

Reflections on the International Conference on Thai Studies

บทสะท้อนว่าด้วยการประชุมวิชาการนานาชาติไทยศึกษา

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Abstract

Despite its robust survival as a well attended conference held every three years since 1981, the International Conference on Thai Studies (ICTS) has occasioned relatively little published introspection in the context of crises in the broader field of area studies. This article considers Thai Studies as a subset of area studies in this light, and it reviews the twelve conferences held prior to the July 2017 hosting of ICTS13 by Chiang Mai University. While the conference in particular, and Thai Studies in general, continue to attract interest, a number of key tensions are evident. These need to be addressed through robust debate, not least within the framework of the conference itself.

Keywords: Thai studies, conference, reflection

บทคัดย่อ

แม้ว่าการประชุมวิชาการนานาชาติไทยศึกษาจะเป็นการประชุมที่มีผู้เข้าร่วมเป็นจำนวนมาก และจัดขึ้นมาอย่างต่อเนื่องทุกสามปีตั้งแต่ ปี 2524 แต่ท่ามกลางบริบทที่วิกฤติของอาณานิคมศึกษา การประชุมไทยศึกษายังขาดการตีพิมพ์เผยแพร่บทบทวนเชิงวิพากษ์ สำหรับบทความนี้จะมองไทยศึกษาในฐานะที่เป็นประเด็นย่อยของอาณานิคมศึกษา พร้อมกับบททวนการประชุมทั้งสิบสองครั้งที่เกิดขึ้นก่อนถึงการประชุมครั้งที่สิบสาม ซึ่งจัดโดยมหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่ ในเดือนกรกฎาคม 2560 แม้การประชุมวิชาการนานาชาติไทยศึกษาจะยังคงดึงดูดความสนใจของผู้เข้าร่วม แต่ยังมีประเด็นหลัก ๆ หลายประการที่ขัดกัน ซึ่งจำเป็นต้องได้รับการถกเถียงอย่างจริงจังในงานเขียนและบนเวทีต่าง ๆ รวมทั้งที่ประชุมวิชาการนานาชาติไทยศึกษาด้วย

คำสำคัญ: ไทยศึกษา, การประชุม, บทสะท้อน

Introduction

In July 2017, Chiang Mai University will host the thirteenth International Conference on Thai Studies (ICTS13). I have had the privilege of attending ten of the first twelve meetings (missing the first one in Delhi in 1981 and the eighth one in Nakhon Phanom in 2002) and of chairing the most recent one at the University of Sydney in 2014 (ICTS12). While the conference has been held without fail every three years, while there has been a good, albeit irregular, alternation between Thailand- and overseas-based university venues, and while ICTS has consistently attracted participants and papers numbered in the hundreds, there has nevertheless been a relative lack of introspection on what Thai Studies really means in a changing world and dynamic academic

milieu, and on what the event contributes to our intellectual and wider understandings of Thailand and matters “Thai”.

In this article I consider the place of Thai Studies as a country-specific articulation of area studies, at a time when area studies have more generally declined as a basis for research and teaching programs. Has the field of Thai Studies and its associated conference continued to exist and occur mainly through tradition or habit, cocooned from the changing milieu of area studies? If so, why and how has the conference continued to attract impressive numbers and engender lively events and loyal cohorts of participants from one meeting to the next? In addressing these questions of Thai studies as a subset of area studies, I consider the performance of Thai studies through the established tradition of the conference. I then reflect on the various interpretations and meanings of Thai studies and the tensions and contestations engendered by such pluralistic understandings, particularly as they exist in a mainly unstated form. Finally, I reflect on current directions and future possibilities in the field, if we can represent Thai Studies as such.

Thai studies as area studies

In an article based on his keynote address and published in the *Bangkok Post* on the occasion of the tenth International Conference on Thai Studies (ICTS10) at Thammasat University, Piriya Krairiksh (2008) traced the origin of Thai Studies to the establishment of the Siam Society in 1868. He showed how scholarly interest in Thailand remained largely a preserve of foreigners until the 1950s. Domination of the field from without is a theme common not only to Thai Studies, but to area studies more generally. Nevertheless, by the time of ICTS10, much of the scholarship being produced under the Thai Studies

rubric was by Thai nationals. Thai Studies has been institutionalized within Thailand through the establishment of the Thai Khadi Research Institute at Thammasat University and the Institute for Thai Studies at Chulalongkorn University. Outside Thailand, Thai Studies has tended to exist within Southeast Asian studies, although in Australia the National Centre for Thai Studies at the Australian National University and in the United States the Thai Studies Centre at Harvard were established as stand-alone centres with support from the Thai Ministry of Foreign affairs – not without recent controversy in both instances.

