

Sydney and Canberra from 1972 and a Backstory

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I have been asked, too many times, to write something about my time at the ANU in Asian studies, and I have always declined. Before I came to the ANU in 1991, first on secondment and then from 1995 until 2007 on a continuing appointment, I had taught for nearly two decades in the history department at the University of Sydney. My years at Sydney were formative in the way I thought about history and the kind of history I wanted to write. I have reconsidered my earlier disinclination to contribute to ANU “memories” and here offer a backstory that might illustrate how personal interests and circumstances danced together while I tried to figure out which one should take the lead.

The academic departments in the two institutions were very different. At Sydney, European, Australian, and American history dominated the course offerings, and the Europeanists had pressed their advantage for many years to keep Asian history out of the first-year offerings so they could generate student numbers in upper-year courses, especially in honours. At the ANU, Asia was the constant, disciplines were the variables. Academic units concentrated on Asia, and proficiency in an Asian language was required for the undergraduate degree. At Sydney, discipline was the constant. The Euro-historians were critical of over-staffing for Asian history. The Commonwealth still reigned, sort of, and there were four historians of India. One specialised in Christian India, and the person hired to teach Mogul history had refused. What gave Asian history its place was administrative convenience rather than geopolitical framework or intellectual tradition.¹ By contrast, in the Research School of Asian and Pacific Studies and the Faculty of Asian Studies at the ANU, the study of Asia was generic. Academic units were dedicated to research and teaching about Asia; in some disciplines proficiency in Asian languages was expected.

My graduate training at Cornell University, where I was affiliated with the Southeast Asia Program, began in the fall of 1965 after my return from Thailand where I had taught English, courtesy of the US Peace Corps, in a small provincial capital on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula. Krabi, now a popular and worryingly overrun tourist destination, was then a sleepy place attractive only to Thai orchid fanciers who would wade through the coastal shallows to the unearthly limestone formations and clamber up in search of a prize specimen. Scenes from the 1974 James Bond film “The Man with the Golden Gun” made the karsts in Phangnga and Phuket world famous. As my tour of duty neared its end, and after a trip to Bangkok to consult the Southeast Asian language expert at the American embassy, I decided I would exploit my language skills to study linguistics.

I enrolled for an MA in linguistics at Cornell with a minor in Southeast Asian history. Phonetics was a required course I loved, but I wasn’t all that interested in constructing a grammar, and the growing battles between the Bloomfield and Chomsky theoretical camps I found tiresome and distracting. Roman Jakobson and structural linguistics appealed to me, as did Benjamin Lee Whorf and the concept of different languages shaping different thought systems, an alternative physics, for example! Real linguists dismissed Whorf as unscientific. Still, exposure to linguistics was to have a lasting effect on my approach to historical writing as the linguistic and structuralist turn gained momentum across many academic fields. I read Thomas Khun’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* with relish. Having been smitten by the charismatic teaching of O. W. Wolters, I was able to change my major program to Southeast Asian history with a minor in Asian art history. My undergraduate major had been in English

literature, and because I had come into the history program through the back door, the department required a course in historiography taught by James John – or was it John James? – a gentle Roman Catholic medievalist. For years I kept the assigned anthology of essays on the philosophy of history that included Carl Becker’s “What are Historical Facts?” It was destiny that a late-comer to the discipline should be forever preoccupied with historical method.

In the 1950s and 1960s the US National Defense Education Act and the Ford, Carnegie, Rockefeller foundations funded language programs and research in Asian studies for strategic reasons: the containment of communism. The American government justified the budget for the Peace Corps, whose first director was President Kennedy’s brother-in-law, as a development program that dispatched middle-level technical manpower out to thwart the dangerous ideology. The acronym for the academic section during our Peace Corps training was WACAS, sounded Whack-ass: World Affairs, Communism, and Area Studies.

By the time I was writing my dissertation in 1970-1971 and thinking about employment, it was clear the Second Indochina War, hugely costly in Vietnamese and American lives, would eventually end. After the US presidential election in 1968 Nixon and Kissinger unconscionably delayed the inevitable. American strategic interests, aided and abetted by the 1972 oil shock, had already begun to shift. As I applied for university positions, it became clear that landing a job teaching Southeast Asian history at an American university wasn’t going to be easy. Wolters ran me into me one day on the campus and said, “Craig, you might have to think about Australia.” I did not welcome this news, but he was right. As fortune would have it, it was not America but Australia that offered me a job at the University of Sydney. One fringe benefit was that every Asian capital was a mere 8-9 hour-flight away.

