

**NUS Anthropology: Three Narratives**

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### Authors' Note:

The following paper by Waterson, Sinha, and Thompson was originally presented at the *Southeast Asian Anthropologies*, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, Singapore, 2-3 October 2014. In the intervening years, significant developments have occurred, including the development of an undergraduate major in anthropology and renaming of the department to the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, providing greater visibility of anthropology within the university. The authors are publishing this paper in the NUS Sociology and Anthropology Working Papers series as an historical document to attest to the development of the discipline at the National University of Singapore.

### Abstract

Since the founding in 1965 of the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore, anthropology has had a significant presence within the Department. However, it has often been overlooked, due to a variety of institutional reasons. This paper provides three personal accounts of anthropologists working within the Department and the ways in which the practice of anthropology has been experienced over several decades of institutional changes at NUS from the 1980s to the early 2010s.

### Introduction

In this paper, the authors seek to provide an account of the development of anthropology at the National University of Singapore (NUS) within the Department of Sociology. Elsewhere Sinha (2012) has mapped the complex and sometimes convoluted institutional history of the Department more fully. Similarly, Thompson (2012) has written on transnational linkages of anthropology in Singapore and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Here we present a small slice of the

same endeavor to reflect on the development and practice of anthropology in Singapore and Southeast Asia by drawing on experiential knowledge and laying out three narratives of personal engagements with anthropology in Singapore from the 1980s to the present. The first narrative is that of Roxana Waterson, who joined the Department of Sociology in 1987 after completing her PhD at Cambridge University based on field research in Sulawesi, Indonesia (Waterson 2009). The second narrative is written by Vineeta Sinha, starting with her experiences in the Department from 1981 as an undergraduate student, moving on to graduate studies (1985-1987 at NUS and 1988 to 1996 at Johns Hopkins University) and then as a member of the faculty (1996 to-date). The third narrative is from Eric C. Thompson, who joined the Department in 2001, after completing a PhD at the University of Washington based on fieldwork in Malaysia (Thompson 2003, 2004, 2007).

The long and sustained relationship of these three authors with the Department from a variety of perspectives has produced intimate familiarity with the institution. We use our own recollections as a lens through which to articulate our experiences of the discipline of Anthropology, embedded within broader departmental and university institutional structures. The intention is to convey the dynamics of this disciplinary co-existence as well as note the high and low points of Anthropology's journey in this institutional setting. We hope that this montage of individual narratives about the Department over somewhat different yet often overlapping timeframes presents an intriguing collective (but not necessarily consensual) institutional memory about sociological and anthropological presence in NUS. These narratives provide insights from more than sixty years of our combined experience in the shaping of Anthropology at NUS, including its relationship to Sociology and emergent trends from the founding of the Department, and particularly the 1980s, to the present.

Presently, the disciplines of Sociology and Anthropology co-exist at the 'Department of Sociology' at the National University of Singapore. This disciplinary 'joint-ness' and the institutional co-location of these two social science disciplines takes us back to 1965 when the first 'Department of Sociology' was founded at the – then – University of Singapore. This early formal conjoining seems to have been motivated by practical considerations designed to ensure a consolidation of social science teaching and research within a tertiary institution. In this shared

existence, the two disciplines were weighted differently. The Singapore situation was one where a joint department carried two separate disciplines, with differing interests and strengths, and there was little intellectual convergence. Although practitioners of the discipline invoked the description, 'Social Anthropology', sociologists and anthropologists did not attempt to bridge the theoretical or methodological divide between sociology and anthropology or seek to build a common discursive space. Colleagues we have spoken to over the years have observed that despite the early 'joint-ness' of the Department, indications are that Anthropology has been the 'poorer cousin' and has not always enjoyed an 'equal' status with Sociology.<sup>1</sup>

Deconstructing this disciplinary relationship also requires access to specific kinds of data, of 'articulate/official' and 'implicit/unofficial' varieties. While some published, official data about anthropological and sociological research and teaching are available in the department's archives, it is far more challenging if not impossible to access the everyday attitudes and decisions embodied in the thought and practices of individuals who were 'in charge' at the department and faculty levels, for example. The latter's actions and judgments would have certainly impacted the experiences of individual anthropologists (and sociologists) at the level of teaching and research. Recollections, remembrances, anecdotes and experiences from students and Faculty of the Department are a crucial source of information for reconstructing narratives about the institution as well as the institutionalization of the discipline. In the following sections, we present the personal narratives of the authors, written independently, then return at the end to reflect on the shared as well as divergent themes emerging across the three narratives.

