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Southeast Asia Studies

Every year aspiring scholars came to Yale to learn in depth — under gifted teachers — about an area with 10 countries, 7 national languages, 2 major religions and various colonial influences. A few still do.

by Elizabeth W. Kodama

Not long ago—as recently as 1970, in fact, and for many years before that—New Haven was invaded each September by a small but determined band of people from as far away as Australia who had come to Yale to earn master's degrees in Southeast Asia Studies. In 1966 I was one of them. There were 13 of us that year, in addition to five second-year M.A. students, two undergraduate Southeast Asia Studies majors, and 10 doctoral candidates in various disciplines. We were a varied lot. Most of us were American; a few were former Peace Corps volunteers who had done their stints in Asia; one was a State Department dropout who had left after a 10-year career, some of which had been spent in Cambodia. Most of us had lived or traveled in some part of Asia, and all of us looked forward to returning there.

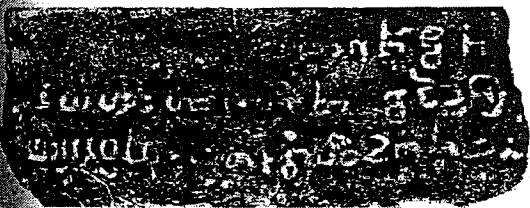
The area we had chosen to study was one so broad and diverse that it seemed to defy anyone to comprehend it. Ten countries (Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, North and South Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines) with seven national languages (Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia were kind enough to share one), two major religions (Buddhism and Islam), two major pre-colonial influences (India and China), a varied colonial background (under Britain, France, Spain, the Netherlands and the United States), and a welter of ethnic and linguistic groups pursuing a variety of occupations including wet- and dry-rice cultivation, batik making, city planning, opium smuggling and, as we know all too well, guerrilla fighting. In short, it was a formidable array. No wonder I began with trepidation—it was hard to decide where to begin.

Fortunately, the program was not without structure. The requirement that each of us choose a single discipline for specialization and acquire competence in one Southeast Asian language during our two years in the program helped somewhat to focus our studies. The immediate problem then became how to make the best possible use of our short time at Yale in what was one of the two finest Southeast Asia Studies programs in the country. We had the opportunity to work with one of the most extensive library collections and some of the finest scholars in this field in the United States.

One such scholar was the late Paul Mus, a Frenchman who had spent part of his childhood in colonial Indochina. Mus was the sort of teacher about whom it was said at Yale that one simply must sometime hear him lecture, no matter what one's interest in Southeast Asia. Originally affiliated with the Department of Indic and Far Eastern Languages and Literature, Mus was the very embodiment of the interdisciplinary approach implicit in the program; his lectures, at once anecdotal and philosophical, reflected both vast personal experience and scrupulous scholarship. An exam question in one of his courses comes back to mind: "If you could talk to a Southeast Asian person—

Elizabeth Kodama, a free lance editor, received her M.A. in Southeast Asian Studies from Yale in 1968.

An ancient inscription from a Burmese temple.



anyone, anywhere—and could ask a single question, who would you choose and what would you ask? As for me, I would like to meet Ho Chi Minh. My question: 'How do you do?' "(It would not be the first meeting.)