Sydney, 1972-1991

A job for a Southeast Asian historian in Australia in 1972 had a lot to do with changes in Australian higher education in response to the Second Indochina War and to the growing importance of Asia to the Australia’s economy and its geopolitical position. As the country continued struggling to free itself from its White Australia biases, the University of New South Wales in 1968 convened a symposium of political and educational leaders. “Australia: A Part of Asia?” was essentially “a call to recognise the deep history and cultural power of Asian civilisations.” A year later the government commissioned a review that recommended more attention to Asia in school curricula and increased funding for the teaching of Asian languages in schools.²

Australian universities began recruiting overseas Asian specialists, and more than a dozen young Americans were appointed in history, anthropology, and political science during the 1970s. I was hired to teach a large first-year course, Asia and the West since 1850, which I shared with an Australian Indonesian historian; decolonisation, revolution, nationalist movements and Western imperialism were the themes. Protests against the Second Indochina War had disturbed the campus calm, and Left-Right divisions had split two departments: Political Economy had spun off from the Department of Economics, and General Philosophy asserted its independence, leaving the newly named Department of Traditional and Modern Philosophy with its conservative firebrands. The Professorial Board at the top of the university hierarchy came under fire, and the university finally relented and created an Academic Board, to which I was elected as was the youthful Malcolm Turnbull and a host of other younger people frustrated by the stuffiness of the institution. The Second Indochina War finally came to end in 1975 with communist victories in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, and Asia seemed

less and less important to the Australian public. Undergraduate enrolments in Asian history declined.

By the early 1980s, with Asian history now on the defensive, lower enrolments forced me to adjust and find something to teach besides mainland Southeast Asian history. Deryck Schreuder, a professorial appointment in 1980 whose speciality was African history, found a way to broaden the department's curriculum by introducing thematic courses, such as revolution, that loosened the hold of the areas on the curriculum. My research was then focused on Marxism and communism in Thailand, so I conjured up a thematic course that reached out to Australian history as well other parts of Asia. Arguing that Ned Kelly, the rebellious Irishman, could be understood as a political activist if not a Marxist was a stretch, but it was a device that lured students away from familiar Australian narratives and allowed me to double up on reading relevant to my research.

A required unit in historical method, an innovation at the time, divided the department, with some historians arguing that a historical method common to all areas did not exist; it depended on context.³ The brightest students were keen for more theory and method, but many teachers resisted. The compromise was to offer weekly "optional but highly recommended" lunchtime lectures, a lame description guaranteed to attract only the keenest students. One of the lectures I attended was on Marxism by Eugene Kamenka, ANU historian of social thought, who presented a simple but memorable digest of Marx. In my pre-digital debris I find typewritten notes of July 1982 for my method lecture, "Language and Mentality in the Study of Asian Culture." There to my wondering eyes should appear a paragraph on Benjamin Lee Whorf and his hypothesis about alternative language worlds.

The history department at Sydney was the oldest in the city and in Australia. It was a real powerhouse, its graduates going on to careers in academia, media, the public service, and the professions. The honours program was very strong with 25 students or more; in 1990, the last year I taught, there were 55 in the cohort. The annual finalisation of honours marks was an event of high drama and spirited debate. One member of the department would turn up wearing shirt sleeve cuff holders as if running numbers in the back room of a speakeasy. These sessions might find colleagues arguing that a student hovering on 79.5% should be bumped up to 80% and therefore Honours I, a better prospect for a postgraduate scholarship, or bumped down to 79, thereby missing the mighty H1 by a whisker.

Noel Pearson, who graduated in 1987, was the first indigenous person to receive an honours degree in the department's program. His honours thesis was an oral history of his hometown, Hope Vale, Queensland, but he was having trouble getting his topic approved. The Honours Convenor, a Medieval historian whose special field was shipping, balked at agreeing to a thesis based on taped interviews. The rule of thumb was that primary materials, the *sine qua non* of a history honours thesis, should be available in university or public libraries to any future scholar wanting to follow up on the research. The convenor's expertise in vessel types, naval architecture and logistics during the Crusades was a long way from the source material and topics Pearson was proposing. As a former convenor of Honours, with a modest knowledge of oral history, I was called in to arbitrate. It was resolved that his project could proceed if he would lodge transcripts of two interviews with the department as token verification that the interviews existed. Just in case someone wanted to follow up.