Thai studies can be regarded as a subset of area studies, within the regional manifestation that is Southeast Asian studies. The essentialising of Southeast Asia as a region has often been questioned (eg Emmerson, 1984; McVey, 1995; Reynolds, 1995; King, 2014) in a way that Thai(land) as an entity was not in the first instance. In part, this is due to the post-colonial, Cold War era origins of the notion of Southeast Asia as a region. The academic formulation of Southeast Asia as a field of study reinforced this externally driven sense of artificiality through the driving of Southeast Asian studies from without rather than from within (Heryanto, 2002). Thai Studies, being based on a seemingly less “constructed” geographical entity within the family of Westphalian nation-states, and drawing on scholarship and construction of a scholarly canon on culture and history from within as well as without, seemed less ambiguous and less externally imposed.

More recent commentary has been more at ease with the notion of Southeast Asia as a region reified through geopolitics, institutional regionalization and sub-regionalisation through ASEAN and the Greater Mekong Subregion, for example. The very process of questioning Southeast Asia as an entity and field of studies has become part and parcel of writing and reflection on the region. Moreover, rather than dispense with the notion of Southeast Asia

as a region, the challenge has been to consider the prospects for a more “home grown Southeast Asian studies” (Heryanto, 2002: 4) while recognizing the constructed nature of the region and the legacy of external knowledge production on indigenous scholarship.

Thai(land), on the other hand, has increasingly been problematized as a field of studies. Thongchai Winichakul’s (1994) *Siam Mapped: History of the geobody of a nation* challenged the naturalized discourse of a Siamese/Thai nation within its current borders, to complicate the question of what is Thai. At a recent seminar at Chiang Mai University, Chaiyan Rachakool related how his students at Phayao during the late 1960s asked him if he was “Thai”, meaning that he was from Bangkok and surroundings, unlike themselves, implying that in other regions of the country Thai was until relatively recently a relative term associated with central Thailand. Anan Ganjanapan suggested that “Thai” for northerners signifies centralised power, again in contradistinction to their own position.¹

Area studies itself is a product of a particular time and geopolitics. Area studies programs blossomed during the Cold War period, and they were associated closely with United States government and foundations’ support for academic institutions to build knowledge of regions where US geopolitical interests required intimate knowledge of culture, society and language. This is not to suggest that all those associated with area studies were necessarily motivated to support the anticommunist agenda of the US at the time, but nevertheless the financial support for area studies was incontrovertibly attributable to these concerns. Thailand was at the centre of controversy over such funding during the late 1960s and early 1970s, following publication of Eric Wolf and Joseph Jorgenson’s (1970) article, *Anthropology on the Warpath in Thailand*.

Following the end of the Cold War after 1989, financial and institutional support for area studies declined sharply. Moreover, the academic case for study of regions in their own right was shaken by the rise of globalization and global studies programs (Ludden, 2000). Critics of area studies as descriptive, devoid of theory and “mushy” (Shea, 1997 citing Harvard professor of political science Robert Bates) found new strength in their critique, and the balance in the tension between universality of concept and specificity of context swung away from place-specific study toward more generalizable discipline-based programs.

Nevertheless, area studies has evolved, albeit in a much more tenuous institutionalized form than hitherto. The 1990s saw a new interest in Asian Studies in Australia in particular. This interest was driven not so much by geopolitical as geo-economic concerns, as government and universities recognized, quite belatedly, that the future of Australia’s global economic engagement lay in the Asia-Pacific region. This did not necessarily result in depth of area studies, and many of the university-based centres that were established tended to orient themselves toward corporate engagement, in the largely forlorn expectation that business would respond in kind with financial support. A number of university-based Southeast Asian language programs were established, but few survived, to the extent that Thai is now only taught as a degree subject in Australia at the Australian National University.