### Roxana Waterson

Over 27 years of teaching in the Department of Sociology, I can look back and see some big shifts in the way that Anthropology has been thought of, both within the Department and in Singapore society at large. This has been paralleled by other significant changes, notably in how NUS has thought about its own place in the region. When I first joined the Department of Sociology in 1987 I was surprised by the apparent disdain shown to Anthropology and its practitioners by senior sociologists within it. It was indicated that Anthropology was not well thought of at the highest levels of Singapore society, since the image of the discipline was that it

concerned itself only with 'primitive', tribal and remote societies and therefore was an intellectual 'frivolity' that could hardly be afforded in pragmatic, modernizing Singapore; indeed, -it was implied that to train people in such a discipline might even be detrimental. Employers, it was said, had some idea what Sociology was, and were happy to hire sociology graduates, but they would have no idea what Anthropology was and would not be inclined to employ anyone with such an 'incomprehensible' training.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than educate the public in a more up-to-date image of what Anthropology was about, this situation was deemed, it appeared, to be unchangeable. It was often implied that anthropologists were not 'pulling our weight' in the Department, and indeed were incapable of doing so because of our putative inability to attract students to our courses. When that was proved to be untrue, the growing popularity of our courses seemed to provoke more anxiety that so many honours students were mysteriously being drawn to adopt anthropological methods in their thesis research.

In spite of the prickly and unproductive atmosphere created in staff meetings, however, in practice I had various opportunities to teach courses jointly with colleagues whose training was in Sociology, and these collaborations were invariably harmonious and rewarding. I certainly got a lot out of them, and I believe they were also beneficial for the students, offering them richer perspectives on social problems. I also benefitted from working together with local colleagues who were anthropologists - including Vivienne Wee, Ananda Rajah, Vineeta Sinha and Mariam Ali - whose perspectives on the discipline were grounded in their knowledge of the region and their consciousness of their own subject positions in a post-colonial world order. I also learned a tremendous amount about both 'Anthropology' and 'Sociology' from co-teaching with Geoffrey Benjamin, and from reading his incisive contributions to the Department's Working Papers series, where he generously shared his formative ideas on such questions as the sociology of religion and of the nation-state. His integrative approach to understanding the cultures of the Malay Peninsula as a 'regional array', shaped by their long history of interactions, was also influential, for me, in the move toward a more historically sensitive approach to ethnography, which was happening in Anthropology more widely in the 1980s.

From the late 1980s, we began to teach our introductory course in Anthropology with an emphasis on colonial history and Wallerstein's world system theory as an explanatory framework for present relations between north and south, or between 'developed' and 'developing' countries. We invited students in their term projects to investigate the histories of their own families over three generations, thus applying ethnographic methods to the study of those closest to them and reflecting on how they came to be in Singapore in the first place. This was a very successful way of getting anthropology out of the textbook and into real life; in the process they became more aware of the astounding differences (much more striking then than now) between their own lives and those of their grandparents. The latter's experiences, dating from the early decades of the twentieth century, were certainly enough to mark them as radically 'other' from their grandchildren's perspective, in spite of being part of the same family, or even household!

When I first joined the Department it was striking to me that NUS, despite its position in Singapore as a natural crossroads of Southeast Asia, taught nothing about the region. Our Department offered a single course on the cultures of Southeast Asia, but there was not yet any programme of Southeast Asian studies, which commenced only in 1991.<sup>3</sup> When the idea was mooted of having a programme in South Asian Studies, its proposers first had to overcome the assumption that only those of Indian descent would want to take up such courses – an idea that has proved quite unfounded. That programme opened in 1999, and while the former has become a full-fledged Department since 2011, the South Asian Studies Programme is yet to be granted departmental status. The opening of the Asia Research Institute (ARI) in 2003 marked a watershed in creating a critical mass of scholars working in the region and making NUS a very attractive place for scholars (from within the region or beyond) to spend periods of time, whether as Postdoctoral Fellows or at later stages of their careers. Many of those have been anthropologists, increasing the profile of the discipline in Singapore quite significantly.

For most of the time I have worked in the Department, perhaps a quarter of its members have been anthropologists by training, though in recent years the proportion has been higher. At first, it was a notable feature of the Department that all the sociologists working in it concerned themselves only with research on Singapore, while the anthropologists were the ones venturing

into other countries of the region, doing work on Thailand, Malaysia, Burma, the Philippines or Indonesia (cf. Thompson 2012). Later on, this ceased to be the case; we were joined, for instance, by Indonesian sociologist Vedi Hadiz, a leading scholar on labour relations in Indonesia. Currently, we have several sociologists working on India, China and Korea, as well as practitioners of both disciplines who, in line with current trends, work on transnational issues such as labour migration, global capital, modernity, or on other comparative aspects of Asian and other societies. My own feeling is that, in an ever more globalized world, we need global theories to make sense of what is happening anywhere in it, and hence the convergence of anthropological and sociological theory would be a natural development.

