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# Breeding Roses and Chasing Unicorns: Reflections from Europe on the Changing Field of Southeast Asian Area Studies

Saskia Schäfer

## Abstract

Drawing on classic articles on the field, approaches of New Area Studies and primary research on journals and study programmes, this article discusses the current state of Southeast Asian studies from a German perspective. Southeast Asian studies has transformed from a field informed by particular political interests into a container category subsuming various different scholarly programmes. Some of these are closely connected to various disciplines, others are trans- or interdisciplinary; some are in close contact with Southeast Asian policy-makers, for instance by educating their future bureaucrats and politicians, and others remain at a distance. Thirty years after the Cold War formally ended, Southeast Asian studies programmes differ vastly in their respective characteristics and outlooks. This article maps some of these and explores their similarities and differences as well as their relationships to the established disciplines.

**Keywords:** Southeast Asian Studies, New Area Studies, Germany, Europe, discipline, field, reflections

## In search of Southeast Asia

Fifty years after the so-called golden age of Cold-War-inspired Southeast Asian studies, some scholars are still chasing unicorns. Many Southeast Asianists themselves have doubted that the region corresponds meaningfully with its name, as it suggests commonality in one of the most diverse regions in the world. Nevertheless, several newcomers have joined the search. In his 1984 essay “What’s in a Name?” Donald Emmerson stressed the constructedness of the region “Southeast Asia”:

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Some who study the region treat it as if it were Shakespeare's rose: a reality existing independently of its name. Others would agree with [J.R.E.] Waddell that an observer of "Southeast Asia" who uses the name incautiously risks hallucinating unicorns: projecting homogeneity, unity, and boundedness onto a part of the world that is in fact heterogeneous, disunited, and hard to delimit. (Emmerson 1984: 1)

The year after Emmerson's essay appeared in the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, the journal published a response from the archaeologist and anthropologist Wilhelm Solheim, who argued that the question of whether Southeast Asia was a "true region" struck him as odd (Solheim 1985). Of course it was, he argued, and offered an array of features that Southeast Asian landscapes shared before the arrival of the Europeans who conquered, occupied, and traded port cities and areas from and with each other, such as for instance in the Anglo Dutch Treaty of 1824, in which the Dutch traded Malacca with the British for Bencoolen in Sumatra. A decade later, the Australian historian Craig Reynolds explained the desire of historians of early Southeast Asia to go in search of an *echt* ["true"] Southeast Asia as part of a postcolonial and anti-colonial project. This search, he wrote in 1995, was an attempt to "write back" against the European intrusion of the establishment of the nation-state. "This pursuit may have resulted in an overly benign view of early Southeast Asia" (Reynolds 1995).

A few years after the publication of Emmerson's essay, in mid-July 1990, thirty-four Southeast Asianists gathered to discuss the relationship of Southeast Asian studies to humanistic and social science disciplines. James Scott, in his foreword to the published proceedings, remarked that every now and then, as among other regional specialists, Southeast Asianists "engage in periodic rituals of self-diagnosis", but that it was not even self-evident "that [they] would even be [t]here in any recognizable form to take [their] own temperature" (Scott 1992: 1).

Since the end of the Cold War, Amitav Acharya points out, "there has been a shift from external, imperial and orientalist constructions of Southeast Asia to internal, indigenous, and regional constructions", towards a "regionalist conception of Southeast Asia as a region-for-itself, constructed by the collective political imagination of, and political interactions among, its own inhabitants" (Acharya 2012: 4), such as in the attempts to further collaboration within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).<sup>1</sup> Yet, these constructions are not written on a clean slate, but build on and draw on earlier conceptions, such as "Nusantara" for maritime Southeast Asia or "Nanyang," a Chinese term for the warmer geographical area along the southern coastal regions of China and beyond, also known as the South Sea.

1 For a perspective that emphasises cultural and historical perspectives over organisational ones, see also Noor 2020.

This article participates in the ritual of self-diagnosis and takes the temperature in a different part of the body. It maps the current state of global Southeast Asian studies from a European perspective, with a focus on German Area Studies. Area Studies in Germany has, as part of the stronger integration of German higher education into the global marketisation of education, been experiencing a transformation that differentiates it from US-American Area Studies programmes. “Area Studies” today is a broad container category subsuming various different scholarly programmes and political aims, some of them reproducing, others countering the exploitability of research for foreign policy interests that motivated much of the funding for Area Studies (Dirks 2012). Some of these aims are closely connected to various disciplines, others are trans- or interdisciplinary; some are in close contact with policy-makers, while others remain at a relative distance. As will later be shown, several functions that Area Studies fulfil in different contexts can be identified, as can various effects they have on the structures of knowledge production.

For the analysis, I draw mainly on secondary literature, on the websites, mission statements and course descriptions of various Southeast Asian studies programmes across the globe, and on statements by governments and other funding agencies. My own twenty years of experience as a student and scholar of Southeast Asia, as well as original survey data collected in December 2019 and January 2020, will add to the discussion.<sup>2</sup>

## Where is the field?

Much of the scholarship in the main social science disciplines – political science, sociology, to a lesser degree also history – obscures the specificity and local embeddedness of knowledge and the small horizon of the samples.<sup>3</sup> The anthropologist and Southeast Asianist Peter Jackson pointed out in his reflections on a new kind of Area Studies that “the West itself is almost always an unmarked site of the universal end of general theory, while the non-West is marked as a site of the particular and of empirical detail” (Jackson 2019: 9).