In the first half of the 1980s I was into semiology and the centrality of language in the construction of knowledge, and I got stuck into Hayden White, both his big *Metahistory* book

and essays like “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact.” At Cornell I had attended a White lecture on one of the *Metahistory* chapters, when he abruptly left the stage without explanation. Maybe his thoughts were tangled and he couldn’t finish, or maybe his lunch hadn’t agreed with him. A colleague suggested I read Carlo Ginzburg’s “Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes” that graphically illustrated similarities in the sign-reading methods of the detective, the medical practitioner and the historian.

I sat in on lectures by Elizabeth Grosz, a philosopher and charismatic teacher whose gift for explaining poststructuralist theory attracted a student following. The city of Sydney arguably became the main conduit into Australia for the “posts,” such as postmodernist cultural criticism, possibly in advance of Melbourne with its stronger Old Left intellectual traditions and union-based politics.⁴ Jean Baudrillard, French sociologist and philosopher, gave a lecture at Sydney, which drew a huge audience that exceeded the seating capacity of the hall. The overflow crowd watched his lecture on a monitor outside, leading to droll comments about his theory of simulacra / simulation being reproduced on-screen by his virtual presence. Another visiting overseas guru was Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, translator of a key Derrida text in 1976, who gave a lecture on Marxism full of such learned exposition and arcane references in German that it baffled economics colleagues who prided themselves on understanding Marx.

My reading in the “posts” fed into the thematic course. When more options were introduced in the fourth-year honours program, I taught *The Recoverable Past*. The past is not directly observable, it cannot be recovered but only discerned by the imagination through the traces it leaves. To capture the point I added a question mark: *The Recoverable Past?* It wouldn’t be false modesty to say that I didn’t teach it all that well. Much of the academic writing originated in departments of comparative literature and communications where cultural studies lurked. No respectable department of English could be without a deconstructionist, I was solemnly told by a true believer. The course material was challenging. The readings dismayed some students and enthused others. Foucault in English translation is not easy: *savoir/pouvoir* sounds great in French, but the word-play is lost in English “knowledge/power.” The high-profile Australian public servant Michael Pezzullo took the course and carved out a rather inauthentic interpretation of Foucault that demonstrated the difficulties of speaking truth to power. What is memorable from that period is that demand for this intellectual fare came, with one or two exceptions, not from historians in the department schooled in traditional historical sources based on documentary material, but from students who asked for more ideas, methodologies, and theoretical readings. Students found in poststructuralism and other “posts” strategies and insights for alternative life-styles and value systems. That this intellectual fare was, like many academic orthodoxies, a fad that came with great fanfare and faded with a whimper.

I can see that my interest in the “posts” was a response to the shift away from area studies as well as to the latest academic orthodoxies. At a conference in Ithaca in late 1979 attended by eminent scholars from Europe and America, Oliver Wolters leaned over to whisper playfully in my ear, “have you ever heard of Derrida?” Even he, card-carrying Anglo-American empiricist, in conversation with a Cornell colleague in anthropology, was adapting the new way of reading literary texts to his interpretation of classical Vietnamese poetry. An essay by Ruth McVey skilfully tracked the move away from area studies. She praised the exciting methodological forefront of academic studies for the self-questioning it advocated, while expressing dismay that it could lead to esoteric studies employing a vocabulary accessible only to scholarly adepts.⁵ In researching the Thai Left and political dissidence in the life of Jit

Poumisak that preoccupied me for a decade, I found a way to exploit the “posts” via Michael Ryan’s critical articulation of Marxism and deconstruction.⁶

At Sydney I was in a history department, and the Asian-language environment I had grown accustomed to in graduate school was located in another department where Indonesian, Japanese, and Chinese were taught. Thai language was not taught at Sydney University, nor was it taught in any other Sydney university. Hong Lysa, my first PhD student, had to spend a year in Canberra learning Thai at the ANU. No university library in Sydney collected Thai vernacular publications or research materials. At Sydney I always felt I was having to dampen Asian enthusiasms to fit into the core programs of the history department, and I longed for a more immersive Asian environment.