To understand the reasons why they developed as separate disciplines in the first place, around the turn of the 19th-20th centuries, requires a historical approach to the formation of fields of enquiry, with the ensuing establishment of departments, chairs, lectureships, and funds for research. The logic behind those developments, however, has by now greatly changed. Methodologies, too, increasingly overlap; for instance, many sociologists over the past decade have 'discovered' the ethnographic method and written books about it. Such developments have not necessarily been reflected in our Department, however; I still remember my surprise when a colleague trained in sociology once asked me, 'So – what is ethnography?' That made me realise that there was a much greater distance between us than I had supposed. So, when students ask me, as they often do, why these two disciplines exist as separate entities, and what value anthropology might have for them, I find myself explaining the reasons why convergence might these days make sense, but adding: 'If I ask myself, "In this Department, are there questions that would never be asked if we anthropologists were not here?"', I still find the answer to be "Yes".' The commitment to asking basic questions about human nature and our evolution as a species, and to including *all* societies, of any time and place, as worthy of comparative study, disrupting the 'methodological nationalism' that so commonly afflicts sociological work, remain, I believe, invaluable contributions to a more rounded training in how to think like a social scientist.

There have been several reasons why, in the new century, a different image of Anthropology might have been able to emerge here in Singapore. In the aftermath of 9/11 and the Bali bombings of 12 October 2002, and the uncovering of plots being pursued by Jemaah

Islamiah members in Singapore to carry out attacks here too, acute anxieties surfaced about the potential for ethnic hostilities to erupt. Was Singapore's much-touted racial harmony nothing more than a thin veneer, beneath which the so-called 'four races', schooled by official discourse into thinking of themselves as distinct from each other, continued to be largely ignorant and distrustful of one another? Lai Ah Eng, a graduate of our Department who took her PhD in anthropology from Cambridge University, was the only individual at that time to have done ethnographic research into the texture of daily life in the communities of an HDB housing estate. She was called upon at this time to organise public seminars and workshops with the aim of promoting inter-ethnic discussion and mutual understanding; she told me she found that she had to start at a very basic level in these sessions, as she quickly discovered that many Singaporeans in fact still know next to nothing about the cultures of their neighbours.

More recently, there has been public debate about the nature of education and how best to ensure that students are well prepared for careers in a rapidly-changing and thoroughly globalised economy. The Straits Times of Thursday Sept 26, 2013, reported on a speech by Education Minister Heng Swee Keat, spelling out the latest initiatives in education, in an article entitled: 'Big Push to Nurture All-round Students'. The education system, he declared, "needs to now produce all-round students who can work with people of different backgrounds and adapt to what companies term a 'VUCA' environment." This hideous neologism apparently is short for "volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous". To thrive in such a world, he went on, students "need to have the confidence to deal with problems that have no clear-cut solutions...and they need to be able to work with others across races and nationalities." What sort of discipline, I ask myself, would be best suited to offer this sort of training? The answer is obvious: Anthropology.

### *Vineeta Sinha*

I joined NUS as an undergraduate in 1981, when I was admitted to the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, where I chose to study Sociology, English Literature and Statistics. As a pre-medical student, I had no familiarity with the discipline of Sociology, which was not then offered in Singapore schools as an A-level subject. At this time I was even more clueless about Anthropology. But it was good fortune to have passed an entrance test for admission to the



Sociology Department. 'Sociology' was a popular subject amongst undergraduates even back then the entrance test I sat for entailed reviewing a passage (which contained some survey data), and then answering a series of questions about how to interpret these (frankly the details are by now hazy but I remember that the test was administered by John Clammer). I must have done well enough (or not too badly) to be granted admission. I had no idea when I started that I would in fact be studying two disciplines as Anthropology was not named in any of these early encounters with the department. Studying 'Sociology' meant being enrolled in two introductory year-long courses – SC101 (Introduction to Sociology) and SC102 (Introduction to Anthropology). I literally 'discovered' Anthropology when I walked into my first lecture in the latter course being delivered by Geoffrey Benjamin, who was introducing Biological/Physical Anthropology to students.<sup>4</sup> In Benjamin's classes, I was intrigued with the world of bipedalism, opposable thumbs, human evolutionary history, *Homo habilis* and *Homo erectus*. By then I had had only very rudimentary exposure to evolutionary biology as a pre-medical student. As an undergraduate, I did not know that in the Sociology - there was co-location of 'American-style Sociology with British-style Social Anthropology' (Benjamin 1989, 2); nor that we were offered foundational grounding in 'Physical Anthropology' and 'Cultural Anthropology' – resembling more the American model of '4 fields of Anthropology'. But it was really what is labelled 'Cultural Anthropology' or 'Social/Socio-Cultural Anthropology' that was the dominant strain in the Department – and this in fact continues to be the case.

