

Farewell lecture Prof.Dr. Vincent Houben, USSH Hanoi 2024

'Area Studies in the Age of (De)globalization - a retrospective and prospective View'

34 years ago, on September 15, 1990, I landed for the first time at Noi Bai airport in Vietnam. Being a lecturer at Leiden University in Ha Lan, I was instructed by my superiors to conduct negotiations at USSH for the conclusion of an MOU on academic cooperation. It was shortly after the fall of the Berlin wall, which marked the end of the Cold War. At that time, universities in the West sought opportunities to re-establish direct contacts with partner universities in mainland Southeast Asia, particularly Vietnam. I remember a warm welcome at the airport, where Prof. Phan Huy Le collected me with a Russian brand Faculty car, accompanied by the young historian Mr. Kim, who would be my guide during my stay in Hanoi. I was staying in a state hotel on Hàng Kai street near Hồ Hoàn Kiếm. At that time only very few cars were on the road, people used bicycles, only a small number of shops existed, some hidden private restaurants and in the evening the streets were empty. People were not yet used to foreigners like me, tended to avoid me or asked for a cigarette or even sometimes scolded at me. The highlight of my visit was a joint trip with to the Hmong minority group in the hills to the Nord west, together with a Faculty delegation. (Foto with villagers, me and Prof. Thuat, a linguist)

During my first visit I gave a guest lecture in French on a comparison between the Indonesian and Vietnamese revolution – some professors were delighted but most of those present had either a command of English or of Russian as a foreign language. So, my words had to be translated into Vietnamese.

Since then, I have visited Vietnam and this university many times and could observe how much the country has changed since then. I came Hanoi over and over again when I became a professor at Passau University in 1997 and later at Humboldt University in Berlin – in fact 18 times until 2018, especially during the 2000s where I sometimes was here twice a year. During these years our academic, and our personal, cooperation has intensified – three USH professors are my former Ph.D.-students (Pham Hong Tung, Nguyen Quang Hung and Pham Quang Minh). In 2018 we co-organized a summer school with German and Vietnamese students on the theme of globalization. Due to the Corona pandemic, there was an interruption and in October 2022 I was officially retired from Humboldt University. So, now at this occasion in 2024, I will give my farewell lecture to you, whom I consider having become my personal friends. (More fotos)

I guess I am a typical representative of the Doi Moi era and the years of globalization, but I think this era has now come to an end. On a global scale, we see the rise of de-globalization and re-nationalization in an increasingly instable, polarized world. Systemic rivalry has emerged between two blocs: liberal democratic versus authoritarian countries. A third bloc, to which Europe as well as Southeast Asia belong, are caught in the middle, having to make strategic choices between alignment and non-alignment. New regionalizations are likely to emerge from this current, instable configuration of coalitions by multiple players.

Area studies have always mirrored the situation of their respective times – colonial times, the Cold War era, the years of globalization and the current period all have given different names to areas that seemed appropriate for that particular time and area studies have followed this changing pattern of spatialization until today. How to conduct area studies is therefore a theme that is still highly relevant for the Institute of Vietnamese Studies. Over the

last twenty years I have been active in developing new ideas on area studies and my ideas have been set out in several articles. At this occasion, I, first, want to summarize my thoughts on “area” and then, second, make some suggestions how this may affect the field of Vietnamese studies in the future.

When national borders are hardening and imperialism is resurfacing, mainstream Area Studies may revert to being security studies in disguise, as they were in the 1950s. During the globalization era area studies sometimes seem to have become an extension of the field of international economics. Driven by postcoloniality, there has also been a cultural studies’ stress on the study of identity. So, every era has produced the dominance of a lead discipline over the area.

Yet I am an advocate of so-called New Area Studies, which calls for area studies as a new discipline, with a clear basis in theory and methodology.

(AD 1) The key question is “what is an area” in order that it can function as an instrument of scientific inquiry?

I consider area not so much as a spatial container but rather an approach or method. In concrete: area covers a deliberately chosen, distinct configuration of places and spatial scales, ranging from local to global, which is meaningful for the study of a particular phenomenon or development. It fuses the universal and the particular and essentially looks for alterity (what is special or relatively different in a particular area compared to other areas). In consequence, areas to be considered are no longer one-dimensional and static but multi-scalar (starting from the village and province and ending with the whole world). Whilst adding the dimension of time, areas are also dynamic, and their relevance is

subject to change. The range of potential themes within Area Studies is thereby unlimited.

In addition, Area Studies pursue a view from within, focusing on those who live in the area – this is a manner to supersede postcolonial as well as decolonial critiques of western knowledge production, which has dominated the study field in the West over the last ten years or so.

