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SEA Library: Knowledge-Building & Resistance in Southeast Asia

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Anarchist Library

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sea.theanarchistlibrary.org

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I spoke to the Southeast Asia Anarchist Library on how their project came together, Southeast Asia and how organizing must be local and global to build a better world.

Asia Art Tours: How did Southeast Asian Anarchist Library come together? And outside of your website, could you describe the resources available for anarchism in Southeast Asia?

Magsalin: I like the idea of The Anarchist Library (TAL) as a place to archive anarchist texts that are at risk of being lost to time and neglect. Indeed, being lost to time and neglect is also a problem for anarchist literature in Southeast Asia. Writings are haphazardly scattered across the internet and in selectively-printed zines. I feel a certain horror in that such literature remains obscure, or worse, lost to time. So I asked the good librarians at TAL for a Southeast Asian section last year.

Usually, new language libraries are only *one* language — Spanish, French, Korean or what have you. This makes sense for large languages that span countries (like English, Spanish, French) or countries with a largely homogeneous language (like South Korea and Korean). However, Southeast Asia is characterized by incredible diversity with more languages than nations. Some Southeast Asian languages only have a handful of anarchist texts so it does not make economical sense to have multiple small libraries with only a handful of texts in them. Additionally, the diversity of languages means that a single anarchist milieu in a country can produce texts in multiple languages. This is the case in the Philippines where Filipino anarchists write in English, Tagalog, and Bisaya. Unlike the other anarchist libraries, I wanted a place that can reflect the rich diversity of languages from Southeast Asia.

Since the start of the project in January, the SEA Library now has hundreds of texts in multiple languages. It has also become a site for original translations such as that in Tieng Viet. For example, David Graeber (rest in power) now has translations of his writings in Tagalog, Bahasa Indonesia/Melayu, Tieng Viet, and Thai. I am quite pleased that various anarchists across the region have made use of the SEA Library as a site for preserving their literature and submitting original translations.

Asia Art Tours: What would you recommend different audiences ‘check out’ from your library to better understand Anarchism in Southeast Asia?

Ringo: I think the texts titled “Anarchism in (insert SEA country name here)” are a good starts to know about the history and development of anarchism in SEA country, Magsalin wrote lots of great texts about anarchism in the Philippines. I recommend Dominic Berger’s old text who discussed about new wave of insurrectionary anarchism in Indonesia in the 2011-2013s.

Magsalin: We have a whole section on introductory texts. We also have a section on the history of anarchism in Southeast Asia. As for specific texts, I quite enjoyed Benedict Anderson’s *The Age of Globalization: Anarchists and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* which among other topics deals with late 19th century and early 20th century intersections with anarchism in the Philippines and Indonesia.

For those interested, you can check out the Southeast Asian Anarchist Library here: sea.theanarchistlibrary.org

Asia Art Tours: Joy James is one of the most influential voices I've ever encountered on abolition and policing, but I have no idea if her work (investigating Black radicals who went against the nation-state such as George Jackson or Kathleen Cleaver) 'translates' when read in SEA.

When we talk about translation, does the changing content/language of translated work make it less effective for a new audience? Or is the act of translation 'anarchist' by trying to move knowledge beyond borders and find points of solidarity? (For example, that ACAB can be universally understood in both SEA and the US?)

Ringo: Yup, in my experience translating English anarchist text to Bahasa Indonesia, I experience some difficulty to understanding the meaning of the text, for example the historical context, location, or group names. Sometimes there are some good texts from western countries, but they cannot be applied in same way because the difference of conditions in SEA, so sometimes some anarchist translators will explain some "hard-parts" or skip irrelevant parts, for example in Indonesia some of Bakunin's texts on anti-theism will be skipped because it does not suit with situation in Indonesia.

Magsalin: Mistranslations are always a risk in translating texts. Most famously, the quarrel with Nestor Makhno and Errico Malatesta was based on bad translation work, their quarrel resolved through quite a number of letters discovering they have more in agreement than otherwise. Despite this, I think these risks are acceptable in exchange for wider dissemination of texts. In my milieu, I've seen translators change certain company names of notorious capitalists into local Filipino notorious capitalists. David Graeber for example talked a bit how people self-organize in an anarchic way while waiting for the bus. In Tagalog, the bus was replaced with the iconic Philippine jeepney. Or in another example, All Cops Are Bad (ACAB) turns into *Ang Kapulisan Ay Berdugo* (AKAB; "the police are executioners") I think these localizations help. As one friend says, preserve the meaning if not the phrasing.

Asia Art Tours: For SEA Libraries, what historical events or moments of catharsis in the bleak present that led you into anarchism?

Ringo: There is a long history about how I finally decided to be an anarchist, but the core point is life experiences as poor people, reading many books, and seeing various horrific acts committed by fascist groups, the state, and capitalism. I find all kinds of freedom in anarchism, as an individual queer and poor person, I've found a comfortable home.