As a field within the social sciences, Southeast Asian studies developed shortly after the Second World War, in the United States, where it benefited from considerable state funding for a brief period. The term Southeast Asia was spelt

<sup>2</sup> The survey was sent to academic and administrative personnel at 78 institutions worldwide that offer Southeast Asian studies. It included 26 open questions on the programmes. While some respondents completed the entire survey, the majority shared their views in the form of partial answers. Altogether, 37 respondents participated. Wherever conclusions in the article are based on the survey results, this will be indicated.

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the best-known work on this is Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* (2000). See also Chou / Houben 2006, Houben 2013, Jackson 2019, Mielke / Hornidge 2014, Amir-Moazami / Streicher 2016, Derichs 2017, Seth 2013, Dirlík 1994 and 2006, and Spivak 2003.

differently than the British variant “South East Asia” but was nevertheless related to the British “South East Asia Command”, the body set up to be in overall charge of Allied operations in the region during World War II. Many of the most revered names in the field – such as Clifford Geertz – first travelled to Southeast Asia as part of government-funded expeditions. The decline of Southeast Asian studies, mainly in funding and thus in institutions, but also in the field’s ability to produce prominent names and well-known works, began in the late 1970s, when, with the Vietnam War waning and Suharto’s rule firmly established, many policymakers turned away from Southeast Asia.

The constructedness of the region and the geopolitical and strategic origins of its demarcations have long become part of what students and scholars of Area Studies must grapple with at the start of their studies. In addition, the imbalance between those who conduct research and their objects of curiosity remains an important aspect of Area Studies, just as in anthropology. Students, scholars and administrators of Area Studies have – perhaps more than many others – taken up the task of testing the framework and questioning their paradigm in addition to filling in the blanks and doing “normal science” (McVey 1995: 3). Many area scholars have made it a habit to question their area or region; they have made the shift away from what Arjun Appadurai suggested calling “trait” geographies to “process” geographies: they have moved from a focus on conceptions of geographic, civilisational and cultural coherence (in the form of values, languages, material practices, ecological adaptations, marriage patterns, etc.) to various kinds of action, interaction and motion (in the form of trade, travel, pilgrimage, warfare, proselytism, colonisation, exile, etc.). As Appadurai called for in 2000, regions have become viewed “as initial contexts for themes that generate variable geographies, rather than as fixed geographies marked by pre-given themes” (Appadurai 2000).

But the unit of analysis is not the only contested part of the field. As the political scientist Tom Pepinsky said in his keynote speech for the Cornell Southeast Asia Graduate Student Conference in 2014, Southeast Asianists eventually came to make peace with their contested region, but then briskly moved from the question “what is Southeast Asia” to the question “how do we study it?” (Pepinsky 2015a: 216). The focus moved from “Southeast Asia” to “studies”, to the status as a field or discipline. Over the past decades, Area Studies scholars have been legitimising and thereby refining their approaches. Highlighting some of these debates beyond the Anglophone academies of the United States and the United Kingdom, Peter Jackson called for a “theoretically engaged project of critical Area Studies in an era when neoliberal managerialism and metrification of research and teaching are casting a conservative pall over the international academy” (Jackson 2019: 49).

Area Studies scholars worldwide often have complicated relationships to the predominant foci and approaches in the established main disciplines. They

often refuse to either confirm or challenge concepts developed in what is commonly referred to as the global North and to thereby offer their regions as “testing grounds” (Mitchell 2004: 85). This refusal “provincialises” the theories packaged and exposes them as special rather than universal (cf. Houben / Rehbein 2010). Many area specialists have lived in their area of specialisation for an extended period and later struggle to translate the knowledge they have gained into the established main disciplines in ways that go beyond their respective region and make them applicable elsewhere. Their sometimes timid attempts often fall on deaf ears: most scholars in the main disciplines who claim the universality of their concepts prefer not to be reminded of the limitations of their empirical basis and hasten to render large regions of the world “special”.

Some scholars have thus found their niche in Area Studies: they are specialists of their region of focus, often spend long periods conducting field research, and then present their findings to other specialists. Some offer their findings to non-area specialists within the same discipline, for instance in anthropology or in comparative political science, but they usually remain focused on their specific region of study. Claudia Derichs has called this the “tunnel vision” that characterises many scholars within the main social sciences and humanities as well as many area specialists (Derichs 2017: 152–172). Their focus keeps them from seeing and analysing the connections beyond their immediate own area expertise. What Benedict Anderson called a “collective failure of nerves” in 1978 is still true: some area scholars mindlessly try to catch up with the disciplines’ latest methodological or theoretical fads while others defiantly crawl “deeper into the ‘area-ist’ shell, insisting – in a defensive, ideological way – on the uniqueness and incomparability of the area of specialization, and engaging in the study of ever more narrowly defined and esoteric topics” (ibid.: 44–45).

## Somewhere between discipline and field

Area Studies scholars have been debating for decades whether the combination of theoretical and methodological knowledge at home in an established academic discipline, and deep familiarity with a particular language, area or region constitutes a discipline, or at least a quasi-discipline. The use of vocabulary here is inconsistent. Many use the notion “field” synonymously to that of “discipline” but for the purpose of this article, it is useful to distinguish the two in order to assess what scholars and administrators mean when they describe their approaches and programmes as “interdisciplinary”, “multi-disciplinary” or “cross-disciplinary”. Many of these programmes are particularly proud of their interdisciplinarity, but as Chua Beng Huat et al. (2019) point out, this

“lifeline” for Area Studies is a deceiving one because alliances usually remain within the humanities, rather than among the natural sciences and social sciences and humanities (*ibid.*: 40). Such deeper interdisciplinarity is a worthy goal, but given the difficulties that scholars within the humanities already have with each other’s approaches, it is likely to remain the exception.

