

“Old Wine in New Bottles”: Colonial Education in Southeast Asia (1850—1950)

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Abstract. Colonial education in Southeast Asia is hardly a new debate under the traditional framework of area studies. However, recent research has shown new attempts and breakthroughs by offering new angles and further interpretation of colonial educational legacy and, more significantly, by undertaking the comparative approach. The paper first argues that the search for new interpretations stems from recognizing the diverse regional contexts. Under the globalized background, it further suggests the comparative approach as the future trend, bringing rejuvenation of the topic and area studies. The article ends with a summary of the current research's strengths and weaknesses and some recommendations for future comparative research in colonial education in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Colonial education; Southeast Asia; Diversity; Comparative approach.

1. Introduction

The study of colonial education in Southeast Asia started in the 1940s when the pioneer J. S. Furnivall exerted a noticeable and long influence in the field with his work *Educational Progress in Southeast Asia*. At this stage, education was considered a social welfare and ultimately part of the imperial mission, which was used to spread civilization and attach the colonized people to imperial rule.

The 1950s and 1960s saw the rise and the high point of area studies. Scholars such as D. G. E. Hall and John F. Cady attempted to write a total history of Southeast Asia. Framing their work country-specifically and chronologically, they tended to study colonial education as a section and focused on the educational development in different regions. At the time, most scholars in this field came from the former colonial sovereign states of Southeast Asia. They were intellectual elites imbued with colonial culture, which led them to overly rely on colonial historical sources and carry an imprint of colonialism in their works.

Influenced by postcolonial studies, researchers after the 1990s and after shifted the previous tendency from an investigation of colonial educational development and policies to an examination of colonial educational legacies. Scholar such as He Shengda treated the current education scenario in Southeast Asia as a byproduct of colonial education policy, emphasizing nationalist movements and bilingual or multilingual education. Compared to scholars several decades ago, in the period, researchers from formerly colonized regions emerged, presenting localized interpretations of the topic.

Within the framework of area studies and postcolonial theory, recent research has inherited the exploration of colonial educational legacies since the 1990s, developing new interpretations of colonial educational legacies and exploring comparative frameworks. Focusing on the last decade of research on colonial education in Southeast Asia, the article aims to show that recent researchers have made breakthroughs by recognizing regional variations. The future trend can be glimpsed as the comparative approach is taken to rejuvenate the field. The paper finally summarizes the pros and cons of the recent research. It argues that future comparative studies of colonial education in Southeast Asia should be placed in a global context and conduct interdisciplinary methods. The different phases of the research regarding colonial education are compared as follows.

Table 1. Comparison of different stages of research on colonial education

No.	Stage	Representatives	Focus	Results
1	1940s	J. S. Furnivall	social welfare	spread civilization and attached the colonized people to imperial rule
2	1950s—1960s	D. G. E. Hall, et al	educational development in different regions	overly relied on colonial historical sources and carried an imprint of colonialism
3	after the 1990s	He Shengda, et al	nationalist movements and bilingual or multilingual education	treated the current education scenario as a byproduct of colonial education policy
4	2010s—present	/	inherit the exploration of colonial educational legacies and recognize regional variations	develop new interpretations of colonial educational legacies and explore comparative frameworks

2. Research based on Perception of Diversity

2.1 Regional Variation in the Southeast Asian Context

One salient feature Southeast Asia holds is its diversity in terms of geographical, economic, religious, ethnic, and linguistic aspects. This diversity is strongly represented in the educational dimension in Southeast Asia. It has influenced the development of education in various regions of Southeast Asia and the direction and methods of contemporary scholarly exploration in the field. In the context of colonial education, recent scholars investigate new angles to interpret colonial legacies based on diversity; the diversity also provides fertile ground for the comparative approach.

There are significant geographical variations regarding education in Southeast Asia. Compared to most of the Southeast Asian countries on land, Indonesia and the Philippines, as large archipelagos, including several volcanoes within their territories, which implies the geographical limitations of school construction, and also interferes with the provision of educational equality. Undoubtedly, economic disparity is also considerable, indicating divergent standards for education equality. While Singapore is classified as a developed country, Indonesia, the Philippines, Laos, and Vietnam possess a backward economy. Geographical and economic disparities influence the varying inheritance of colonial educational legacies in Southeast Asian countries and affect education development after their independence.