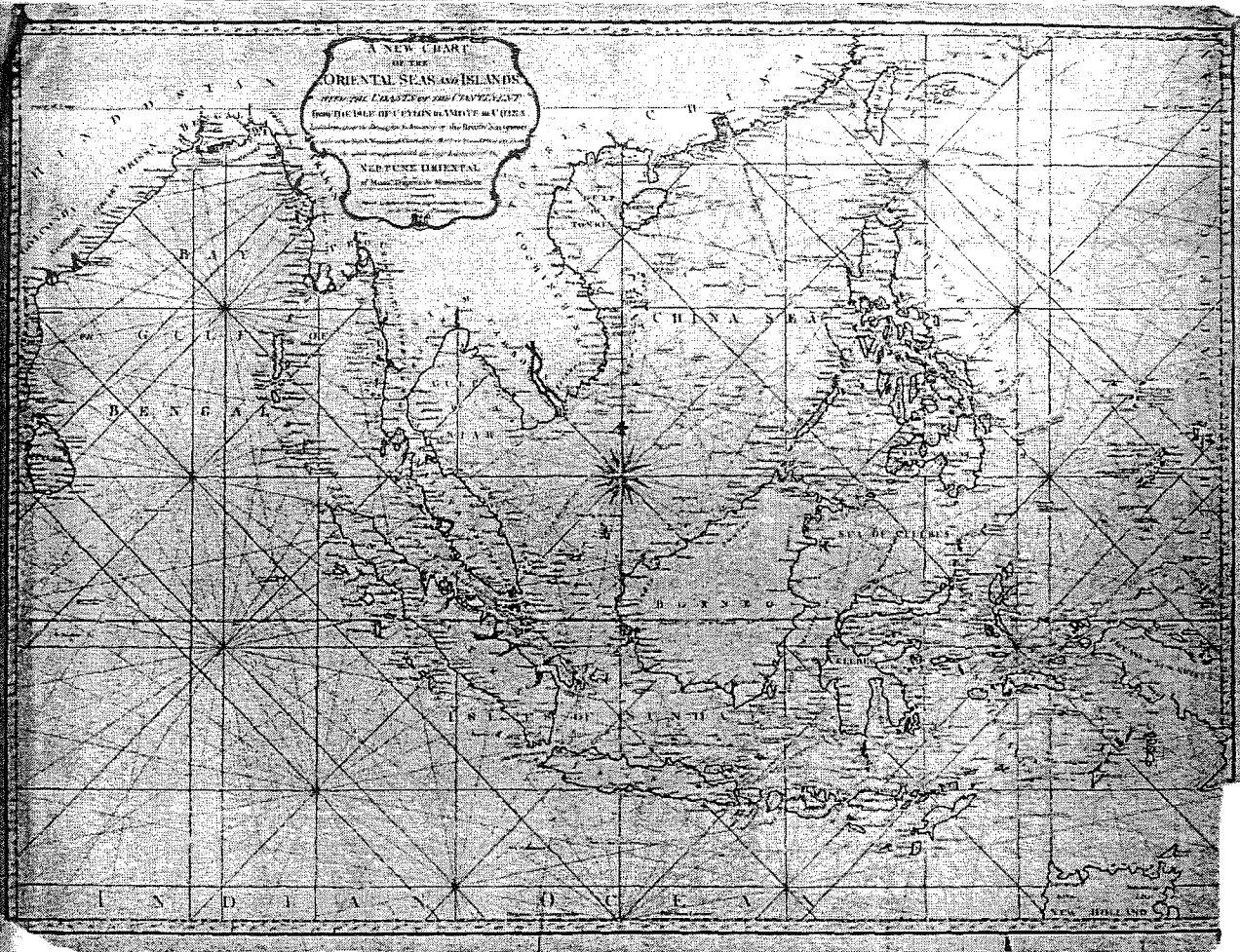
Less impressionistic but equally impressive was the late Harry Benda, to whom must go a great deal of the credit for turning the study of Southeast Asian history inside out and shifting the perspective from Europe to Asia. His doctoral dissertation, a study of the impact of the Japanese occupation on Islam in Java (later published as "The Crescent and the Rising Sun"), grew out of reading and thinking that he did while a prisoner of war in a Japanese camp in Java in World War II. The unusualness of his approach toward Asia was apparent even then: while the other European P.O.W.'s sat gloomily longing for news from Europe, Benda was devouring the vernacular newspapers to find out what was happening on the other side of the prison walls. The Asia-centric approach to Southeast Asian history which we now take for granted is to a great extent his legacy.

But Southeast Asia Studies at Yale was by no means a two-man show. Area specialists in the departments of political science, economics, sociology, anthropology, geography, religious studies and linguistics offered a broad range of courses, and instruction was offered in a half-dozen Southeast Asian languages. Visiting scholars and diplomats came to New Haven often to deliver lectures and to speak less formally at the weekly brown-bag lunches which, in my second year, became a beloved institution. In short, in the 1960's, Yale was a very good place to be if you were interested in Southeast Asia.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said in 1973. In the past few years, death has deprived the University of both Mus and Benda and has also claimed William S. Cornyn, the Yale linguist whose pioneering work in Burmese during World War II was one of the foundations of the program. Budget cuts have meant the loss of several younger faculty members and the reduction of language instruction to Indonesian only. Both the undergraduate major and the master's degree program in Southeast Asia Studies have been eliminated, and funds for the lecture and publication series and for library acquisitions have shrunk.

The situation, however, is by no means uniformly bleak. Doctoral candidates in several disciplines are doing research here on Southeast Asia, guided by area specialists in a few departments, and many more are engaged in field work in Asia. Although attendance is only about one third of what it used to be, people still come to the brown-bag lunches with the same open, almost earnest, readiness to share ideas. And the Council on Southeast Asia Studies continues to sponsor an occasional lecture and publish an occasional monograph. But to someone like me who was here in the fat years, 1973 looks very lean indeed.