Disciplines are an awkward category. In his reflections on interdisciplinarity, Benedict Anderson offered a sober assessment of academic disciplines during his time as a scholar:

Departments were based on the pleasant notion that disciplines were scientific divisions within the broad field of scholarly knowledge, and that what marked each division was a basic common discourse. In fact, this idea is a fiction, since scholarly knowledge changes all the time in many different directions. (Anderson 2016: 138)

Those who believe that a discipline outlines a collective set of theories and methods only needs to observe the scholarly exchanges between, say political theorists and empirical democracy scholars, the latter tending to quickly settle on an operationalisable definition of democracy and then get to their phone interviews to gather the numbers for their calculations. Likewise, a Foucauldian anthropologist and a deconstructivist legal scholar will more easily find common ground than a historical sociologist and a quantitatively working one.

Comfortably situated on the margins of his own disciplinary affiliation, Anderson further reminded his readers that the history of the word “discipline” “goes back to the self-punishing rigors of medieval monks intent on subjugating the body as the enemy of the soul” (Anderson 2016: 161). Michel Foucault described the tasks of the academic disciplines in the following words:

The disciplines characterise, classify, specialise; they distribute along a scale, around a norm, hierarchise individuals in relation to one another and, if necessary, disqualify and invalidate. (Foucault 1995: 223)

Most scholars of Area Studies today feel more comfortable calling their area of expertise a “field”. But in the sense outlined above, the field of Area Studies also qualifies as a discipline, especially in contexts where entire Area Studies departments with tenured jobs exist, such as in many European countries and Australian universities (Milner 1999). I will return to these infrastructural differences and the question of discipline below. The main point here is that the focus on an apparent clash between a homogenously imagined Area Studies and similarly homogenously imagined disciplines obscures the view towards broader tensions within the various academic systems about how knowledge should be produced.

Specialised knowledge production in the form of Area Studies is, as a group of leaders of interdisciplinary research clusters at the National University of Singapore has put it, “on life support”. They argue that Area Studies suffers from a three-pronged problem: weak rules or the lack of a defined canon, hard

geographical borders and the “politically corrosive legacy of Area Studies’ origins in the global North” (Chua et al. 2019: 45). All of these, in addition to “the charge of being methodologically backward and theoretically unsophisticated [...] have led to the ‘prestige and plausibility’ and even delegitimization of Area Studies” (Anderson 2016: 44).

Student interest in Area Studies has been waning and replaced by a desire to understand globalisation in a more encompassing way, illustrated by the mushrooming of “International Studies” and “Global Studies” programmes, some of which offer not only undergraduate degrees but also PhD programmes, despite internal discussions about the value of interdisciplinary “training” for the academic system and job market, whose increasing professionalisation clashes with the fluidity and constant change of knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

In their capacities as leaders of research clusters in Singapore and as scholars of Asian Studies inter alia in Asia, Chua Beng Huat, Ken Dean, Ho Eng seng, Ho Kong Chong, Jonathan Rigg and Brenda Yeoh map various solutions to these problems that focus on areas and regions as flexible and fluid, as networks and circulation societies that transcend and connect. This perspective focuses on wider networks, flows, circuits and circulations. Another way to address the “sins” of Area Studies is to seek comparisons within the South, an approach also supported within the framework of Comparative Area Studies (Ahram et al. 2018). Finally, the authors approach Asia as a site of theorising rather than for testing theories developed in the global North.<sup>5</sup> Audrey Yue writes, “to do cultural studies in Asia is [...] to depart from Asia as a region and rethink Asia as a site of theory” (Yue 2017: 5). Chen Kuan-Hsing (2010) called for writing from Asia instead of seeing Asia in relation to the West.

As some of these initiatives illustrate, the appetite for Area Studies programmes and approaches arises not only from interest in a particular region, but also from a desire to globalise the social sciences, to add perspectives and experiences other than Transatlantic ones to theoretical debates. Tom Pepinsky correctly notes that “much of the anxiety associated with the ‘studies’ in Southeast Asian studies is not really about the clash between area and discipline, but about the tensions between disciplines, or within disciplines” (Pepinsky 2015a: 216). For instance, some political scientists have accused the methods of Area Studies of being journalistic, merely “descriptive” rather than theoretical, and generally mushy, or even “pre-scientific” (Shea 1997). Often, what the critics are missing are hard facts, numbers and rankings. Contrasting methodological approaches in this way and negating the place of qualitative work also serves the purpose of placing particular epistemologies oriented towards the natural sciences at the heart of political science as a discipline.

4 For a discussion about changes of the academic system regarding “education” and “training”, see e.g. Anderson 2016: 142.