Magsalin: I had progressive and later libertarian sympathies for a while, but these ideas did not enter the realm of revolutionary thinking until I encountered state violence on an intensely personal level. It was at that moment I realized that there can be no reform for prisons and state violence, only its abolition. While as a progressive, I was enamored by decentralization and libertarian socialism; I was particularly fascinated by Rojava. From Rojava I found Murray Bookchin whose work factored into Rojava's politics and from Bookchin I encountered Ursula K. Le Guin and her book *The Dispossessed*. Reading about anarchism wasn't enough for me to become an anarchist. The pieces in my mind only fit together when I had that moment of clarity when encountering the violence of the prison system.

Asia Art Tours: What issues do anarchists in Southeast Asia have with domestic nationalists?

Ringo: In Indonesia, we are facing a lot of problems about repression. Starting from a sequence of repressions after the anti-monarchy demonstration in Yogyakarta on 1 May 2018, riots on May Day 2019 in various cities, and the arrest of some anarchists because doing provocation using graffiti last 2020 a year ago. Now anarchism always been scapegoated and used as a pretext from the police to represses many demonstrations. Anarchists in Indonesia are still not organized and have problems with discipline, and just wasting time to talk and LARPing on the internet. At the same time, nationalists and religious conservatives groups has been organized and have support bases from the community. The strong repression that comes when anarchism sprouts prevents anarchism from being able to develop properly. I think a similar situation also occurred in other SEA countries.

Magsalin: In the Philippines, virtually all political factions are nationalist, from the Communist Party to social democratic parties to the right-wing author-

itarians. Nationalism remains unchallenged politically. Only a few including the anarchists in the Philippines articulate anationalism, much less question nationalist imperatives and its statist implications. As for right-wing nationalists such as those who support Duterte and Duterteism, their nationalism oftentimes attracts left nationalists such as the Communist Party and the Makabayan Bloc who both reached the same conclusion of supporting Duterte out of nationalist pride. While both opportunist blocs have since broken with Duterte, they will continue to be susceptible to future populists as long as they continue to articulate nationalism

Asia Art Tours: How do you see the SEA Library project as struggling against nationalism both from abroad (tankies) and domestically (domestic nationalists)?

Ringo: SEA Library can show Western tankies that anarchism is present and active in third world countries. Anarchism has a long history in the liberation struggle in many parts of Southeast Asia, not like as they say that anarchism only exist in Europe and North America. SEA Library can be a storehouse of ideas for the anarchist community to preparing and organizing. Of course, nationalist groups are more problematic than groups of western online communists.

Magsalin: I see the SEA Library as repository as a tool for radicals across the Southeast Asian region to articulate libertarian, anti-political, and anationalist positions. There are also guides on the SEA Library and the English library on how to organize in an anarchist fashion.

It is clear that Marxism-Leninism after the collapse of the Soviet Union continues to be in retreat save for a few sites which continue people's wars such as in the Philippines and India. It is only quite recently that Marxism-Leninism is starting to regroup and mount new campaigns. Without a hegemonic Marxist power (and I do not consider the People's Republic of China to be so), I do not see international tankies to be a threat. In the Philippines however, Stalinism still persist as a hegemonic force among the Philippine left. They have used their hegemony to assassinate other leftists such as social democrats and Marxist-Leninists. Just this year, they claimed responsibility for the killing of a labor organizer. Though they apologized, I am not convinced they are a force to be trusted

Asia Art Tours: Globally, with censorship, authoritarianism and state violence rising, do you see translation a way to shepherd or safeguard knowledge from danger? In the face of domestic state violence, how does translating a Thai anarchist to Portuguese, a Cambodian anarchist to Armenian, or an Indonesian anarchist into English, allow their knowledge and wisdom to survive?

Ringo: I see translating and archiving texts as important action equal to other actions such as organizing communities, throwing stones to the bank windows, or punching rapists in leftist communities. The work of translating text will spread and allow exchange of knowledge between anarchist communities in different countries and will allow for the dissemination and exchange of knowledge between anarchist communities in different countries. This work also will allow the global south anarchist community to learn from western anarchists who more literate because of their privilege as developed countries with better access to education and the internet. Or vice versa, western anarchists can learn from global south anarchist who are until now considered not-existent. (*Although in fact the most successful projects with anarchist and anti-authoritarian tendencies are in non-western countries such as Rojava, EZLN, Barbacha, Abahlali baseMjondolo, etc.*)

I see many cool anarchists whose their works are not gaining popularity because difficult to find the English translations of their text or lack attention from western anarchists. I would mention for example, Sam Mbah, Japanese anarchists like Kōtoku Shūsui, Kanno Sugako, and Osugi Sakae, and many Asian anarchists.

Magsalin: Translation work has always been difficult but important work. Errico Malatesta for example had been translated into dozens of languages including Tagalog, his knowledge and wisdom brought into new audiences and contexts. With more translations also come more articulations, new interpretations, and novel applications. While translations are slow and difficult, I hope for Southeast Asian anarchists can commit to it.