

FIELDWORK AND THE ACADEMIC JOB MARKET AS A SOUTHEAST ASIANIST

Kai Ostwald, University of British Columbia



The generally poor state of the academic job market has been widely reported upon, and it is no secret that the number of PhDs on the academic job market exceeds the number of available tenure-track positions. Social scientists whose research focuses on Southeast Asia face a particular challenge in seeking employment, as few positions in North America or Europe call specifically for expertise on the region. But Southeast Asianists can and do regularly succeed in getting hired. Other contributions in this collection of essays provide specific advice on individual aspects of completing dissertation fieldwork without explicitly assessing the implications for securing employment. The purpose of this essay is broader: it provides an overview of the North American political science job market and then suggests that there are two general channels through which dissertation fieldwork can boost a junior scholar's chances of navigating the market successfully. The job market is a fickle beast: there is no simple formula to unlock it and guarantee success. But awareness of the points developed below can help ensure that fieldwork is not just intellectually productive, but valuable for professional development, well.

The first channel involves developing case expertise and crafting a scholarly identity. There is a clear commonality among most of the Southeast Asianists who have succeeded on the academic job market in recent years: they have produced work that is grounded in a deep understanding of the region, but resonates strongly in broader disciplinary debates that ultimately transcend region. This is reflected in their scholarly identities, which balance elements of disciplinary and regional expertise. Professional development

in most PhD programs focuses strongly on the former, often leaving other elements – like recognition as an area expert – up to students. It goes without saying that fieldwork provides an unparalleled opportunity to build the case expertise necessary for producing a stronger and more competitive dissertation. But beyond this, it also offers an opportunity for students to develop a reputation for area expertise and to grapple with the individual balance between disciplinary and regional focus. Being able to articulate this scholarly identity will make for a more coherent job application and, *ceteris paribus*, better employment prospects.

The second and related channel involves building a professional network. Academia is a collective endeavor. Job candidates are assessed not as individuals in a bubble, but as nascent nodes in existing scholarly networks. As such, the more established a candidate's foothold in the relevant networks is, the better their chances of positive outcomes will be. Obviously, fieldwork provides an opportunity to build professional networks in the country of study, which should be fully pursued. But more than that, it provides a strong opportunity to build networks among North America, Europe, or Australia-based scholars who also work on the country of study, as well as with NGOs and other IOs that bring their own deep networks.

The political science job market

Paul Schuler and I wrote an article for *Pacific Affairs* that examined the state of the academic job market for scholars of Southeast Asia.¹ The findings underscore a widely held

1. Kai Ostwald and Paul Schuler. 2015.

"Context and Comparison in Southeast Asia: The Practical Side of the Area Studies-Discipline Debate", *Pacific Affairs*, 88(4): 871-888.

belief: few tenure track positions in the North American political science job market call specifically for expertise on Southeast Asia. In fact, only 2 (UC San Diego and Ohio University) of the 122 postings in the 2014/2015 APSA Comparative Politics job advertisements made mention of interest in Southeast Asia expertise, and neither were earmarked specifically for experts on the region.² This contrasts strongly with other regions like Latin America (18 positions mention interest in region, while 8 are earmarked specifically for the region), Middle East and North Africa (16 and 8 respectively), Sub-Saharan Africa (13 and 6 respectively), or even China (10 and 4 respectively) and South Asia (10 and 2 respectively). Extending the search back to 2002 using a dataset supplied by APSA revealed similar results.³

How are we to interpret this? Area expertise is clearly valued: even if only a small fraction of positions call specifically for expertise in Southeast Asia, most of the comparative politics job listings call for some regional focus. Moreover, the near absence of jobs earmarked for Southeast Asia does not imply an absence of interest in the region. Quite to the contrary, my own experiences suggest that many scholars of comparative politics see Southeast Asia as important and would welcome a colleague that brings this expertise to a department. The absence of earmarked positions has more to do with Southeast Asia being perpetually overshadowed by larger

2. Two additional postings from Singapore (Yale-NUS and Singapore Management University) also mentioned Southeast Asia expertise. Given the job market cycle, we relied on APSA's September 2014 job listing document for the analysis.