Area studies, on the other hand, have been resilient where they have adapted. The launching in 2012 of the Sydney Southeast Asia Centre – host to ICTS12 – was predicated on an approach to Southeast Asian Studies that is more firmly based in, and institutionally structured around, the disciplines and Faculties. Its approach fosters problem-based interdisciplinary scholarship and an engaged approach to area studies favouring collaborative teaching and research.

Despite the waxing, waning and reformulation of area studies over the years, a number of critiques and areas of concern continue to challenge the promises associated with area-based approaches to scholarship. Many of these issues apply as much to Thai Studies as they do to area studies more generally. On the positive side, area studies provide specialized understanding of language, culture, history and other significant aspects of context that mitigate against application of ethnocentric assumptions based in disciplinary approaches developed in western centres of academe. For some, the building of a canon of knowledge about particular countries or regions is a scholarly end in itself. Critics of area studies point to the tendency toward description over analysis, empiricism over theory and conceptualization. There can be a tendency for research to be defined by the case rather than exploration of a more general problem. More fundamentally, a descent into assertion of uniqueness can have deeply conservative implications for the politics of knowledge. Gibson-Graham (2003: 407) encapsulate the risks rather starkly in reference to what Katherine Gibson nicknamed, in an earlier era, the “Research School of Specific [play on ‘Pacific’] Studies” at the Australian National University, due to the tendency for discussion at academic seminars to descend into a comparative, “Well, in *my* village...” or, “But on *my* island...”. Cultural stereotyping and essentialism are longstanding risks in country- and area-specific scholarship, and they can feed into autocratic elite-controlled definition of regional or national values, as evident for example in the Asian Values debate of the 1990s associated with Lee Kuan Yew (eg Barr, 2000). These tensions are central to current approaches to Thai Studies and are explored further below.

Thai studies performed through ICTS

There are few, if any, country studies events that have as regular, longstanding and well-attended an international conference as that of Thai Studies. This raises questions of how and why the International Conference on Thai Studies has maintained interest at a time when area studies more generally has been challenged, largely de-funded, and seen by many as an anachronism. The puzzle is all the greater for the fact that ICTS does not have a permanent secretariat or association that runs the conference. In effect, the conference hosting has been by way of relay, the baton being handed on through a decision taken by vote or by consensus at a business meeting held during each conference and chaired by the current host.

ICTS has been held every three years since 1981. Its hosting has alternated irregularly between a university in Thailand and a university overseas with significant interests in Southeast Asian studies. The conference is multi-disciplinary, but in keeping with area studies elsewhere, papers have come mainly from the humanities and social sciences. Each conference has been marked by political events and currents of the time at which it was held, providing a forum for discussion and debate of significant issues of interest within and also beyond academia. The following is a snapshot of the twelve ICTS events held to date, seven of which have been held overseas and five in Thailand.

In 1981, ICTS1 was held in New Delhi. The conference was initiated and hosted by Sachchidanand Sahai, an epigraphist with interests in Southeast Asia and its cultural, literary and religious links with India, including the Lao version of the Ramayana. The first conference was a relatively low-key event compared with later meetings, but it established, among other international academic links to Thailand, a collaboration between Indian scholars with

interests in the cultural connections between Thai Ahom in Assam and the wider Tai world of mainland Southeast Asia. It also included international scholars working on Thailand in various fields and disciplines such as those related to rural development (eg Terwiel, 1984).

ICTS2 in 1984 was the first time the conference was held in Thailand. While the venue was the Ambassador Hotel, the conference was hosted by the Institute of Thai Studies at Chulalongkorn University in affiliation with several other Thai universities. This was a time when there was much discussion on Thailand's re-emerging democracy, often referred to at the time as "half-baked democracy: ประชาธิปไตยครึ่งใบ", during the Prem era. Interest in democracy was also prompted by academic reflections on the marking of fifty years of constitutional monarchy two years earlier, and critical discussion of Thailand's so-called "democratic era" that had in fact been marked more by military intervention than by consistent electoral politics. The conference was chaired by Professor Pensri Duke, Director of the Thai Studies Program at Chula. This program was largely geared to the humanities, but the conference call included sessions on social science themes including politics and government, international relations, the role of women and rural society (Duke, 1983). It also extended to the development of science and technology, although this field has been quite thinly represented at ICTS since its inception.

