scaled networks. Here the problem arises that uni-directional dependencies are excluded. The strength of this concept is an explicit notion of space, whereas its weakness is its fuzziness.

Beyond mere particularism – despite tremendous diversity

Introductory and overview publications on contemporary Southeast Asia stress its diversity (Vorlaufer 2018: x–xi, Husa et al. 2018: 11, Ba / Beeson 2018: 7–11) just as texts on history emphasise the region’s multiple historical emergence (e.g. Wolters 1999, Schulte Nordholt 2019: 22–24). A recent historically focused introduction refers to this as Southeast Asia’s “mind-boggling heterogeneity” (Rush 2018: 6). As a bibliography consisting only of books that cover the entire

region clearly reveals, diversity is a default notion in titles on the area (Antweiler 2004). Literature from geography, sociology, political economy and especially anthropology of the region abounds with the word “diversity” (see e.g. Steedly 1999, Szanton 2010, Guyer 2013, Kleinen 2013, Derichs 2014). Popular notions portray Southeast Asia metaphorically as the “Balkans of Asia”, a “bridge continent”, “hybrid region”, “collage”, “jigsaw puzzle” or even “shatterbelt” (Spencer / Thomas 1971). Thus, what we could call “deep diversity” makes Southeast Asia a real challenge for any Area Studies approach. Taking into account this overwhelming diversity, what about Southeast Asia’s unity? “The interesting case with regards to Southeast Asia is, why no such homogeneity has been constructed, not even by anthropologists or sociologists” (Korff / Schröter 2006: 63). Are there historical continuities and commonalities among societies and cultures of Southeast Asia (Rush 2018: chapter 1)? Can we disentangle something that has been aptly called the “cultural matrix” (King 2008: 15–16)?

Regarding cross-cutting similarities within the region, there is the question of whether there may be more unity within its sub-regions than in the region as a whole. The argument would be that “Mainland Southeast Asia” (or even the sub-sub region of “Indochina”) and “Insular Southeast Asia” (“Maritime Southeast Asia”, “Archipelagic Southeast Asia”, the “Malay Realm”, “Insulinde”) show enough similarities within themselves to figure as separate regions (Josselin de Jong 1965, Tachimoto 1995, King 2005, Wang Gungwu 2012, Ellen 2012). Cynthia Chou emphasised this multidimensionality and went so far as to say that “there are different ‘Southeast Asias’ to study” (Chou 2006: 130, Chou 2017; similarly Bowen 2000: 4–6).

On the other hand there are debates about overlaps with neighbouring cultural realms. There have been discussions about including adjacent lands such as parts of Bangladesh (conventionally South Asia), Taiwan or Yunnan (conventionally East Asia) in conceptualisations of the region. Political scientists habitually include Vietnam as part of East Asia (but see Evans 2002: 151–155, Croissant / Lorentz 2018). The Philippines are often seen as an outlier within Southeast Asia (Hau 2020). Similarly, others have emphasised the similarities of Papuan Indonesian cultures with those of the Pacific realm of Oceania (Uhlig 1989). Internationally, political scientists nowadays tend to include Southeast Asia within Pacific Asia and, especially because of differences in state formation, to differentiate between Southeast Asia and the Chinese-influenced realm of Northeast Asia (Huang / Jong 2017: 12–14).

Southeast Asia was and is a zone of intensive trade in regional scope. From a historical perspective, trade organised in widely spun multi-cultural trade networks rendered the region a true melting pot. The margins of Southeast Asia leading to neighbouring Indian, Chinese and Oceanic realms were especially important (van Schendel 2012: 499, Reid 2015, Schulte Nordholt 2018: 24–32).