Among nearly all the countries in Southeast Asia, religious diversity is apparent to see. Religion is a significant factor when discussing colonial education, as religion and education often interweave; the interaction of imperial and local religious powers is one aspect of exploring colonial education. As imperial powers entered the area, missionaries brought Christianity into rural or mountainous regions. Preceding that, there were existing religions in Southeast Asia. Transferring from South Asia, Hinduism can be found in parts of Malaysia and Singapore. Buddhism cannot be bypassed when discussing colonial education in Myanmar, while Confucianism and Taoism were brought by the Chinese and migrated to Vietnam. Islam was spread (partly) from Persian merchants to the Philippines [1].

Another striking characteristic of Southeast Asia is the ethnic and linguistic diversity, which is a mixed result of colonialism, migration, trade, and globalization. Apart from missionary education, another lasting colonial educational legacy includes the English language, multilingual school system, and ethnic pluralism. Colonial power intensified the migration and divergence of race. In that case, ethnic and linguistic pluralism is manifested in recent scholars' new interpretations of colonial educational heritage. For example, they discuss colonial legacies together with immigration culture.

2.2 New Interpretation Under Area Studies

Under the traditional framework of area studies, recent scholars have come up with new angles to interpret colonial educational legacies with diversity-based perceptions. Specifically, scholars have various research tendencies regarding colonial education in different regions.

2.2.1 British Malaya and Singapore: Language, Ethnic, and Migration Culture

Recent studies on colonial education in British Malaya and Singapore partially continue on the traditional narrative of the colonial legacy, focusing on the relationship between British colonial educational policy, the English language, and nationalism.

Tan Yao Sua examines the dualistic educational system implemented by the British for the Malays, including the Malay peasantry and the Malay nobility. She argues that both two systems of education served British different purposes and needs. Rural-based education as a means of social control limited educational mobility for the Malay peasantry, while an elitist English education encompassed the Malay elites into the ruling and a pro-British standpoint [2]. She further points out that though Malay elites eventually led the Malays to independence, they maintained the superiority of English education over Malay education, which was adverse to the interests of the Malay masses. Carolina López C. also studies from a language education perspective, presenting that “language is the soul of the nation [3].” She discusses the relationship between language education, identity, and national unity in Malaysia. Still focusing on colonial nationalism, Sai Siew-Min describes the British officials and educators’ roles in Malaya’s nation-building. She stresses the common usage of the English language as the colonial legacy and provides a historical narrative of “English-mediated official multiculturalism,” which she believes is the “rationale of Singapore’s independent nationhood”, but such colonial roots were forgotten [4].

Unlike former interpretations, scholars like Sin Yee Koh and Karen M. Teoh relate colonial education to the Malaysians’ migration culture. Koh specifically examines education-induced migration as education is often the first step driving Malaysian’s mobility and emigration. Based on that, Koh studies the culture of educational migration in the context of the British colonial legacies of race, education, and citizenship, which she argues have been inherited and intensified in the postcolonial Malaysian state. Specifically, she points out that the colonial-institutionalized idea of race reproduces such education-triggered migration culture [5]. Koh tends to objectively assess colonial legacy, away from the one-sided criticism in the early postcolonial studies, placing equal emphasis on colonial and postcolonial interventions.

Similar to the early studies, Teoh also stresses that a linguistically plural system of schooling stems from colonial roots in British Malaya and Singapore, which exacerbated the sharp divisions between the overseas Chinese community and various ethnic groups. Yet she does not merely focus on the divergence as the former interpretation did but introduces a gendered perspective to explore the relationship between overseas Chinese political identities and overseas Chinese women. By studying the continuous movement of marginal people and their ideas, as in the case of overseas Chinese women in Malaya and Singapore, she presents a norm rather than an exception besides nation-state history [6].

