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Interview

Eminent Scholar-historian and Southeast Asianist: Interview with Emeritus Professor Dr. Anthony Milner

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Introductory Note

Anthony Milner was Basham Professor of Asian History at Australian National University from 1994 to 2013 and Dean of Asian Studies from 1996 to 2005. His scholarly and professional relations with Malaysia have been close and long-established. He was the 4th Distinguished Pok Rafeah Chair in International Studies at the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in 2010-2011 and published the collaborative work under the Chair, titled *Transforming Malaysia: Dominant and Competing Paradigms* in 2014. In 2014-2015 he was Tun Hussein Onn Chair of International Studies at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS Malaysia). He is currently a Visiting Professor at the University of Malaya, a Professorial Fellow at the University of Melbourne, and an Emeritus Professor at ANU. In 2017

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he received the prestigious Malaysian Merdeka Award – and, also, an Honorary Doctorate in the Humanities from the University of Malaya. In 2007 he was made a Member of the Order of Australia "for services to education in the field of Asian studies as an academic and an author, and in international relations through the development of cross-cultural education and outreach activities". He is a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (FASSA) and a Fellow of the Australian Institute of International Affairs (FAIIA). His writings about Malaysia include Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule, The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya, and The Malays. Kerajaan and The Malays have both been translated into Malay and Thai.

One distinctive characteristic of Professor Milner as a scholar-historian is his masterly application of "the history of ideas approach" as manifested in his works and this interview. Under the guidance of SEASSR's Chief Editor, we crafted the questions and conducted a detailed face-to-face interview with Professor Milner in early 2023, covering a wide range of themes. The interview provides rich insights into Milner's intellectual formation, his networks with other scholars, his growing interest in interdisciplinary writing – and, subsequently, his focus not only on the Malays and their political culture, but also on Southeast Asia, its culture and practice of diplomacy, and the usefulness of lenses of history, culture, and ideas in shaping international relations. This interview covers his formative years in Australia, the United States, and England, up until his appointment to the Distinguished Pok Rafeah Chair in International Studies at IKMAS, UKM. It also include his later work on Southeast Asian regionalism, Malaysian foreign policy and Australia-Asia relations, as well as his thoughts on the role of the historian in policy debates on inter-state relations. This is an authoritative text which has been carefully checked, edited, and clarified by the interviewers and also by Professor Milner himself - and is approved by him.

– Wan Puspa Melati & Bakri Mat on behalf of SEASSR

Abbreviations

WB – Wan Puspa Melati & Bakri Mat
AM – Anthony Milner

PART I

WB: Before getting into your experiences and publications, please tell me about your personal background. Where did you grow up and do your degrees?

AM: Well, I am an Australian, and not from a particularly academic background. I assumed I would go into dairy farming or grazing in the Western District of Victoria, like my mother's family. My father was a businessman with Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI) and was interested in how Australia would engage with the Asian region as we moved beyond the British relationship. He would be surprised today to see how strongly Australia has turned to the American relationship. Influenced by him, I suppose, I got more and more interested in Australian-Asian relations.

After a short period at agricultural college, I went to Monash University, a new and very political university – a great place to learn Marxist theory and engage in large-scale 'teach-ins' debating Australia's engagement in the Vietnam War. Monash had established at great speed both a high-quality history department and an impressive Southeast Asia Centre – both led by John Legge. I was able to study with such well-known Southeast Asianists as Ian Mabbett, Herb Feith, and Cyril Skinner – and even the famous D. G. E. Hall. I also got to know Milton Osborne and Jamie Mackie. The Australian specialists in the History Department were equally impressive. The historian of colonial government, Bruce Knox, focused our minds on the rigorous reading of primary sources. Through my Politics teacher, Anthony de Crespigny, I became interested in the subversive conservatism of Michael Oakeshott. Let us come back later to why I began to take a special interest in Malaysia.

John Legge was a superbly innovative historian of Indonesia.

He had a theoretical interest in history – particularly the way the discipline could benefit through dialogue with such social sciences as anthropology and sociology. Political culture was not his first interest, but he introduced us to the writings of Masao Maruyama and Clifford Geertz. Probably because of my concern about Australia's engagement with the Asian region, this was the type of analysis I liked best. Much writing on the region stressed 'development' – concerned, it seemed to me, to make Asian societies more like 'us'. By contrast, I wanted to understand the perspectives and values that would influence Australia's neighbours – Indonesia, Malaysia, and, of course, Vietnam – as they gradually cast aside policy preferences endorsed by former colonial rulers. Maruyama and Geertz were the types of scholars who could help.

Although I enjoyed my degree, I never expected to do well – so was surprised to finish top of the Honours Class. Suddenly launched on an academic career, I started as a teaching fellow at Monash, tutoring in English constitutional history under the disciplined leadership of John du V. Morgan. Another teaching fellow that year was Elijah Moshinsky – who showed signs of becoming a theoretically imaginative historian but later established himself as a much-celebrated opera director.

I next went to the University of Malaya for a short period – and was disappointed to find Bill Roff and Wang Gungwu no longer there. Arasaratnam was a decent and generous professor and I continue to value Rollins Bonney's book, *Kedah*, a great study of Malay approaches to foreign relations. This was 1969 – and it was hard to focus on historical research rather than the upheaval taking place in Malaysia. I was lucky to meet such ambitious radicals as Musa Hitam and Abdullah Ahmad (Razak's political secretary) – both of whom downplayed the seriousness of the rioting. Travelling with my friend Raja Azwa, I even had time in Kota Bharu with Tunku Abdul Rahman – charming, but by then losing his grip on the prime ministership.

I then went to Cornell to do my Masters and PhD. This is sometimes seen as a golden era for the Southeast Asia Program – exciting and intense. With my Honours degree behind me, I

suppose I was a little pleased with myself. Perhaps many of the new graduate students thought this way. Soon, we all began to feel we were starting over again – facing a program of coursework almost as long as an undergraduate degree. This program, however, turned out to be fantastic. It was great to work with Oliver Wolters – and, also, Ben Anderson, anthropologist James Siegel, art historian Stan O'Connor, Thai historian David Wyatt, and the famous linguist, John Echols. Many of my fellow students went on to impressive careers in academia – I think of Jennifer Cushman, Tony Day, Kate Howell, Shelly Errington, Rey Ileto, and Lee Poh Ping – as well as Craig Reynolds and the Andayas (Leonard and Barbara). This was a great group. I learned as much from them as I did from our teachers. We talked intensively about theoretical and methodological issues – which I loved, partly because of my early training with Legge. He was well respected at Cornell, especially by Wolters.

Wolters – a specialist on early Indonesian/Malay history who later worked on Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam – argued effectively that 'Southeast Asia' was a genuine field for historical inquiry, reinforcing the academic legitimacy of Cornell's Southeast Asia Program. He had been a student at Oxford, attending lectures by the influential philosopher R. G. Collingwood. As an undergraduate, I was interested in Collingwood's way of thinking about history – stressing the reconstruction of thought processes in different eras – and argued with John Legge, whose earliest academic publication had dismissed Collingwood's approach. One of the first things I noted on Wolters's library shelf was the central location of Collingwood's books – and I think Wolters's knowledge of this philosophical tradition underpinned the exciting way in which he later drew upon literary theory, poststructuralism, and other theoretical innovation.

Years later, I got Wolters and Legge together in Australia. They had debated with one another for years, in the most friendly way, and I liked seeing the sparks fly in Canberra – and while they both visited my wife's and my grazing property, 100 km away (near Braidwood). I was fortunate to work with these two men – leading specialists in Indonesia as well as pioneers in theoretical experimentation. If you look at the Encyclopedia Britannica of those years, the entry on

Indonesia's early history is written by Wolters, while Legge wrote the modern history section.

Influenced by Wolters and Shelly Errington, I became interested in literary criticism – which I had not studied as an undergraduate – and soon saw how it could deepen our analysis of historical texts. A book many of us liked was Auerbach's *Mimesis*.

At Cornell in the 70s, we talked enthusiastically about structuralism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and deconstruction. It was a wonderful pioneering atmosphere. It is troubling to reflect that it was probably the Vietnam War that made the Southeast Asia Program wealthy enough to attract such a good lineup of students.