In 1987, the Australian National University hosted ICTS3 in Canberra. Chaired by anthropologist Gehan Wijeyewardene, the conference truly internationalized Thai studies, in at least two ways. First, it brought together scholars of Thailand from Europe, North America, Japan, Australasia as well as significant numbers from Thai universities at a leading global centre of Southeast Asian studies. Second, the conference challenged the notion of "Thai" studies by deliberately and reflectively expanding to the Tai realm,

raising questions about the coterminous overlap of culture, language and political boundaries. The conference was also held on the cusp of transition into a particularly open and relatively democratic era in Thailand's academic and political culture, and it also provided a venue for discussion of the collapse of the Communist movement and emergence of civil society.

ICTS4 in 1990 was a very different sort of meeting. On the one hand, its location reflected the Tai studies imprint of ICTS3, and its siting in Kunming had to do with the substantial Xishuangbanna presence three years earlier in Canberra. However, held in China only a year after the Tienanmen Square massacre, the conference attracted a boycott by a number of critical scholars. The atmosphere of the conference was tense, and despite the organisers' pleas for participants not to politicize it, the Chinese government shamelessly distributed propaganda material on Tienanmen, allowed very little social interaction between Chinese and foreign scholars, and required all presentations to go through official interpretation into Chinese.

The conference left the region in 1993, this time heading to the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. The conference was chaired by Andrew Turton. HRH Maha Chakri Princess Sirindhorn, who has officiated at several ICTS events, attended the SOAS conference, where she noted a paper by Charles Keyes that was based on her visit to Laos the previous year. According to Keyes, she commented at an evening reception that, "you interpret too much".² Though hosted again by an anthropologist, the conference maintained and extended its interdisciplinary scope. This was the conference at which environmental themes first made a significant mark, coming a year after the Rio conference and at a time when Thailand's environmental concerns were taking a leading role in the country's civil society movement.

In 1996 the conference moved back to Thailand for only the second time out of six meetings. Chiang Mai University hosted ICTS6, with leadership from the Faculty of Social Sciences. In terms of participation, this was the largest ever Thai Studies meeting, and with encouragement from conference chair Chayan Vaddhanaphuti it brought many non-academic local voices to issues of social and environmental justice. At the same time, the conference continued to provide space for more traditional topics in history, literature, Buddhism and so on. The location of the conference, along with its inclusion of marginalized ethnic minorities and other groups, further complicated the Thai/Tai dimension by providing room for perspectives on, and of, many non-Tai groups who live within the Thai national space.

Moving to Europe for the second time in 1999, ICTS7 was hosted at the University of Amsterdam, chaired by Han ten Brummelhuis. Located in some magnificent old buildings in central Amsterdam, the conference came soon after Thailand's financial crisis and also not long after the promulgation of its 1997 constitution. Community rights, an important element of the constitution, also featured at the conference, which included a special plenary panel by ethnic minority leaders talking about land and forest rights. The conference proceedings had resonance back in Thailand, as some of those from Chiang Mai University who had helped facilitate the airing of rights issues were criticized for their interviews with the BBC and more generally of giving an international hearing to sensitive affairs deemed domestic in nature.

In 2002, ICTS8 was held in Nakhon Phanom, hosted jointly by Ramkhamhaeng University and Nakhon Phanom Rajaphat Institute. Isan and Laos featured quite prominently in the proceedings, reflecting the location of the conference and the continuing interest in reflecting on the geographic and ethnic peripheries to the core of things Thai. Post-crisis developments as well

as reflection on the early part of the Thaksin era were key temporal contexts for this meeting.

The conference was held in North America for the first time in 2005, hosted at Northern Illinois University in De Kalb, Illinois, with collaboration from the University of Wisconsin. In many ways a North American hosting was overdue, given the substantial historical US and Canadian scholarly involvement in Thai Studies. ICTS9 attracted a large number of Thai scholars, reflecting generous bursary opportunities – this was particularly impressive given the relatively large distance, time and expense required to reach this mid-western location from Thailand. While the conference maintained and even further extended the usual breadth of disciplinary content, one of the markers of the event was reflection on Thailand’s southern conflict. Another was discussion of the Thaksin Shinawatra phenomenon.