3. We also looked beyond political science to several other disciplines, including History, Cultural Anthropology, and Religious Studies. Those searches revealed similar patterns.

Ostwald

or more proximate regions in the formulation of department priorities. In short, the job market figures are sobering for Southeast Asianists, but they should not be seen as a broad rejection of area expertise generally or Southeast Asia expertise specifically; candidates should rest assured that regional expertise is an asset.

Leveraging regional expertise

While there is strong and growing interest in Southeast Asia, the lack of earmarked jobs dedicated to its study means that candidates should not expect to get hired primarily on the basis of their expertise in the region. Rather, it is incumbent upon them to leverage Southeast Asia's rich diversity to produce a dissertation that addresses a question of general importance to comparative politics, or whatever other broader field a candidate wishes to engage. The past decade especially provides many examples of research that does precisely this by addressing a general political science audience while remaining deeply grounded in the Southeast Asian context.⁴ This

4. There are far too many excellent research of this type to provide a comprehensive list here, but among the most visible examples are Dan Slater's *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010); Edmund Malesky and Paul Schuler's "Nodding or Needling: Analyzing Delegate Responsiveness in an Authoritarian Parliament," *American Political Science Review*, 104(3): 482-502; Allen Hicken's *Building Party Systems in Developing Democracies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Andrew MacIntyre's *The Power of Institutions: Political Architecture and Governance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); or Meredith Weiss's *Protest and Possibilities: Civil Society and Coalitions for Political Change in Malaysia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) for highly visible examples. Readers may also want to consult Erik Kuhonta, Dan Slater, and Tuong Vu, *Southeast Asia in Political Science: Theory, Region, and Qualitative Analysis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008) for a lengthy examination of how the study of Southeast Asia can contribute to questions of

research, in other words, leverages regional expertise to build general political science knowledge and contribute to the development of general political science theory. To be clear, not all of a candidate's work must strike this balance, but without a critical portion that does, it will be difficult to secure employment in a disciplinary unit.

What does this merging of discipline and area expertise look like in practice? Beyond the examples I reference above, I can briefly share my own experiences. Several debates in the ethnic politics literature resonated strongly with me during the early phases of my PhD program. Yet I found that the theories, which were generated primarily from cases in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, were difficult to reconcile with my understanding of ethnicity in Singapore and Malaysia. In the latter cases, much of the diversity is the result of migration and politically motivated group differentiation, which has significant implications for how ethnic diversity manifests itself. This recognition motivated an interest in studying how states use public policies in areas like housing, schooling, and national service to shape the ethnic identities of their citizens – something that does not get much attention in the aforementioned cases that dominate the study of ethnicity in comparative politics. Bringing this back to the discipline, the aim of this research agenda is to broaden the general understanding of how public policy can impact the manifestations of ethnic diversity. We might even argue that Singapore and Malaysia are particularly well situated to provide insights and lessons on this, given that they have been experimenting with various policy approaches for nearly half a century, considerably longer than many other cases where large-
wide importance to political science.

scale mass migration from culturally dissimilar places is a more recent phenomenon.

It is not always easy to determine when a project that is grounded in Southeast Asia will generate sufficient enthusiasm in the broader discipline. A former committee member of mine suggested a useful exercise: each time I shared a new research idea, I was asked to identify the five scholars that I hoped to engage with the project. When none of the names I gave were active and well-positioned (in North American) political scientists, he advised me to save the project for a later date. Further, he pushed me to articulate how my arguments would build on the (current) work of those scholars (including non-Southeast Asianists), similarly suggesting that I alter the project if I could not convincingly articulate this. I suggest this exercise with some hesitation. Impactful research comes in many forms, and it is important that students conduct research that excites and motivates them (as opposed to research that feels imposed on them). But it is likewise true that the job market is highly competitive, and that—all else equal—PhD candidates will find it easier to generate enthusiasm for their projects if they have clear relevance to the active research agendas of established scholars in the discipline they seek to work in.