The thesis I wrote at Cornell reflected my interdisciplinary concerns. In the coursework, I had taken anthropological as well as art history subjects – and my thesis drew especially upon cultural anthropology, particularly Geertz's work. I focused on the Malay world partly because my Honours thesis at Monash had been concerned with 19th-century Malayan history – and I had begun to dig more deeply into Malay perspectives at the University of Malaya. My Honours study made use of the British colonial archives available on microfilm at Monash – and it concentrated more on British than Malay perspectives. In Malaysia I had begun a study of Malay resistance to the British, making use of my knowledge of the colonial archives. The thesis I wrote at Cornell focused directly on Malay perspectives and was later turned into a book, *Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule* – which I will discuss below.

Toward the end of my time at Cornell I was thrilled to get a temporary lectureship – certainly a good basis for applying for more permanent positions. I nearly joined the Australian Foreign Affairs Department - but then a job came up at the University of Kent at Canterbury, England, where they had a small Southeast Asia program. The idea of time in England was attractive, because of the archives and libraries there.

My first boss at Kent was Dennis Duncanson – a quite conservative former Malayan Civil Service officer who had been (with

Robert Thompson) an adviser to the US Government on fighting the Vietnam War. His views were very different from those of my future ANU colleague, David Marr – but he spoke eloquently on radio and had wide interests in Southeast Asian Studies. He was generous, drawing me into activities with the Royal Asiatic Society, ASEASUK (the UK Southeast Asianist group), and SEALG (the Southeast Asian Library Group for Europe). Barry Hooker was outstanding in the Kent Centre – writing many books on Southeast Asian law. He could be a good, inspirational company – and he brought many Malay postgraduate students to Canterbury. Some of these students – for instance, Abu Bakar Hamzah and Azizan Abdul Razak – taught me more than I could ever teach them.

Looking back over my teaching career I think this was consistently the case with graduate students. I always pushed them to spell out and debate the argument in a PhD or Masters' thesis – but have the feeling that I gained more than they did from the supervision process. An extraordinary example of this is my correspondence in recent years with Ng Tze Shiung, especially on the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment.

There was not much history interest in Southeast Asia at Kent, but I taught a little in the History Department and liked the kind professor, Roger Anstey – who wrote about a topic everybody is talking about now, the ending of slavery. What Kent did offer was the opportunity to increase my familiarity with anthropology. In Southeast Asian studies there was Roy Ellen (a well-organized, highly professional academic who became a leading specialist on Indonesia) and Jeremy Kemp (whose work was admired by Wolters – but never produced in enough quantity to bring him a high reputation). I learned most from a brilliant philosopher (a student of Peter Winch), John Bousfield – who had taken a close interest in anthropology. I think I was responsible for drawing him into Southeast Asian studies – particularly the study of Islam. We talked for hours – and I was devastated to learn in later years that he had committed suicide.

English anthropology – and I am putting it very crudely – was much more about social than cultural structures. I remember once talking with the famous Lucy Mair about poststructuralism

and American cultural anthropology – when we turned to social functionalism she thumped her hands on the table, declaring we were now discussing something real. The person from whom I learned most about English anthropology, however, was John Davis. He went on to become Professor of Social Anthropology at Oxford and Warden of All Souls College – and at Kent, he was certainly a rising star. His knowledge of his field and its personalities was extraordinary – and he communicated this in a manner influenced by his admiration for Anthony Powell's great series – *Dance to the Music of Time*. I enjoyed my time with Davis. We even shared a house for a while – a little Gatehouse, once part of Archbishop Cramner's estate in Bekesbourne, and later owned by writer Ian Fleming – after John returned from research in Libya. Kent was not a great university – but the university community and the people living nearby (including some clergy from the cathedral and a brilliant whole food store proprietor) made the place both stimulating and fun. My landlord was John Quine, a retired diplomat, who had specialized on Japan. We talked a lot about international relations. I only learned later that he had become head of counterintelligence at MI6. John made great contributions to High Table discussions at Kent and remained a close friend until his death in 2013.

We had very few students at Kent – but they included Adina Othman (who went on to become Deputy Minister of Culture in Brunei) and Jane Drakard. Jane became a close friend – especially after she came to Australia, where she married John Legge (his strikingly impressive wife, Alison, had died some years earlier). Jane specialized on Sumatra – making innovative use of Malay texts – and won wide respect, especially from Wolters. I think he was keen to bring her to Cornell – but in the end, her teaching career was at Monash, where her courses attracted much student enthusiasm. Jane writes beautifully and her work has always been of theoretical importance.

By Australian standards at that time, there was not a great deal going on in Southeast Asian studies in the UK – though the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), with its fine library, included such impressive scholars as Jeremy Cowan and John Bastin.

I remember Cowan giving a great lecture on the state of Southeast Asian studies, explaining why Ben Anderson's work on Java deserved wide acclaim. The President of the Royal Asiatic Society (RAS), Charles Beckingham, asked me to give a Society lecture on 'Islam and Malay Kingship' – and the article I later wrote for their journal has continued to be cited. Islam was a topic of growing interest in the UK during the 1970s – and I have recently returned to the history of Islamization in an article for the Malaysian Branch of the Society (JMBRAS). In my RAS lecture, I concentrated on the monarchs' role in Islamization – an angle given little attention in the past. Rulers, I noted, were seldom overthrown with the coming of Islam – in fact, they were often described as being active in the spreading of the new religion. I wondered how the rulers viewed Islam – and in asking this I was influenced by what Wolters had been writing on the much earlier Hinduization process in Cambodia. His aims were Collingwoodian – seeking to get inside the thinking of those reaching out to a new religion.

At Kent, I also did a collaborative project on Chinese accounts of the Malay Peninsula with my old Cornell friend, Jennifer Cushman – and an edited handbook on 'South East Asian Languages and Literatures' with Patricia Herbert (a renowned Burma specialist, based at the British Library). I also began to work with Ed McKinnon – a former Sumatran planter whose interest in archaeology eventually led him to a Cornell PhD. We collaborated on a study of the kingdom of Aru in East Sumatra – based most of all on his extraordinary ceramic and other finds near Medan. Research collaborations can be one of the joys of academic life – and I am sad that Ed's recent death has put an end to a new research initiative.

England was a good place to be for many reasons – despite the economic troubles of those years - but my future had to be in Australia, where the study of Southeast Asia was an urgent matter with immediate practical implications. In England Southeast Asia seemed to be valued as a distant, exotic interest – and I was even approached by Swan's tours to lecture on a high-level tourist expedition to Indonesia. The main academic benefit of being at Kent was the interdisciplinary discussion – helped by the University's

college system, with tea rooms bringing us together in the best way. The tea lady or tea man, as my wife Claire, observed long ago, can do as much for academic deliberations as any expensive Deputy Vice-Chancellor.

Let me say something at this point about my PhD thesis and my first book. Although my Honours thesis, focused on British policy, it had taught me something about archival research, this was not the type of project that had led me to Southeast Asian studies. It did not help to understand the world views that might influence societies emerging out of the colonial period.

At Cornell, I wanted to write a thesis that might serve as a foundation for investigating a local perspective – what Dutch scholar Jacob Van Leur had called an 'autonomous' perspective. It seemed vital that we assess the impact of European imperial power on Asian thinking – and, therefore, I thought it necessary for studies of the colonial period to commence with an attempt to analyze the 'traditional' polity and mental framework. The thesis I then put together had two dimensions. On the one hand, I responded to John Gullick's influential book, *The Indigenous Political Systems of Western Malaya*, a fine work – but one based on his training in English social anthropology and focused on political institutions and the flow of 'real power'. One of my questions was, how might training in American cultural anthropology rather than English anthropology shape a study of the 'traditional' Malay polity? Gullick's determination to examine the indigenous polity as a working system of political control brought important analytical advantages, particularly for comparative purposes, but it imposed a framework on the study that might be distorting. I liked the Geertzian desire to examine the categories of experience of the people themselves. I wanted to get a Malay understanding of what we – as outsiders – might call their 'political' condition.