Apart from occasional trips to Thailand on sabbatical leave or during holiday time, the best I could do was make an annual trip to Canberra, usually in August, when the inland city was frosty and I could happily wear my American winter coat. At the National Library of Australia I consulted the growing Thai collection being catalogued under the supervision of Rosemary Borthwick, who spoke and read Thai, a legendary figure for her industriousness and sympathies for Southeast Asian cultures. Her diplomat husband, Alex, had been First Secretary in the Bangkok embassy in the early 1960s, and Australian ambassador to Laos in the early 1970s. It was ironic that as I prepared to leave Sydney for a contract appointment at the ANU, Sydney and Macquarie Universities secured a budget to fund a Thai-language program and hire a Thai teacher-linguist from Bangkok.

Canberra, 1991-2007 and after

An anthropologist in the Faculty of Asian Studies at the ANU, whose doctoral research had focused on Buddhist monks and magic in rural Thailand, had left for a post in Europe, and the university lacked a Thai specialist. Tony Reid in the Department of Pacific and Asian History (PAH) in the Research School of Pacific Studies (RSPS) was ramping up his project in the economic history of Southeast Asia, and the department organised a five-year appointment for a mainland researcher. I arrived in early 1991 to find a convivial group of academics and staff. At morning teas the department head would announce PhD completions and publications and welcomed new research students and visitors such as myself. The Pacific historians in PAH, which published the *Journal of Pacific History*, were active with seminars and research students. I was asked to convene a “course” for new research students to familiarise them with the School’s expertise, a painless task that involved organising speakers and colleagues from its many disciplines. I was anointed the PAH representative on a School consultative committee, a task of moderate importance that no one else wanted. A member of Ranajit Guha’s Subaltern Studies collective, Dipesh Chakrabarty, was at the ANU when I arrived, adding his trademark sparkle to seminars and casual conversation.

During a sabbatical at the ANU in 1983 I had met Ranajit when he had attended one of my seminars. He had just published *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. The patriarch of the Subaltern Studies collective, Ranajit was then engrossed in editing the first volumes of *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, a full-frontal assault on Indian Marxist historiography and elite nationalism that was to have an impact on critical theory and peasant studies in South America. At the seminar I had spoken enthusiastically about Haydn White, whose work I was finding helpful in working out my ideas on emplotment in Thai historical narrative. Ranajit knew nothing about Haydn White, and although he was polite at the seminar and in conversation afterwards, he did not share my

enthusiasm. Haydn White had nothing to teach him; he had other muses, other thinkers who engaged him. I had just co-authored a long essay on Marxism on Thai historical studies, where Hong Lysa and I discussed The Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP), a topic debated during the political upheavals in the mid-1970s by political economists and economic historians about Thailand's lagging development.⁷ Ranajit was utterly dismissive of the AMP. He was very well read in the Marxist literature, and for him, the AMP wasn't real Marxism. Subaltern historiography with its theoretical and philosophical underpinnings was in a class above it.

On a visit to the Guha home I discovered who Ranajit's muses were. Ushering me into his study, he gleefully pointed out that there were no history books. Instead, the shelves were filled with books by and about Marx (a historian, to be sure), and Gramsci; structural linguistics (Roman Jakobson was a particular favourite); semiotics; anthropology (a lot of Levi Strauss); psychoanalysis (Freud); and philosophy. He proclaimed that Hegel was currently his bedtime reading. I asked why he didn't have any favourite works of history in his personal library. He was ready for this question and had doubtless been asked it before. Most history books have only facts, he said: "I can always go to the library and look up a fact." I abbreviate the conversation. I don't think Ranajit answered even an innocent question briefly. He was in a playful mood, for I had spotted history books in another room. He made sure I noticed *The C. L. R. James Reader*, the Trinidadian Marxist with a capacious intellect. Ranajit departed Canberra in 1995 with Mechthild to live in Austria, her homeland.

The ANU posting was a turning point for me: the academic environment swung away from Europe towards the East, and in a few months I was surrounded by colleagues immersed in the study of Asia. The teaching load and admin requirements were light, and I was able to make headway on unfinished projects: an edited volume of essays on Thai national identity and the finishing touches on a posthumous book about a Sino-Thai tin mining dynasty in southern Thailand by Jennifer Cushman, a dear friend from Cornell days who had moved to Canberra. To commemorate her scholarship colleagues from Australia and abroad gave lectures that became a volume of essays on the Chinese in Southeast Asia. My contribution was "Tycoons and Warlords: Modern Thai Social Formations and Chinese Historical Romance" (1996, 2001) about the many Thai renditions of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Ch *Sanguo Yanyi*, Th *Sam Kok*). On a research trip to Bangkok in 1992 I found that all the major weekly news magazines were running columns on *Sam Kok*. The retranslations, rewritings and applications of the *Romance* had become a growth industry. In one of those all-too-frequent violent interventions by the Thai army to suppress political dissent in 1992, the former prime minister and army general resigned in disgrace, and columnists had great fun comparing him to one of the central *Sam Kok* characters.