In addition to this extreme diversity, the region currently has no dominant regional power and historically was a mixing zone with no hegemonic dominant civilisation. In contrast to India for South Asia and China for East Asia, currently there is no regional power dominating the vast realm of Southeast Asia. Indonesia is by far the largest country in the region but does not (or not yet) act as a regional power. With all its diversity plus continuous intra-realm variation, Southeast Asia provides a suitable laboratory for social and cultural studies – especially for an empirically oriented testing of the concept of area (Antweiler/ Hornidge 2012: 5). As mentioned, taking these circumstances together and considering relations to neighbouring cultural realms, Southeast Asia can be a litmus test for Area Studies (Schulte Nordholt / Visser 1995, Kratoska et al. 2005, King 2008, Winzeler 2010, Rigg 2016). In order to go beyond an unrelated collection of country studies we need an area or regional approach. This is especially necessary for any systematic and comparative research. Beyond all construction there is a cartographic reality of space. Otherwise Southeast Asian Studies would remain an assemblage of mostly localised, nation-oriented, historically specific or otherwise particularistic accounts. On the other hand, we would have a small number of very general studies often not grounded in truly regional or even comparative empirical research.

Within Southeast Asian Studies there is a lot of talk about comparison but truly comparative approaches are quite rare (Anderson 1998, Harootunian 2003, Huotari / Rüländ 2018). Among the disciplines, linguistics and political science (e.g. Kuhonta et al. 2008) are the main exceptions here. Within Asian studies in the German-speaking countries there is a renewed interest in “entangled comparison” or “thick comparison”, which calls for comparisons intensively linked to studies on the ground. The basic problem pertains to Asian Studies in general: “Whereas quantitative inquiries deploy comparative methods (while lacking fine-grained insights into cultural specificities), qualitative research is generally challenged when involving in comparisons” (Pfaff-Czarnecka / Brosius 2020: 1). A recent example is the Comparative Area Studies approach aiming to combine context-specific insights from Area Studies with cross- and inter-regional empirical methodology (Köllner et al. 2018: 3).

Construction and co-construction: well-taken critiques vs. bugbears

Mainstream critiques raised against Southeast Asian Studies are to a large degree a derivative of the diagnosis of a Western hegemonic legacy of ways of research. The three main critiques state (a) that the region of Southeast Asia is merely constructed, (b) that this construction represents an outsider’s view and

(c) that the realm of Southeast Asia is a strategic or power-related concept (Thum 2012 as a concise summary). Taken together, this amounts to a view of former and even current Southeast Asian Studies as a nostro-centric and dominance-oriented endeavour, biased in Eurocentric, Atlanto-centric or US-centred ways. As far as research and training institutions are concerned, this critique is quite accurate (Schulte Nordholt 2004) and can also be directed at many conceptualisations of regionalism (Rüland 2017). Currently the main institutions of Southeast Asian research are centred in the US, the United Kingdom, Australia, the Netherlands and Singapore. Furthermore, the output of research on the region is heavily skewed towards English texts. In anthropology, e.g., the burgeoning studies about Southeast Asia produced in Japan are recognised almost only as far as they are written in English (Shimizu 2005). Southeast Asian scientific voices are only slowly being recognised. Some colleagues from the region even went so far – I think too far – as to ask whether there is any place for Southeast Asians in Southeast Asian Studies at all (Heryanto 2002: 3–5).

This state has been criticised and there are calls for a de-centring of Southeast Asian studies. From Southeast Asia, there have long been calls for an attempt to examine the area beyond Western perceptions, for an “indigenous social science” or an “Asian anthropology” (Abdullah / Manuati 1994, Rafael 1999, Goh 2011, Park / King 2013). These alternative approaches come especially from researchers from the Malayan realm and from East Asia or Australasia (e.g. Yamashita / Eades 2001, Alatas 2006, Ooi 2009, Duara 2015). There is also an emerging institutional interest in Southeast Asian Studies within Southeast Asia itself, as can be seen from many recently established academic centres.

All this notwithstanding, scholarship and academic teaching within the region itself tend to re-institute methodological nationalism. Despite programmatic statements, most studies sailing under the banner of “Southeast Asian Studies” are in fact still largely confined to specific countries (Evers / Gerke 2003, McCargo 2006). As a look into recent conference programmes or publication lists quickly reveals, this holds true for the entire region: the overwhelming number of studies made by scholars with roots in Southeast Asia are about their own countries and there is also a certain mutual ignorance between mainland and insular researchers (Korff / Schröter 2006: 63–64).