Secondly, Gullick's work drew largely on British documents - and I wondered what we might get if we looked at Malay writings. Much academic commentary on traditional (*hikayat*) Malay writings, warned they were useless historical documents – unreliable, especially poor on dates, biased. In Leiden, the generous Dutch

scholar, Roolvink, repeated this warning – in his case delivered through a delicious waft of cigar smoke. I took the risk and came to see the *hikayat* literature, although largely the product of an elite, as a marvelous source – at least for a student of political culture. The themes the texts develop, the values they enunciate, and the particular words they employ – provide at least a starting point for determining the concepts and priorities influential in pre-modern society.

So. in the thesis – and the later book – I tried to bring these Malay writings into dialogue with British official documents, seeing how one type of source material might help us read the other. The exercise involved problematizing some of the key terms used by Gullick and others – including 'state', 'real power', and 'political system'.

Although Geertz's influence was important here, I think I concentrated more on the interrogation of specific pre-modern texts. This was exciting – and I often consulted John Bousfield, Tony Day, Shelly Errington, Kate Howell, and Rey Ileto. At Kent, their advice continued to be important, as I developed the thesis into a book. The published volume, I think, did contribute to scholarly debate, including in Malaysia. It received quite good reviews – including a thoughtful critique from John Gullick. He disagreed with my line of argument – presented perhaps too provocatively - but could not have been more generous. The book may also have helped me some years later to get a year-long appointment (on Macarthur money) at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton.

I came back to Australia after spending five years at Kent - in the last year of which, I was Head of my little Department. This was a good administrative experience – facing up to the financial cuts imposed by the Thatcher Government. I also benefitted from spending two years as Chair of the Southeast Asian Library Group. It was in this job that I worked on the 'Southeast Asian Languages and Literatures' project, recruiting specialists from the UK and a range of European universities. Academic administration of one type or another was to become a major concern for me later, in Australia.

When I returned to Australia in 1981 it was to a lectureship in the ANU History Department. Manning Clark had been its head and he was still around. He was an extraordinary historian – a

type of Australian Michelet or Carlyle, a prophet almost, with a high public profile. I heard him lecture once at Monash – and was inspired. I loved the idea of working near Manning – with Ian Hancock, John Merritt, and other Australianists also close at hand. Campbell Macknight was rare in contributing to both Australian and Indonesian history – and I continue today to gain much from our conversations. The new History professor was John Molony – himself a charismatic figure, exploring Roman Catholicism and what Ranajit Guha would have called 'subaltern' dimensions of the history of Australia. This History Department was intensively Australian, and Victorian. Most members even supported the one Melbourne football team – Manning's beloved Carlton.

Returning to Australia, I was hoping to resume the task of analyzing Southeast Asia from an Australian perspective – and Manning's department certainly grounded me.

In Canberra, however, I was drawn not only to historical research but also immediately joined the Australian Institute of International Affairs, worrying often about how Australia might deal more effectively with the Asian region. In thinking of myself as a Southeast Asianist grounded in Australia, I should make one important point. In marrying Claire in the early 1980s I was getting together with someone quintessentially Australian – in outlook as well as experience. Her family has also been important in Australia – in diplomacy, law, and academia. Some of her ancestors arrived in the first decades of White settlement, even before my own mother's family. Conscious of our families' farming background, Claire and I soon acquired a cattle and sheep property – not only as a second source of income but also because we found Australia's rural mythology attractive. Amazingly, all our excellent children have imbibed this mythology – and, also, acquired impressive country skills. Although Australia is a strongly urban/suburban country, it is the rural world that offers something distinctive.

When outsiders think about Southeast Asia, we need to reflect on the analytical framework we employ – and this links to the ethos we inherit. In the case of Australia, there is stress on individualistic liberal democratic values, and the way we employ such categories

as 'political', 'economic', and 'secular'. As analysts we need to think about our own 'horizons' – and here I am grateful to the writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer (introduced to me by a rural neighbour, ANU philosopher Peter Herbst). Claire, time and again, takes me back to an Australian perspective – not necessarily to adopt that perspective, but at least to know that it is there, and influential. Her childhood experience in Sri Lanka and India, as the daughter of a diplomat, probably sharpened her awareness of intercultural dynamics.

WB: What or who inspired you to specialize in the history of Southeast Asia, and especially of the Malays? And what are the contributing factors to your interest in the key themes or issues that you have explored?

AM: I have begun to answer these questions. I mentioned my father and then Monash University. At school, although assuming my future was in farming, I did have a little interest in history, stimulated by Henry Hall, who had written three serious books on Australian and British Empire history in the 1930s before spending decades teaching dull schoolboys. To some extent, my choice of Malay history followed a student exchange visit to Malaysia and South Thailand when I was an undergraduate – a visit funded by a couple of months of hay-carting in Western Victoria over the previous Christmas. Travelling with a friend, John Cummins – a reflective person with a strong sense of humour – we got a cabin on a small cargo vessel sailing between Bangkok and Patani, calling into numerous ports along the way. We then travelled by shared taxi down the East Coast of Malaya. This was the mid-1960s – and, as we read up on the region, it became clear that some places we visited had changed surprisingly little over a century. The trip stimulated the historical imagination – long before I had developed serious academic ambitions. The other reason I focused on the Malay world, as I have mentioned, was that Monash had accumulated important source materials for British Malaya.

Perhaps I should say more about my work on Southeast Asia in the Canberra context. At ANU, I tried to promote Southeast Asia in the teaching program of the History Department – and in some cases

did so in collaboration with people from the Faculty of Asian Studies. The Thailand specialist, Baas Terwiel joined me at one point – but decided I was peddling Marxism. I think he confused my interest in theoretical/historiographical matters with the issue of political bias – but the accusation amused some of my colleagues.

In Canberra, Jamie Mackie – Professor of Political and Social Change at ANU and a wise advisor from Monash days – opened doors into the Institute of International Affairs and the Asian Studies Association of Australia. Historians had been involved in the Institute since its foundation – the University of Melbourne's, Ernest Scott was an early leader; later there were many more, including John Legge. I became Chair of both the Canberra Branch and the National Research Committee. Working with the diplomat Trevor Wilson, I also organized a conference on the future of the Foreign Affairs Department – which included fine presentations from Wang Gungwu and the Secretary of the Department, Stuart Harris. In the case of the Asian Studies Association, I became editor of its journal, *Asian Studies Review*. My priorities for the Review were book reviews and theoretical debates – and the lively editorial committee, which included Jennifer Cushman and Virginia Hooker, was full of ideas for promoting debate and innovation in Asian studies.

All of this happened in my first ten years back in Australia. I was also writing my colonial-period, follow-up book to *Kerajaan* – and, in addition, joined David Marr and Wang Gungwu in holding a major conference on Southeast Asia from the 9th to 14th centuries. After some debate, the conference was organized around themes in Oliver Wolters's book, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*. Tony Reid and I disagreed about whether to employ the Wolters structure – and I was grateful for Gungwu's support. Tony had been making an impressive contribution to ANU with edited volumes – but has now withdrawn from this exercise. In the end, I edited the conference volume, *Southeast from the 9th to 14th centuries*, with David Marr. I had long admired his work on Vietnam and benefitted greatly from working with him in the editing process. The conference (and volume) brought together a fine range of scholars – including J.G. de Casparis and Pierre-Yves

Manguin, as well as Wolters himself. The Australia-based participants – such as Ian Mabbett and Campbell Macknight – were prominent in our deliberations. Gungwu, as one would expect, wrote a superb overview-style introduction to the conference book.

In these busy years, I also joined the Japan specialist, Drew Gerstle, in convening two conferences at the ANU's Humanities Research Centre. The Centre was run brilliantly by Ian Donaldson and Graeme Clark – and had acquired an international reputation with great speed. These 'Europe and the Orient' conferences were to a large extent a response to the Orientalism debate underway at that time – inspired by the work of Edward Said. The conference aimed to highlight not downplay cultural differences – and to show how such differences could be a creative influence, especially in the Arts.

Our participants included Clifford Geertz – and no one could have been a more cooperative academic guest. I have begun to wonder whether people with the highest international status are in fact the most modest and flexible visitors.