The story of the program's demise—and of its



period. The University took over Carnegie's share of the budget, and the program began to look elsewhere for the additional funds it needed.

Fortunately, that money was forthcoming in the form of grants from the Ford Foundation and the United States government, through the Office of Education and later the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. From 1958 to 1971 the Southeast Asia Studies program received from the Ford Foundation a total of \$1,125,000, two-thirds of which consisted of consumable funds, while the other third was used, with an equal amount from the University, to endow one and a half chairs. The Ford funds did double duty, as the University used them as matching funds to qualify for approximately \$730,000 in government money. It was this great infusion of money that made possible the expansion of the program in the '60's—Southeast Asia Studies' golden age at Yale.

Finally the program's goals were nearly achieved: instruction through at least the third-year (advanced) level was offered in Vietnamese, Thai, Cambodian and Tagalog, in addition to the original Indonesian and Burmese, and Southeast Asia area specialists joined the departments of political science (where one of the Ford-endowed chairs was established), anthropology (the "half-chair"), economics, sociology, religious studies and history. In fact, during my second year at Yale we proudly bore the distinction of being the only American university with two Southeast Asian historians—an early-period specialist and a modern

Opposite, three languages of Southeast Asia: Burmese, Thai and Javanese. Above, an 18th-century map of the area.

one, who also conveniently specialized in different parts of the area.

No sooner was the program constructed, however, than its pillars began to tremble. Near the end of the decade, both the quality and quantity of applicants for the M.A. program began to fall, for reasons that are not clear. While this was perplexing and discouraging, it did not threaten the rest of the program. The real threat was financial. Southeast Asia Studies was extremely vulnerable, since it was so heavily dependent on outside funding. The understanding between the Ford Foundation and the University had been that, at the end of the second grant period, Yale itself would take over that share of the Southeast Asia Studies program's budget previously paid by Ford, as it had in 1957 when the Carnegie grant expired. No one had imagined, in the early years, that the expiration of the Ford grant would coincide with a severe financial crisis that was forcing budget cuts throughout the University, nor had the planners anticipated that government money would decrease sharply at almost the same time. But that is what happened.

Rather than assume the burden of maintaining the Southeast Asia Studies program at the same level with almost no outside support, the University decided in 1971 to eliminate the master's degree and the undergraduate major. Thus the last M.A.s were granted in June of 1972. In response to pleas from Yale's Concilium on International and Area Studies, the Ford Foundation made a

ကု မဟာကမ္မဘျာဠာသုတ်တော်သည်။ ဤကဲ့သို့ပြုလုပ်နေ
 သောသင်တန်းများကို ပြန်ပေါ်ပေးရာ၌ ရေတပ်မတော်အုပ်
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 ပေါ်ပေးသည့် သင်တန်းကုမ္ပဏီပိုင်ရှင်နှင့် သင်တန်းမှ အရာရှိ
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 နှစ်မြို့ပြသောသင်တန်းများကို ဆယ်တင်သောလုပ်ငန်း အ
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 လည်း အင်အားပြည့်စုံစွာ ဝက်ဖွဲ့ ခုနှစ်၌တည်ထောင်ခဲ့သည်။
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 ဗာပူးနှင့် ဂလပ်စတိုးမြို့များတွင် တည်ထောင်ထားကြသည်။

เป็นฝ่ายคัมภีร์ พระอาจารย์ผู้สอนธรรม
 คือ พระธรรมกถึก เป็นฝ่ายเทศนา อา
 จารย์สุรจนาพระคัมภีร์ เป็นฝ่ายวิชา
 และอาจารย์ผู้บอกวิปัสสนา เป็นฝ่าย
 วิปัสสนาธุระ คือ ผู้สามารถในทางไท
 ่ทรงแต่งตั้งให้เป็นคณาจารย์ในทางน
 โดยเทียบกับตำแหน่งฝ่ายบริหารดังนี้

အသံကျွမ်းကျင်စွာဖြင့် ဗမာစာ၊ မြန်မာစာ၊ ဟိုတို့ကို အလွန်ကျွမ်းကျင်စွာဖြင့်
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rise—is an interesting and perhaps instructive one. While my generation's interest in Southeast Asia in many cases grew out of the Vietnam War, Yale's interest dates from the Second World War, when Professor Cornyn and Isidore Dyen, both linguists, developed courses in Burmese and Indonesian for the Army Specialized Training Program. The army program ended with the war, but the University, recognizing the increasing importance of Southeast Asia in world affairs and the need for a pool of scholars and specialists who could understand and interpret the area, decided to strengthen its offerings on Southeast Asia. Yale's Southeast Asia Studies program, established in 1947 with the help of a grant from the Carnegie Corporation, was the first of its kind in the country and the first area studies program of any kind at Yale.