2.2.2 British Burma: Buddhism and Knowledge Production

Previous studies on the colonial legacy in British Burma tend to center on the British official education system, which shaped the Burmese elite that was receptive to British thinking and ironically contributed to Burmese nationalism. Exploring further from that, recent researchers have searched for new angles, emphasizing Burmese Buddhism and collective knowledge production among Burmese elites and colonizers.

Fully aware of the peculiarity of the Buddhist context in Burma, Julianne Schober stresses the significance of monastic education and reflects on colonial education’s influence on local knowledge. She argues that “the trajectories of colonial education, its institutions, and policies offer special insights into conceptual links between knowledge, religion, and power and reveal how colonial reforms of education worked to submerge local knowledge [7].”

Alicia Turner's paradigm-shifting work, *Saving Buddhism*, highlights the notion of a decline in Buddhism and the subsequent reformatory efforts to avert the decline. She probes colonial education in British Burma in the context of the debilitating of Buddhism. Colonial intervention is unnegotiable in the Buddhism decline: old monastic education was replaced by modern educational institutions. Instead of focusing only on the struggle between British officials and monks in building modern schools, she reveals the issue of religious education in secular schools, how it was introduced as part of the regular curriculum, and the problems it faced [8].

Similar to Schober, Carol Ann. Boshier also focuses on the interaction between colonial knowledge and indigenous knowledge. While Schober stresses how colonial education and knowledge overwhelmed traditional Buddhism and local knowledge, Boshier concentrates on how colonial knowledge and local knowledge (not purely, already influenced by colonial knowledge) collaborated in Burma Research Society (BRS). As the first research institution in British Burma, its constitution of internal membership shows a fusion of the energy and initiative of a generation of Burmese and Europeans and the collaborative production of knowledge between the colonizer and the colonized. Based on Turner's exceptional work, she highlights that Burmese elites tended to shape Burmese identity by emphasizing Burmese Buddhism [9].

2.2.3 French Vietnam: Nationalism and Higher Education

Traditional assessment and interpretation of the colonial legacy of education in French Vietnam tend to stress its negative aspects. Much attention has been paid to the struggle for national independence, and far less effort has been devoted to the encounter with French culture. Jonathan D. London stresses that French colonialism contributed not only to the demise of Confucian institutions but also to the rise of a new and increasingly radical anti-colonial intelligentsia whose members would eventually overthrow French rule [10]. Likewise, Luong Quang Hien also glimpses the appearance of the French intellectual and educational hierarchy in Vietnam in the 1920s and concentrates on French educational reforms in Indochina Peninsula [11].

Compared to London and Luong, Trần Thị Phương Hoa explores further the pedagogical practice and its social impacts on revolutionary movements, highlighting the interaction between French and Vietnam. Based on the case study of a French-style centralized system of education established in Tonkin from 1885 to 1927, he succeeds in offering a multi-layered and more objective evaluation of the influence of French-driven schools on revolutionary movements. On the one hand, highly concentrated schools created a new intellectual atmosphere with favorable conditions for revolutionary networking. On the other hand, through speeches and collective activities, the possible spread of freedom, liberty, and national integration of French revolutionary ideas subtly promoted the nationalist movement [12].

Another perspective is the profound impacts of the French colonial educational institutions on the higher education system established in Vietnam during the postcolonial period. Anh Ngoc Trinh analyzes several local dimensions of the educational system in colonial and postcolonial Vietnam, including local people's criticism, contextualization, nationalism, and patriotism. He also illustrates that such local responses are prominently reflected in the national reforms and internationalization policies for higher education, such as institutional mobility and model borrowing [13].

2.2.4 American Philippines: Labor Migration, Export-oriented Education, and American Teachers

Traditional interpretations of the role of colonial education in the American Philippines mainly concentrate on higher education. These works stress the privileged status of English, the professional training of Filipinos to serve colonial bureaucracy, and the "political education" preparing for independence. Vicente L. Rafael emphasizes English as the sole language of instruction in American colonial education. He argues that the classroom was the site for a kind of linguistic war as native students were required to suppress their vernacular languages [14].

