Students in development sociology (DSOC) view their approach to studying rural, agrarian, and environmental change as distinct; always starting on the ground or “in the field.” This approach evolved over the years in the department and clearly applied to DSOC students working in Southeast Asia after SEAP’s formation in 1950.

Most students arrive at Cornell for graduate studies having spent time in one or more countries of Southeast Asia. Some have been involved in development work through organizations like the Peace Corps or the Canadian volunteer organization Cuso International. Others spent time in academic programs in Southeast Asia, and chose Cornell because of the university’s strong reputation for research and political engagement in Southeast Asia as well as its broader profile in the region for research in history, politics, and anthropology.

Our intent in this article is to provide a sense of the ideas guiding Southeast Asia-based research of Cornell students and faculty in the Department of Rural Sociology, later the Department of Development Sociology and now the Department of Global Development. Further, we offer a few reflections on this community of practice and how it has changed over time.

SEAP’s founding in 1950 provided opportunities to deepen and extend work on rural transformation and development with attention to the study of communities, agrarian change, and environments in Southeast Asia. Applied and theoretical research on these topics already had a long history at Cornell. In his 1909 Farmers’ Week address, Liberty Hyde Bailey, the director of the College of Agriculture called for new studies into “the structure of rural society.” The Department of Rural Social Organization was founded in 1918 to answer this call, in the vanguard of a larger trend at US Land-Grant universities.

Over the next century, the Department changed its name twice—to ‘Rural Sociology’ (RSOC) in 1930 and then ‘Development Sociology’ (DSOC) in 2003—and incorporated a sub-unit on demography in 1962. The most recent change came in January 2020, when DSOC was incorporated into a new Department of Global Development (at the time of this writing the graduate field remains DSOC). The department’s mission has changed over the past 110 years as it built on its initial goals of applied research on and for US farmers to study the languages and cultures of countries of strategic interest, many of which were in Southeast Asia. Additional funding supported international development as a response to communist and other challenges to US-allied governments, including funding from the Ford Foundation, the National Science Foundation, and the Ford Foundation. Increased funding for regional research from institutions like Fulbright and Ford Foundation followed. While area studies of the imperial powers, this funding did not come with strings attached. Most SEAP-affiliated scholars and RSOC graduate students conducted research that was often critical of US government actions in the region, and they often worked with governments in Southeast Asia who opposed US intervention.

The authors of this essay are part of a large and diverse group of SEAP-DSOC Ph.Ds. A partial list compiled from SEAP’s records and our own recollection yielded at least fifty-eight students conducting doctoral research on one or more of the following countries: Indonesia (17), the Philippines (15), Thailand (14), Malaysia (12), Vietnam (7), Myanmar (3), Cambodia (2) and Laos (1). After graduation, many went on to careers with international development organizations and foundations such as the Ford Foundation, the Environmental Defense Fund, and the CGIR institutions. Others became engaged scholars and academics doing research and conducting trainings to inform social and environmental justice initiatives and development practice. Many of these scholars worked closely with NGOs, peasant and labor organizers, and other advocates in the region when these sorts of organizations were finally able to emerge from under the authoritarian “thumbs” of post-colonial governments.

Nancy & Peter on the 1980s

Research interests among our fellow Cornell students were shaped by the intersection of ongoing events in Southeast Asia with emerging theoretical perspectives. The decade of the 1980s was only a few years after the ending of the Vietnam war, an “American” war that radicalized many scholars working in Southeast Asia. Looking back, the number of faculty across the Cornell campus working in Southeast Asia at that time is phenomenal! The Cold War continued through the 1980s, making many countries in Southeast Asia inaccessible to US-based scholars, including Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma. “Pro-western” countries were mostly ruled by dictators who came to power via military coups. Research permissions were difficult and time-consuming in the countries that allowed foreign researchers in at all.

The research access difficulties we faced as students were shared by found ing generations of the SEAP faculty, with some later blacklisted or carefully watched while in the countries they studied. For example, it was during this time that Ben Anderson was famously invited back to Indonesia after a long exile due to his and Ruth McVey’s infamous “White Paper” on the events of 1965-1966. When he arrived at the Cengkareng Airport, he was turned away by security forces.