5 See also the *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Journal* and Chen 2010.



When a group of German students at my own university in Berlin demanded that their university change the title of their degree back to *Regionalwissenschaften* (roughly: “regional sciences and humanities”) from *Regionalstudien* (“regional studies”) in 2019, they were doing so also because they face scepticism within the academic system, specifically the accusation of not working scientifically – “science” being understood here to follow the natural sciences. This accusation is a familiar one, but it concerns more than the tension between Area Studies and the predominant structure of academia into disciplines: it concerns broader questions of the place of theory in the social sciences, questions of positivism and constructivism, of empiricism and hermeneutics, of facts and truth. In their reflections on Area Studies and the social sciences, Schirin Amir-Moazami and Ruth Streicher have connected the “return to positivist epistemologies”, the “revitalized belief in the truth of ‘big data’ and a significant absence of reflexivity vis-à-vis the epistemological underpinnings of the categories with which data is gathered” to the “the exclusion of non-European archives” and highlight that the underlying epistemologies are also, often implicitly, ingrained in Area Studies (Amir-Moazami / Streicher 2013).

The administrative formats of Southeast Asian Area Studies vary widely: much like other disciplines, Southeast Asian studies is taught and researched in specialised departments, in dedicated journals and to some degree in regular academic conferences, but one major difference between the Area Studies originating in U.S. Cold War efforts and many European Area Studies constellations is that in the United States, Area Studies is mostly structured in programmes and centres rather than in departments. The Center for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, for instance, has no faculty of its own, but 20 affiliated members from a range of departments such as Archaeology and Public Health (author’s survey 2020). As David Szanton (2004) explained, Area Studies departments with their multidisciplinary directly challenged the disciplinary departments. Trying to be both multi-disciplinary and departmental, they challenged the predominant notion that a department represented a discipline. This was “more than the older elements of the university would easily tolerate” (Szanton 2004). Area Studies centres, on the other hand, which made no claim to being departments or disciplines, were much less of a threat, but (merely) functioned as connectors between different discipline-based departments. Thus, most American Area Studies programmes do not offer permanent positions, except for a few notable exceptions such as in Princeton and Chicago.

In many European countries, today’s Area Studies programmes are built on the traditional Oriental Studies. Europeans have systematically studied “the Orient” for more than two hundred years. In the early 14th century, the Council of Vienne recommended language courses of Oriental languages at five Euro-

pean universities, emphasising the importance of the linguistic approach to Islam and laying the groundwork for later scholarship (Rudolph 1991: 68). The first European chair for Arab philology was established in 1539 at the Collège de France (Arkoun 1997: 33). In 1795, the *École spéciale des langues orientales* was founded in Paris; the University of Naples “L’Orientale” was founded even earlier in Naples in 1732. The German Oriental Society (*Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft*) was established in 1845 in Leipzig and has regularly held conventions up to the present day.

It was this “tradition of Orientalism” that gave Area Studies in Europe “something of an anchor against political winds” (Scott 1992: 2) and allowed it to disentangle itself to some degree from the “hegemonic grip of the disciplines” (ibid.: 4).<sup>6</sup> Germany is a particularly interesting case in this context, partly because of the rich tradition of scholarship on the “Near East”, but also because of the divergent paths that this tradition took in East and West Germany respectively, and because of the ways in which these two academic systems were then joined together. For a long time, it was not questioned that Oriental Studies in Germany was an academic discipline. It had everything a discipline needed: chairs, teaching programmes, degrees, associations, journals, rites of passage. The core of the discipline was the study of language and history. In its founding document, the German Oriental Society declared that it was founded “to promote all aspects of knowledge of Asia and of closely related countries in every aspect, and to propagate participation of this in wider circles. Hence the Society will deal not only with ‘oriental literature’ [*morgenländische Literatur*] but also with the history of these countries and the research of their situation both earlier and more recent times” (Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft 1847: 132–133).

At the same time, the authors stated that they did not wish to interfere with politics and religion in the countries they studied, nor did they want to look down on the practitioners of other religions (Preissler 1995). Orientals themselves, the document emphasised, would be welcomed as members of the association, should the occasion arise. These naïve-sounding but surely carefully crafted formulations point at the level to which the power relations in the production of knowledge about “the Orient” were already obvious in these early stages of institutionalization. Discussions about issues of geopolitical influence, the instrumentalisation of knowledge and racism were part of the formation process more than a hundred years before Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (Said 2003). In the 1860s, several Ottoman, one Asante representative and other international members became members of the society, but they would remain a tiny minority. Until today, the vast majority of academic and administrative staff at German Oriental/Asian and Area Studies institutes are originally

6 On German Orientalism, see Marchand 2009, Polaschegg 2005 and Kwaschik 2018.

German or West European, and almost all of the tenured academic staff are white. Early career scholars and doctoral students are of very mixed backgrounds, but not only have German academic institutions been very slow at trying to diversify their faculty and staff, but also the proportion of degree holders likely to leave academia is higher in Area Studies than among those who hold degrees in the main disciplines. The discipline has transformed itself from its largely philological and historical origins towards catering to students' interests in contemporary social and political questions, often regarding not only other world regions, but questions of globalisation, which other disciplines seem ill-equipped to tackle (Poya / Reinkowski 2008).

In German higher education politics, the subjects formerly subsumed under Oriental Studies are usually considered *kleine Fächer*, “minor subjects”, along with, for instance, papyrology, dance studies, and glass and ceramics studies. Their relationship to what German scholars and administrators now call Area Studies (*Regionalstudien*) is contested: some view these “small subjects” within the humanities and as distinct from social sciences with a regional focus; others conceive of them as a necessary and natural extension of their traditional focus (cf. Krämer 2017, Jokisch 2008).