Let us have a look contentwise at the core of these critiques. Firstly, Southeast Asia is portrayed as a constructed area (cf. King 2008: 13–17, Acharya 2012, Houben 2013, Iletto 2013). Linked to the allegation of the area as an outsider’s paradigm is the critique of practicing an Othering or being an Orientalist and thus failing to study societies on their own terms. I largely agree, but this often goes in line with an assumption that this construction would be *entirely* strate-

gic or a Eurocentric fantasy. Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak speaks of an “imaginative geography” and proposes that one should “imagine pluralized Asias” and “break postcolonialism into pluralized (Euro)Asias” (Spivak 2008: 2, 11).

Against this, I argue that Southeast Asia as a region was and is constructed, but it is constructed on an experiential basis and thus co-constructed by combining human imagination with material reality. There are spatial clusterings of phenomena such as social structure or kinship patterns and confluences of historical processes, as with trade (for example Higham 2014, Reid 2015). Such a mixture of reality and construction also pertains to earlier external concepts such as the much older Chinese concept of *Nanyang*, which is not exactly coterminous with Southeast Asia in that it refers primarily to areas reached from China by sea rather than by land. This encompasses a much broader region than maritime Southeast Asia but excludes northern Burma and Laos.

The allegation that areas are merely arbitrarily constructed or artificial is overstated at best. In order to argue against conceiving a straw man, I ask: who ever really postulated fixed territories with closed boundaries and a clearly distinguished inside and outside? All the classic area texts mention overlaps with adjacent areas and mention peripheral or marginal spaces. In contrast to its notorious popular use as well as assumptions of its critics, even the concept of *Kulturkreise* did not invoke closed geographical or national containers. Against this bugbear of closed space, what was meant are regions or clusters of intensified exchange. Similarly, the archetypical proponents of a “culture area” approach in anthropology, like Clark Wissler, Alan Kroeber and Julian Steward, never thought in static, clearly bounded and internally homogenous territories (Malm 2013; for examples cf. Haller 2018: 74–76). The same holds – despite critical aspects – for the concept of sub-continental *Kulturerdteile* in German-language cultural geography. Neither classical nor modern works of this approach (Kolb 1962, Newig 2005) eschew connectivity of such a huge realm with neighbouring areas (Uhlig 1989, on Southeast Asia as a “bridge continent”). The alleged container thinking thus may hold for many popular materials as well as for almost all school materials until today, but to a far less degree for scientific texts. Overstated critical mantras bear the danger of an Othering of Area Studies or regional specialisation, as in German geography (cf. critique by Verne / Doevenspeck 2014: 8–14).

The standard criticism portrays the area-oriented conceptualisation of Southeast Asia as a result of colonial cartography and strategic manoeuvring in the WWII and later cold war geopolitical theatres. This is a default statement in textbooks on the region. But, again, this regionalisation did not arise out of nothing, but based on empirical commonalities among cultures within this region. To portray the concept as a mere product of geostrategic thought is again a severe reduction at best. The English term “Southeast Asia” was

created before late colonial times. The concept of Southeast Asia as a cultural realm is historically older, especially in the German-speaking scientific world (*Südostasien*, Heine-Geldern 1923). This areal concept was derived from an interest in the distribution of languages and material culture and from motives quite different from geopolitics or colonialism. Furthermore Southeast Asia is conceptually also rooted in non-European traditions of science, for example in China, Japan and Korea (Shimizu 2005, Woo / King 2013). Allegedly merely constructed notions e.g. of a collective ASEAN identity leave the academic perimeter of scholarly research and become part of everyday lives. They are an aspect of identity construction not only of political leaders but also of ordinary people. In these transfer processes people are not passive receivers, but they take area conceptions and localise them (Jönsson 2010, Rüländ 2017). The same holds true for nation-building-infused provincial identities that integrate manifold linguistic cultures (Antweiler 2019). Such imaginations become social realities in themselves and should matter for empirically oriented social scientists and cultural studies.