In the galaxy of other Asianists, I recall John Hay's paper on the concept of space in Chinese painting and Roy Howat's examination of the lightning response of Debussy to the exotic Javanese gamelan. Jim Boon, David Bromfield, and Tony Day also gave great papers that advanced our theme - and Amin Sweeney added a tone of academic mischief to the proceedings. Another example of cut and thrust was the way Derek Freeman took time off from his onslaught against Margaret Mead to attack Geertz. I remember Ranajit Guha also flying into action. He was one of the best things about ANU in these years. Vice Chancellor Tony Low recruited him – one of the many fine contributions made by this generous academic leader.

We put out two volumes of papers from this conference – I don't think the books got the interest they deserved, but I enjoyed working with Drew.

I am describing the main activities in which I was engaged at ANU. There was much else going on at ANU in these years in Asian studies. Cornell had been intellectually stimulating, partly because of the stress on coursework in the PhD – and, also, because of the concentration there of intellectually innovative faculty and student

scholars interacting vigorously with one another. The ANU Asia's commitment to Southeast Asia was larger and more diffuse – but did students find it as intellectually exciting?

I finished the 1980s with my year at Princeton. This was a fantastic opportunity. Claire and I – together with the children – first spent a month or so in Kuala Besar, Kelantan. We stayed in an old Malay house, secured for us by Dato' Ray Hall – a charming, generous Irishman who did much for the education of young Kelantanese. As our children integrated themselves with the village kids, I kept working on my colonial-period Malay study. Also, Lee Kam Hing drew me into the Malaysian national biography project – which led me to think about the practice of biography in Malay society. I wrote an essay on this for the lively journal, *Kajian Malaysia*. In Kelantan I suppose I was tuning up on Malaysia, preparing myself to contribute to the discussion in Princeton.

The Institute – once the academic base for Albert Einstein - was a great place to think and write. Academics seemed not to waste their time on administration. Arriving at the Institute, visiting scholars were advised to focus on writing – not running around the United States attending conferences. We had a few obligations – a weekly research seminar and a daily afternoon tea. The warning was given, not to be late to afternoon tea. The cookies will disappear quickly – as many scholar mathematicians were so young they were still growing. The Institute's permanent members in the social sciences included Michael Walzer, Joan Scott, and Albert Hirschman as well as Geertz. In the history group was the historian of Spain, John Elliott. All these people were accessible to visiting scholars – and at Princeton University, not far away, there was Natalie Davis and the great seminar leader, Lawrence Stone – and Jim Boon in Anthropology.

The book I wrote on colonial Malaya, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, was much influenced by the intense theoretical discussions at Princeton. The team of visiting scholars that year was wonderful from my point of view – I thanked them all in the book. I think now of Liah Greenfield and Robert Thornton; also, Peter Lake and Maurizio Viroli told me about the 'history of ideas' work underway at Cambridge, especially the extraordinary

historiographical project of John Pocock. I will return to Pocock. Jim Scott (at Yale) visited the Institute several times and Claire and I also went to his farm. Cheah Boon Kheng was on leave at Yale – and both he and Jim were great people to talk with about theoretical issues as well as Malaysia.

My *Invention* owes a debt to various other scholars outside the United States – including Ariffin Omar and Shamsul AB – as well as John Gullick and Bill Roff. Academic work, in one sense or another, is driven by conversation. Reflecting on our careers, it is important to stress this point – and to identify people who have shaped our thinking and analysis.

I should make one observation at this point – obvious though it might be. Building a career in Australia, it was useful to have studied at Cornell, taught in England, and gone back to Princeton for a year. The US/European record continues to be seen as providing academic legitimacy – and this is in some ways a problem. After a decade as Dean of Asian Studies at ANU (1996-2005), I had the luxury of spending time in Japan, Malaysia, and Singapore – and think I know more about the Asian region now than I did when full-time at ANU. It is increasingly vital for Australian scholars to engage with scholars in this region – and this needs to be promoted by university leaders. At ANU, Ranajit Guha suggested I spend a sabbatical year in Calcutta, where Partha Chatterjee worked. I regret not doing this. At Princeton, both Chatterjee and Guha were viewed with real respect. In Singapore and Malaysia, Syed Hussein Alatas would have been great to work with earlier in my career – as Sharon Siddique often mentioned.

To return to my little narrative, arriving back in Australia from Princeton I was soon asked to run the Academy of Social Sciences' major project on Australia-Asia relations. Much had been written about Australia's defence and economic relations with the region; this project, proposed by former Foreign Affairs chief, Stuart Harris, was to examine the role of differing values and perspectives in Australian interactions with Asia. At first, I was hesitant about taking this on – partly because of the need to finish my Malaysian writing projects – but soon realized it was exactly the type of work that I had hoped to do long ago when beginning to think about a career in Southeast Asian studies.

The project taught me a lot, including about raising funds for research and extending my networking. I had excellent visits to Japan and China – helping me think beyond Southeast Asia. This is not the place to discuss these visits, but I should highlight the intellectual challenges in my conversations at Nichibunken, the International Center for Japanese Studies, in Kyoto. This place had been accused of promoting nationalist ideology – but Drew Gerstle suggested I visit and my conversations with Yamaori Tetsuo made me wish I'd taken up Japanese studies. He questioned the conceptual foundations of the Academy project – and in ways that helped our future work.

The Academy Project produced three books of essays for Oxford University Press, a data paper series (published by the University of New South Wales), and a radio series. The element I enjoyed most was a series of intensive Perceptions workshops dealing with one dimension or another of Australia-Asia interaction. We covered differing perceptions in such areas as democracy, the media, citizenship, business ethics, and national security – in a sense, this was a Geertz/Wolters enterprise, in its concern for intensive description and political culture. I was struck by Geertz's insistence that "no one who comes to Morocco or Indonesia – is likely to confuse them with each other or to be satisfied with elevated banalities about common humanity or a universal need for self-expression." The Project, of course, involved reflecting on Australian as well as different Asian approaches – making me value my undergraduate work on Australian history.

For the workshops, the Project brought together small groups of analysts, always involving specialists from the Asian region. Those from Malaysia included Muhammad Abu Bakar and Shamsul AB. We met for initial conversations with a range of practical stakeholders on the topic (including people in government) and then moved to a three-day retreat. We aimed to finish at least a skeleton of a research paper in those days. In the following weeks – working with Mary Quilty, a gutsy, creative co-editor; and, also, with a great executive officer, Leanne Lynch – we prepared a rough draft of the paper, circulating it to seminar participants. We worked each draft into a data paper – published by Steve FitzGerald's Asia Australia Institute

– and, later, edited the drafts again, bringing them all together in a collected volume: *Australia in Asia: Comparing Cultures*.

My networks at the time of commencing the Australia-Asia Perceptions Project were more in the United States and Europe than in the Asian region. I think it was Sharon Siddique, then Associate Director at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, who helped most to identify and recruit Southeast Asians for our workshops and publication projects.

The Project ran for three years – and I often turned for advice to Stuart Harris and James Cotton, as well as Bruce Miller and the later Academy Directors. Bruce, a prominent and sharply articulate scholar in international relations, became a good friend. The project and its publications were reviewed in generous detail in the *Asian Studies Review* (23, 1, 1999) by the Indonesianist, John Ingleson – a fellow Legge student who had become an impressive academic administrator and a national leader in the promotion of Asian studies. We also got a fair bit of media publicity for the project – in some cases just for individual data papers. To our delight, the Foreign Editor of *The Australian*, Greg Sheridan, gave our *Comparing Cultures* book a magnificent review.

Just how far our publications, media work, and briefings helped Australians to focus on Asian region challenges is hard to judge – but the Project certainly shifted my focus away from the US and the UK toward Asian universities and think tanks. In my involvement in research projects and networks, visiting professorships, and duties as an External Examiner and reviewer of various academic departments, I think I have been more engaged in Asian region activities than many of my Australian colleagues – certainly in the years since ceasing to be Dean at ANU.