Southeast Asia was subsumed under Studies of the Far rather than of the Near East, and structurally became part of several of the German Orientalist institutions. In the 1950s, the GDR government integrated the study of Southeast Asia into the so-called *Asienwissenschaften* (Asian Studies), which in turn were structurally connected to African Studies. Departing from the philological origins and taking area-specific knowledge into a more explicitly political direction, Area Studies in the GDR consisted of social sciences (*Gesellschaftswissenschaften*) with additional language training and a focus on specificities in the observed regions.<sup>7</sup> This establishment of *Asienwissenschaften* against the background of Oriental Studies but with the political goals of the GDR in mind is one of the key moments of the transition into the amorphous quasi-discipline that is German Area Studies today.

In the 1990s, most scholars of GDR Area Studies were replaced with West German colleagues after the German reunification. GDR-style Area Studies was largely marginalised and the respective disciplines, such as Sinology, experienced a philological revival, but later suffered from waning interest on part of students (Krauth / Wolz 1998). Around the same time, social scientists and university administrators in the UK and other European countries installed “development studies”, which shared some aspects with Area Studies in the ways the GDR had established. Language skills usually were and remain optional rather than a core part of development studies in the UK style, which has since been exported to other places, including Germany.

7 See Krauth / Wolz 2020. An introduction to social sciences was obligatory for all students. From 1951 until 1989, the courses were organised by the respective Institute of Marxism and Leninism at each university.

This influence from two sides is still visible in the various names of Area Studies programmes in Germany today. They are usually referred to either as *Regionalwissenschaften* or *Regionalstudien*. The German word *Wissenschaft*, typically translated as “science”, is a more encompassing term. It includes the social sciences and humanities and contains hermeneutic philosophy and political theory just as much as quantitative approaches. Thus, for more than a century, Germans conducted *Asienwissenschaften* (“science and scholarship of Asia”) without ever doubting their *Wissenschaftlichkeit*, their “scientific character” or “scholarly rigour”. This self-understanding is mainly rooted in two different academic traditions: that of the GDR *Regionalwissenschaften*, which based their rigour on the theories and methods of the social sciences, and that of the West-German tradition of *Orientalistik* (“Oriental Studies”) and *Islamwissenschaften*, “Islamic Studies”, one branch of Area Studies.

Islamic Studies shares with other regional studies the focus on languages, although which languages in addition to Arabic and Turkish is a matter of contestation, but it differs through the fluid localisation of Islam. Of course, the status of Islamic studies as a *Wissenschaft* is contested, but many of the leading scholars in this field have successfully claimed and defended it as a discipline of its own with institutes and chairs at almost all major German universities. One still finds remnants of this proud linguistic and theological disciplinary past of the current Area Studies in job interviews headed by very senior professors who will pose the first question in Malay, or ask the interviewee about particular sections of the Quran to determine whether a particular group of Muslims is heretic, rather than analyse heresy as a power discourse.<sup>8</sup>

The reading of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* was not part of the introductory courses of Middle East and Asian Studies at many German universities until the mid-2000s.<sup>9</sup> This soon changed: reflecting the power dimension of knowledge production became a key element of Area Studies. With reflection and self-questioning came doubt. Students and scholars within the departmental structures of Area Studies were not able to transform these doubts into progressive theorisation in the same way that anthropologists did. Lecturers in German Area Studies programmes today will raise eyebrows among their students when they teach hermeneutics, discourse analysis or methods such as ethnography and conversational interviews: is this really *wissenschaftlich*? At the same time, in defence of the existing Area Studies institutes and the establish-

8 I am referring to my own experiences here; for more detailed discussions of the tension between theological, hermeneutic and social science approaches, see Poya / Reinkowski 2008.

9 I myself enrolled in a programme on “Southeast Asian Studies” in 2003. For this article, I asked several colleagues with Area Studies backgrounds about their experiences as undergraduates: many of them were introduced to Said late in their studies. Several of them said that while individual lecturers favored postcolonial approaches, it was possible to obtain one’s degree without ever having read *Orientalism*. This changed in the 2010s, when *Orientalism* became a key text of introductory courses in Area Studies.

ing of new ones, Area Studies in Germany is not going anywhere anytime soon. On the contrary: it has been thriving, as the following section will show.

## Waves of rising and declining

The doubts originate in attacks from two sides, formulated especially since the 1980s and 90s: postcolonial scholars have been attacking Area Studies for its geopolitical offerings to policy makers and the proximity to power of many research institutions, their racism, and the imbalance between the researchers and their subjects. At the same time, increasingly method-oriented social scientists level their attacks against Area Studies scholars who spend a lot of resources on language training, logistics of travelling and building trustful relationships with locals, all at the expense of statistics courses and other skills.