I also learnt very quickly (even in my first year and largely from my peers) that Sociology and Anthropology were marked here as 'distinct' disciplines and that it was 'better' to study the former than the latter. I heard from fellow students negative, stereotypical perceptions about Anthropology as being concerned only with the tribal, rural world and with primitive peoples, thus rendering it irrelevant to the study of modern societies. However, I also found a group of students whose curiosities were piqued in a number of Anthropology courses (including kinship, cultures, religion, and anthropological theory), which were offered to undergraduates. At this point courses were differentiated along disciplinary lines, and the Faculty and even students identified with one or the other discipline. Admittedly, the overall numbers who enrolled in undergraduate Anthropology courses in Singapore were smaller than those in the Sociology

courses. Certainly, a category of students found the former 'more interesting' and opted to not only enrol in them but also pursue dedicated ethnographic research at honours and graduate levels. Speaking from personal experience and from conversations with some of these students in the mid- to late 1980s, those who came to Anthropology liked its comparative, cross-cultural reach, its focus on a universal human condition and its scrutiny of diverse human cultures; they appreciated its concern with long-term human history, garnered from discussions of Physical and Biological Anthropology; some were indeed fascinated with the discussion on tribes and primitive groups, which may have appeared exotic to some, but many were also attracted to studying minorities and marginalised communities; the ethnographic method and doing fieldwork with 'real people' were additional appeals. Not surprisingly, over the years, at honours and post-graduate levels, students have opted to undertake qualitative and ethnographic research under the supervision of both anthropologists and qualitative sociologists in the Department.

In my experience, the main perceived difference between Sociology and Anthropology amongst students and some faculty during my undergraduate years seemed to rest on the choice of methodology – represented by the polarities of 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' methods. Already in the 1970s, sociologists at the Department aspired to undertake survey research using quantitative methodologies and data analysis techniques which Benjamin notes 'came to be recognised by others as Singapore style of sociology' (1989:2). In Singapore, fieldwork and the ethnographic approach typified exclusively the discipline of Anthropology and not Sociology. This is ironic given the centrality of qualitative research techniques and, in particular, ethnographic approaches in the history of Sociology, especially urban sociology. Anthropologists were hired and anthropological research undertaken by graduate students and teaching faculty. I myself chose to read a combination of Sociology and Anthropology courses but was increasingly drawn to Anthropology as I approached the honours year. I remember hearing senior students speak in exciting modes of the enriching experience of fieldwork and participant observation. I chose to 'do honours' in Sociology (and not English Literature) largely because of the primary research and fieldwork component of the honours thesis and the appeal of ethnography and the fact that I had encountered inspiring and excellent educators in Sociology. In fact, it was a requirement that already at an honours level, the thesis work undertaken by

students had to be grounded in primary fieldwork; for anthropologists, this meant empirical work through the ethnographic method. I personally know of students in these years who wanted to pursue non-fieldwork based topics (either in the use of secondary data or in considering theoretical subjects) for their honours thesis but were not granted permission to do so. Consequently, anthropological work produced by Singapore-trained students has been consistently defined by methodological rigour with an emphasis on empirical grounding through sustained fieldwork and participant observation.

The other draw that Anthropology had for me in my student years was the study of religion in all its diversity and complexity in an urban context. Over the decades, Singapore-based anthropologists have produced ethnographic accounts of Chinese Religion, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism (Mariam Ali 1988, Rajah 1975, Sinha 1985, 1988, Tong 2007, Wee 1989). The intriguing, and at the time hugely challenging, but inspiring lectures by Geoffrey Benjamin in his religion course are etched in my mind and I have carefully kept my hand-written notes from those days. Despite being defined as a highly sensitive subject in the Singapore context, 'religion' was a popular course and attracted large student enrollments. The teaching of religion-specific modules was enhanced by primary research on religions in Singapore (Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism), undertaken by anthropologists at the Department. My interest in the study of Indic religions was further inspired when I had the opportunity to meet two scholars of religion – the late M.N. Srinivas and Trevor O. Ling - both of whom were based in the Department for several years as Visiting Professors. I had the good fortune of taking classes with both these luminaries and hearing their experiences of Anthropology and fieldwork.