The Berlin Wall had come down, the Cold War was over, and the world was becoming multipolar. China rising was nothing new for Southeast Asia. At the time Thailand was one of the fastest growing economies in Asia, on its way to becoming a Newly Industrialized Economy, a Little Tiger, spurred by Sino-Thai entrepreneurs whose business canny was mythified in business manuals featuring characters and scenes from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The manuals preached that business was warfare by other means, advice intended more of a mental exercise, karate in the mind, so to speak, rather than an actual battle plan.⁸

I had frequent contact with the Faculty of Asian Studies (FAS) where Tony Diller was head of the Thai language program. I had first met him in 1965 in the Bangkok Peace Corps office where we both had make-do jobs at the end of our postings. To encourage the study of Asian languages in schools and universities, the Australian Ministry of Education established

national centres, including one for Thailand located at the ANU, and Diller became the foundation Director of the National Thai Studies Centre (NTSC). He was a sociolinguist with a boundless knowledge of Thai etymologies and history of the language, and his teaching skills had earned him the sobriquet Teacher Tony. He illustrated his lectures using a southern Thai shadow puppet.

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At the end of 1992 Sue and I took our young boys to Thailand, their first exposure to the country, as it was also for Sue. Simon was 6½, Oliver was 4½. When they were older, and feeling comfortable in the culture, they returned to Thailand many times with friends. We spent most of our six weeks north of Bangkok where the Ayutthaya Historical Study Centre offered us courtesy accommodation in a Thai house that featured a beautiful teak floor, two bedrooms, a bathroom with a large urn for splashing a shower, and a basin to wash clothes. The house had no kitchen, and the boys at that age were not yet used to Thai cuisine, so feeding the family was a challenge. At dinnertime we would squeeze into a two-row jitney with other passengers and ride to the market for a roast chicken, or we would catch a ride to a nearby restaurant where the boys predictably chose toasted ham and cheese sandwiches. One evening back at the house Sue turned on the light in their bedroom and discovered an enormous lizard on the wall. The boys were pretty chill, but it really was exciting to see nature up so close. *Tukkae*, the Thai word for the creature, is onomatopoeic after the croak it makes in descending volume: the more times it sings out, the larger the animal, so the saying goes, and this one was huge. We hustled it back outside with a broom handle.

Thai and Australian colleagues and friends would visit, and we would explore the historical park as well as nearby cottage industries aiming to export local wares: knives forged from wrecked automobile chassis; pottery for tableware. I had a desk at the Centre, but I made little progress with my research. It was enough to imbibe the atmosphere in this historic city. For four centuries Ayutthaya had been an international port that boasted trade links to the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, Japan and China. Portuguese, Dutch, Chinese and Arab traders passed through this cosmopolitan centre on a fortified island upstream from today's capital. In the late 17th century the language of diplomacy was Portuguese. Ayutthaya was the home of the royal court until the second half of the 18th century when the city was razed by Burmese armies. Large cannon, stocks of gold and gems, 700 elephants, artisans, and royal and noble families were hauled away to Burma, thus scattering the city's population. Upcoming military rulers moved the royal base south, first to Thonburi and then to Bangkok on the eastern side of the river, to begin the task of restoring government and the royal rituals that sanctified its authority. Ayutthaya bricks, distinctive for their shape, found their way south for the construction of the new royal centres. Over the years villagers had helped themselves to building materials, so what remained of the built environment had lost its grandeur.

Around our simple teak house it wasn't surprising to stub your foot in the ground and unearth Chinese pottery shards and fragments of brick and stucco. In the heat of the day Sue would find Simon and Oliver in the shade under the house digging up remnants of a glorious past, their happy time occasionally interrupted by the plop of a monitor lizard as it slid into the pond. During the 19th century Thai kings warring on the Malay Peninsula had removed Muslim peoples from their homelands in the south and resettled them in Ayutthaya. We could hear the *muezzin* calling the faithful to prayer.