Current concepts and their implicit spatiality

Regarding the alleged outsider's source of the notion Southeast Asia (van Schendel 2012: 500), this critique itself argues via assumed regions. And the outsiders are not all "Western": currently a large number of people living a Southeast Asian identity reside outside the region, for example in Australia, England, Canada, the United States or Arabian countries. More fundamentally, the "genesis and validity" (*Genese und Geltung*) of scientific positions should not be confounded. Even if the concept is that of an outsider it may be scientifically correct or fruitful. Against notions of cultural appropriation I would argue that academic knowledge should not belong to a particular cultural group or tradition (cf. Cribbs's comment in van Schendel 2012: 504).

There are several constructive answers to the abovementioned critiques. Beyond New Area Studies, as in this volume (cf. Houben 2017), there are several recent approaches, for example Post-area Studies, Critical Area Studies, Crossroads Studies, Boundary Studies and Inter-Asian Cultural Studies. Beyond that there are notions that emphasise connectedness and cross-bordering (e.g. Middell 2017, Derichs 2017b). Examples abound: "beyond area", "differentiated spatialities", "trans-regional connections", "trans-national spaces", "transient spaces", "translocality", "trans-boundary" and "borderlands". Other proposals speak of "inter-connected spaces" and "connectivity", or of "entanglement", "discursive moment" or simply of "mobilities".

Most of these propositions come with their own implicit spatial baggage. If we talk of “trans-regional” connections or of “trans-national” interaction, we refer to “spatial” units. The same holds for the use of “transient spaces”. Furthermore the question is “trans” to what? The same can be said for all formulations with “boundary” such as “boundary studies” and “trans-boundary” research. Boundaries require units (to be bounded). Spatial boundaries imply area units. Any boundary space is an area and automatically creates spatial entities and raises the question of sub-areas. Notions of “borderland” (Horstmann / Wadley 2005) and “transgressing” are doubly loaded as regards space. Formulations such as “dynamic borderlands” and especially notions such as “transgressing borderlands” comprise multiple spatial connotations. Other formulations try to distance themselves from old area thinking by promoting “Post-area Studies”, “Critical Area Studies” or research “beyond areas”, but all three use the very word and thus transport an idea of space.

If we use terms such as “Inter-Asian Cultural Studies” (Chen 2008), similar problems are inherent. As with the notion of intercultural relations any “inter” logically needs at least two entities to be linked by it. This pertains also to the notion of a “third space” (Appadurai 1997). Any talk of “entanglement” should precisely state which items or entities are entangled. Are they systems, cultures, civilisations or areas? Such formulations implicitly use similarities in two or more areas respective to civilisational realms. Any talk of spatial “mobility” requires minimally two areal units. “Cross” implies mobility and a border, which also requires minimally two units. The notion of “crossroads” refers not only to roads (implying spatial links and lacunae) but also asks (a) cross which entities such a mobility is realised in practice (cf. Mielke / Hornidge 2015). Notions of “connectivity” and “inter-connected” spaces or “connectivity in motion” imply the question of which entities are connected and whether the concrete connections themselves move. Most of the objections to areas or more specifically container ideas are not at all specific to Area Studies but reflect classical problems in conceptualising contiguous social spaces (Lewis / Wigen 1997). Even more fundamentally, the entire critique is structurally quite similar for example to the objections to the anthropological concept of culture in the plural sense.

A relational alternative: area as network-cum-family resemblance

Two concepts might be productive in developing a reflected yet empirically grounded science of areas: networks and family resemblance. A first concept I

would consider as fruitful not only for Southeast Asian Area Studies is the notion of a “network” (or “web”). A network is a structural and relational concept, the main elements being actors and relations. Actors may be individuals, collectives or institutions. Relations form a structure and may be spatial. The concept allows for spatial, motional or communicational proximity (see “air-travel proximity” vs. “digital proximity”, van Schendel 2012: 498). It provides a simple and parsimonious model that allows but does not require repetition, purposefulness or mutuality (reciprocity) of relations. Instead of *ex ante* definitions of borders of regions, the outer borders of such a network would be derived empirically *ex post*. The relational approach allows for an empirical determination of fringes and frontiers. Thus spatial areas are conceivable as zones of intensive internal exchange. Through mapping connectedness by the measures of centrality, betweenness and closeness, network analysis is useful for elucidating embeddedness or disembeddedness. The method is also valuable for historical research, for example on pre-modern trust networks or the webs of the silk roads (Gordon 2008: 16).