From the perspective of area specialists working within political science and sociology, Area Studies is in a permanent crisis. This is mostly because competition on the academic job market has increased and there are few incentives to spend time fulfilling the requirements of Area Studies when it offers so few job opportunities. In the United States, the political scientists who turned their back on Area Studies after the drop-off in the initial Cold War-related funding never returned. Tom Pepinsky notes that policy makers continue to believe in the importance of area expertise. The crisis, he argues, “lies in the relationship between it and the academic disciplines that employ most area specialists and where most Ph.D. students are trained” (Pepinsky 2015b). Many social sciences, he says, “favor theoretical advancement and contribution to existing academic debates, not close knowledge of the nitty-gritty details of national politics” (Pepinsky 2015b). Another development that contributed to the relative decline of Area Studies in the United States was the absorption of area expertise into some particular departments of main disciplines. If the fundamental role of Area Studies in the United States has been to de-parochialise U.S.- and Euro-centric visions of the world in the core social science and humanities disciplines (Szanton 2004: 4), Area Studies scholars in the United States have been successful to some degree, at least comparatively speaking.<sup>10</sup>

In Germany, by contrast, area expertise concerning areas outside Western Europe and North America never made it into most of the main social sciences and humanities. One reason for this is that the parochialism of the main social sciences in Germany is even stronger and more stubborn than in the United States. Another is the relatively comfortable situation of Area Studies. Those with tenured positions conduct research and teach among like-minded specialists

<sup>10</sup> Without looking at even more parochial systems for comparison, the situation may be as bleak as some observers state; see Kurzman 2015.

and are less pressured to contribute to existing academic debates outside their narrow field. Their insights remain locked into their particular niches and rarely make it into larger debates.

In the early 2000s, as the government under Gerhard Schröder pushed the restructuring of the German academic landscape, the German Council of Science and Humanities (*Wissenschaftsrat*), an advisory body to the German Federal Government and the state governments, recommended strengthening Area Studies. After some internal debate, the council decided to use the term *Regionalstudien*, “regional studies”, rather than *Regionalwissenschaften* (“regional sciences and humanities”) (*Wissenschaftsrat* 2006). Arguments against the usage of the term *Regionalwissenschaften* were that the term erodes important differences between the “small subjects” within the humanities and the collaboration-based Area Studies, and that Area Studies relies on disciplines rather than forming its own *Wissenschaft* (Puhle 2005). Ultimately, some of those arguing for the term also wanted to avoid the competition and challenge of the established disciplines. The situation is comparable to that of Area Studies centres versus departments in the United States. This tension informs the two competing terms that commonly describe departments and chairs concerned with particular regions, from North American Studies to Albanology.

In 2006, the Ministry for Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, BMBF) established a major funding scheme in support of Area Studies. It was part of a major restructuring programme of the German academic system. The so-called German “Excellence Initiative”, a political initiative aimed at stimulating and accelerating the process of differentiation in the German university landscape and at integrating German scholarship better with global trends, channelled substantive funding into research collaborations. The programme has since been renewed several times. As part of this aim, the government has been strategically supporting Area Studies at various universities, citing the increase in globalisation and the need to understand developments in and to be able to communicate with other world regions as the main reasoning behind these initiatives. In some places, this has strengthened the position of Area Studies vis-à-vis the main disciplines in terms of resource allocations and infrastructure. Area-specific knowledge is framed as useful and desirable in the globalising economy. To what degree this influences actual scholarship and outcomes remains another question.<sup>11</sup>

Simultaneously, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) has funded at least one multidisciplinary graduate school for educating PhD students loosely connected to Islamic studies but also rooted in other social sciences and humanities, producing more than fifty graduates within a decade. Their projects were sometimes philological, but often combined language skills and anthro-

11 For a detailed discussion of this initiative and how it draws on notions of area-specific knowledge of the 19th century, see Kwaschik 2018.

polological fieldwork in areas such as Xinjiang and rural Afghanistan, as well as European cities. For the field of Islamic Studies in Germany, the success of this particular institution meant a dramatic shift in scope from an Arab-centric notion of “the Muslim World” to a much more encompassing understanding of Islamicate societies and Muslim subcultures in non-Muslim societies. Other Area Studies institutions, such as the Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn, have also combined language training and education on the Middle East and East Asia in an encompassing Asian Studies programme, and others such as the Department of Oriental Studies at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg followed suit and included some work on Islam in Indonesia in their research and teaching. For Southeast Asian studies, this development sits well with an increase in the attention paid to religion, and a growing willingness to see Islam in Southeast Asia from a more comparative perspective that moves beyond the notion that “Indonesian Islam” or “Southeast Asian Islam” is per se different from an Arab-centric norm (see also Formichi 2016). As indicated earlier, among scholars within the so-called “small subjects”, many embraced the chance to remake their discipline in collaboration with the representatives of the main disciplines who valued area foci. Many of them were not deeply convinced by the postcolonial thinkers they cited in their grant proposals, but connecting *Regionalwissenschaften* to *Regionalstudien* was the chance to rescue their institutes and to connect their expertise to the interests of students and the general public. This was particularly the case in the field of Islamic Studies, as discussed in the previous section, but other Area Studies and to some degree religious studies also benefitted from the initiative.

Beyond these weak but slowly growing pockets of interest in Southeast Asia in various Oriental Studies and Islamic Studies institutions, Southeast Asian Studies is currently taught at six universities in Germany: two call it *Südostasienwissenschaften* (“Sciences or Scholarship of Southeast Asia”), one calls it *Südostasienstudien* (“Southeast Asian Studies”), one *Austronesistik* (“Austro-nesian Studies”), one *Südostasienkunde* (“Southeast Asian Expertise or Studies”) and one *Indonesische Philologie / Malayologie* (“Philology of Indonesian / Malay Literature”) (Portal kleine Fächer 2020). Together, they comprise 9.5 full professorships, most of them with several attached non-tenure-track assistant professorships. The core of these programmes is their respective language training, where Bahasa Indonesia and Vietnamese are the most popular, followed by Thai and Bahasa Malaysia. The Institute for Asian and African Studies at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin is the only institution in the country that offers a greater variety of language instruction, such as Khmer, Tagalog, Mon, Lao and Myanma. Besides Area Studies students, the language programmes are popular among anthropologists, and to some degree with people from outside the academe, mostly connected to development work. The traditional

centres in Southeast Asian studies – Ithaca, Canberra, London, Singapore, Kyoto – all continue to place a strong emphasis on language skills.