Also, current ‘New Area Studies’ constitute a counter-project against monodisciplinary ventures. They reflect the life-worlds of people living in and beyond the area-in-focus. This necessitates fieldwork on the ground (digital research does not suffice) and the collaboration between local scholars and foreign experts. All this requires an intimate familiarity with the area and high-level language skills.

Doing Area Studies is also a methodological challenge. It requires the application of a combination (triangulation) of methods from history, anthropology, sociology, political science, international relations etc. Yet there are also methods, which are specific to New Area Studies and these are mostly still unknown. Here I will only briefly mention three of these:

- (1) *kaleidoscopic dialectics* (looking for configurations on the basis of looking at area from all possible perspectives (cf. Boike Rehbein);
- (2) *situational analysis*, in which data are processed toward situational space and relegated to larger contexts (cf. Adele Clarke).
- (3) *modified network analysis* based on flows and connectivities of all kinds with a focus on actors and spatial distinctions.

In 2021 I published a history book on Indonesia, in which I applied these New Area Studies' principles to a concrete subject matter: the colonial history of Indonesia between 1820 and 1945. It collapses the idea of the interplay of spatial scales and temporalities into the novel concept of "topochrone". Topochrones are specific space-time configurations in which the nature of connections between several scales is condensed into a single pattern, which I then ultimately label in the form of a specific mid-range concept. The topochrones I found for this book are situational-cum-processional charts that depict the dialectical tensions between centripetal and centrifugal forces in the imperial world of Indonesia and Asia. It also shows the dialectics of connectivity and disruption in spatial networks as well as the flexibility of historical actors' circulations across borders versus the rigidity of demarcated colonial structures.

(AD 2) What are the implications of what I just said for Vietnamese studies?

In a guest lecture here in Hanoi titled 'theories of globalization and region' in September 2017, I already started to think about this. I start by simply repeating what I said then:

What is 'area', what is specific about Vietnam and other places? The point of departure is opposite to mainstream social science: the aim is not to find out what is universal ('global') but what is specific or 'different'.

Classic area studies study the history, culture and language of individual nation-states. Southeast Asian studies are divided up as such. Problems: 1st it is not clear where the boundaries of area are – territorial but also cultural. Do the *viet ky* belong to Vietnam as an area or not? Can Vietnam

be studied in isolation, without recognizing globalization as a long historical process?; 2nd problem is that area studies are descriptive and do not produce theories of their own but depend on western disciplines for that.

Positive aspects of area studies are: a bottom-up approach (lifeworld of common people instead of view of global corporations or global institutions); they are not necessarily dependent on western theory (modernization paradigm).

An essential question is now on the table and it should be answered in the future: How could the contours of Vietnamese studies in the context of New Area Studies then look like?

At the third international conference on Vietnamese studies in Hanoi in December 2008 I already advocated a turn of the study of Vietnam towards studying Vietnam within the context of Southeast Asia. This took already existing trends within Vietnamese studies a step further. Then I referred, first, to the work of Nhung Tuyet Tran and Anthony Reid's book *Viet Nam. Borderless Histories* (2006) which tried to find (p. 3) out 'the ways in which a Vietnamese identity interacted over a thousand years with Chinese, Cham, Khmer, French, and stateless people of the [Indo-Chinese] peninsula'. Secondly, I pointed to a 2008 article by (late) Oscar Salemink, in which he argued that Vietnam, as we know it now, is the result of a history of religious, political, cultural and economic exchanges between lowland Viet and ethnic minorities in the mountains. I argued that one should also focus on Vietnam's interactions and interconnections with the wider world, in order to define what has created Vietnam as an area.

Tran & Reid's contribution deals with inter-ethnic entanglement, the lowland-highland entanglement of Salemink with dilation or expansion as a model of Vietnamese historical development. But that different things are inter-connected does not, to my opinion, suffice – it is the nature and the exact classification of the interconnections that interests me and where I see the advancement of New Area Studies in the future. It is like an exercise in mathematical morphology used in image processing, which is not aimed at the whole picture but tries to distill the properties of a part of the picture.

I have brought up other classifications of multi-layered rhizomes (to use a term that comes from plant science) in my 2021 book on Indonesian colonial history between 1820 and 1945. I am not going to outline the six empirical case-studies in this book but simply state that I found four different spatial configurations or “scalar fixes” or toponomes that I labelled on the basis of their morphology – “*chain*” (a linear connection between hinterland – coast and world market), “*circuit*” (the circular movement of colonial officials within the colonial empire), “*grid*” (a complex multi-scalar series of connections between local, national and global) and “*cascade*” (a rapid succession of events leading to the breakdown of the imperial power hierarchy).

An intriguing question is what taxonomy of spatial configurations or vectors (lateral, circular, top-down, bottom-up etc.) can be found for Vietnam and this could be a program for the future development of Vietnamese studies. Since I have now reached retirement and will retreat because of old age, this is a task for you to take up!