Yale was a good place for such a program. In addition to its distinctive language courses, the University had a superb library collection on Southeast Asia, most of it acquired early in this century when Clive Day, the first American historian of Indonesia, was on the Yale faculty. (Charles Bryant, curator of the Yale Southeast Asia Collection, points out with amused pride that the first catalogue of the Yale library, published in 1743, included three titles on Southeast Asia.) Another Yale anthropologist, Raymond Kennedy, had for many years been engaged in research on island Southeast Asia and was an internationally known specialist in this field.

While Yale had a head start, however, it also had

a long way to go. In the opinion of the program's planners, a strong Southeast Asia Studies program had to be comprehensive both in disciplines and in geographical scope. This necessitated expansion in two very expensive areas. First, area specialists had to be hired in a number of crucial disciplines, particularly geography, economics, political science, history and religion. Second, language instruction had to be extended to include all the national languages of the area.

Funds from the Carnegie grant—a total of \$300,000 over a 10-year period (the grant was renewed in 1952)—were used for both of these purposes as well as to support field research and publications, and some progress was made. It was during this period that Paul Mus and Karl Pelzer, professor of geography, joined the faculty. However, the program also suffered some great losses. Its founding father, Raymond Kennedy, and his fellow anthropologist, John Embree, a mainland Southeast Asia specialist who came to Yale in 1948, were both killed in 1950—Kennedy in an automobile accident on Christmas Eve in New Haven, Embree in an ambush in Java, where he was engaged in field research.

Thus, in 1957, the program still lacked specialists in crucial fields, chiefly the social sciences, and although courses in Tagalog and Thai had been added to the curriculum, there was still no instruction in any of the languages of Indochina. Impatient with the slow pace, the Carnegie Corporation refused to renew the grant for a third five-year

transitional grant of \$650,000 to be divided among the Concilium's eight member councils over a three-year period, but of this only \$7,000 went to Southeast Asia Studies. Starved of funds, the council had to let a number of junior faculty members go when their contracts expired—a depletion made all the worse by the sudden deaths of Mus, Cornyn and Benda. Needless to say, these losses left gaping holes in the curriculum.

To those who knew the program in the '60's, and especially to those who helped build it, the events of the past few years are inevitably a great disappointment. Karl J. Pelzer, chairman of the Council on Southeast Asia Studies since it was created in 1961, has presided over the reductions and contractions of the program with a heavy heart. But financial problems are not the only ones that have beset the program. "Even when we had the money to pay the salaries," Professor Pelzer said recently, "it was often very difficult to get a department to hire a Southeast Asia specialist." Instead the various departments have become oriented more toward problems or modes of research that cut across geographical areas.

In fact, the area studies approach may be a trend that has passed its peak, according to Harold C. Conklin, professor of anthropology and acting chairman of the council this year. In his view, area studies programs should not be expected to be permanent features of the scholarly scene. In their time they serve an important function in calling attention to a problem area and attracting brains and money to its study, but it is the traditional academic disciplines that remain constant. Although the Southeast Asia Studies master's degree program did channel a few students into the doctoral program in anthropology, Conklin expects to continue to have in the future, as in the past, a small stream of graduate students in anthropology with a special interest in Southeast Asia. This will also be true of the few other departments at Yale that have area specialists on their faculties—linguistics and political science, for example.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the history department, where the situation is uncertain. In the two years since Benda's death, visiting professors here on one-year appointments have taught Southeast Asian history. It is hoped that the University will soon appoint a permanent Southeast Asian historian. Such an appointment would certainly be appreciated by Benda's former students, some of whom have already worked under three dissertation advisers and understandably wonder what (or who) is in store for them next. But it also seems imperative for Yale to offer instruction on a regular basis in the history of this important part of the world, not only for the few graduate students specializing in Southeast Asian history but for Yale College students and graduate students in other departments who plan to do research on topics related to Southeast Asia.

While Conklin is philosophical about the elimination of the M.A., he is concerned about the integrity of the library collection, as is its curator,

Charles R. Bryant. The library has also been hurt by the financial pinch. The budget for 1973-74 shows a cutback of 53 percent in acquisitions and 50 percent in staff compared with two years ago. Furthermore, while University support for acquisitions in other area collections has increased in recent years to compensate for the reduction in outside funds, Yale's contribution to the Southeast Asia Collection budget has fallen by 36 percent in the last two years. Thus the continuing value of Yale most durable asset in Southeast Asian studies is in question.