In many other places, for reasons outlined above, but also because of a greater globalisation of Area Studies programmes in terms of language backgrounds on the part of scholars and students, the importance of language training is in decline. Many students and scholars use their native languages, especially those located in institutions in Asia, but also elsewhere: a survey respondent from the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa pointed out that 30 per cent of their local population have Southeast Asian heritage, and some of those also bring respective language skills (author's survey 2020).

Some Southeast Asianists have discussed as one key problem the absence of Southeast Asians in many programmes (Heryanto 2002: 6) and the danger of reducing local scholars to native informants (Heryanto 2002: 6). But at the same time, in Asia itself, Area Studies seems to be less under pressure than in the United States. This might be because for Asian scholars, as for European Asianists, Area Studies programmes are an opportunity to respond to the parochialism of the social sciences and humanities. Another trend became visible in the responses to our survey: there are several policy-oriented programmes that work in an interdisciplinary way. When they are located in Asia, they use Area Studies approaches to enhance the applicability of theories derived from examples in the global North to their own region.

## Various effects of Southeast Asian Area Studies

The previous section has already alluded to the large variety of functions that Area Studies programmes fulfil today. The examples from the German case have shown that Area Studies in Europe takes on different forms and fulfils different functions than in the United States. Southeast Asian Area Studies in Australia or Japan<sup>12</sup> has followed yet another path, as geographic proximity and national anxieties not only make Southeast Asia a neighbour that many students and scholars are eager to understand, but also pull it into security concerns and discourses.

In Europe, Area Studies of Asia and Africa are a blend of updated or re-made Oriental studies, remnants of Cold War Area Studies imported from the United States, and globalised and de-colonising social sciences and humanities. In Germany, the recent funding initiatives for Area Studies have had four main effects:

12 For Japan see Yamashita 2004



First of all, as intended, the additional funding for Area Studies has allowed German scholars to participate on a greater scale in global scholarly networks. The funding has allowed them to invite scholars from around the world, and to participate in conferences and workshops that they might otherwise have missed. This has successfully globalised research in Germany in the sense that German Area Studies scholars are in much closer touch with scholars elsewhere than in previous decades. In another sense of the word “globalisation”, the rise of Area Studies has enabled more scholarship that moves beyond the focus on the Transatlantic world.

A second effect, also intended, is that of bridge-building, both between the “regional sciences and humanities” and the main disciplines. Such a bridge-building function is inbuilt in American Area Studies because with very few exceptions, each area scholar has a disciplinary appointment. In the German context, area specialists can afford to communicate less with the main disciplines. This allows them certain freedoms, but also robs them of the opportunity to disseminate their knowledge in the mainstream disciplines. The new funding schemes have specifically targeted the isolation of some institutions and successfully encouraged cooperation across universities. The bridges between Area Studies and other disciplines are not as plentiful, but they too exist to a greater degree than some decades ago. Often, they take the shape of collaborative “projects”, which Area Studies scholars are invited to formally join. The degree to which their expertise really informs their collaborators in the main disciplines, for instance in the form of joint authorship or engagement through reading and citations, remains questionable. In practice, the knowledge produced in Area Studies often remains area-specific.

A third effect is that to some degree, the large number of small interdisciplinary projects has meant that James Scott’s call for research on “the periphery, the world of non-elites, oral culture, popular religion, the countryside, non-formal practices” (Scott 1992: 7) has been heard: many young researchers have thrown themselves into fieldwork among marginalised migrants, small and often remote congregations, and phenomena such as pop-preachers. Some of the German initiatives have been very good at bringing people from all over the world to Germany. They have also invited practitioners and public intellectuals to further their engagement with their topics in an academic setting. Tragically, many of these works will remain raw dissertations sitting on the shelves of the university library only, or perhaps published as is but without any further editing work. Funding for PhDs in Germany is very short at three to four years, and the vast majority of these researchers do not have or will not be granted post-doctoral periods comfortable enough to turn their research into well-edited articles and books. Here, due to the quantified way of evaluating success of higher education policies, a lot of high-potential work gets funded in its early phase but not properly nurtured along the way.

A fourth, and perhaps not intended but without question accepted effect is the perpetuation of the fundamental parochialism of the main disciplines. This remains unchallenged. Politicians of higher education in Germany do not exert much pressure on the main disciplines to break up their Transatlantic worldview. It hinges largely upon the research interests of individual professors whether a discipline opens itself up geographically, such as for instance in the form of the M.A. degree “Global History” that the Freie Universität and Humboldt-Universität jointly offer in Berlin, or whether it remains inward-looking and focuses on methodological finessing. While the reviewers of grant proposals reward practices of name-dropping and decorative inclusion of research areas outside the Transatlantic, the absence of actual measures of performance prevents collaborative research clusters from actually eroding the barriers and hierarchies between the established main disciplines and Area Studies.