Soon after the end of my Academy secondment, the ANU decided after many years to fill the Chair of Asian History which the Indianist, A.L. Basham, once held. The appointee, so it was explained, would need to agree to be Dean of the Faculty of Asian Studies and to cooperate with the Director of the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (RSPAS) in coordinating research and teaching in this area across the university. There was a strong application list – and

I was delighted to be offered the job. The Director of RSPAS, Merle Ricklefs, was an excellent collaborator – disciplined, reliable, and supportive. Vice Chancellor, Deane Terrell – a very decent man with a vision for Asian studies – told us to make new appointments, and Merle supported my plan to recruit a team of exceptional specialists to give ANU an immediate injection of Asia expertise. Rey Ileto and Craig Reynolds, for instance, brought new leadership in the study of the Philippines and Thailand. We already had such prominent scholars as Virginia Hooker and Ian Proudfoot in Malay studies, Ann Kumar and George Quinn on Java, Tony Diller on Thailand – and, as I have mentioned, David Marr on Vietnam. I mention here only the Southeast Asianists, given the interests of this journal. Asian studies at ANU, it seemed to me, were generally in good shape at the time I became Dean. When a senior figure in the university Chancelry asked if I would like to 'do a restructure' – I replied, 'Why?'.

One sign of success in our Southeast Asia strategy was that the doyen of Japanese research on Southeast Asia, Yoneo Ishii, asked me to join him in leading a Japan-Australia research collaboration in Southeast Asian studies. We met with the President of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Knowledge – and then I obtained some supplementary funding from the Australian Research Council. Ishii came to me, he said because it was now obvious that the Faculty of Asian Studies was the Australian lead institution on Southeast Asia research. The Japan-Australia collaboration turned out to be more a getting-to-know-you initiative than a publication project, and we Australians did learn about how Japanese researchers went about their work – with long in-country fieldwork and strong multi-disciplinary teams. In later years, some of us (certainly Ileto and I) spent longer periods in Japanese institutions, attempting to do serious writing. My thinking about Southeast Asian studies owes a lot to conversations with Japanese colleagues. I think now of Tsuyoshi Kato (whom I first met at Cornell), Junko Koizumi, Moto Uchibori, and Hiroyuki Yamamoto – all prominent scholars whose work deserves even wider recognition outside Japan.

As Dean of Asian Studies, I had two special objectives: first, to make sure students in the Honours class had a common theoretical

component in their degree, concentrating on the way different disciplinary perspectives might be employed in reading Asian source materials; secondly, to convince government and the private sector that training in economics or strategic/international relations needed to be supplemented by language-based, culture-informed 'Asia knowledge' if Australia was to be effective in the Asian region. The second objective led me to collaborate at ANU with both the Faculty of Economics and the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre; it was also the initial reason for agreeing to a comprehensive partnership with Asialink at the University of Melbourne. No organization in Australia, it seemed to me, was so focused on improving the quality of Australia-Asia relations as Asialink.

In the 1990s, I was also editor of the Southeast Asia Publication Series (of the Asian Studies Association of Australia) – the book series with Allen & Unwin publishers, which put out major research work by Merle Ricklefs, John Walker, Fadzilah Cooke, Philip Taylor and numerous other Australia-based scholars. Another role providing an opportunity to influence Australian research on Southeast Asia, and Asia more generally, was as a member of two Australian Research Council panels. John Ingleson drew me into this Research Council work.

These were heady years – when Southeast Asian studies appeared to be booming. In 2000 I was asked to talk about Southeast Asian studies in Australia in the Golay Lecture at Cornell – this lecture marked the 50th anniversary of the Cornell Southeast Asian Program. I assumed something of a triumphalist tone. Sadly, I could not give the same lecture today.

WB: Your extensive research and published works on Malay history, Southeast Asian studies, and regional relations have garnered significant attention and recognition, Your publication, *Kerajaan*, was selected by the United States Association for Asian Studies as one of the 25 "works of major importance to historical studies" and "most frequently cited in the literature" in the field of Southeast Asian history. As a leading authority in the field, I am curious to know why you chose that complex subject? And how

has your work contributed to the understanding of the region's political, social, and cultural developments?

AM: I have begun to answer these questions, noting how uncomfortable I was with development perspectives – which seemed to focus in a top-down manner on the transfer of Western ways of thought and Western institutions to Southeast Asia. I always hoped to get insider perspectives. My main interest was the colonial period – the 19th and early 20th century – and there had to be a standpoint from which to assess the impact of the West. If pre-colonial perspectives remained influential despite the colonial impact, they would play a part in shaping the post-colonial nation. Cultural anthropology and literary criticism were helpful in getting at a local standpoint and, as I have indicated, traditional *hikayat* literature provides valuable source material. In debating – very respectfully – with Gullick and others, I think I helped to promote scholarly deliberation on pre-modern Southeast Asian perspectives and their implications. I certainly helped to prepare myself to write the follow-up study, *The Invention of Politics*.

In both these books I sought to problematize terms which analysts often employ – terms such as 'state', 'political system', 'government', 'politics', 'the individual', and so forth. I wondered if these were Western concepts that distort our understanding of non-Western, and especially early societies. I was impressed by French historian Febvre's observation that it is impossible to employ the concept of "unbelief" in writing about 16th-century Europe because in that period 'every activity, every day" was "saturated with religion". In my commitment to problematizing, however, I was not as rigorous as I hoped. In later years I felt I had taken for granted the categories 'race' and 'ethnicity' – and had not thought enough about how 'Malay' might have been understood in different regions and different eras.

In *Kerajaan* and later writing I certainly focused on key Malay terms – such as. '*kerajaan*', '*nama*', and '*belanja*'. I then tried to analyze how modern concepts were introduced, and the implications such change entailed. In writing *Invention* – especially in Princeton – I became preoccupied in particular with how the idea of 'politics' became

influential. I was intrigued by the observation of one Malay author of the 1920s that 'politics', or '*siasah*', was a new 'custom' ('*adat*').

My *Invention* was in some ways a response to Bill Roff's fine book, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* – as Clive Kessler explained eloquently and generously in recommending my manuscript to a publisher. Roff wrote in the 1960s – at a time when there was less division in Malay society – and he tended to be preoccupied with explaining why the unification of Malay society had been taking place. By the time I was writing – in the 1980s and early 1990s – the Islamic Fundamentalist movement was gaining pace, Prime Minister Mahathir was struggling against Malaysian royals and there were books coming out with titles like 'The Breakup of the Malay Community'. My concern was to explain the divisions in Malay society – the 'origins of Malay division' not 'the origins of Malay unity' – and I stressed the contest between three groups: the *bangsa*-minded (proponents of ethnic nationalism), the *umat*-minded (those focused on the trans-ethnic Islamic community) and the *kerajaan*-minded (those who continued to lay stress on the Rulers as central in Malay life). In proposing this framework, as many readers would expect, I was influenced by the way Geertz described three different *aliran* in Javanese society.

My emphasis on the coming of 'politics' concerned the changing way in which the *bangsa*, *umat*, and *kerajaan* people debated with one another. Ideas activists began to deal with one another in different ways in the colonial period – and began to converse in a new discourse. Particularly in Princeton, I sought advice from those about me. Jim Boon saw how Louis Dumont could help, reminding me that the presence of 'politics' cannot be merely assumed. I had been directed to Partha Chatterjee's work on social ideology – the problematic and the thematic – by Ranajit Guha. Others suggested that in analysing the growing influence of 'politics' I would benefit from reading Habermas (on the 'public sphere') and John Pocock (on 'civic humanism'). Although I concluded that Malay 'nationalism' failed to tie the society together, I began to think that a type of social bond did emerge when all sides began to operate in this novel discourse of 'politics'.

My approach differed from that of Roff in one further way. His viewpoint was more explicitly retrospective. He started with the emergence of Malay nationalism and asked how this came about. I attempted a prospective viewpoint – positioning myself back in around 1800 and examining how royal courts responded to new ideological changes, such as the Wahabi (or Salafi) movement and the strong ethnic sentiments promoted by Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir (Munshi Abdullah) and others. I tried to write *Invention* 'from the inside'- commencing with the 'traditional' polity, not a modern political formation such as 'Malay nationalism'.

My year at Princeton was a fantastic way of tuning up again – a decade and a half after finishing my PhD. The intense discussion, more about theoretical issues than Malaysia, helped me to write a book very different from *Kerajaan* – a book concerned explicitly with ideological change. For all his great strengths, Wolters had never been comfortable dealing with real, transformative change. On this matter, I was grateful to my Princeton colleagues.