Nancy tramping through swidden - the birds next caves of, East Kalimantan, ca. 1980.
A partial list of our fellow graduate students and their research topics in the 1980s illustrates the kind of innovative scholarship that stems from a cross-theoretical approach:

- Peter Vandergeest on agrarian transformations and peasant resistance in a rice and palm economy in Southern Thailand
- Nancy Pulso on the history of non-timber forest product trade in East Kalimantan and later on the dispossession of poor Javanese peasants from the island’s rich palm economy in Southern Thailand
- Jill Belsky on agroforestry and upland agriculture in Indonesia and the Philippines
- Benjamin Bagdion on the political economy of logging and a pulp mill in the Philippines
- Filomeno (Jun) Aguilar on sugar plantations and agrarian capitalism in the Philippines
- John Dewd, John Ambler, Bryan Brun, and Uraiwan Tan-Kim-Yong (who famously threw water on her dissertation examining committee in celebration of the Thai New Year), on small scale irrigation in Indonesia and Thailand
- Stephanie Fried on Dayak leaders and writers in East Kalimantan
- Joe Weinstock on identity and rural change in Borneo
- Shari Kendrick on rivers in the northern and southern coasts of Java
- George Ad Conrad on Indonesian dams and development
- Charly Mehl on rural change in Thailand
- Mohammad Habb and Ernest Sternberg on rice farming and irrigation in Malaysia
- William Sandell on social forestry in Java
- Anne Hawkvis on smallholder farmers in the hinterlands of Semarang
- Kamali Soedjatmoko on ethnic-based political movements in East Sumatra
- Diane Well on the “factory daughters” of rural Java
- Angkla Kusuman on labour and migration in Indonesia and Thailand
- Connor Bailey, who worked closely with MIT, graduated in 1980 but deserves mention for his pioneering research on the political economy and ecology of small-scale fisheries and aquaculture in Malaysia and the region.

Both theoretically and translated into practice in the region, these different conceptual approaches were constantly in tension, but also informed each other. Many combined components of both. During the 1980s, Southeast Asia turned away from more radically inspired mobilizations because of the threat of violent repression or worse. Dire consequences could be imposed on citizens (and researchers) of Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia if they were labeled “communist,” yet “Marcist.” The community-based approach also inspired research in Development Sociology on small scale irrigation, community forestry, and smallholder farming, the effects of the Green Revolution on property, poverty, differentiation, and the displacement of communities due to ongoing construction of dams, widespread “political forest” reservation, the increase in logging, mining, and other forms of resource extraction, and resettlement programs. The effects of political violence on the social and ecological balance, and the rise of conservation movements were shared by most students in DSOC, leading to a lively culture of conceptual exploration and sharing that also engaged students who worked primarily in Southeast Asia.

In addition, it wasn’t until the end of the 1980s that NGOs became prominent in using Marxist and Gramscian analyses of rural class relations as articulated through peasant studies and critical political economy lenses. At the same time, growing interests in environmental change and community resource management led many of us to research that “took nature seriously.” These commitments were shared by most students in DSOC, leading to a lively culture of conceptual exploration and sharing that also engaged students who worked primarily in Southeast Asia.

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Wolff and Amrith Wido, the Indonesi- an and Javanese teachers. The 1980s were a time when important new theoretical approaches were being introduced and elaborated—from political ecology to post-structuralism. Jill Belsky introduced us to geogra- pher Piers Blaikie’s seminal 1985 book, The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries at just the time we

Nancy’s extended family in a village now part of Singkawang Metro Area, West Kalimantan, 2014.
Hilary on the 2010s

I finished my PhD in summer 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic exposed persistent inequalities and normalized new surveillance technologies across the globe. As we watch the pandemic’s health and economic impacts unfold across Southeast Asia, development sociologists’ classic questions—whether about migration patterns, food production or class politics—seem more germane than ever.

Graduate students who conducted research in the 2010s negotiated a dynamic region, one in which research access was both extensive and often contingent. New geographies have opened up for rural research since Nancy and Peter were students—my colleagues conducted ethnographic, archival, survey, and participatory fieldwork in previously inaccessible countries such as Cambodia and Vietnam. And yet we worked at a political moment marked by resurgent racialized nationalism and militarized authoritarianism. Countries like Thailand and the Philippines have become more repressive, while great democratic hopes for Myanmar have faltered in the wake of the Rohingya genocide.

As in earlier generations, many DSOC graduate students came to Cornell in the 2010s with experience living in the places we chose to study and a commitment to applied work and development practice. Like many Cornellers, I followed work with activists in Yangon, and began with two Burma Studies Workshops, organized in 2014 and 2015, that were indicative of SEAP’s long tradition of expertise in places like Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam.

On campus in the 2010s, graduate students took DSOC’s required courses—quantitative methods is still dredged by many incoming students—and many absorbed the department’s Marxist methodology and theories. I was committed to working in Indonesia for the past decade. My research incorporates political ecology approaches and development scholarship of the 1980s, while also incorporating new feminist and critical voices.