My independent research began with my honours thesis research in 1985 on the subject of 'Modern Indian Religious Movements in Singapore.' In my Master's thesis, I moved on to provide an ethnographic account of 'Singaporean Hinduism,' a linguistic description that my research has nudged me towards (Sinha 2005). These early experiences have shaped my career as a researcher, and I have remained a student of religion. My PhD work took me to the sub-discipline of Medical Anthropology, but I 'returned' to religion when I joined NUS as a full-time faculty and was tasked to teach the undergraduate religion module in the department. This also prodded me towards newer research on religion and specifically Hinduism in Singapore and

elsewhere beyond Indian shores (Sinha 2010, 2011). More recently, I have been engaged with theorizing forms of Hindu religiosity in urban Singapore through my focus on the realm of 'popular' religiosity. Through these projects I have consciously and explicitly retained an ethnographic focus on the everyday enactments of Hinduism, while locating its practice within the context of an urban, secular nation-state, structured according to bureaucratic, pragmatic rationality. My substantive research has thus far concentrated on Hindu festivals, rituals, deities and temples, but with the strong awareness that this religion (like all others here) has to exist, function and operate within administrative and legislative boundaries clearly prescribed by the logic of pragmatism. The diasporic context of Singapore and Malaysia has been a backdrop for these inquiries as well my primary fieldsites

Drawing on my experiences as an undergraduate and graduate student, the years between 1982 and 1988 were probably the most exciting, in terms of the range of Anthropology courses taught by enthusiastic and well-regarded anthropologists, including scholars like Geoffrey Benjamin, Anthony Walker, John Clammer and Clifford Sather. From the 1970s, several prominent anthropologists had visited the Department for varying periods, including Clifford Geertz, Lawrence Babb, Peter Metcalf and Mark Hobart. I remember Professor Srinivas speaking of Social Anthropology as 'self-study' rather than the study of the exotic 'Other.' This resonated with me at the time in seeing Singaporean social anthropologists (*and* sociologists) who were conducting research in their own backyard. In this context, where the anthropological 'Other' could not be readily identified and appropriated by anthropologists for scrutiny, it seemed as if it was the ethnic and religious minorities who moved into and 'occupied' this slot and thus became the focus of anthropologists – both local and foreign. Additionally, anthropological research in the department did concern itself with tribal groups in Malaysia and *Orang Asli* communities in Singapore and its off-shore islands, in addition to undertaking some comparative research in the broader Southeast Asian region, especially Indonesia.

Starting in the mid-1990s, the Anthropology side of the department experienced low points in NUS. Amongst these were the departure of key and pioneering members of the department who were crucial in shaping and institutionalizing the teaching and research of cultural anthropology. This undoubtedly reconfigured the kind of presence Anthropology has had

in the department subsequently. This exodus was due to a combination of structural factors and personal career choices, but also reflects disciplinary politics within the Department at the time. In 1996, I returned to the Department with a PhD in Anthropology from the Johns Hopkins University. Interestingly, I had a dual/split identity imposed on me given my training. I recall with amusement that there was always some confusion about 'what' I really was and which side of the disciplinary divide I could be placed in. In some departmental faculty counting exercises – I was rendered '1/2 Sociologist' and '1/2 Anthropologist.' Some of this had to do with the fact that I had done both Sociology and Anthropology courses as a student, had a PhD from an anthropology department but had indicated that I wanted to teach the Department's compulsory third-year sociological theory module – which I was in fact assigned to teach upon my return in 1996 and which I have continued to teach, most recently in 2015 and again in 2022. I am still seen as straddling the two disciplines although I have never personally seen this as a problem or a dilemma; this training in Sociology and Anthropology has been empowering and made me the 'ethnographer' that I am and which defines well how I have consistently seen myself.

When I joined the department as full-time faculty in 1996, some things had not changed. For example, the numbers of anthropologists remained far fewer than sociologists, as did the overall number of courses dedicated to Anthropology, and some disciplinary-specific modules continued to exist. But there were some critical changes too. The introductory course in Anthropology was no longer essential for students – it had become an optional module. Some of these department-level changes were conditioned by broader Faculty- and University-level curriculum reviews and decisions. However, significant shifts in a positive direction were also discernible. For instance, through various curriculum reviews, several courses were re-named to enable both anthropologists and sociologists to teach them, while in the supervision of student research and examination of theses (honours and graduate), a similar fluidity and flexibility prevails, both of which reinforce efforts to undo the colonial-era foundations of the Anthropology-Sociology disciplinary divide.