While the disciplinary component of research is provided by graduate training, it is often left up to students to develop the sufficient case expertise necessary to produce strong research. This is especially true for students of Southeast Asia, given the remarkable diversity of this area and the sparse attention it receives in most departments. But even when there are resources at a home university, the bulk of expertise on Southeast Asia is in Southeast Asia. For example, if a

Ostwald

scholar wants to write a dissertation on ethnicity in Singapore and Malaysia (as I did), there is no substitute for learning from Singaporean and Malaysian scholars, whose knowledge on that topic far exceeds that of most North America-based Southeast Asianists in breadth and depth. Only time in the field will allow this expertise to be fully developed, thereby bringing nuanced evidence to issue of concern in the discipline of political science.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing job applicants is to differentiate themselves from their co-applicants, who will number in the dozens if not hundreds for competitive tenure-track jobs. The most effective way of doing this is having a strong publication record, especially if it includes high-visibility outlets in the discipline that houses a given position. For that reason, many PhD candidates are encouraged to dedicate a significant portion of their efforts during graduate school to publishing papers.⁵ Regardless of publication record, however, a candidate's application will benefit if they are able to articulate a clear scholarly identity that incorporates elements of thematic expertise (institutions, elections, ethnic politics, etc.) and regional expertise. The many conversations that are integral to fieldwork provide a strong opportunity to work out elements of that identity.

Professional networks

5. There is a sense that this dynamic has strengthened following the poor job markets during and immediately after the 2008/09 financial crisis, resulting in a publication "arms race" among PhD students. Increasingly, the job market stars (and even some not considered stars) enter the market with three or more publications, some in top journals. Clearly, building a publication record of that kind during graduate school requires an immense and immediate focus on publishing, which is difficult to reconcile with the demands of developing broad regional expertise – especially when language acquisition is required.

Success on the job market is not an individual effort. An applicant's chances are strengthened when there is a strong team of advocates behind them. This begins with an applicant's committee, from whom recommendation letters will likely come, and who are best positioned to speak to applicant's strength during the "feeler" talks that often precede the formal application process. Advocates at other universities can likewise be highly valuable when they are able to support and endorse a candidate.

More broadly, however, it is important to realize that scholarly knowledge is generally advanced by networks of researchers, rather than isolated individuals. As such, departments typically assess applicants in terms of how they fit into existing scholarly networks, which junior scholars are expected to contribute to over the course of their careers. All else equal, the more established an applicant's position in a recognized and influential existing network, the more competitive they will be. This calls for junior candidates to increase their visibility and disseminate their ideas. Aside from publishing in journals, candidates should actively participate in conferences and workshops relevant to their disciplines and cases. APSA's Southeast Asia Politics related group, as well as the Southeast Asia Research Group (SEAREG) are excellent examples of this. Publishing in high quality Southeast Asia journals can also increase credibility and visibility. Several, including those based in the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), will be "counted" by many in the discipline, even if discounted somewhat vis-à-vis a disciplinary journal. While they are not peer-reviewed and hence will not "count" as proper publications on the job market, candidates should also consider platforms like *New Mandala*,

The Diplomat, *ISEAS Perspective*, and *The East Asia Forum*. These can be effective at disseminating research, increasing visibility, and establishing a place in the relevant professional networks.⁶

It is obvious that fieldwork offers exposure to Southeast Asia-based researchers, but it often also presents surprisingly good opportunities to connect with scholars based in the United States, Europe, or Australia, among others. This is especially the case at places like ISEAS or NUS's Asia Research Institute (ARI), which regularly draw non-local researchers for talks or longer research visits. As these visiting researchers are typically not teaching, the opportunities for productive conversations are often greater than with meetings at their home universities during the academic year. Clearly, junior scholars should take advantage of those opportunities whenever possible.

