

00:04

I promise you that I will not sing. I will spare you that, at least. But I am a historian with a background in philosophy, and my main area of research is basically the history of Southeast Asia, with a focus on 19th-century colonial Southeast Asia. And over the last few years, what I've been doing is really tracing the history of certain ideas that shape our viewpoint, the way we in Asia, in Southeast Asia, look at ourselves and understand ourselves.

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Now, there's one thing that I cannot explain as a historian, and this has been puzzling me for a long time, and this is how and why certain ideas, certain viewpoints do not seem to ever go away. And I don't know why. And in particular, I'm interested to understand why some people -- not all, by no means -- but some people in postcolonial Asia still hold on to a somewhat romanticized view of the colonial past, see it through kind of rose-tinted lenses as perhaps a time that was benevolent or nice or pleasant, even though historians know the realities of the violence and the oppression and the darker side of that entire colonial experience. So let's imagine that I build a time machine for myself.

01:45

(Makes beeping noises)

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I build a time machine, I send myself back to the 1860s, a hundred years before I was born. Oh dear, I've just dated myself. OK, I go back a hundred years before I was born. Now, if I were to find myself in the context of colonial Southeast Asia in the 19th century, I would not be a professor. Historians know this. And yet, despite that, there's still some quarters that somehow want to hold on to this idea that that past was not as murky, that there was a romanticized side to it.

02:25

Now, here is where I, as a historian, I encounter the limits of history, because I can trace ideas. I can find out the origins of certain clichés, certain stereotypes. I can tell you who came up with it, where and when and in which book. But there's one thing I cannot do: I cannot get into the internal, subjective mental universe of someone and change their mind. And I think this is where and why, over the last few years, I'm increasingly drawn to things like psychology and cognitive behavioral therapy; because in these fields, scholars look at the persistence of ideas. Why do some people have certain prejudices? Why are there certain biases, certain phobias?

03:13

We live, unfortunately, sadly, in a world where, still, misogyny persists, racism persists, all kinds of phobias. Islamophobia, for instance, is now a term. And why do these ideas persist? Many scholars agree that it's partly because, when looking at the world, we fall back, we fall back, we fall back on a finite pool, a small pool of basic ideas that don't get challenged. Look at how we, particularly us in Southeast Asia, represent ourselves to ourselves and to the world. Look at how often, when we talk about ourselves, my viewpoint, my identity, our identity, invariably, we fall back, we fall back, we fall back, we fall back on the same set of ideas, all of which have histories of their own.

04:03

Very simple example: we live in Southeast Asia, which is very popular with tourists from all over the world. And I don't think that's a bad thing, by the way. I think it's good that tourists come to Southeast Asia, because it's part and parcel of broadening your worldview and meeting cultures, etc, etc. But look at how we represent ourselves through the tourist campaigns, the tourist ads that we produce. There will be the obligatory coconut tree, banana tree, orangutan.

04:33

(Laughter)

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And the orangutan doesn't even get paid.

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(Laughter)

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Look at how we represent ourselves. Look at how we represent nature. Look at how we represent the countryside. Look at how we represent agricultural life. Watch our sitcoms. Watch our dramas. Watch our movies. It's very common, particularly in Southeast Asia, when you watch these sitcoms, if there's someone from the countryside, invariably, they're ugly, they're funny, they're silly, they're without knowledge. It's as if the countryside has nothing to offer. Our view of nature, despite all our talk, despite all our talk about Asian philosophy, Asian values, despite all our talk about how we have an organic relationship to nature, how do we actually treat nature

in Southeast Asia today? We regard nature as something to be defeated and exploited. And that's the reality.

05:40

So the way in which we live in our part of the world, postcolonial Southeast Asia, in so many ways, for me, bears residual traces to ideas, tropes, clichés, stereotypes that have a history. This idea of the countryside as a place to be exploited, the idea of countryfolk as being without knowledge -- these are ideas that historians like me can go back, we can trace how these stereotypes emerged. And they emerged at a time when Southeast Asia was being governed according to the logic of colonial capitalism.

06:23

And in so many ways, we've taken these ideas with us. They're part of us now. But we are not critical in interrogating ourselves and asking ourselves, how did I have this view of the world? How did I come to have this view of nature? How did I come to have this view of the countryside? How do I have this idea of Asia as exotic? And we, Southeast Asians in particular, love to self-exoticize ourselves. We've turned Southeast Asian identity into a kind of cosplay where you can literally go to the supermarket, go to the mall and buy your do-it-yourself exotic Southeast Asian costume kit. And we parade this identity, not asking ourselves how and when did this particular image of ourselves emerge. They all have a history, too.

07:16

And that's why, increasingly, as a historian, I find that as I encounter the limits of history, I see that I can't work alone anymore. I can't work alone anymore, because there's absolutely no point in me doing my archival work, there's no point in me seeking the roots of these ideas, tracing the genesis of ideas and then putting it in some journal to be read by maybe three other historians. There's absolutely no point.

07:47

The reason why I think this is important is because our region, Southeast Asia, will, I believe, in the years to come, go through enormous changes, unprecedented changes in our history, partly because of globalization, world politics, geopolitical contestations, the impact of technology, the Fourth Industrial Revolution ... Our world as we know it is going to change.

08:12

But for us to adapt to this change, for us to be ready for that change, we need to think out of the box, and we can't fall back, we can't fall back, we can't fall back on the same set of clichéd, tired, staid old stereotypes. We need to think out, and that's why historians, we can't work alone now. I, I need to engage with people in psychology, people in behavioral therapy. I need to engage with sociologists, anthropologists, political economists. I need above all to engage with people in the arts and the media, because it's there, in that forum, outside the confines of the university, that these debates really need to take place.

09:00

And they need to take place now, because we need to understand that the way things are today are not determined by some fixed, iron historical railway track, but rather there are many other histories, many other ideas that were forgotten, marginalized, erased along the line. Historians like me, our job is to uncover all this, discover all this, but we need to engage this, we need to engage with society as a whole.

09:32

So to go back to that time machine example I gave earlier. Let's say this is a 19th-century colonial subject then, and a person's wondering, "Will empire ever come to an end? Will there be an end to all this? Will we one day be free?" So the person invents a time machine --

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(Makes beeping noises)

09:53

goes into the future and arrives here in postcolonial Southeast Asia today. And the person looks around, and the person will see, well yes, indeed, the imperial flags are gone, the imperial gunboats are gone, the colonial armies are gone. There are new flags, new nation-states. There is independence after all. But has there been? The person then watches the tourist ads and sees again the banana tree, the coconut tree and the orangutan. The person watches on TV and watches how images of an exotic Southeast Asia are being reproduced again and again by Southeast Asians. And the person might then come to the conclusion that, well, notwithstanding the fact that colonialism is over, we are still in so, so many ways living in the long shadow of the 19th century.

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And this, I think, has become my personal mission. The reason why I think history is so important and the reason why I think it's so important for history to go beyond history, because need to reignite this debate about who and what we are, all of us. We talk about, "No, I have my viewpoint, you have your viewpoint." Well, that's partly true. Our viewpoints are never entirely our own individually. We're all social beings. We're historical beings. You, me, all of us, we carry history in us. It's in the language we use. It's in the fiction we write. It's in the movies we choose to watch. It's in the images that we conjure when we think of who and what we are. We are historical beings. We carry history with us, and history carries us along. But while we are determined by history, it is my personal belief that we need not be trapped by history, and we need not be the victims of history.

12:04

Thank you.

12:05

(Applause)