As for the future of the Council on Southeast Asia Studies, it will continue, at least for the time being. There are important services that it can render: providing a focus for communications between area specialists and students at Yale, guiding and encouraging students (including the 35 graduate students now working on dissertations in Southeast Asia-related topics), helping scholars and students find fellowships for travel and field research, and sponsoring lectures and publications. It seems highly unlikely, however, that Southeast Asia Studies at Yale can look forward to a renaissance, for the record of the past 26 years suggests that Yale simply is not willing to make a permanent commitment to offering comprehensive instruction in this area if it must be done at its own expense.

"I wish I could be more optimistic," Karl Pelzer said the other day. "At the same time, when I look at where our students are now—ambassadors, *chargés d'affaires*, specialists in all kinds of places, and of course academics—I feel a bit better." And well he might, for there is indeed much to be proud of. In the period from 1961 to 1972 alone, M.A.'s in Southeast Asia Studies were given to 68 people, a good number of whom subsequently went into government, foundation or private research work. A sizable proportion decided to pursue advanced degrees, either at Yale or elsewhere, and most of them are now teaching. During the same period the University also granted Ph.D.s to 25 men and women in various disciplines whose area of specialization was Southeast Asia.

Through these routes Southeast Asia Studies has not only served the country and the broader academic community but has provided the University itself with qualified scholars. The Ford-endowed chairs in both anthropology and political science are now occupied by men whose doctorates are from Yale—Harold Conklin and Peter Busch—and linguist Rufus Hendon, who teaches Indonesian here, is also a Yale Ph.D. Charles Bryant was a classmate of mine in the master's degree program.

The council has also served both Yale and the New Haven community with its public lecture series on Southeast Asia. And the publications program, which includes 48 titles in its reprint, monograph, translation and bibliography series, has made a valuable contribution to the understanding of Southeast Asia. If only we could expect as much from Yale in this area in the future as we have seen in the past.

Elizabeth "Beth" (Wheatley) Kodama

Elizabeth Wheatley Kodama August 27, 2010 Elizabeth "Beth" Edna Wheatley Kodama died on August 27, 2010, of cancer, surrounded by her loving family. She was 64. Beth was the beloved daughter of William B. and Martha M. Wheatley of 170 Winston Way, Syracuse, NY, and Skaneateles Lake. She was born on December 5, 1945, in Columbus, Ohio, and grew up in Syracuse. Always a good student, she graduated from Nottingham High School in 1962 and earned a bachelor's degree from Muskingum College in Ohio. In her junior year, she studied at the International Christian University in Tokyo, and that experience motivated her to pursue a master's degree in Southeast Asian Studies at Yale University. There she met Kenneth Kodama from Honolulu, Hawaii; they were married in Syracuse in 1967. Beth worked as a copy editor for Yale University Press in Connecticut, then for Tokyo University Press during a three-year residence in Japan. While in Japan she was featured on a television program teaching English. Later, she worked as a copy editor for the Brookings Institution Press in Washington, DC, and as an analyst for the U.S. government in Maryland. Beth and her husband, Ken, retired to Eugene, Oregon, in 2001. Beth's many talents included learning languages, crafts, dancing, music and gardening. Her lifelong love of sailing began during many summers spent at Skaneateles Lake at the family cottage. Her many volunteer activities included supporting food banks in Maryland and Oregon, the Mt. Pisgah Arboretum in Oregon and the Eugene Public Library. Survivors include her husband; her parents; daughter, Emily Kodama of Missoula, Montana; son and daughter-in-law, Matthew and Rachel Kodama and grandsons, Miles and Jude of West Bridgewater, Massachusetts; brothers, William J. Wheatley of Petersham, Massachusetts, Daniel Wheatley of Arlington, Massachusetts, Jonathan Wheatley of Walpole, Massachusetts; and sister, Barbara Wheatley of Middletown, Maryland. A Celebration of Life ceremony was held on September 7 at the Eugene Yacht Club. Attendees included numerous friends from Eugene, high school and college friends from Massachusetts, North Dakota and Colorado, many relatives from Hawaii and cousins from New York and Pennsylvania, in addition to immediate family. In lieu of flowers, friends were asked to support the GrassRoots Garden/FOOD for Lane County, 770 Bailey Hill Road, Eugene, OR 97402. The GrassRoots Garden is dedicating their herb garden to the memory of Beth Kodama.

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