Still highlighting the English usage in colonial education but exploring further from that, scholars such as Neil G. Ruiz, Yasmin Y. Ortega, and Mark Maca link English-based American free mass education programs to the context of labor migration. Ruiz and Ortega stress the economic

impacts on Filipino export-oriented education. Ruiz indicates that advances in English-based mass education have led to a massive exodus of labor [15]. According to her interviewee, Ortega points out that such an export-oriented pattern of higher education will not be altered in the short term. Local higher education institutions will continue to prepare Filipino students for overseas work [16]. Unlike Ruiz and Ortega, Maca lays her focus on how the education system influences Filipino emigration. She argues that from the earliest years of American rule, the entire schooling system was designed to help foster Filipinos' desire to emigrate. She examines two aspects that drive the desire. One is the imported US-centric textbooks that "seeds of the 'American Dream' in Filipino consciousness [17]." The other is the industrial and agricultural education that trained Filipino laborers to serve American profits and interests.

"American Teachers in the Philippines" is another perspective in recent studies. Scholars such as Sarah Steinbock-Pratt and Elisabeth M. Eittreim argue that American teachers were positioned between the colonial administration and the Filipino people. They adopted and coopted the official depiction of themselves as benevolent educators and agents of racial uplift. Yet as Eittreim stresses that, though, to some extent, American teachers "intentionally empowered Filipino students," their actions reinforced power at the center of the empire [18]. Steinbock-Pratt further points out that their choices during their participation in the expansion of education, including the daily interactions and encounters with indigenous members in the Philippines, shaped the contours of US imperialism [19].

2.3 New Framework under Globalized Context: Comparative Studies

Area studies has faced crisis for several decades compared to the peak in the 1960s. As Rachel Harrison and Geir Helgesen suggest, an ideal vision for area studies should "enhance the appreciation of difference [20]." Southeast Asia is prominent in its diversity and complexity, providing a solid foundation for comparative studies, which are promising in integrating and analyzing variations. Under a globalized context, the lens of colonial education in Southeast Asia helps to glimpse scholars' efforts in embracing differences to address the crisis in area studies. Recent comparative studies on colonial education in Southeast Asia include trans-regional comparisons within Southeast Asia, comparisons of different colonial empires in the same region, and comparisons between Southeast Asia and Europe.

Matthew J. Schauer has been prominent in recent comparative studies. His doctoral thesis examines the role of imperial anthropology in facilitating the formation of imperial education policies relating to the Malay peoples of British Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies. He stresses the interplays between local and imperial knowledge. On the one hand, he argues that Malay cultural heritage and imperial ethnology were utilized by the governments of British Malaya and the Netherlands Indies to inform policies of imperial education. On the other hand, imperial education boosted the Malay people's ideas about social, cultural, economic, and political status. More significantly, he places the comparative study in the global context. He first compares the manners of the two colonies exchanging information regarding imperial education and shows the similarities and differences in how they utilized Malay heritage in imperial education. He then presents that British and Dutch civil servants and policymakers were connected by worldwide networks of academic knowledge through participating in scholarly historical and anthropological societies [21].

Another of his work focuses on the vocational education program, especially handicraft education, transferred from the American Philippines to British Malaya. He illustrates that after 1916, the British in Malaya began to borrow ideas concerning vocational education from the American Philippines. Such cooperation regarding colonial education between colonial rivals shows the pursuit of "a stable political environment and perpetuation of profit [22]." Apart from the cooperation, he also shows different colonial goals of vocational education programs between the two colonies. In addition, he offers a microscopic view by showing the case of Sir Richard Olof Winstedt, who traveled as an envoy to the Philippines to document the vocational education system.

A gendered perspective is also provided by presenting that Malay women were recognized as more industrious than men and, thus, were given more educational opportunities in the colony.

Besides comparing two regions, Jessica Trisko Darden introduces a greater range of comparison objects, including British Sarawak, Malaya, and Singapore. She demonstrates a similar trend: “the increasing centralization of control over Chinese Schools in Sarawak was consistent with British Malaya and Singapore with sizeable Chinese populations [23].” She emphasizes the role of British colonial education policy for security and political purpose and argues that the interplays of international and domestic security conditions, especially the relationship with the Communist Chinese state, shaped British efforts on shifting the education policy to control Chinese minorities in colonial Southeast Asia. She also reassesses the traditional narratives on British intentions of introducing English-language study, which was to create a common language to facilitate colonial administration. She reveals that British colonial education policy did not initially aim to erase linguistic or religious boundaries between groups [23].

