

DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT: “WE TALK ABOUT SEA HISTORY BEING WRITTEN FROM A SEA PERSPECTIVE. HOWEVER, MOST SEASIAN HISTORIANS ARE TRAINED BY WESTERN SCHOLARS USING WESTERN THEORIES AND INTELLECTUAL TOOLS. THEREFORE, THEIR SCHOLARSHIP IS NO MORE ‘INDIGENOUS’ THAN THAT WRITTEN BY ANG MOH.”

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The above statement holds five implications. First, Western scholars cannot write Southeast Asian [SEA] history from a SEA perspective. Second, Western intellectual training has “corrupted” the native sensibilities of ethnic SEA historians, rendering them incapable of writing authentic local SEA history. Third, Western and Western-trained ethnic SEA historians are fundamentally the same because of their common training and perspective towards history. Fourth, Western scholars hold higher status vis-à-vis SEA ones since they train the SEAsians who then [as implied] dutifully follow what they have been taught. Finally, an “autonomous” history of SEA can only be written by ethnically SEAsian historians unsullied by Western training. From these implications, I assert this statement is seriously flawed. The only part of the statement I accept is its argument for collapsing the dichotomy between “local” and foreign historians of SEA. I will discuss these implications to explain how I come to my opinion.

The suggestion made in the statement that Western scholars cannot write SEA histories from “within” is based in an old argument that Western historians of SEA cannot write from an Asian-centric perspective since they can never fully escape their cultural heritage and Western

intellectual training and will always view SEA, albeit to varying extents, as Westerners.¹ This argument has been expanded more recently by post-colonial criticisms of the Western production of history. These critiques argue that lingering traces of colonial era Orientalism remain present in Asian histories written by Western trained scholars, and that the systematic reproduction of such constructions in Western historiography sustain and reproduce Western myths of Asia while suppressing genuine Asian history.²

While these arguments have some merit, I argue that they are too deterministic. What they really point to are the major cultural and methodological difficulties Western scholars face when writing SEAsian history, but they do not prove in any sense that these difficulties are insurmountable. These arguments, implicit in the statement, moreover tend to portray the world in artificially dichotomous Westerners and Asians terms. This dichotomy possibly made more sense to people in the first half of the 20th C where Eurocentric historiographic views, influenced by the political circumstances of the time, were still predominant and were only just being challenged. However in the present global-political context, where the world is more fluid and less boxed up into rigid and hierarchical categories, the distinction between Western and Asian, culturally and otherwise, is less distinct and appeals less to common sense experience than before.³

¹ Smail, John R.W. *On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia*, in *Autonomous Histories, Particular Truths – Essays in Honor of John R.W. Smail*, ed. Laurie J. Sears, University of Wisconsin, Center for SEA Studies, Monograph Number 11, 1993, pp. 40-41

² Winichakul, Thongchai, *Writing at the Interstices: SEA historians and Post-national Histories in SEA* in *New Terrains in Southeast Asian History*, eds. Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Liok Ee, Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 2003 p. 18

³ Smail, “Autonomous History” p.42

The point here is that given the general contemporary trend towards the flattening of racial/cultural hierarchies and the blurring of cultural/ethnic/national distinctions, the argument that Western scholars cannot write authentic SEA history today feels more artificially deterministic than ever, since increasingly the sense is *not* that there are Western or Asian historians, but that there simply *are* historians. It is clearer today that culture is learnt and/or unlearnt with need, time and exposure, a person is not born Westerner or SEAsian or necessarily stays that way. In cultural terms at least, “Westerner” or “SEAsian” is not a fixed category. Furthermore, there is no reason to think these categories are mutually exclusive.⁴ Most people hold several cultural identities simultaneously, thus it is very possible that a person could authentically be identified as both Westerner and SEAsian and vice versa. If for instance a Western historian embeds himself for a long stretch around Asians, mingles predominantly among them, learns their language, participates in their culture and makes effort to seriously study and understand its dynamics, I think it can be fairly said that he is more Asian culturally [without necessarily giving up his Western background] than an ethnic Asian who has no sense of his origins apart from his skin tone. It is hard to understand why such Westerners who are not totally hypothetical today are unable to write Asian histories from “within”.