I was on secondment from Sydney, and I was to return after five years. A review of FAS was underway, and renewal of the teaching Faculty resulted in several continuing appointments, including one for mainland Southeast Asian history. FAS was a small teaching

and research unit in the shadow of the better endowed RSPAS that received Commonwealth funding earmarked for research. One of the best things about being in the Faculty was I could emerge from my office and soon find myself conversating in Thai with a colleague or student. Delegations from Thai universities visited; a princess arrived to donate a ceramic copy of the first Thai inscription from the late 13th century. In the mid-1990s Thai prime minister Banharn Silpa-archa visited Canberra and was so taken by the Telecom Tower on Black Mountain that he had a copy erected in his native province of Suphanburi. The National Thai Studies Centre organised annual Thailand updates, and the Centre's budget allowed us to invite specialists from Thailand to speak on current politics and the economy. Peter Warr, an economist in the research school, was a regular at the updates where his user-friendly talk on the Thai economy was always very popular. For several years during Asia-Pacific Week Peter Jackson, a colleague in PAH, and I organised a mini-Thai studies conference for research students from across the country. We could fund travel grants for MA and PhD students from other universities to try out their thesis ideas before a knowledgeable audience. Anthropologists in RSPAS and their students added disciplinary strength to the Thailand program. Gehan Wijewardene edited the *Thai-Yunnan Project Newsletter*, and Andrew Walker had extensive research experience in northern Thailand and on the Thai-Lao border along the Mekong River. In the 1990s Thailand was second only to Indonesia among Southeast Asian countries studied at the ANU in terms of the depth of its research and the range of its activities.

I taught courses in mainland Southeast Asian history, and only in my last years before retirement did I teach a country-specific course on Thai history. I convened a research seminar for students intending to write an honours thesis as well as a final year honours seminar that allowed me to experiment with exercises that took advantage of the students' proficiency in Asian languages. I also co-taught History and Theory in the Faculty of Arts with a colleague in the European and Australian history department. Rey Iletto and I collaborated on an advanced undergraduate course on Edward Said's pathbreaking *Orientalism*. My research students wrote doctoral theses in Thai cultural, intellectual, religious and business history as well as in Lao and Vietnamese history. I don't recall that any of my MA students pursued academic careers; they found work with NGOs and with the Thai and Australian governments.

Over a decade from 1994 I was on the Southeast Asia regional committee of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) based in New York City and Washington. Biannual meetings were often in the USA, allowing me to reconnect with academic colleagues in America whose friendships had frayed after my two decades in Australia. The meetings also introduced me to academics and public intellectuals from the region. We had discussions about Southeast Asian futures in the age of globalisation, new narratives of modernity that were evolving: minorities and the national community, the role of public intellectuals and their relationship to power, civil society and the limitations on free speech in the public sphere. A colleague from Myanmar declared there was no public sphere in his country. I was Chair of the committee, the only white European at the table. Itty Abraham, the very smart SSRC program director, would take me aside before the meetings to explain the agenda and let me know how the discussion should proceed.

For some, especially elites, globalization was a magic orb, as Anna Tsing put it. But globalisation, which had quickly become a buzzword in the Thai media, had many critics, with academics and public intellectuals debating the pros and cons of the interconnectedness of new economic arrangements across the world which were marginalising many peoples. The consequences for the environment were deleterious. To keep pace with the changes as the

word's usage mutated, Thai public intellectuals quibbled about how best to translate the term into Thai.

Along with other factors, globalisation spelled the end of the SSRC's regional committee structure as the federal government and American foundations shifted their funding priorities, forcing the SSRC to reorganise in favour of thematic, trans-regional and cross-cultural components. Social scientific disciplines – economics, international relations, political science, sociology would now be constant. Area studies, a concept that held area constant and the disciplines variable, had been vital in encouraging and funding the acquisition of area-specific knowledge and the teaching of languages. Working with the SSRC and the close relationship between the ANU and the Australian government led me away from my earlier historical research on the 19th and early 20th century. A semester teaching at Berkeley in 2000 allowed me to exploit the burgeoning Thai literature on the new “borderless” world and the expansion of Thai business into the region – northern Southeast Asia and China – and write a concluding chapter to a revised edition of *National Identity and its Defenders* (2002): “Thai Identity in the Age of Globalization.”

