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Culture, Regionalism and Southeast Asian Identity

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This paper explores the link between culture and regionalism in Southeast Asia in terms of three main dimensions. The first is culture's place in regional definition; how historical cultural and ideational flows may serve as the basis for imagining Southeast Asia's regionness. The second is the growing deployment of culture in the agenda of regionalism, with particular reference to ASEAN's plan to construct an 'ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community'. The third is the diffusion of popular culture and its relationship with the 'soft power' of larger Asian actors, such as Japan, China and India, in Southeast Asia. Together, these three dimensions offer a usable if not exhaustive framework for understanding of the relationship between culture and regionalism in Southeast Asia (although they can be used for similar studies about other regions). Unlike recent contributions to the subject of cultural product diffusion that are written from the point of view of the region's great powers, Japan, China and India, this paper is written from the perspective of Southeast Asian states.

In this essay, I take culture to include both traditional culture (ideas, beliefs and practices of everyday life rooted in history) as well as cultural identity that produced through mutual interactions, collective imagination, and shared norms. My notion of culture includes both elite culture (high culture) and popular culture, although the two have very different dynamics and impact on international cooperation. Elite culture is a more important determinant of Southeast Asian regionalism today, although there is now an attempt to bring popular culture into ASEAN. My main argument is that culture has been a double-edged sword in Southeast Asian regionalism. Some intra-regional conflicts such as that involving Thailand, Cambodia and Burma, have their sources in historical and cultural forces. But regional interactions and the constructed identity of ASEAN have also done much to contain these conflicts. The challenge for Southeast Asian and Asian regionalism is to harness popular culture into a force for strengthening regional institutions and strengthening regional identity.

Culture and Regional Definition

Where does culture fit in the regional definition of Southeast Asia? Southeast Asia's claim to be a region has been, and remains, a thoroughly contested affair.¹ Skeptics like to remind everyone that the term is fundamentally a colonial and Cold War construct. It became a recognizable term only with the creation of the Allied South East Asia Command headed by Lord Mountbatten during World War II, and acquired further

¹ Amitav Acharya, *The Quest for Identity: International Relations of Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 2000).

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prominence in the international stage as a theatre of the Cold War, thanks to its association with the Vietnam War and the South East Asian Treaty Organization. A related take on the region is starkly summarized by Clark Neher: “the notion of ‘Southeast Asia’ is more a result of American and European professors looking for a convenient way to study a geographic region than it is a meaningful term for an area that systematically shares commonalities.”²

The real question about this characterization is not that the term ‘Southeast Asia’ is an invention, but whose invention is it. The answer should be fairly obvious to the students of modern Southeast Asia. If the term Southeast Asia originated from the scholarly musings of American and European professors, it was much less from the musings of *political scientists* like Professor Neher, and considerably more from the musings of historians and archeologists. The latter tend to be far more sensitive to culture and identity than political scientists, even those working in the area studies tradition. And this in itself is telling.

Recent historical and archeological research and reflection confirm cultural and political interactions within and across the continental and maritime domains covering much of what is known today as Southeast Asia predating the colonial era, not to mention the post-Second World War period. These interactions range from the distribution of pre-Indic Dong Son artifacts (jars and bells which might have symbolized political authority) in Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia,³ to the shared characteristics of the Mon-Khmer language spoken in Burma, Thailand and Cambodia, and to the overlapping (in both time and space) system of imperial *Mandalas* (a term of reference for loosely territorialized and hierarchical polities in classical Southeast Asia based on the Indic model) such as Funan, Champa, Srivijaya, Pagan, Angkor, Ayutthaya, Ava, Majapahit and Malacca (which started as a Hindu polity and even after its rulers embraced Islam, remained true to the idea of an Indic *Mandala*). Moreover, Southeast Asia was the hub of a commercial system, one of the earliest instances and patterns of regionalization and globalization, even before the ‘age of commerce’ identified by historian Anthony Reid. These interactions were not casual or intermittent, but long-term and continuous, until they were decisively disrupted by colonial intrusion. They featured both conflict and cooperation. Moreover, the cultural (including artistic), commercial and political concepts and institutions underpinning these interactions were not separable, but closely intertwined. Southeast Asia’s precolonial regionness was bolstered by the diffusion of the ‘Sanskrit cosmopolis’ within its geographic confines and its centrality along the ‘maritime silk road’.