In Asia, the aim of many Area Studies programmes and departments is to find a way to overcome the parochialism of U.S.-dominated social sciences, especially in political science and sociology, but also in the humanities. Most survey responses named “globalisation” as a main reason for the continued importance of Area Studies. One survey respondent wrote that “[the] study of world areas (combining languages and area expertise) is the only way to keep ‘global studies’ in check; without Area Studies, the study of the world is incomplete” (author’s survey 2020). Some respondents emphasised the relief of not having to legitimise their scholarly or administrative regional focus at Asian universities, compared to universities in the West. Of course, Area Studies programmes differ among the countries, with some being strongly policy-oriented. An example is the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), a graduate school and policy-oriented think tank within the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. Known earlier as the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies when it was established in July 1996, RSIS offers graduate education in international affairs, taught by an international faculty, including historians and other non-political-scientists.

Whatever the precise pathway and motive behind various Area Studies approaches, they allow for much-needed specialised scholarship, but at the same time they treat the symptoms rather than tackle the cause of the problem: scholarship marked as area-specific perpetuates the notion that there is a general, un-marked core in the West, and that beyond it are, to varying degrees, additional specificities. Whether in Europe or in Asia, Area Studies simultaneously allows the crossing of boundaries but does not work towards dismantling them.

## Thinking forward

From a broader perspective, Area Studies across the world fulfils three main functions: first, it facilitates issue-focused approaches that combine theories and methods from various main disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities, and sometimes also beyond that. Second, it allows the study of “non-Western” societies in their respective contexts in response to the parochialism of social sciences and humanities, and – only seemingly contradictory – third, allows the main disciplines to remain as parochial as they are, because that which is locally specific to the West may be analysed in the main disciplines while everywhere else falls under Area Studies, dismissed as specific and non-theoretical.

These functions are not that far off from what some area specialists involved in the crafting of U.S.-American Area Studies envisioned: in 1948, the political scientist and Japanologist Robert Hall led a team that drafted a report for the Social Science Research Council, pleading for the institutionalisation of Area Studies as the most effective way for achieving three objectives: first, to extend the relevance of the humanities, including the study of foreign languages in a rapidly changing world; second, to link the humanities to the social sciences across a broad range of interdisciplinary endeavours; and third, to safeguard the American national interest in what was rapidly becoming a global confrontation with communism (Katzenstein 2002). The third objective has become obsolete due to the breakdown of communism and the rise of other global powers. Instead, Area Studies and similar programmes such as International and Global Studies allow scholars to approach issues in a multi-centric world from various angles. They respond to a variety of problems within the academic system.

But the pressures that area scholars discussed in the 1990s in the United States have only increased since then: metric-based performance measurements ensure that research outcomes are predictable. In the social sciences, the focus increasingly lies on methodology, often requiring detailed coursework in statistics and programming. The professionalised academic system in its current global configuration values neither deep familiarity with a region, nor language skills.

At the same time, scholarship has globalised and diversified, but it has done so in deeply unequal ways. The dominance of English as the world’s main research language allows for more global communication among elites, but it proves problematic for the perspectives of non-elites, not to mention their attempts to bring their research into journals.

This pressure on languages other than English also affects other disciplines, perhaps most of all anthropology and sociology. Already in the mid-1990s, George Marcus (Marcus 1995: 101) concluded that most multi-sited field studies

were carried out in monolingual, mostly English-speaking settings (Marcus 1995: 211). Even though language skills remain basic prerequisites for anthropological and ethnographic fieldwork (Clifford 1997: 198) and for any method of qualitative research, contemporary anthropologists and sociologists face similar pressures to Area Studies scholars. Often, they are expected to bring the necessary language skills with them prior to their respective trainings, or to acquire them on the side. Competence in a language is often assumed rather than openly discussed (Tremlett 2009: 64).

In a multipolar world order with a few dominant languages, and with increasingly competitive and market-oriented education, anthropologist and post-colonial scholars would be natural allies for most contemporary area scholars. Collaborations between anthropology and Area Studies have been plentiful, but they usually focus on the objects of their curiosity or what Kuhn (1962) would call “normal science” rather than discussing the paradigm. Anthropologists could take some of their insights from the writing culture debate – the discussions of reflexivity, objectivity and the concept of culture, as well as ethnographic authority in an increasingly fragmented, globalised and (post) colonial world (Clifford / Marcus 1986), as well as discussions on language, social reality and power relations (Gal 2012: 8; Farquhar / Fitzsimons 2012: 101–102) – to a broader level and make more encompassing demands not only for their own discipline but for the academe more generally.

If it was properly positioned to fulfil their full potential as envisioned by some of its more optimistic proponents, Area Studies would offer a way to tackle the legacies of the anti-communist era that still remain not only in Area Studies scholarship (Winichakul 2014: xv–xvi) but also elsewhere.

In order to work towards these goals, Area Studies needs to embrace its identity as a quasi-discipline progressively and forcefully rather than accept the claim that it is second league. This means demanding a high level of language skills, of knowledge of local contexts, and of substantive fieldwork. It means offering one’s work for collaborative projects with colleagues from the main disciplines as equal partners, not as decorative and exotic add-ons. Further, it also means translating one’s own work again and again. More generally, it is also the task of area specialists to point at what is area-specific to knowledge produced on the empirical basis of the Transatlantic world. There is much that area specialists of the Transatlantic cannot be expected to know about the world, and specialists of other areas need to identify the contradictions and encourage the conversation. In an academic system in which the power of knowledge production is more equally distributed, there would be no Area Studies, or rather, all the world would be Area Studies, in the best sense of the term.

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