The argument that there is not one centre sometimes denies the relevance of spatial imbalances or distance. If this approach is to be related to space we should ask if actors, relations and their nodes or knots are topographically determinable, whether fixed, moving or movable. We should avoid a bias towards connectedness and a fixation on nodes and thus not overlook structural wholes (Granovetter 1973). Taking a network approach, a region could be determined as an accumulation of actors or as higher densities of relations, that is, as a relational cluster. If movements are dominant the area could be seen as the culmination of trajectories within relations. Thus exchange and migration – both aspects of mobility – may constitute a region historically. This can be shown in the case of Southeast Asia (Antweiler 2011, Rush 2018, Schulte Nordholt 2018).

Networks provide a relational and very open approach useful for quite different purposes. This approach and its accompanying methodology are mostly applied in cultural anthropology and sociology but still seldom used in Area Studies. The network or web concept could and should be used if socio-spatial relations are seen as the core of areas (Derichs 2014: 2, 2017b) and especially by projects explicitly interested in relational patterns. A network approach allows for an empirically grounded analysis of societal as well as economic and power relationships. We can ask who the dominant and the subordinated actors are. We can study connectedness as well as disconnectedness and thus avoid the overstated assumptions of connectivity and mobility often found in current studies. A concept similar to network suitable for this line of thinking is the notion of “archipelago”. We can think of the concrete Malay or Indonesian *Nusantara* or an Asian *Mediterranée* (Lombard 1998: 184, 193; Evers 2016). Formally an archipelago is a structure of dispersed spatial entities, each

one circumscribed but unequally linked within an overall structure. Thus we can study spatial networks with knots, clusterings and hubs, e.g. current dominant knowledge and power centres linking Mainland and Insular Southeast Asia.

A second helpful conceptual idea emerges from the notion of “family resemblance”. As conceived by philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, family resemblance (also “family likeness” or “cluster definition”) as a method searches for commonalities between entities without asking for a continual sameness among them or an absolute internal unity within the encompassing unit. His idea is unrelated to any gene-related conception of family. Wittgenstein explains family likeness through the example of games, which are similar to each other only in that they are games. Games have several overlapping similarities, e.g. by usually having rules. “Games” are neither just a word, as represented in nominalism, nor are they examples of continual similarities, as in realism. They instead form a “family” whose members reveal overlapping similarities but do not share universal qualities in all relevant features (Wittgenstein 2009: 36e, § 66–67; Needham 1975: 355ff.).

While aiming at an inventory of attributes, this concept allows that there is not a single feature shared by all items compared. Concerning widespread features in Southeast Asia (Table 1), any researcher having done fieldwork in more than one location within the region will be quick to mention locales and/or times where the respective feature is not present. “For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look!” (Wittgenstein 2009: 36e, § 66). Accordingly we can look closely for similarities in general, in details and in gradations instead of attempting or claiming to find strict equalities or absolute universals (for a similar argument cf. Rehbein 2013).

Combining the two approaches, one via networks and the other via family resemblance, we could look for inter-relations between Southeast Asia as a network and as a unit characterised by manifold family resemblances. We could ask how these inter-relations are constantly changing with emerging forms and often hybrid formations. Such an endeavour would go beyond the Murdockian Human Relations Area Files project (Murdock 1975) of a simple quantitative inventory. Since it entails dealing with specific traits, this concept of family resemblance is useful to allow for a “unity-in-diversity” perspective in Area Studies in a grounded way, thus going beyond the usual “anything goes” or purely political programmatic spatial imaginings. The similarities found within Southeast Asia might themselves be conceived as forming an abstract network: “And the upshot of these considerations is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: similarities in the large and in the small” (Wittgenstein 2009: 36e).