² Clark Neher, “Review of *The Quest for Identity: International Relations of Southeast Asia*”, *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol.61, no.3 (August 2002), p.1101.

³ An up to date and credible synthesis of this research is presented by archaeologist Dougal JW O’Reilly, *Early Civilizations of Southeast Asia* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007). The author argues that the appearance of the Dong Son drums and jars “in many diverse parts of mainland and island Southeast Asia provides evidence [not only] of a sophisticated exchange network...at an early time” (meaning pre-Indic), but also of political connections, as the drums “probably served as symbols of authority, conferred upon other regional chiefdoms as emblems of power.” (pp.39-40). Moreover, the subsequent flow of “Indian cultural styles allowed the [Southeast Asian] elite to share a ‘cultural vocabulary’ (p.190) which underpinned a regional political and economic order.

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The fact that these interactions also drew in India and China, the two neighbouring cultural giants, does not detract from Southeast Asia's centrality in these interactions. On the contrary, the respective roles of India as the main ideational influence (the Greece of the region) and China as the main geopolitical influence (substantive but much subtler than the Roman imperium) over the region, constituted unique features of the classical regional order in Southeast Asia, much as Greek ideas and Roman military prowess shaped the regional order of the classical Mediterranean.

Culture shapes the regional definition of Southeast Asia in another way. The traditional view of Southeast Asia as a region of 'low culture' relatively to China and India became a major issue in academic debates about Southeast Asia's regional identity. The view that Indian and Chinese culture simply swept a culturally backward Southeast Asia was disputed by historians and archeologists. Southeast Asians were seen not as passive recipients, but active borrowers and modifiers, of foreign culture. They selectively borrowed foreign culture to suit their own context and need, and in accordance with preexisting beliefs and practices. For example, while Indian cosmological ideas and political organization were accepted, the Indian caste system was not. This capacity to localize was the basis for a new and autonomous history of Southeast Asia and a potent source of regional identity.⁴

In the early years of ASEAN, Sri Lanka was acceptable to its founders as a member (India was not) because of cultural similarities between this Buddhist nation and Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand and Burma, and in special recognition of Sri Lankan Buddhist clergy's role in reviving Buddhism in Thailand.

In short, while the naming of Southeast Asia might have been accomplished by Allied Powers and Cold War geopolitics, the fact of Southeast Asia as a region with shared features and continuous interactions has its basis in a prior history and cultural matrix. And a growing awareness of this heritage is a considerable if contested rationale for contemporary Southeast Asian regionalism.⁵ But this does not mean history and culture is a sufficient explanation for Southeast Asian regionalism. Culture has been incorporated into what has essentially been a regionalism dominated by political considerations. Culture-based regional identity has been made and remade by regionalist-biased elite politics. In short, the cultural basis of Southeast Asian regionalism is contingent upon a particular kind of interaction and socialization undertaken through its contemporary and modernist regional organization.

Regional Institutions and Cultural Regionalism

⁴ This understanding of cultural diffusion derived from Southeast Asian historiography forms the theoretical framework of my *Whose Ideas Matter: Agency and Power in Asian Regionalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

⁵ O.W. Wolters, *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, 2nd edition (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999)

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The Allied South East Asia Command and the Vietnam War point to the primacy of external forces in the early regional definition of Southeast Asia. They suggest that the concept of Southeast Asia was mostly a matter of official and media labeling, through 'speech acts' by Western, especially British and American, governments and media (still mostly under Western ownership).

To what extent this has changed now, and who performs the speech act in contemporary articulations of Southeast Asia, is a pertinent question. Obviously, there has been a clear shift from Western to indigenous speech acts in so far as Southeast Asia's regional name is concerned.

A long-time and highly regarded specialist on Southeast Asian politics, Donald Weatherbee argues that "In order to study Southeast Asia as a region, it will be necessary to identify unifying transnational or institutional patterns."⁶ If so, then since 1967, ASEAN has provided such unifying patterns. What began as a straightforward case of inter-governmental cooperation has now acquired a complexity that would be difficult to analyze from a traditional realist or liberal lens.