WB: How have you navigated the challenges of conducting historical research in Southeast Asia, especially Malaysia including issues related to language, access to archives, and political sensitivities?

AM: Managing political sensitivities has not been a particular problem. I write mainly about the past – though an attentive reader would realize that I often have an eye on current issues. It is possible that my writings on Malaysia's plural society – including the race paradigm – and the Islamization process, as well as my discussion of such concepts as 'politics', 'political system', 'ethnicity', 'individualism' and 'monarchy', have the capacity to promote understanding rather than antagonism. I hope so – but think I have never made such an objective explicit.

The challenges I face are not primarily concerned with obtaining new sources – but more about re-reading known sources. As indicated, I tend to seek key Malay terms – and attempt to problematize (or bracket) taken-for-granted, English-

language concepts. As a historian, I have not made a philosophical investigation of hermeneutics or deconstruction – but have found these lines of thinking helpful. I am obviously interested in what Collingwood called 'absolute presuppositions'.

Apart from the discussion of terms in *Kerajaan* and *Invention*, in other writings, I talked about 'biography' and 'race'. My contribution to the Malaysian biography project noted the argument that British biography was the most developed type of biographical writing – and then asked whether Malay biography might be shaped by different poetics. Was it less concerned about interiority – and more focused on the social positioning of the person discussed? I felt it wrong to assume what 'biography' entails – and then insist that Malay biographical writings are inferior. Similarly, it is easy to assume what 'race' or 'ethnicity' entails – and then proceed to analyze 'the Malays' or 'Malayness' in these terms. When I eventually wrote the book '*The Malays*' for the Blackwell series 'Peoples of South-East Asia and the Pacific', I suppose I disobeyed the injunction of the series editors to provide "a complete history, from origins to the present, of the peoples under consideration'. I was uncomfortable with the task of presenting such an authoritative, 'expert' overview – and decided to examine how the idea of 'Malay' developed over time, and in one location as opposed to another. Being 'Malay' can mean something very different when one moves from Western Malaysia to Singapore or Eastern Indonesia, or South Africa. As Shamsul AB commented on the book cover, my study of the concept 'Malay' also led me into "the broader field of identity study in the social sciences."

I had been commissioned to write *The Malays* when serving as Dean at ANU, but eventually wrote the book at the Research Institute at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies – a perfect place for concentrated writing. I wrote my study of the concept of 'Malay' at quite a fast speed, seeking advice from many directions – starting in Japan with Tsuyoshi Kato. The book is very much a conversation with other scholars. I had only encountered Ismail Hussein once, years earlier, but Henk Maier – always an influence on my thinking – once remarked on his centrality in this book. I certainly benefitted from correspondence with Geoffrey Benjamin in Singapore. In the writing itself I got constant help from

Jane Drakard – and, as always, from Claire.

In one sense, I suppose, this book was radical. Lots of people – and I am one of them – have been throwing around the word 'Malay' in their scholarly writings. My fine supervisor, Oliver Wolters had written a book with the title 'The Fall of Srivijaya in Malay History' and some historians had suggested that in pre-modern times the 'heritage of Melayu' had an ideological value that could influence real political behaviour. Did people get up in the morning, saying, "I want to be a great Malay, and advance the Malay cause?" Do we have any evidence? In my work, I suggested that some Bataks had undergone a process of 'Malayization'. They had been involved in genuine cultural change, but I had not tried to determine whether they would have seen this change as 'Malayization'. A principal concern of my *The Malays* was to examine how the idea of being 'Malay' developed. Here, I looked at the role of the Melaka sultanate and then such early 19th-century thinkers as Thomas Stamford Raffles and Munshi Abdullah. Abdullah, I thought, had never received full recognition for being an ideas entrepreneur in the creation of the *bangsa Melayu* (Malay nationalist) movement.

But what did the term 'Malay' mean? In the past, I had not thought enough about 'race' and 'ethnicity'. These terms, I now saw, can also distort our understanding of social organization – or what Yamamoto Hiroyuki called 'people-grouping'. The term 'civilization', it began to seem, might be a better way to describe 'Malay or 'Malayness'. As a Visiting Professor at Humboldt University in 2007 (working with Vincent Houben), I gave a talk on this topic and was struck by the response of a senior German scholar. He found it hard to believe that although '*bangsa Melayu*' is an influential concept, it has not generally been perceived in terms of belonging to a biological race. My approach to 'Malay' was to some extent influenced by Oliver Wolters. He had been much concerned with the way foreign ideas, going back to Hindu and Confucian concepts, have been 'localized' – often "fractured and restated" and "drained of their original significance" – in Southeast Asia. My discussion of race took such a localization approach. The discussion came up again when I worked on a project at IKMAS in 2010-2011.

WB: Can you say a little more about the collaborative project you undertook after your appointment as the Pok Rafeah Chair at IKMAS, UKM in 2010?

AM: Working at IKMAS (UKM) was enjoyable – in fact, visiting professorships in general are perhaps the most attractive jobs in academic life. You do not tend to be engaged in battles over funding, promotions, teaching priorities, etc. You have the potential to engage in genuine research and theoretical discussion with your new colleagues. At IKMAS I worked with Abdul Rahman Embong, Tan Siew Yean, and Helen Ting – all excellent academics, thoughtful and rigorous. We focused on the Malay-Chinese-Indian race paradigm which seems to be cited at every turn in public discussion in Malaysia. In 2003 I published an article on the 'plural society', trying to show how in Malaysia this particular social formation was shaped by local forces, going back at least to the Melaka era. Looking at the racial structure highlighted by commentators on Malaysia, it seemed to be imposed top-down on Malaysia. Some analyses give the impression that yes, the nation may be an imagined concept – but, in the Malaysian case, there exists below the nation a stubborn demographic reality. Our IKMAS project argued that the Malay-Chinese-Indian structure was not a mere description of social reality – it was a paradigm into which social complexities have been fitted. The book produced by the IKMAS group, *Transforming Malaysia: Dominant and Competing Paradigms*, discussed the historical development of this paradigm – noting Charles Hirschman's work on the role of changing British census classifications. We sought to demonstrate the availability in Malaysian society of other possible paradigms – but admitted the race paradigm has become tenacious, almost impossible to escape, and that it influences sharply many areas of Malaysian public life.

The colonial role in race-building is fascinating. To give an example from Sarawak, anthropologist Edmund Leach, writing a report for the colonial government, noted in his diary that he had "almost entirely dispensed with all the 200 odd minor 'tribal' names which clutter up the earlier literature". In early 19th-century Siam,

only a small percentage of the population had been considered 'Thai'. As the country 'modernized', large numbers of subjects were incorporated into the Thai race.

We had plenty of well-organized working seminars in my IKMAS years – often discussing the history of ideas as well as Malaysian history and society – and established personal relationships that continue today.

WB: Please elaborate on the other paradigms mentioned in the book *Transforming Malaysia*.

AM: Yes, after stressing that the race paradigm is powerful as well 'constructed' – Ben Anderson's term 'imagined' obscures the deliberate nature of this ideological work – we discussed other possible paradigms. You could, of course, have a class paradigm – and there is also the historical *kerajaan* itself, which was not race-based. People of many ethnicities could live in those monarchies, those sultanates – accepted there so long as they were loyal subjects of the ruler. Looking beyond the Malay world, the multi-ethnic potential of monarchies is captured in Joseph Roth's novel, *The Radetzky March*, which deals with the Habsburg empire. My wonderfully insightful friend, Christoph Altenburg – a member of the Habsburg family – had often brought home to me the ideological tension between monarchy on the one hand, and ethnic nationalism on the other.

In the Malaysian case, the trans-ethnic idea of being a subject (*rakyat*), a form of residue from the pre-modern world, might still have value as a bonding concept – even for people who are uncomfortable with present-day monarchy. Rahman Embong discussed this potential of 'subjecthood' – this "trans-racial perspective of the *rakyat* paradigm" – in an innovative way in our book.

The preoccupation with race is one of the defining features of modern Malaysia. Just look at the country's Constitution. Much in that document is familiar to an Australian – both our countries are federations governed by the Westminster system. As I constantly argued in an annual essay for Routledge Press's volume, *The Far East*

and Australasia, what makes the Malaysian text distinctive – and analytically interesting – is its stress on race, Islam, and monarchy. In my writings, I have sought not to criticize but to understand the central role these concerns play in Malaysian national life.