The next two conferences were both held in Bangkok. In 2008, ICTS10 was hosted by Thammasat University in association with Mahasarakham University, at Thammasat’s historic and central Tha Prachan campus. Rather unusually, the conference took place during the teaching semester, giving a lively – and crowded – ambience to the proceedings. It was marked by some fairly daring panels, including one devoted to commentary on the banned publication “The King Never Smiles” by Paul Handley. Despite the timing of the conference relatively soon after the September 2006 coup d’etat, there was a particularly critical edge to the meeting, perhaps reflecting its siting and participation by an October generation now providing academic leadership in Thailand.

In 2011, ICTS11 was hosted by Mahidol University, but at a hotel venue (Siam City Hotel) rather than on-campus. Perhaps based on the core interests of the organisers, based at the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, the conference seemed to revolve more around linguistic,

cultural and historical themes than around issues with a more contemporary bite or critical edge, but of course individual papers provided many exceptions.

Most recently, we hosted ICTS12 at the University of Sydney, the first time the conference had been held in any country outside Thailand for a second time. This was the largest major conference hosted by the Sydney Southeast Asia Centre. It was also the first time that the conference had occurred in an overseas city with a significant Thai population, with an officially designated and signposted Thai Town, and the theme of the Thai diaspora, as well as Thailand's more general economic, gastronomic, cultural and even political presence in Australia provided the basis for a special session and associated activities involving the Thai community. The politics of the moment also lent themselves to discussion of the red-yellow shirt street politics and wider political tensions, exactly one month ahead of the May 2014 coup d'état. The sensitivities of the moment further came out through a panel on the royal succession, which in the lead-up to the conference created significant tensions between the academic organisers and the Royal Thai Consulate in Sydney, which was under instruction from the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs to have nothing to do with the conference so long as the succession panel went ahead. The panel proceeded as the best attended non-plenary event of ICTS12, and ultimately the Consulate was represented at the conference and agreed to speak at the special session on Thailand in Australia.

Clearly each of the ICTS events has been shaped by its location, social and political currents of the time, and the disciplinary orientation of its organisers. Behind some of the more interesting debates, more often implicit rather than explicit at the deliberations and reflections associated with each conference, lie some more interesting questions about Thai Studies as area studies, and these in turn produce significant tensions.

Meanings and Tensions in Thai Studies

Thai Studies is understood in a number of ways. Through ICTS and more generally, Thai Studies can be seen as a space of engagement between foreign and Thai scholars for the building of an understanding of Thai culture, society, literature, politics, environment, the country's regional and global positions, and for the development of knowledge about Thailand in many other fields. Within this engagement, Thai Studies has somewhat different meanings for foreigners looking in than for Thais looking out – or, in some cases, content to look within their own cultural and national space. The long tradition of foreign scholarship on Thailand included early anthropological work based around the Bang Chan studies. It has led to certain characterisations of Thailand that have influenced subsequent studies, for example John Embree's characterization of Thailand as a loosely structured society, Fred Riggs' notion of the country's governance as being dominated by a bureaucratic polity, or Duncan McCargo's representation of its royal elite as a network monarchy (see Charles Keyes' article in this volume). For Thai scholars, Thai Studies has been a way of building and communicating understandings of their own society, and ICTS has been an important means of projecting such understandings outwards.

Yet the differences of approach to Thai Studies are, I suggest, not fundamentally between Thai and non-Thai scholars. Rather, there are four more fundamental axes of tension in Thai Studies, each of which reflects the critiques of area studies referred to above. First is the tension between ideographic, descriptive scholarship, on the one hand, and theoretical, conceptually informed approaches to the subject matter on the other. Second is the tension between Thai Studies as a construction of canonical knowledge versus Thai Studies as a field of debate, deconstruction and challenge to

official or other received wisdom on Thai-ness. Third is the tension between assertions of Thai uniqueness versus comparative studies, which seek to apply more universal concepts that place Thailand within a global realm of scholarship. And fourth is the notion of Thai Studies (and indeed Thai-ness) as geographically fixed within a national space versus the idea, expounded ever more overtly from ICTS3 onwards, of a relational, mobile and globalised point of reference to what is Thai. Of course, these four areas of tension are overlapping. They are also deeply imbued with current debates in the academic and socio-political realms in relation to the conservative rule of the present military regime and the knowledge politics inherent therein.