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Our family went to Thailand again in 1997, the year of the Asian financial crisis, this time to Burapha University in Chonburi along the east coast. I was located in the Indochina Studies Centre in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science. There had been little attention to Thailand's neighbours to the east and northeast, but opportunities beckoned, as ASEAN had recently accepted Vietnam into its fold. The quid pro quo for the Centre's hospitality was that I would write an article for the Faculty journal highlighting Burapha's potential to become a hub for Indochina studies in Thailand.

On this occasion our host made available a flat on the sixth floor of a building that housed students and faculty. The accommodation had a kitchen. but the tap water was dodgy. Power blackouts occasionally disabled the lift, and we were fearful of being stranded between floors, so we hauled our bottled drinking water up the stairwells to our rooms. I could have organised car during our stay, but I had never driven in Thailand. Thai drivers don't always have insurance, and the prospect of a prang with a stranger's car was unsettling; Our host suggested we make use of unlocked bicycles in the car park. Who owned the bicycles? We commandeered a couple, and when we went to the market Sue and I would each ride a bicycle with Oliver and Simon sitting behind. The boys would insist we should race home over the uneven ground, and the extra wear and tear on the low-tech bikes resulted in a few repairs. The TV in the flat received Thai channels only, so we created our own entertainment. Sue had stitched up Zorro outfits, complete with masks, for the boys, and at 5:55 p. m. they would march out carrying their plastic swords and call us to attention to watch a colourful review of the royal family's activities that day.

What gave the Burapha stay a little spice was that the community boss, known as Kamnan Poh (Somchai Khunpluem 1937-2019), was a notorious local godfather (*jao pho*), a moniker he protested, a slur on his good name. He was finally put behind bars for graft, corruption in property developments, and organising a murder or two. On a walk down to the beach we would pass Kamnan Poh's house where an ominous sign in Thai and English hung on the back fence: Beware of the Dog. We never crossed paths with Kamnan Poh, who was doubtless busy with his nefarious activities or evading law enforcement, but our hosts had stories about his comings and goings. Just before our arrival, voters had returned him to office as the subdistrict headman. “He was the only candidate, but he was definitely our best

candidate,” quipped a teacher. I wondered if there really was a dog in the backyard. I suspected notice of a ferocious beast on the property was a droll touch of menace to remind the community of its finest and only candidate for political office.

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In the early 2000s the ANU created a college structure that that would rationalise the relationship between the Faculty of Asian Studies and the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies; the name had changed in 1994. I did not like the look of that future and contemplated another one. I had a couple of projects that would keep me busy, and retirement in 2007 would liberate me to finish them. Unlike many universities, the ANU has resources that would allow me to share an office. To keep abreast of new research and at Jim Fox’s urging, I became pro bono Chair of the Asian Studies Editorial Committee at ANU Press, then in its infancy.

One project was an edited volume of essays by O. W. Wolters. During that first year in graduate school as I became disenchanted with the linguistics MA, I was seduced by the course Wolters taught on Southeast Asia to 1500 CE and thought about changing my program. Those who attended his lectures found that the unlikely subject of “early Southeast Asia” came alive as fresh and contemporary in his classroom. He was an enthusiastic teacher, even if he could be infuriatingly difficult to follow. “I was new at the job and didn’t quite know what I was doing,” he admitted in a lament familiar to those lecturing for the first time. At the end of the first semester a blizzard in Ithaca forced the closure of the campus for several days, giving me extra time to prepare for the final exam, and I did well enough to change my major to history.

Wolters had been a Chinese specialist in the Malayan Civil Service (MCS). As independence in 1957 loomed and he needed to find another career, he exploited his Chinese language skills to write a doctoral thesis on early Malay commerce. Cornell offered him an appointment, and at the age of 49 he transplanted himself and his young family to upstate New York. I wanted to introduce Wolters to new readers as well as select and edit eleven essays on early Malay, Thai, Cambodian, and Vietnamese history and historiography. Writing about him was not easy. Anecdotes abounded but the facts were hard to come by. After Singapore fell to the Japanese, he spent the rest of the war as a POW in Changi Prison. He steadfastly declined to speak publicly about that experience or about the Malayan Emergency when he worked in psychological warfare. With the MCS and government officialdom behind him, he was now a scholar and teacher and well aware that as a “colonial imperialist,” as he once put it, he had played a part in depriving a Southeast Asian state of its sovereignty.⁹