Apart from comparisons within multiple regions in Southeast Asia, scholars have also compared the colonial educational measures taken by different colonial empires for the same colony. The Philippines is a suitable region as Spain and the US successively colonized it. Mary Anne S. Mendoza focuses on the different education policies taken by Spain and the US, which caused the regional cleavages in the Philippines. She further argues that the contrasting colonial education policies resulted in the divided religious identity formation [24]. Christians experienced a shared experience and fostered a national identity, while Muslims underwent a shallow education policy and thus maintained fragmentation.

There are further trans-regional comparative studies that take a more globalized view and investigate the varying indigenous responses and impacts of colonial educational policies between colonies in Southeast Asia and Europe under the same imperial power. Eleftherios Klerides chooses British Singapore and British Cyprus as the case. He indicates the uneven development of colonial schooling in the two colonies and explores why the British failed to lead Cyprus to the path of centralization by the segregated school system while they succeeded in Singapore. He argues that the reasons lie in the political dominance of the Orthodox Church and the radicalization of the Greek and Turkish communities, which opposed the British policies of school integration. Conversely, as Singapore was a non-Christian and “uncivilized” land before colonization, it was easier to foster an Anglo-Asian elite class and thus promoted the making of multiculturalism [25].

3. Discussion

Overall, research on colonial education in Southeast Asia has a wide regional variation. On the one hand, aware of diversity and complexity, scholars have various tendencies in exploring the topic in different regions in Southeast Asia. On the other hand, the diversity is also reflected in the number of studies from different regions. It is related to the suzerain countries, which have built research institutions on them, with flourished research in Vietnam and the Philippines. Also, it partly resulted from the differing developmental outlook of modern countries. For example, more research is shown in Singapore, while research in regions like Laos lags and needs to catch up.

Given that the topic is hardly new, recent researchers’ efforts are appraisable on revitalizing the field, essentially trying to address the crisis of area studies in Southeast Asia. As Chua Beng Huat argues, one of the doctrinal positions that area studies need to adopt is “to be open and responsive to trans-regional comparative engagements. [1]” Recent scholars successfully offer new angles to reassess colonial legacy by recognizing and inviting regional differences. Above all, by applying a comparative approach to the field, scholars are able to break the boundaries, place the topic into the shifting and uncertain globalized context, and involve themselves in the broader scholarship to embrace deep interdisciplinarity. For example, the “network” concept is widely applied in recent works; the micro-global perspective is used to show subtle knowledge transformation from one colony to another; scholars find the cross point that links anthropology to imperial education.

However, research on colonial education in Southeast Asia is caught in a dilemma, with few relevant studies in the last five years. Due to regional variations, research on some regions has been limited and backward. Concerning comparative studies, much more attention has been paid to the current educational development in Southeast Asia. In contrast, comparative studies are not the mainstream of recent research on colonial education, with even fewer conducted with an interdisciplinary approach.

From the analysis of the current research in the field, the article suggests comparative studies have the potential to rejuvenate the field. It would possess broader possibilities with multiple and interdisciplinary methods in a global context. For example, ethnicity, gender, and language can be the focus of the comparisons, for Southeast Asia embrace ethnic and linguistic pluralism, resulting in various colonial education policies and practices, and anthropology, gender theory, and even philology can be applied in the process. Also, colonial vocational education (including agricultural, industrial, medical, law education, and so on) could be another comparison focus, as it can first link to multiple disciplinary fields and be discussed in a knowledge transfer or micro-global perspective.

4. Summary

The paper seeks to show that recent researchers have updated older research or broken new ground on colonial education in Southeast Asia. It stresses the need to look at the different national and local contexts that caused the regional variation of progress in the field. Above all, it suggests that the potential to revitalize this hardly new topic lies in the comparative approach. Finally, it first discusses the strengths and weaknesses in the field. It then gives personal suggestions on future comparative studies in the field: comparative studies should be placed in a global context and conduct interdisciplinary methods.

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