WB: Moving beyond Malay studies, another of your interests – on which you have been published widely – is Asian regionalism. Given the current political and economic landscape in Asia, what do you perceive as the key challenges and opportunities for regionalism in the future, and how do you suggest addressing them?

AM: I am more respectful of ASEAN regionalism than most analysts in Australia and the West. Southeast Asia is an extraordinarily complex region – in its mixture of civilizational traditions and the variations in economic development as well as sheer national size among its component states. We should recall as well how turbulent and violent a region of Southeast Asia was some decades ago. Critics of ASEAN often ask too much of the organization – and underestimate its achievements. Incorporating the Communist states as members after the Vietnam War was a major achievement. It is also ASEAN that has brought the large East Asian states – China, Japan, and South Korea – into dialogue with one another. Ridiculing some ASEAN institutions for being 'talk shops' misunderstands the importance of 'talk' in Southeast Asia. It also takes no account of the role of 'talk' in the development of 'Europe' as a regional community. ASEAN, we should remind ourselves, seeks to promote inclusive regionalism – regionalism including China and not designed specifically to counter China – rather than the adversarial regionalism which both China and the United States have initiated.

I can understand the drivers behind adversarial regionalism. It fits with a balance-of-power approach to international relationships. But that approach has not been so influential in Southeast Asia, where countries have operated surprisingly comfortably in hierarchies. The smaller countries have often leveraged their relations with greater powers – seeking, in a sense, not to balance against but to embrace

the larger state, gaining material and other advantages in doing so. We might see here an attempt to socialize such a state – rather than merely treating it as a potential adversary. For countries like Australia, it seems to me, that there are obvious advantages in having ASEAN act in this way – offering an alternative to the more combative regionalism, represented in the QUAD or the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

I argued for a much stronger Australian commitment to ASEAN in an Asialink (University of Melbourne) report published a decade ago – and, also, in a report on Australia-South Korea cooperation which appeared in 2023. The ASEAN element in the Korea report was influenced by an earlier project led by my friend Lee Poh Ping (who died in such a tragic way). I have argued the benefits of ASEAN's inclusive regionalism to an Australian Senate's Foreign Affairs Committee – and, also, in several Australian newspapers.

Surveying approaches to regionalism in various parts of Asia, they seem to differ from the perspectives that tend to be encountered in Australia. Sheryn Lee and I wrote an article on this in 2014. Also, as a visiting scholar at Kyoto University in 2011, I engaged in discussions about how the study of regional institutions needs to draw on historical and cultural knowledge, and not merely international relations expertise.

Malaysia is important in the creation of 'Asia' as well as ASEAN. Remember Prime Minister Mahathir's advocacy for an East Asian Economic Group in the early 1990s, well before East and Southeast countries were brought together officially as ASEAN-Plus Three (APT). In the early post-independence period, Ghazali Shafie suggested that regionalism was deeply embedded in Malay thinking. He talked about the value of 'togetherness' – the concept of *berkampung* – and stressed that the bamboo plant provides an important lesson. This plant "by nature does not stand alone or singly'. Only in a cluster can bamboo withstand strong winds. The urge toward regionalism, he was suggesting, is virtually in Malay DNA. With this in mind, outside commentators need to be patient when ASEAN countries are seen to stress 'togetherness' – even ahead of a commitment to tackle human rights issues in a member

country, or perhaps the regional problem of the smoke haze. Another consideration here – so a reading of history, including pre-modern indigenous writings would suggest – is a long-term commitment to non-interference in a country's internal arrangements. Because these writings speak so clearly on behalf of non-intervention, the concept carries a historical depth that goes well beyond the value placed on state sovereignty. My increasing preoccupation with Southeast Asian approaches to foreign relations brings me back, in a way, to the interest that first led me to Southeast Asian Studies. The way regionalism is understood is only one of my concerns – but this area is certainly one where many Western scholars have failed to come to terms with non-Western perceptions and motivations.

WB: What role can historians of Southeast Asia play in shaping current public discourse and policy debates, both within Southeast Asia and globally?

AM: As you will gather, I do think historians have a role to play in discussions about foreign relations. Apart from engaging in the Australian Institute of International of International Affairs, I spent a decade on the Australian Government's Foreign Affairs Council and am still International Director at Asialink and Co-Chair (with former senior ambassador, Ric Smith) of the Australian Committee of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP). As a historian, I guess I have done a fair number of radio discussions – and written quite a few opinion pieces in newspapers. For some years, beginning in 1999, I edited – in collaboration with Alison Broinowski and then Deborah Johnson – a monthly survey of developments in Southeast Asian countries, a project funded by the ASEAN Focus Group in Sydney. We commissioned authors from both inside and outside academia. We even had pieces from John Sanderson – a charming and brave man who, as Force Commander of the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (1992-1993), made an extraordinary Australian contribution to Southeast Asia.

Working with Asialink over almost three decades – especially with CEO Jenny McGregor and Asialink Chair, Sid Myer – we have

developed projects aimed at building stronger understanding between Australian and Asian (particularly Southeast Asian) thought leaders. These projects include the 'Asialink Conversations' – which benefitted enormously from the intellectual and funding support of Sid's father, Bails Myer, an Australian hero. On our travels, he introduced himself to regional leaders as 'a retired shopkeeper, who happens to have had a chat recently with our Prime Minister' – and immediately displayed the diplomatic skills of a star ambassador. In these 'Asialink Conversations', often with the brilliant planning assistance of Andrea Haese at ANU, we tried to bring Australian political, business, and academic leaders into dialogue with counterparts in the Asian region. These events included Foreign Ministers and Prime Ministers from around the region, as well as from Australia. In some cases, the discussion of historical topics – I think of the contributions of Sultan Nazrin Shah and Jawhar Hassan of Malaysia, Thant Myint-U and U Tun Aung Chain from Myanmar, Takashi Shiraishi from Japan, and Milton Osborne from Australia – provoked as much enthusiasm as deliberation on current economic and political developments. Two Australian Foreign Ministers, Alexander Downer and Gareth Evans – radically different in so many ways, but both serious about Australia's future in the Asian region – helped push forward the work of Asialink.

Another project in which Asialink engaged was the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Dialogue. It was suggested by Tan Sri Jawhar at ISIS and Asialink responded rapidly. I was in New Zealand at the time, giving a series of lectures, and when I met up with the lively Simon Murdoch (Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Trade) he agreed to give the new Dialogue full support.

Regarding my theoretical interests, some years ago my main interdisciplinary concern was history's relation to anthropology; in more recent years my focus has obviously been on international relations (IR). I have reflected a little on this second area in an article in *Pacific Review* (April 2017) – and, also, in a book chapter on Wang Gungwu's debate with IR scholarship. I am struck by Gungwu's warning that IR can impose an American framework on foreign relations thinking. Also, such senior diplomats as Singapore's

Bilahari Kausikan and Malaysia's Raja Nushirwan argue that training in history and literature can be of more benefit than IR for those engaged in actual diplomacy. Given what I have said already about Geertz, Wolters, and Collingwood, my specific interest as a historian is of course the analysis of strategic and foreign-policy cultures. I am concerned, as in much of my earlier work on Malay history, to problematize concepts assumed to be fundamental in Western analysis – such as 'sovereignty' and 'balance-of-power' – and seek to understand the terms in which influential Malays and other Southeast Asians might comprehend foreign relations. In a sense, I am trying to identify a Malay critique of IR – just as in earlier years I had searched for Malay alternatives to conceptual frameworks developed in social anthropology and political science. The Academy's Australia Asia Perceptions Project in the early 1990s was a great time for furthering these interests – and I have also learned from strategic analysts Desmond Ball and Ron Huisken in CSCAP. A wonderful two years (2014-2015) as Tun Hussein Onn Chair at ISIS Malaysia gave me new opportunities for studying foreign relations, as has my Visiting Professorship at the Asia Europe Institute (AEI) at the University of Malaya

With respect to the IR profession, talking with my friends Richard Higgott and Amitav Acharya encourages my interest in the relatively recent non-Western IR scholarship. Yan Xuetong's Princeton book of 2011, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* – which examines the continuing influence on China's international behaviour of ancient Chinese political thought – has encouraged me to investigate the historical origins of modern Southeast Asian approaches to foreign relations. To get at 'ancient Malay political thought' I have been reading – or re-reading – traditional Malay *hikayat*. The team at ISIS – led by Tan Sri Jawhar, and then Tan Sri Rastam – were tolerant of what some IR specialists would consider an eccentric investigation and were often generous with advice. While at ISIS, I gave a couple of lectures on the possible influence of pre-modern ideas on Malaysian foreign policy.