A good deal of our understanding of the cultural basis of ASEAN regionalism centers on the ASEAN Way, especially the centrality of consultations (*Musyawarah*) and consensus (*Mufakat*) which in turn is supposed to derive from Javanese village culture.⁷

But the ASEAN Way is not an unchanging phenomenon; its importance has diluted as ASEAN has looked for new ways to institutionalize and legalize itself, especially now with the adoption of an ASEAN Charter. The Charter is part of a broader process of institutionalization that ASEAN members see as necessary for the organization in dealing with the new transnational challenges, such as financial crises, pandemics, natural disasters and terrorism.

One notable development in ASEAN regionalism today is the emergence of the idea of an ASEAN community with three pillars: The ASEAN Economic Community, the ASEAN Political and Security Community, and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. The last of these is of special interest here, not just because it relates closely to the overall theme of this conference and book project, but also because it is the last and perhaps most challenging of the three pillars. ASEAN began with economic aspirations, although not with the explicit aim of forming an EU-style economic community. ASEAN's political and security underpinnings, though deliberately underplayed by the founding fathers

⁶ Donald K. Weatherbee, "Introduction: The What and Why of Southeast Asia", in, Donald K. Weatherbee et al., *International Relations in Southeast Asia: The Struggle for Autonomy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), p.15.

⁷ More discussion on the cultural underpinnings of ASEAN can be found in my previous writings, such as "Culture, Security, Multilateralism: The 'ASEAN Way' and Regional Order", *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 19, no.1 (April 1998); "Ideas, Identity, and Institution-Building: From the 'ASEAN Way' to the 'Asia Pacific Way'", *Pacific Review*, vol.10, no.2 (1997), pp.319-346; and *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001 and 2009).

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wary of being criticized as a SEATO through the backdoor, nonetheless became increasingly salient through the Cambodia conflict and the end of the Cold War. But during these years, ASEAN remained a project of the regional elite, and without much in the way of cultural and social personality or impact. The idea of an ASEAN Socio-Cultural community (ASCC) is meant to address that. It is supposed to bring regional interactions and identity-building to the popular level, thereby both broadening and deepening ASEAN regionalism. To make this point forcefully, the newly adopted ASEAN Charter claims “to place the well-being, livelihood and welfare of the peoples at the centre of the ASEAN community building process”.⁸

But ASEAN has a long way to go in realizing its socio-cultural community. Linkages among civil society groups among member countries, perhaps the most important measure of the ASCC’s implementation, remain weak, relative to intergovernmental interactions and extra-regional affiliations. Part of the reason is the internal weakness of civil society groups, which are subject to government control and repression in many member states. While ASEAN is slowly encouraging a ‘participatory regionalism’ involving civil society actors, such as the ASEAN Peoples’ Assembly (APA) and the Solidarity for Asian People's Advocacy (SAPA), there are clear limits to this process. Moreover, the break-up of the ASEAN summit in Pattaya in February this year would discourage its more conservative and authoritarian members to allow civil society engagement with the ASEAN process. The government of Singapore has already enacted legislation allowing its security forces even greater authority to control demonstrations.

At the same time, culture also remains a lingering basis of intra-regional tensions. A violent mob burnt down in the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh, Cambodia ostensibly because a Thai actress had suggested that Cambodia’s most revered cultural icon, the Angkor Wat (located in the province of Siem Reap, literally *crush Siam*), belonged to Thailand. And military skirmishes have broken out between Cambodia and Thailand in 2008 and 2009 over the status of Preah Vihear Buddhist temple complex located on their common border. The sensitive and often strained relations between Burma and Thailand are also deeply influenced by the legacy of the past, when the Buddhist rulers of their classical kingdoms, Pegu and Ava in Burma and Ayutthaya in Thailand, fought dozens of wars, including over possession of white elephants (a symbol of Buddha). For background, a total of twenty-four wars are recorded between Siam and Burma between 1539 and 1767 in Prince Damrong’s classic account of that rivalry;⁹ although the regular occurrence of such warfare point not to mutual indifference but to interaction, a more crucial indicator of regionness than cooperation per se).

The runaway success of the Thai film, *Suriyothai*, based on the story of a Thai queen who sacrificed her life resisting Burmese aggression, is a powerful remainder of that legacy. Malays in both Singapore and Malaysia resent the Singapore’s dating of its national

⁸ Preamble of the “Charter of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations”, Available at <http://www.aseansec.org/21069.pdf>.

⁹ Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *The Chronicle of Our Wars With The Burmese: Hostilities Between Siamese and Burmese When Ayutthaya was the Capital of Siam* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2001).