As a result of changes implemented at the Faculty level, graduate studies in the Department have been re-shaped to move from exclusively thesis-based degrees to the introduction of a modular component to supplement research achievements – yet further

evidence of the Americanization of the university system. Since 2006, both master's and PhD students have had to read a set number of modules (essential and optional) as part of the degree requirement – in addition to completing a thesis based on primary research. A comprehensive and qualifying examination system has also been instituted. Consequently, the number of modular offerings in Anthropology has had to be increased. NUS-based anthropologists have called for rethinking the stereotypical definition (and dismissal) of ethnography merely as 'description' and 'data collection.' The association of anthropologists with the ethnographic method (and interestingly the distancing of sociology from ethnography), has also served to stigmatize anthropology as being empirical and 'descriptive' and lacking a theoretical component. In response, practitioners have reiterated that 'ethnography' is both a methodological tool and a theoretical strategy that enables nuanced sense-making of complex ethnographic contexts. Additionally, through the production of sophisticated ethnographies (about Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia for example), anthropologists at the department have demonstrated that ethnography can be the basis for generating concepts and theories and for re-conceptualising existing theoretical formulations.

The recent leadership has been supportive of anthropological initiatives and has signalled that the discipline has a legitimate presence in the Department. While graduate studies in Sociology and Anthropology have been possible at the department since the early 1970s, no separate track for either discipline had been recognized in terms of graduate training. Most recently, the Department has successfully applied to the Faculty to have a 'PhD Programme in Anthropology' explicitly recognized. This recognition means that the disciplinary grounding of graduate students is now registered formally. These graduates, in order to compete effectively in the job market, must be identified as trained anthropologists, and the overt marking of their graduate training in anthropology lends institutional credence to their professional identity. This is both a recognition of graduate student interest in Anthropology and of the fact that many doctoral students at the Department (who are now increasingly non-Singaporean and from Southeast, East and South Asia and beyond) are in fact being trained in anthropological traditions. There is also a practical imperative here, seen in the opportunity for the Department to position

itself as a centre of anthropological training in Southeast Asia and more broadly Asia, and to boost interest in its graduate programme.

Looking ahead to the next generation of anthropologists, the current practice is that NUS PhD graduates in Anthropology (and Sociology) are largely non-Singaporean. They come from countries in Southeast Asia, South Asia, China, Australia, New Zealand and farther afield. Upon graduation, most return to their 'home' countries and find jobs in universities there. This trend is in contrast to the situation in the 1970s, when the graduate programme in the department attracted and trained Singaporeans, many of whom then were recruited as faculty. In comparison, Singaporean students are trained in Anthropology departments in UK and North American universities, and may not necessarily return to work in Singapore. Many in this group also opt not to work on 'Singapore-related' topics as these might be seen as 'too local and narrow' and 'not marketable' for a job in Europe and America, thus pursuing more 'global, universal' subjects for research. In any case, the local academic market is highly competitive and there are a handful of tertiary institutions that cannot completely absorb the many Singaporean PhDs produced annually. For a variety of reasons, presently the department does not hire its own PhDs – sociologists or anthropologists - and recruitment typically taps the pool of PhDs trained overseas, including its Singaporean hires.

There has been adequate support for the creation of new Anthropology modules, reviving dormant Anthropology modules and hiring of more anthropologists in the last 10 to 15 years or so with a somewhat open and inclusive attitude from department and faculty leadership. Practitioners at the Department have been engaged in rethinking both the undergraduate and graduate curricula to reflect core foci within the discipline and to translate these into a set of modular Anthropology offerings. The current situation of Anthropology in Singapore at NUS looks promising through the possibility of new hires and a more enhanced graduate and undergraduate curriculum that accords greater visibility to anthropological methodologies and theoretical orientations. The reproduction of disciplinary knowledge, the training of students, the institutionalization of discipline-specific norms and practices are not possible without institutional support, which the discipline has received in Singapore - even in its darkest hours. Material and economic considerations, compounded by political factors, profoundly influence

how the discipline in Singapore can be conceptualised and practised. No doubt, the reality of limited resources and institutional support impact not only the survival of any discipline but also shape its future professionalization. In this context, in a recent exciting development, the Department has successfully introduced Anthropology as an undergraduate major, admitting the first cohort of students in 2022. This has been long overdue and completes the circle of training students through undergraduate to graduate levels. As the Head of Department of Sociology from July 2015 to June 2021, it was personally a gratifying moment for me. It would not be an exaggeration to say that I spent practically my entire tenure as Head, working with the department, faculty, university, and the Ministry of Education to make this happen. Remarkably, this proposal was supported unanimously by the entire department – quantitative and qualitative sociologists, demographers and anthropologists – and was a signal collective effort - which was taken across the finishing line by Kelvin Low, the current Head of Department. As a result, not only does the department now offer two undergraduate majors and minors – in Sociology and Anthropology – but the word ‘Anthropology’ has been officially added to the name of the department, bringing visibility and recognition to a discipline that has nonetheless long flourished in the department, albeit for too long without official recognition.