Further thoughts

The job market gives PhD students incentives to write dissertations that address primarily a disciplinary audience. Where possible, they are also pushed to publish in disciplinary journals. Neither of these two aims inherently demands learning about the region beyond the scope of what is necessary to complete those individual projects. It would be easy to conclude from this that PhD candidates should focus only on narrow expertise, leaving the project of broadening their regional knowledge to a later phase of their careers.

6. While this is general rather than Southeast Asia-specific advice, there are strong upsides to having a website prior to the job market. As a candidate's research gains visibility, many readers will do a quick Google search. A website gives a candidate the opportunity to showcase their skills and indicate the direction of future research.

Ostwald

While job market realities do require prioritizing narrow dissertation case knowledge, they do not preclude building a strong foundation of broader regional knowledge, which again brings numerous tangential benefits. As junior faculty, for example, candidates will likely be called upon to teach a class on broader Southeast Asia—if not East and Southeast Asia combined. Most candidates will also find that there are few other experts on the region in the social sciences at their university, and may thus be asked to field questions on all countries in the region from other faculty members and administration. This goes as well for the advising of graduate students. To be clear, these points are of second order importance to a strong dissertation project when competing on the job market, but they may nonetheless be an asset for a department that has little other Southeast Asia expertise.

While a job in a political science department is the most obvious target for political science PhD candidates, there are additional options within academia that warrant consideration. The most visible of these—not to mention generally the most open to political science PhDs—are policy and foreign service programs, of which places like Georgetown's School of Foreign Service, UCSD's School of Global Policy and Strategy, Princeton's Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, University of British Columbia's Institute of Asian Research, and University of Washington's Jackson School of International Studies are just a few.

This category of programs is remarkably heterogeneous, making generalizations difficult. Nonetheless, a few basic points can be noted. To begin, the core criteria for being seen as a competitive candidate for policy positions are similar to those in traditional political

science departments; in other words, the strongest asset a candidate can bring is an innovative dissertation and a record of (or convincing potential for) publication. Beyond this, there are numerous minor divergences. Unsurprisingly, these begin with a more pronounced preference for policy relevant research vis-à-vis most political science departments. While it is not universally true, many policy schools count policy impact as among the performance evaluation metrics for faculty members. Where this is the case, areas like media engagement, professional networks in Southeast Asia (or within US-based institutions that operate in Southeast Asia), and publications in regional platforms may be directly sought in candidates.

To conclude, the highly competitive nature of the academic job market makes it imperative that job candidates establish a foothold in North American political science networks. Publications in political science journals and a dissertation project that can appeal to non-Southeast Asianists are important components of this. But that disciplinary orientation should not come at the expense of regional expertise, which has benefits both for securing employment and for continued scholarly development.⁷

Hicken, Allen. 2009. *Building Party Systems in Developing Democracies*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Kuhonta, Erik, Dan Slater, and Tuong Vu. 2008. *Southeast Asia in Political Science: Theory, Region, and Qualitative Analysis*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Malesky, Edmund and Paul Schuler. 2010. "Nodding or Needling: Analyzing Delegate Responsiveness in an Authoritarian Parliament", *American Political Science Review*, 104(3): 482-502.

MacIntyre, Andrew. 2003. *The Power of Institutions: Political Architecture and Governance*, Cornell University Press.

Ostwald, Kai, and Paul Schuler. 2015. "Context and Comparison in Southeast Asia: The Practical Side of the Area Studies-Discipline Debate", *Pacific Affairs*, 88(4): 871-888.

Slater, Dan. 2010. *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Weiss, Meredith. 2006. *Protest and possibilities: Civil society and coalitions for political change in Malaysia*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.