The tendency toward assertion of uniqueness in area studies is perhaps more pronounced in Thai Studies due to the fact that, unlike its Southeast Asian neighbours, Siam was never formally colonized by a European power. This has provided a basis for those who wish to assert that study of Thailand is of inherent interest in its own right, as if the country, its culture, language, history, economy, political system or other features were subject to different rules and principles to other places and hence not open to more universalistic or comparative theorization. Politically, the idea that things Thai are, at a profound level, unknowable by non-Thai has been a part of debates on religion, monarchy, rights, electoral democracy and other areas of sensitivity to the ruling regime, especially in the face of scholarly as well as journalistic criticism from abroad.

ICTS12 was bookended by an opening keynote talk by Thongchai Winichakul and summary comments in the concluding session by Craig Reynolds. Both talks independently made use of the notion of Thai provincialism to raise concerns over the inward-looking tendencies in Thailand-based scholarship in the field of Thai Studies. Reynolds' talk noted the irony that

such provincialism tended to be most observable at the centre rather than at the margins, reflecting a Bangkok-centric view of the world content to isolate itself from comparative reference or reflection. The irony is all the greater given the earlier almost obsessive concern in Thai Studies, especially during the 1990s, with globalization and its implications for Thailand. Rather more sharply, scholars critical of hyper-royalism and nationalistic tendencies finding their way into scholarship use the term “*kala-land*” in reference to the idiom of hiding under a coconut shell to shut oneself off from the rest of the world.

Whither Thai Studies?

Given the somewhat precarious situation of area studies in general, the different takes on Thai Studies and tensions inherent therein, and the politically constrained environment for critical scholarship that pervades under the current military regime, is there a future for Thai Studies? I suggest that there is, and the enthusiastic response to the call for panels and papers for ICTS13 seems to bear this out. That said, at the time of writing, some are proposing and boycott of ICTS13 in response to the increasing heavy-handedness of the military regime, including its absurd and draconian warnings against contact with dissident academics. While there are differences of position on the boycott among progressive academics, the debate itself is, I suggest, a very healthy and necessary part of keeping ICTS events relevant with a critical edge. A healthy future may therefore also rely on Thai Studies being represented more overtly as a contested field, along the axes of tension outlined above and, no doubt, in many other ways. Thai Studies events might also be designed to consider more deliberately the reflexivity between scholarly knowledge and the politics of Thai-ness, celebrating the debate this engenders rather than fretting over it.

In September 2016, the University of Sydney hosted an intermediate-scale conference on *Thailand in Comparative Perspective*, conceived and chaired by Aim Sinpeng. This very lively event attract a significant cohort of younger Thailand-based scholars interested and willing to engage in a comparative approach to their various areas of study in the humanities and social sciences, overcoming some of the artificial separations between generalization and context-specific description, and of problem- rather than case-driven enquiry. Again, this is promising for the future of Thai Studies. In this light, it would also be interesting to examine parallels and draw more overt linkages between debates on and within Thai Studies, on the one hand, and area studies in other countries such as Indonesia and geographical regions such as Latin America or sub-Saharan Africa, on the other.

Peter Jackson (2005) has commented on the positive role of critical cultural studies among Thai scholars in challenging some of the essentialist and nationalistic tendencies in Thai Studies, showing how post-structuralism and post-colonial theory are being applied. He also warns against taking this too far, and in effect throwing out the baby with the bathwater, in the sense of obliterating the idea of Thai cultural logics, and in so doing reverting to the western academic hegemony that has for too long pervaded area studies in Southeast Asia. It is by working consciously within these creative tensions that we are likely to see Thai Studies continue to flourish, to engender constructive and lively debate, and to maintain enthusiasm for many more International Conferences on Thai Studies at three-yearly intervals for the foreseeable future.

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Endnotes

- 1 Annual social science seminar, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, 19-20 August 2016. There were no written papers for this seminar, but Chaiyan and Anan's talks can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3s8CzWTtf4&t=3029s> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BwOWe6XGztQ&t=1613s> respectively.
- 2 I am grateful to Charles Keyes for confirming my own recollection of this conversation. See Keyes (2000) for a published version of the paper.

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