Continuing to work on this topic. I have been drawn into further inter-disciplinary and, also, inter-professional discussions. I have

been working closely with Azirah Hashim (an admired linguist and superb academic administrator) and, also, puzzle aloud with such perceptive thinkers as diplomat Astanah Abdul Aziz and lawyer Philip Koh. With respect to the IR profession, I am currently planning a collaborative project on Malaysian foreign policy with Roy Anthony Rogers – and there are also lively regional security specialists at IKMAS and the University Malaysia Sabah. We find rich foreign policy thinking in parts of the Malaysian Foreign Ministry and National Security Council, as one would expect – and, also, in political parties. The Chancellor of the University of Malaya, Sultan Nazrin Shah of Perak, who is highly respected as an economic historian, has provided a framework for the analysis of ASEAN perspectives on foreign relations – in a much-admired address on ASEAN approaches to foreign relations, delivered in Sydney in 2018.

Apart from regionalism, my interest in Southeast Asian foreign-relations thinking covers such areas as the handling of larger powers and the specific role of 'talk' in coping with inter-state tension – as well as the challenge of whether to interfere in another country's internal affairs and the insistence on moral balance (and not merely power balance) in foreign relations. Certain distinctive features of the present-day Malaysian outlook do seem to be present in pre-colonial thinking, as revealed in the *hikayat* texts – and I was reassured when Astanah and Lee Poh Ping agreed that such study of historical heritage is valuable.

Debate about the drivers in inter-state relations seems to me to be an urgent priority – an area in which academics should be supplementing official-to-official deliberations. A lot of Western writing, and Western-influenced writing – especially on ASEAN and ASEAN-China relations – is ridiculously uninformed, and I intend to continue to make this point.

WB: How do you envision your research shaping and informing future studies in the field of Southeast Asian history?

AM: In 2023 I have been writing again on the coming of Islam to Southeast Asia – trying to explain why it was adopted from the

13th century and not earlier. The issue, I think, is relevant to our thinking about Islamization today. I have also been working with a former student, Wilbert Wong – looking at debates about the writing of Malaysian history – trying to show how and why the current dominant, Melaka-based narrative was constructed. This work may be seen as peripheral to Malaysia's current debates – but remember, it is historians who 'write the nation'. I hope it is a topic that will interest Henry Barlow – who has made such a large contribution to Malaysian studies, from outside academia. Regarding regional relations, apart from the Australia-South Korea-ASEAN project, I am involved in Track 2 dialogues both with India and ASEAN.

A major academic project on my mind is a book that examines the 'rules-based order' in East Asia in about 1800, then shows how it was overturned by the West – especially the British. Many commentators today are troubled by the idea that China, Russia, or Islamic activists, are challenging the US-endorsed international rules system consolidated at the end of the Second World War. It will be disorienting for some to see that the English were once the wreckers of an international order. The final part of the book will consider whether elements in the pre-modern order have survived - and could be continuing to influence inter-state behaviour. This is a project I hope to complete in cooperation with Peter Borschberg, who has an extraordinary knowledge of the historical sources for Southeast Asia, together with a valuable academic background in the Cambridge History of Ideas school. I met Peter when I held the Visiting Raffles Professorship at the National University of Singapore in 2002 – a great job title! – and met there also Tan Tai Yong, who seemed a model university administrator, and the postgraduate student, Khairudin Aljunied, who has now written a fine series of books on what I would call Malay 'history of ideas'. The University of Malaya has just appointed both Khairudin and the excellent Farish Noor as history professors – which is a great achievement for the university's impressive Dean of Arts, Danny Wong.

You ask how I might hope to influence Southeast Asian historical studies. I am worried about the future of the field. When I was Dean of Asian Studies at ANU we had senior historians on Indonesia,

Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines – and I almost boasted of this in my 2000 Golay Lecture. Today, Robert Cribb - who has just retired from ANU – tells me ANU now has no Southeast Asian historian. I suppose we need to convince a new generation that the discipline of history brings huge practical advantages – including in helping to analyse, predict and shape relations between states. In Australia – and, I think, Malaysia – there is a flood of students coming into international and strategic relations courses. Historians must argue that the study of history adds depth – including essential local knowledge – to research and teaching in these disciplines.

I was reminded of this historians' mission a few weeks ago in Hanoi – when my old friend Kwa Chong Guan and I were leading a workshop on the much-discussed, international 'rules-based order'. He is also a historian – prolific and innovative, and based in Singapore – as well as an analyst of current strategic relations issues. We were both convinced that this workshop benefitted from historical insights, especially concerning past occasions when an international order had been subverted in the Asian region.

Historians, as I have been suggesting, can assist IR specialists in investigating non-Western frameworks for thinking about foreign relations. To rely only on Western concepts such as the 'balance-of-power' imperative is not only intellectually unproductive but may also have practical consequences, damaging not enhancing order in the Asian region. It is good that scholars are now investigating specific Chinese understandings of foreign relations – in Southeast Asia, the project is only just beginning.

Malaysia has been a leader in building ASEAN regionalism – and, also, in engaging the rising China. It should be an objective to theorize Malaysian and other Asian approaches in a manner that would enrich the entire discipline.

WB: Looking ahead, what are some key areas of research you think most pressing for scholars of Southeast Asian history?

AM: I guess my current focus on inter-state relations is clear enough. A project I started some years ago with Desmond Ball still seems

vitally important. To promote inter-state understanding, we sought to investigate the languages of security employed in different countries in our region – and the Australian Research Council supported our objectives. The project recruited linguists and historians – and, with much help from Nich Farrelly and Sheryn Lee, two highly qualified Asianists, developed a website lexicon at ANU. Several essays came out of the project – but we ought to have gone further. Des's death damaged this project – and I miss him in many other ways.

Historians and social scientists obviously need to do work that matters to our governments and public spheres. assumptions, categories of analysis – and experimenting with new ideas – these aims lie at the heart of a productive academic culture.

Born at a high point of Western hegemony, I now live in a period of transition that is civilizational as well as economic and political. Understanding this transition, and charting the way political and social life will develop in the new era, must be a preoccupation for scholars in Southeast Studies – and in many other specializations. The historian, as always, will need to look back as well as forward – look back, as I have said, even before the Western imperial era. Investigating historical processes, in my experience, can also achieve a softening of present-day tensions and resentments.

Two final thoughts: first, inter-disciplinary work seems increasingly common, which is a good thing. But we need first to be grounded in our discipline. I remember Ben Anderson making this point to me. Historians gain when we reflect on historiography before looking across theoretical investigations in anthropology and international relations. Secondly, there is a growing call for scholars to be explicit about their ideological and social positioning – their own 'absolute presuppositions', what Gadamer termed their own 'horizons'. This call will be all the more urgent in an era of civilizational transition – and may bring research benefits. Investigating non-Western perspectives certainly provokes me to consider my heritage of ideas. For foreign relations thinking the English SchooI of IR is helpful; but I also feel the need to know more about the broader liberal tradition, including how it has developed in Australia under the influence of Alfred Deakin and others. I find myself asking why

Wordsworth's writing was a turning point – and read Charles Taylor and Larry Siedentop to dig into the deeper history of individualism. My Malay studies, ironically perhaps, nearly always drive me to reflect on my Anglo-Australian roots.

Reassessment, reconceptualization, and theoretical reflection – will drive exciting research, often having far-reaching practical consequences. The Academy 'Project' I ran in the 1990s, with help from Malaysian colleagues, possessed such ambitions – insisting on the reconsideration of Australian perspectives and values, as well as the need to comprehend various Asian understandings. It is a pity this project is not being undertaken today, when it is needed more than ever.

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