If a drawback faced by such a historian is a cultural lens shaped by a Western upbringing, this lens is double edged since a person who learns a second culture is also less likely to be blind to assumptions held as unquestioned, universal “truths” by that culture; an advantage shared between observers of foreign origins [so long as they keep their minds open] and indigenous thinkers exposed to foreign ideas, which potentially stimulates analysis overlooked by purely

⁴ Winichakul, Thongchai, *Writing at the Interstices* p. 20

indigenous thinkers limited by having access only to a world with a singular cultural thought. Also, it is arguably impossible to objectively quantify how ‘indigenous’ a native intellectual is. As Thongchai Winichakul points out, does traveling abroad, reading western influenced scholarship [which is virtually unavoidable today, regardless of what language it is written in], being an ethnic minority like a Sino-Thai, and so on make a SEAsian somehow less “native”?⁵ Is there such a thing as a pure SEAsian today? Probably there is not. Such arguments asserting the existence of pristine cultural states moreover imply that culture [SEAsian and Western] is unchanging and non-dynamic, a conception of culture which is today discredited – not least because it [ironically] perpetuates the colonial Orientalist idea of “immobile history”.

The statement also begs the question of what is SEAsian. If only SEAsians can write SEA history from an indigenous perspective, does this mean that an Indonesian will *inherently* have a better understanding of say Burmese history than an American, because the Indonesian is authentically SEAsian while the American is not? This is surely a fallacy. Even if it is granted that modern SEAsians share a cultural “affinity” across their diversity, a notion itself open to debate, it is still a question of how deep this affinity goes that no historian born outside SEA can grapple with it. Even if the statement is taken to refer to SEA historians writing on their own country, this criticism I argue still stands. Although “home” historians certainly have advantages in language and in cultural understanding, there is no absolute reason, unless we believe in biological determinism, why this *initial* advantage cannot be overcome by a foreigner [which includes SEAsians not native to a specific SEAsian country] with skill, time and determination. A good example would be the late O.W. Wolters, whose expertise in classical Vietnamese

⁵ Winichakul, Thongchai, *Writing at the Interstices* p. 20

language and culture arguably exceeded that of most ethnically Vietnamese historians.⁶ I would go further and suggest that for historical study of pre-historic and “classical” history, which is in many respects disconnected from the present, being a native SEAsian does not help significantly since arguably everybody [Western, SEAsian or otherwise] comes to it initially as a foreigner.

The statement also suggests that Western training “corrupts” SEAsian native sensibilities, and implies that this corruption happens because SEAsian scholars only regurgitate what their Western teachers tell them. These points are questionable. Although it is true that many Western conceptions led to skewed “Orientalist” perspectives on SEA, it is also true that Western trained scholars have acknowledged and corrected many of these skewed perspectives – showing that modern Western historical scholarship is neither static nor dogmatic. It is also important to highlight that today many SEAsians contribute towards *shaping* Western scholarship on SEA. This is seen in a recent collection of essays, “*New Terrains in SEA History*”, written by ethnic SEAsian historians making original contributions to SEA historiography. It is no longer a one way street, and the trend seems to be moving towards a more active native SEAsian involvement in influencing trends in “Western” SEAsian historiography. The fact that language and race barriers in SEAsian scholarship have been increasingly broken down in recent times has also contributed to greater mutual respect and sharing of ideas that appears to be leading towards a single SEAsian historiography representing the combined effort of all SEAsianists regardless of origin.⁷

⁶ Ibid: p.23

⁷ Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Liok Ee, *Introduction*, in *New Terrains in Southeast Asian History*, eds. Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Liok Ee, Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 2003 pp. xi-xxiii

Thus instead of viewing Western historiography in terms of Western “hegemony” as the statement does, it might make more sense today to understand it simply as an *approach* to history which originated in the West but is today shared and shaped by historians around the world. This Western approach to history moreover has characteristics that clearly benefit the study of history, a point the statement seems to deny. Most importantly, Western intellectual training [at least today] places a premium on originality, critical thinking and a critical approach to knowledge acquisition.⁸ It does not [ideally] teach regurgitation, and moreover, its critical method has the *content* and *intellectual framework* of the history constantly under question and scrutiny. This is thus a major advantage of Western intellectual training – its loyalty is to its critical approach to acquiring information rather than to the information itself. Thus, although big mistakes can happen, Western historical method is currently structured such that it encourages problems to be located and corrected and is open to new angles to examine existing subject matter. The very idea of “autonomous” or ‘indigenous’ history the statement promotes is for instance a Western conception.