There is a lack of a critical mass of Singaporean anthropologists *trained and practicing in Singapore*, an absence which is marked and consequential in a rather depoliticized anthropological perspective that does not fully articulate the need for delinking and disengaging from currently hegemonic anthropological traditions of the United States and more broadly the West. While some of these ideas have been raised and discussed informally amongst individual anthropologists in Singapore, they have not received the systematic intellectual and political scrutiny they deserve. It is possible that if there were supporting institutional mechanisms these might create opportunities for more formalised, systematic, enthusiastic and spirited debates about the identity and status of Singapore and Southeast Asian Anthropology.<sup>5</sup> Given that the number of anthropologists in the department is more or less on par with sociologists, and considerable student interest from undergraduates and graduates, there is every reason for optimism that anthropological teaching and research will continue to thrive in the new/old ‘Department of Sociology and Anthropology.’



Eric C. Thompson

When I applied to the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore in early 2001, the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences had recently implemented a hiring scheme in which candidates came to give a “job talk” as a routine part of the hiring processes. I recall two things about the job talk I gave. The first is that in the course of “Q&A” two members of the department took up a debate with each other on certain merits of the argument I was making about rural-urban interactions in Malaysia. This was rather positive, as they focused their intensive critical questioning on each other and took some of the attention – and pressure – off of me, although it did give a glimpse how sharp debates within the Department could be. The second and even clearer impression I came away with was the astonishing and very satisfying realization that I was speaking to an audience in which not only did everyone know where Malaysia was, at least half seemed to actually care about events there. I had never experienced that sort of engagement presenting my work in the United States, where presentations required long preambles simply to locate Malaysia on the map. It made me very enthusiastic to join the Department and the University when in the course of events I was offered employment.

At the point at which I joined the Department, in December 2001, both the Department and the University seemed at the very height of what colleagues as well as NUS administrators described as a transition from a “British” to an “American” system. This involved many changes, both large and small, such as redefining the fourth or “honours” year of undergraduate education and changing staff titles from Lecturer and Senior Lecturer to Assistant and Associate Professor. At the largest scale, the transition involved a shift in emphasis in the University toward recognition as a globally recognized research university and (much denied, but inevitably) away from being singularly or at least primarily focused on undergraduate teaching and serving national developmental needs. Not that national priorities were abandoned. Rather, having a globally recognized research university was seen as the next step in NUS’s role in transforming Singapore from a “third world country” into a “first world” global city.

Joining the Department at that moment and being a recent product of the American university system placed me in a somewhat privileged and advantageous situation. As a junior

faculty member, I found myself being called on in a variety of ways, mostly informal, to lend my (supposed) expertise or at least knowledge of United States academia into sorting out how the “American” system could or should be implemented. At the same time, it was immediately clear that the Department was going through rather wrenching changes due to the transition. Senior colleagues were seeing years – sometimes decades – of their life’s work, especially around undergraduate teaching as well as various forms of national and institutional service, such as policy-oriented research, suddenly devalued, as the university aggressively implemented new schemes of value around internationally recognized research and a “publish or perish” ideology.

The establishment of a tenure-and-promotion system weighted toward research output made my earlier career priorities, as defined by the institution, fairly clear. This translated to: do some administrative (“service”) work and at least passable teaching, but above all publish. Less clear was the ideal or desirable publication strategy. While rhetorical weight was given to quality, this seemed defined largely by a four-tier journal ranking scheme. Colleagues (thankfully for me, other colleagues) were tasked with placing a vast number of sociology and anthropology journals into this four-tier scheme; and it was clear that tenure-and-promotion to Associate Professor hinged on publishing a book from one’s dissertation and a significant number of articles in Tier 1 or Tier 2 journals. Failure to do so – failure to gain promotion-and-tenure within about six to seven years - would mean termination from NUS if not the end of an academic career altogether. For an early career professional, it produced the crudest form of Foucauldian disciplining and subjectification.

This system, as it was implemented at NUS and given the institutionalized academic landscape, had profound effects on how I positioned my scholarship. When I joined the Department, I already had an article in press in what was considered one of the elite “top tier” anthropology journals (*American Ethnologist*, 2003). However, I knew from that experience how long it took to see such an article through to publication. I had originally submitted the article to a different journal in early 1999, had it rejected, revised and resubmitted it to *AE* in 2000 and after a couple of rounds of revision and resubmission it was finally published toward the end of 2003. While I was mainly a qualitative rather than quantitative researcher, I had enough math to figure out that given a four-year submission to publication cycle, aiming to publish primarily in

top-tier anthropology journals would likely lead to a quick exit from the profession, or at least from NUS, because it would not produce the quantity of publication that the University demanded.