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history and identity to the arrival of Raffles, rather than to the founding of the Malacca Kingdom/Sultanate in the early 15th century.

Culture and Soft Power

The relatively recent notion of soft power begs the question whether and to what extent popular culture can be one of its sources. Like the notion of ‘normative power’ in the European Union, the concept of soft power invites debate as to whether it should include cultural, economic and military components. If soft power rests on persuasion and legitimation, then there is no reason why we cannot extend the notion beyond its formulation by Nye (covering diplomatic and later economic elements) to include cultural instruments.

Cultural products are often employed by great powers (as well as others) to enhance their international image and prestige. But they are hardly autonomous from the political context and can be a double-edged sword. The diffusion of cultural products, such as music, films, comics and cuisine, can be an important measure of regional interaction and identity. Cultural products broaden regional interactions by promoting contacts and cooperation among civil society groups. At the same time, they spur fears of cultural dominance and invite resistance from importing societies.

In convening the Asian Relations Conference, the first international conference of Asian countries after World War II, in New Delhi in 1947, India¹⁰ organized an ‘Inter-Asian Art Exhibition’ for the visiting delegates. Despite its name, the exhibition was essentially a portrayal of India’s historical links with its neighbours encompassing Iran, Indonesia, China, and Central Asia. The official script of the exhibition prepared by the Indian hosts spoke of an Indian ‘cultural empire’ which ‘once embraced these distant lands for several centuries’ over an area encompassing Burma, Malaya, Siam, Cambodia, Champa and Indonesia (Java, Bali, Sumatra).¹¹ Whatever their intentions, the exhibition was too Indo-centric not to have had a sobering impact on foreign participants, already wary of India’s political dominance of Asian regionalism. Indeed, the fear of Indian dominance (as well as dominance by China, whose then nationalist government had asked for and received the right to host the next Asian Relations Conference) led a group of Southeast Asian delegates attending the Delhi Conference to imagine a regional association of their own – meaning the Southeast Asian countries minus India and China. This was in a way a stepping stone to ASEAN, which has a better record of longevity than the short-lived Asian Relations Organization that came out of the 1947 New Delhi Conference.

Indian films have been quite popular in Southeast Asia, where they are viewed not only by the resident Indian population, including those who have become citizens of their adopted countries for many generations, but also by non-Indians, such as the Javanese

¹⁰ At the time of the Conference, India was still under British rule, but Prime Minister-in-waiting Nehru was allowed by the British a free hand in hosting the event through the nonofficial Indian Council of World Affairs. For details, see: *Asian Relations: Report of the Proceedings and Documentation of the First Asian Relations Conference, New Delhi, March-April 1947* (New Delhi: Asian Relations Organization, 1948).

¹¹ *Asian Relations*, p. 302.

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and Malays. The same can be said of Indian music, which are often part of Bollywood films. But this did not necessarily ensure acceptance of India in ASEAN until political and economic conditions became favourable with the end of the Cold War and India's domestic economic reforms. There have been calls by Islamic groups to impose restrictions on the entry of Indian films, even though they are regarded as being more compatible with Asian values than Hollywood movies.

Similarly, the widespread popularity of Taiwanese songs and Hong Kong movies in Southeast Asia (among the Chinese population) does not make it more likely that these countries would depart from their one-China policy or offer support for the democratic movement in Hong Kong, although the reaction at the popular level is likely to be different from that at the governmental level. In South Korea, a nationalist backlash against China (over Korguryo) and Japan has produced a limited but discernable interest in Indian culture, even though Japanese and Chinese cultural products far exceed cultural exports from India (notwithstanding the Korean myth of origin which features an princess from Ayodhya, India who married into a King of Gaya in present South Korea). Hence, it is difficult to establish any clear link between the diffusion of cultural products are the acquisition and exercise of soft power by the region's major nations: Japan, China and India.