This brings up the question of what is meant in the statement by history written “from a SEA perspective”. If the statement denies the value of Western historical theories and intellectual tools and also rejects the contributions of ethnic SEAsian historians to Western historiography, then what sort of ‘indigenous’ history is it talking about? Possibly it refers to reviving styles of recording the past kept by SEAsians before the Colonial era. But surely that approach no longer represents the general cultural worldview of SEAsians today and would thus not constitute “autonomous” SEAsian history. Possibly then it is calling for a historiography in the present built up by SEAsian scholars completely independent from the West. This however seems highly

⁸ Winichakul, Thongchai, *Writing at the Interstices* pp.21-22

impractical and moreover foolish, since (1) SEAsian scholars today, as mentioned, already have growing influence shaping the interpretations of SEA history within the framework of Western scholarship and do not need to force open a separate intellectual space. (2) This would mean the end of cooperation with Western SEAsian scholars and the abandoning of Western ideas, even useful ones, simply because they are Western – notions clearly not in the interest of furthering historical knowledge.

The statement thus is especially concerned with the idea of “purity”. Its argument seems to be that the more “pure” the SEAsian historian, the more closely his history touches at the “truth”. But this over-idealizes nativity. We find for example that SEA “native” chronicle histories were recorded predominantly from the perspectives of the elite. What then about the history of ethnic minorities, peasants, gender relations, material culture and so on? But as the logic of the statement goes, these subject matter are Western historical innovations and thus considering them only corrupts native purity. Similarly modern SEAsian “nationalist” history, that SEA nationalists might argue is local authentic, is generally filled with biases that support national origin myths and internal political balances.⁹ The point is that even “native” history has its own particular biases which might be even more pronounced than those in Western scholarship – nativity is thus no guarantee of “reality”. The statement also misses a point about “autonomous” SEAsian history – that a SEAsian perspective can only exist in reference to perspectives that are *not* SEAsian. Thus arguably what makes a SEAsian perspective possible is not simply ideological purity, but awareness that it is specifically SEAsian, which can only come about with a consciousness of perspectives looking at SEA from the outside in. Thus the ideal of the “pure” native historian is itself a logical impossibility.

⁹ Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Liok Ee, *Introduction*, pp. xiv-xvii

Although it is true that the bulk of new historical theories and trends still originate in the West, it is hard to conclusively say that SEAsian historians applying these ideas are necessarily apeing the West because the “West” is not monolithic – there are different and competing strands of thought in Western historiography and as Winichakul suggests, the processes of selection, adaptation and sometimes elaboration of specific Western ideas to SEA history by ethnic SEAsian historians is [usually] creative, original, and critical.¹⁰ Take for instance the influential ideas of the French thinker Michael Foucault. If we say that native SEA historians adapting his ideas are intellectually subservient to the West, can we then say that American historians borrowing these same ideas are being subservient to the French? I think it is more fairly said for Foucault’s case and others that often ideas become broadly influential because they are compelling and not merely because they are Western. Furthermore, it is a fact that scholars in general, Western and otherwise, are divided on the applicability of various ideas [e.g. Postmodernism], which reflects that divisions within scholarship today cut *across* Asian and Western lines. While it is true that the best Western universities currently have more prestige and influence than SEAsian institutions arguably even in SEAsian history, it is also a fact that SEAsian scholars have become increasingly self-confident with growing cosmopolitanism and prosperity, and seem increasingly willing to assert their influence on the direction of “Western” SEAsian historiography.

To conclude, the statement is highly flawed. It is based in the existence of untenable assumptions and rigid categories. It does not reflect the changing realities, increasing self-confidence and growing influence of SEAsians in academia. It also does not point out the benefits of Western training in knowledge acquisition and over idealizes native historical

¹⁰ Winichakul, Thongchai, *Writing at the Interstices* p.21

understandings. At points the statement also smacks of racial determinism. The only point in it that makes sense is its rejection of a dichotomy between Western and Western trained indigenous SEAsian scholars, but this similarity is not found in common intellectual “corruption” as the statement suggests, but in their mutual cooperation towards the advancement of SEAsian history.

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