When I asked graduate students from the 2010s for memories of SEAP and DSOC, my colleague Rebakah Daro Ninarchek put it beautifully:

“for me DSOC was a drive into the deep end of a swimming pool, whereas SEAP was a long swim back and forth across the pool—so many interesting people working on fascinating topics in different disciplines and different countries. We were all united in our passion for the region, and we were all looking at the same events happening in a courtyard, but we all saw them unfolding from different windows overlooking the courtyard.”

Many of my graduate student peers navigated between DSOC and SEAP, finding continuity in the grounded and critical approaches emphasized in both communities. Many will work for fewer years, as DSOC has negotiated its place in a new Department of Global Development within the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, a strong sense of identity as critical, engaged, and public scholars who has prevailed among the DSOC grads. The department’s power, however, means that many of us still find ourselves negotiating the ethics and politics of research, theory, and practice in relation to research funding and its ideology, though this increasingly comes not only from the US or Southeast Asia governments, but also from the private sector.

Most graduate students from the last decade were awarded teaching positions, though our ranks also include a data analysis specialist at Cornell’s Department of Statistics, and a political scientist with Rachel Safman. Many continued their research in the region. I was delighted to learn while writing this that Ama Rada Finlandia, who attended a DSOC Grant for an interdisciplinary program on Mekong sustainability at Michigan State University working with a team that includes both Daniel Ahlquist and Alice Beban, also former SEAP/DSOC graduate students. The last public talk I attended as a student in Cornell was campus was alum Christian Lentz’s Gatty Lecture in February 2020 on histories of territory and state formation in Vietnam. Many of these projects build on the legacies of earlier SEAP/DSOC research, bringing updated questions and research approaches to new puzzles and sites.

Conclusion

Peter, Nancy and Hilary each arrived in Ithaca as graduate students from research and work in Southeast Asia. When Nancy walked onto campus, she was committed to working in Indonesia and planned to return there after grad school, only to be waylaid by an opportunity to work on a project in Sarawak (for another DSOC grad from the 1970s, Louise Fortmann). Like many of our peers, we already had a close connection to the region and choose Cornell primarily because of its strong area studies reputation. Our commitments to a particular program were decidely less clear. When Peter’s acceptance letter from Cornell’s Department of Ananyi, the College of Rural Sociology arrived to which he had applied for admission to the US or Southeast Asia governments, but also from the private sector.

We left Cornell as young professionals who were looking for framings that could combine two seemingly disconnected ontologies and histories with more macro international (the descriptor of the times, pre “globalization”) processes. We worked across the tradition of the Annals School and the Binghamton-based World Systems Institute and by the end of the 1970s, those of us who were working with activists and underground organizers we met during fieldwork. Paolo Freire’s approach to development for empowerment as articulated in Pedagogy of the Oppressed was an inspiration for many, as was the scholarship of E. F. Schumacher, Amartya Sen, James Scott, Michael Watts, Ben Kienman, Michael Aung-Thwin, Ruth McVey, Hal Conklin, Clifford and Hilda Geertz and the other members of the Harvard Research team sent to Indonesia. Tom Harrison’s work in Sarawak also informed Indonesian Borneo research in the 1980s.

Ben Anderson’s Imagined Communities made him globally famous and known across disciplines. An SSRC colleague once confided that for years his book was the most heavily cited in research proposals all over the world. The first edition was written in his (old yet still beautiful) 102 West Avenue office and published in 1984. Less widely known is his 1978 essay “Studies of the Thai State through the Lens of the Rice Revolution,” which exploded the basic assumptions of SEA/Thai history with the argument that colonialism were not in fact so unique.

SEA/Thai history with the argument that colonialism were not in fact so unique. SEA/Thai history with the argument that colonialism were not in fact so unique. SEA/Thai history with the argument that colonialism were not in fact so unique. For example, the Vietnam War was not a colonial war, but a civil war, though this understanding of colonialism as an imperial project was still emerging in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As we watch the pandemic’s health and economic impacts unfold across Southeast Asia, development sociologists’ classic questions—whether about migration patterns, food production or class politics—seem more germane than ever.

Many of our peers have now been shaped by the legacies of earlier SEAP/DSOC graduate students from the last generation. Later graduate students built on the legacies of earlier SEAP/DSOC graduate students from the last generation. Later graduate students built on the legacies of earlier SEAP/DSOC graduate students from the last generation. Later graduate students built on the legacies of earlier SEAP/DSOC graduate students from the last generation.

THANKS TO Lindy Williams, Christian Lentz, Amanda Flaim, Daniel Ahlquist, Rebakah Daro Ninarchek, Luin Golding and Jill Belsky for sharing reflections.