China's growing soft power in Southeast Asia is not so much due to the popularity of Chinese cuisine or music, but its diplomatic 'charm offensive' backed by a policy of nonintervention and restraint towards ASEAN countries, in stark contrast to the situation before the late 1970s, and its participation of ASEAN-led multilateral institutions. If China becomes too assertive, including culturally, then it risks dissipating the goodwill it has earned in the region. It is worth reminding ourselves that the debate over Asian values in the 1990s was partly due to the initial conflation of Asian values (by Lee Kuan Yew) with Confucian values, which automatically excluded and alienated non-Confucian peoples. Now, most Asians would be rather wary of any attempt to link China's peaceful rise with the revival of its historical tributary system, even if the latter is presented as a form of benign hegemony or hierarchy.¹²

Compared to China, Japan has devoted more attention and resources to cultural diplomacy in Asia and beyond. Japanese popular culture – music, animation, fashion, advertising images and food - are both 'pervasive' and 'amply visible'¹³ throughout Asia. The spread of Japan's popular culture in Southeast Asia more than matches that of China, an impressive fact given that the ethnic Chinese population of Southeast Asia is much greater than that of ethnic Japanese. But Arguably, Japan today lags behind China in terms of soft power in the region. The differential soft power of wealthy Japan and relatively poor China in Southeast Asia suggests not only that soft power has some

¹² David C. Kang, "Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytic Frameworks," *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Summer 2003), pp.57-85.

¹³ Brij Tankha and Madhavi Thampi, *Narratives of Asia: From India, Japan and China* (Calcutta and New Delhi: Sampark, 2005), p.73.

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autonomy from material (here economic) capabilities, but also that its popular culture does not automatically translate into soft power.

The balance of soft power in contemporary Asia is not static however. It might shift in Japan's favour if Tokyo comes to be seen as being more sincere in its apology for its World War II atrocities. Could it then surpass China in soft power because of its superior economic capabilities and the arguably greater appeal of its cultural products? This of course would depend on the extent to which China itself improves its cultural exports to supplement its enhanced economic capabilities. But the important question here about soft power is not whether it's fungible, but whether it's durable. For example, the US soft power in Southeast Asia was at a critical low after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, but anti-Americanism (an indicator of soft power) in Indonesia fell sharply after the US Navy provided substantial aid to Indonesia after the Indian Ocean Tsunami in December 2004. And with the installation of Barack Obama, who spent four childhood years in a Jakarta suburb with his American mother and Indonesian stepfather (who was named *Lolo* and with whom young Barry Obama appear to have developed a close personal bond)¹⁴, as America's 45th President, anti-Americanism in Indonesia seems to have receded further.

In this context, how durable is the current surge of China's soft power in Southeast Asia? It remains contingent upon the internal practices and external behaviour of the Chinese state and society. If these change and China turns nationalistic and aggressive towards its neighbours, then much of China's soft power will dissipate. Whether the diffusion of Chinese cultural products can prevent such an outcome and make Southeast Asian countries acquiesce with Chinese hegemony remains to be seen, although this seems unlikely.

Conclusion

I have argued that culture and cultural products are not an independent factor in regionalism and regional identity. They are politically constructed and channeled. And that their impact can be double-edged. While a rediscovery of classical cultural interactions have contributed to a growing sense of regional identity in Southeast Asia, cultural narratives and symbols have also been divisive factors in Southeast Asian (and wider Asian) regionalism. The challenge for Southeast Asian and Asian regionalism is to turn it into a force for strengthening regional institutions and constructing a regional identity. Fortunately, with minor exceptions, Southeast Asia does not have Northeast Asia's 'history' problem. Moreover, there are growing indications of the emergence of a nascent regional identity among Southeast Asia's power elite and students. A recent survey of 2170 students in all 10 ASEAN countries (including both arts and social sciences as well as science and technology students) conducted by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies found that "over 75 per cent agreed that they felt themselves to be citizens of ASEAN. Nearly 90 per cent felt that membership in ASEAN was beneficial to their nation and nearly 70 per cent felt that it was beneficial to them personally."¹⁵ This comes after a

¹⁴ Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (Three Rivers Press: 2004).

¹⁵ Eric C. Thompson and Chulanee Thianthai, *Attitudes and Awareness Towards ASEAN: Findings of a Ten-Nation Survey* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, ASEAN Studies Centre, 2008).

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2005 survey by the *Straits Times* of Singapore conducted among a thousand English speaking urban residents in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam about whether “people in ASEAN identified with one another.” Although the survey found doubts and scepticism about the pace of regional integration in ASEAN, it also revealed that six out of ten polled agreed that “people in ASEAN identified with one another”.¹⁶

¹⁶ *The Straits Times*, 5 December 2005.