While I finished the Wolters book another project was taking me back to the south where I had taught in my youth. Knowing of my off-beat interests, a Thai colleague gave me a book about a legendary Thai policeman who, in his youth, had acquired knowledge of arcane rituals and practices that empowered and protected warriors and fighters on both sides of the law. He was a small person but larger than life, and lived to at least 100. Khun Phan came from Nakhon Sithammarat in the mid-south on the east coast of the Malay Peninsula where, over time, geological change and alluvial deposits had created an ecological niche of interconnected lakes. Centring Khun Phan’s career in this niche offered a vantage point to look outward: to the regional trading world that had flourished for centuries, and northward to the Bangkok megalopolis. With significant exceptions, mainstream Thai historiography has centred on the kingdoms in the Chaophraya River basin that looked down on the rural and regional. The environment, the lakes and the jungle were not mere backdrop to the human story but were inscribed in Khun Phan’s person. The southern policeman was a creature of the regional ecosystem, and local and regional scholars had plenty to say about his life and times.¹⁰

Khun Phan was only the most recent historical figure I had come across who induced me to linger and look closer. Others included a commoner who challenged royal historical writing, a princely Buddhist ecclesiastic, a political dissident and polymath who died before his time, an economic historian, friend, and inspiring mentor to the young, and the British scholar from the late colonial world. What had captivated me about the characters in this list who seem to have emerged accidentally, unbidden, rather than from a deliberate plan? Thai kings, prime ministers and military leaders – those who wielded power – are perennial popular biographical subjects who held little interest for me.

Autobiographies and personal histories, memoirs and travel literature have always attracted me: authors such as George Kennan, Leonard Woolf, Virginia Woolf, Bruce Chatwin, and Colin Thubron who painted memorable word pictures of the natural landscapes he travelled through in Asia and the Caucasus. Recently I discovered the Canadian writer Miriam Toews's *Swing Low: A Life*, about her father who died by suicide, and Michael J. Arlen in *Passage to Ararat* puzzling over the Armenian heritage he shared with a father who wanted to deny it.

The biographical subjects that I wrote about were connected to larger themes that preoccupied me at the time. For many years I thought Buddhism was the key to understanding Thai civilization, after that it was Marxism, disparaged as alien and irrelevant to Thai experience. Then came *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Sino-Thai tycoons and globalization, followed by Thai manual knowledge, and manuals are absolutely the key to civilizations everywhere!

21/04/2025

¹ C.J. Reynolds, "Asian History," pp170-177 in Barbara Caine et al., *History at Sydney, 1891-1991: Centenary Reflections* (Sydney: Sydney Studies in History, History Department, University of Sydney, 1992).

² David Walker, *Stranded Nation: White Australia in an Asian Region* (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2019), 437-438, 456-457. "Teaching of Asian Languages and Cultures in Australia," known as the Auchmuty report after J. J. Auchmuty who chaired the review committee, was published in 1971.

³ A.D. MacLachlan, "A Changing Curriculum: from the 1960s to the 1990s" in Barbara Caine op. cit., 96-97.

⁴ C.J. Reynolds, "Poststructuralism in History," pp106-113 in Barbara Caine op. cit., 106-113; "Post-structuralism in a Department of History," *Australian Historical Association Bulletin*, 72 (Dec. 1992), 26-33.

⁵ Ruth McVey, "Globalization, Marginalization, and the Study of Southeast Asia" in Craig J. Reynolds and Ruth McVey, *Southeast Asian Studies: Reorientations* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1998), 37-64.

⁶ *Thai Radical Discourse: The Real Life of Thai Feudalism Today* (Ithaca: Southeast Asian Program, Cornell University, 1994). Michael Ryan, *Marxism and Deconstruction: A Critical Articulation* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

⁷ "Marxism in Thai Historical Studies," *Journal of Asian Studies* 43(1), 1983, 77-104.

⁸ Reynolds, "Sino-Thai Business Culture: Strategies, Management and Warfare," *The Asia Pacific Magazine*, 6-7 (1997), 33-38.

⁹ "The Professional Lives of O. W. Wolters," 1-38 in O. W. Wolters, *Early Southeast Asia: Selected Essays*, Craig J. Reynolds, ed. (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2008).

¹⁰ Craig J. Reynolds, *Power Protection and Magic: The Cosmos of a Southern Policeman* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2019).