

Colonial and Post-Colonial State-think and the Problem with University Education in Southeast Asian Countries

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The problem here is not a university press per se NOT publishing one academic's book, this happens to academics all the time -- books are constantly rejected on the basis of peer review, incompatibility with the mission of the press and so on. An abandonment after selection and contract would seem to indicate that a university press responded to undisclosed "stakeholder" concerns. This seems to fit a pattern that has overtaken the evolution of universities across Asia. Professionally, I advocate the role of historians in trying to explain the background of contemporary problems and that policies could be better informed if they are made with an understanding of the history behind them, and this is what I will try to encourage briefly here.

Across the long history – and I look beyond the first university at Bologna to early proto-universities at Nalanda and Gundishapur as well, so thousands of years – universities were actually given to parochialism, the teaching of religion, the education of noble sons to do and think exactly as their fathers had done and their peers would do, the university was a place where thinking was structured according to what I call *state-think*-- I am here applying James Scott's concept of state space to the patterns of thinking¹ -- in a way that made thinking easy to conform to the state, to run the state, to lead the state.²

The unspoken part of this process was learning how to control, suppress, and exploit the vast majority of the population. Colonial authorities knew this when they introduced colonial universities in the decades up to and just after World War I. These were to teach the colonial mother tongue, European ideas and values, and both obedience and the figurative whip through the provision of certain kinds of knowledge and behaviour. Select Southeast Asian youth of means and merit, would walk in elite children and walk out colonial bureaucrats, military officers, and intermediary elites. They saw or were meant to see the world as sharply defined, hierarchically stacked ethnic minorities, right and wrong moral sexual behaviour, the legitimacy of the huge global and racial disparities in wealth and just why Southeast Asians on the whole deserved to be servants and peasants, and why the indigenous mode of thought was inherently inferior to the western mode of thought.

But the 1920s and 1930s were when that beautiful moment happened, when Southeast Asians found in their education all the things the colonial state did not wish them

¹ James Scott discusses his ideas about state space in James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) and in idem, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

² I am using state-think here not to refer to ideology or political support for the state per se but the introduction or reinforcement of structures of thought that do limit thinking to certain avenues and blind the mind to alternative routes, drawing the intellectual inextricably into a particular intellectual framework in which the state's ideas can make sense, ensuring that while the university product may support many different political choices in later life, alternatives that would fundamentally change the political order, do not even show up on the university graduate's intellectual register.

to see, learned about revolutionary ideology, why the global disparity in wealth was a result of slavery and exploitation, and why their own modes of thought were not inferior. Universities in Southeast Asia continued to train the governing and commercial elites, but they also produced the revolutionaries and thinkers who would effectively lead their countries to victory in Burma, in Vietnam, Indonesia, and against absolute kingship in Thailand in 1932.

Here I will make three, very specific points.

1. Southeast Asian Universities have been designed for state-think

First, Southeast Asian universities like universities in many former colonies have been *designed* to be places for *state-think*. Universities in the region were usually founded by colonial states or post-independence states, not to encourage free and critical thought, but to service the state and populate a gentleman's club of bureaucrats, officers, and business leaders.

The primary mission of these universities remains for them to be centres not of the development of critical thinking but merely places to teach their students what to think rather than how to think, to reinforce an imaginary in which certain political and economic elites are dominant as the only possible and acceptable world in which to live, and to suppress any deviation from conformity.

2. As a historical Phenomenon Southeast Asian Universities are Battlegrounds for contesting state-think

My second point is this, Southeast Asians everywhere as students and academics have always struggled in universities to carve out spaces to challenge these efforts, to explore, experiment, to question. The "Southeast Asian" university if it is successful, not as a state project, but as a historical phenomenon, is a battleground where the *state-think* can be challenged and students whether they leave as conformists or revolutionaries have at least had the opportunity to question the order of things and change, even just a little, they come out better able to make their own choices as a result.

This is the historically conditioned role of universities and this development is one of many features of the arrival at a free and open society. Yes, the attempt to impose state think in universities is true in these as well because it comes out of bureaucratic rationality not social morality. So, I am not worried about states trying to determine what universities teach, again there are historical reasons why this EXPECTATION by governing elites is valid.

3. Rising Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia today seeks to close the intellectual counter-spaces produced by academics and students

Third, while governments in democratic and democratic aspiring societies have one version of state think that can tolerate a fairly high level of contravention, authoritarian and military governments have less tolerance, none. The 1960s to 1980s saw many of these regimes, in some countries somewhat longer and then a return to earlier civilian governments and the universities returned to normalcy. The retreat of Democracy in the last half decade across the region, or the return to authoritarianism we have seen in Myanmar since 2017, however, has created the trend I am most worried about today.

What is working against the historical role of universities across Southeast Asia today is the increasingly effective closing up of what we can call the *intellectual counter-spaces* of both students and academics by the invisible hands we'll call for the moment "stakeholders."³ This is the critical moment when universities go from saying this is what the state wishes to teach you to this is what the state limits your understanding to be. And they cancel the contract for a book that showed a different way to view one of the societies in the region. Worryingly, I think this is the trend, especially with the *apparent* success of many authoritarian states in controlling covid-19.

What students and academics in universities globally need to do, not just in the West but in Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere is to help students and academics in ASEAN universities defend their *intellectual counter-spaces* in their own universities through pressure such as the reviewing boycott launched by Pavin and by providing, even just virtually, intellectual lifelines that reach over the military picket and the invisible shields of the authoritarian-minded "stakeholders."

³ Observers often confuse as intellectual counter-spaces the many high-profile research centres that have popped up at well-founded universities in the region in the last thirty years. Some states are savvy that international reputations are not built like this so cloak the core of a university with high profile links with elite institutions elsewhere, by creating nominal centres for critical thought, often bringing in internationally-famous academicians, but these appendages very soon succumb to the *colonial mode of university education* like the rest of the institution and the famous personages they import flee, if they can, to Oxford or Kyoto, but never to another Southeast Asian university ever again. This game is about pretending to encourage critical thinking only to win higher ratings on international university rankings.