Table 1: Southeast Asia – a profile via connectedness and widespread attributes

Southeast Asia – A profile via connectedness and widespread attributes	<p>antagonism and relations between highland or inland and lowland societies</p> <p>contrast and relations between coastal and inland polities</p> <p>charismatic leadership (“men of prowess”)</p> <p>political power mainly based on workforce (vs. land area)</p> <p>public demonstration of power important (titles, regalia, monuments)</p> <p>polities with fluid borders (<i>mandala</i>, galactic polity, theatre state, exemplary centre)</p> <p>external economic ties strong, trade relations intensive</p> <p>wet rice cultivation</p> <p>slash-and-burn agriculture</p> <p>staple diet of rice and fish plus fermented fish products</p> <p>social organisation and kinship inclusive</p> <p>kinship bilateral or cognatic, marriage alliances important</p> <p>socioeconomic hierarchies, inequality positively approved/ affirmed</p> <p>lineage and inherited rank only slightly emphasised</p> <p>gender relations relatively egalitarian, high prestige of women</p> <p>public and performative orientation of culture</p> <p>urban culture: societal organisation in a <i>plural</i> (vs. pluralistic) way</p> <p>assimilation or integration of strangers and foreign ideas easy</p> <p>tension between book religion vs. local beliefs</p> <p>historical consciousness presentist</p> <p>leisure activities: betel chewing, cock fights, chess</p> <p>material culture: tattooing, penis inserts and gong-based musical instruments</p>
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Source: Compiled by author, modified after Antweiler 2017: 76

Instead of a pre-conceived Southeast Asia the rationale in using family resemblance would be to start with a comparison of local cases open to finding differences and similarities, which may be derived from ethnographies or other case studies. Since currently there are no explicit trials in this direction I present this as a thought experiment. We would compare data about as many human collectives as possible in the area of study. These may be localised face-to-face cultures, sub-cultures or ethnic groups. In light of the difficulty of determining clear boundaries between collectives we can take the number of languages as a proxy (around 1250 in Southeast Asia). The expectation would be that if we scan these collectives for characteristics derived from a comparative reading of ethnographies made in the area, the result, if plotted as a map,

would *roughly* match the outer border of the eleven countries currently forming Southeast Asia as a political unit. In greater detail I would expect that for example parts of Southern China, Taiwan and Northeastern South Asia would be included.

The minimal assumption is that the features in such inventories are widespread in the area. We would expect that the traits are shared by the overwhelming number of human collectives in geographic Southeast Asia. But by taking the concept of family resemblance seriously, we would assume that not even one of these features is shared by *all* collectives within that geographical realm. We would also expect that some but not many of the attributes are found in collectives outside Southeast Asia. Additionally we could argue negatively and mention features of adjacent areas, e.g. caste systems and pastoral nomadism, which are almost but not totally lacking in Southeast Asia. Taking this empirically derived clustering – and not a preconceived area – we could then develop a more cohesive concept including empirical testable hypotheses about shared attributes in the area. Such hypotheses would start from a rationale of trying to link shared attributes in a causal instead of a purely summative way.

Summing up

The real challenge for area studies is to theorise area in a way that avoids the spatial determinism of geo-ecological or geopolitical traditions without rendering area a purely socially constructed phenomenon. This paper has suggested a reconciliation of diverging epistemologies. What was argued here for space can be transferred to thinking via areas in general. Spatial features are a condition enabling and constraining human action. But space is partially constructed and as such plays a constitutive, framing and supportive role for social action. Areas should thus be conceived as an amalgam of physical surfaces plus spatialised social relations, supplemented by culturally mediated and often politically charged conceptualisations of these spatial features. Well-taken critiques of Area Studies of and within Southeast Asia should be differentiated from bully bugbears and fancy straw men. Overstated critiques entail the danger that the “spatial turn” in social science and in cultural studies shifts again to an “aspatial turn”. Southeast Asia – with all its mind-boggling contemporary diversity as well as historical and contemporary trans-area relations – provides a suitable laboratory for critically examining the potentials and limits of Area Studies.

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