At the same time, my personal and intellectual journeys at NUS had me come under the sway of Geography, which was clearly a powerhouse department within the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, at least with regard to its international research profile. My dissertation work had been a sort of cultural geography, about the influence of urban cultural systems of meaning and urban social relations on rural villages and rural youth in Malaysia. In many ways it fit more closely with what many human geographers at NUS were working on than with the work of colleagues in Sociology. More importantly, from a solely careerist perspective, it became clear to me that the leading journals in geography published articles much more quickly than was the standard in anthropology. In addition, one quirk of the NUS system was that publication in any journal that any department considered a “Tier 1” or “Tier 2” journal counted. It did not have to be ranked by one’s own department.

So, on the one hand, the rankings of my own department were crowded with Sociology journals with which I had little affinity and anthropology journals that were unlikely to publish my work in time for it to count in the tenure process. On the other hand, journals ranked highly by Geography, as well as the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, appeared to provide a clearer and quicker path to publication. (At the same time, this disciplinary ranking and tiering also led me to publish in sociology journals, and here I benefited from the fact that NUS sociology had a strong set of colleagues pushing for a more “international” rather than “American” focused sociology; meaning the journals such as *Current Sociology* and *International Sociology*, into which my work in the early 2000s fit more neatly than in the leading American sociology journals, were more highly regarded at NUS than they might have been in an American sociology, or certainly anthropology, department.) As much as I found this subjectification into careerist calculation distasteful, it did have positive effects, particularly in leading me to engage in literatures and conversations, particularly in Geography, that I would have been unlikely to engage with under other circumstances. As I began to joke, “I am an anthropologist in the Department of Sociology, who hangs out with geographers, which makes me either highly interdisciplinary or simply

confused.” This became one of the more light-hearted ways to explain myself, when queried by colleagues as to my disciplinary background.

There have been anywhere from seven or eight to ten or more anthropologists in the Department of Sociology (about a quarter to a third of the Department) and twenty or more in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at any given time during my first fourteen years at NUS. Yet the absence of Anthropology existing in name anywhere within the Department, Faculty or University, led to the discipline’s subordination and invisibility in a variety of subtle and not-so-subtle ways. In hard to define but noticeable ways, I have found myself misidentified as a sociologist (if I fail to or do not have the opportunity to “explain myself”), which leads me to be included in certain international networks or conversations and not in others. Similarly, I noticed a variety of ways in which not only my own work but that of other anthropologists at NUS was rendered invisible. For example, in the mid-2000s, the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) had a visiting committee evaluate the Faculty’s strengths in Southeast Asian Studies (not only the Department by that name, but the Faculty as a whole). One section of the report highlighted a weakness or concern that anthropology was a leading discipline in the field of Southeast Asian studies and that FASS lacked an anthropological focus. It appeared clear from the way the report was written that the visiting committee had assumed the lack of a Department of Anthropology to equate to an absence of anthropologists in the Faculty.

The status of Anthropology within the Department of Sociology has shifted and become more visible during the decade or more since I came to the Department. In my early years, there seemed more divisions between Sociology and Anthropology colleagues, though there were many positive working relationships among particular individuals. The divisions were not coming only from the Sociology side of the Department but from anthropologists as well. I was particularly struck by the ways that disciplinary prejudices cultivated in North America were reproduced in Singapore. For example, one anthropologist colleague in the Department related to me how their PhD supervisor and committee at a prominent American university had warned not to become “infected” by sociological thinking and approaches when returning to work in the Sociology Department in Singapore. Similar slights emerged from time to time from the sociological side of the Department as well. For example, again in the mid-2000s, when members

of the Department were asked to recommend senior academics as candidates in an international search for Head of Department, I queried whether prominent anthropologists would be considered. A senior member of the Department involved in the search responded, “Well, this *is* a Department of Sociology.” In other words, no, anthropologists can be in the Department but they cannot be considered for Head of Department (though since that time Vineeta Sinha, with a PhD in anthropology, has led the Department). This of course was just one opinion and not policy; yet it speaks to the way in which disciplinary biases were articulated.

Despite these various frictions, all of which rarely amounted to anything more than irritations, working as an anthropologist in the Department of Sociology has had tremendous benefits as well. My position in a Department of Sociology, particularly one which combines Sociology and Anthropology but without creating a named division between them, has been conducive to reflecting and working on the very problematic division of labor between these disciplines. In my early years in the department, I was influenced by a number of colleagues, particularly Vineeta Sinha and Farid Alatas, who were working on the intellectual project of reframing Anthropology, Sociology and the social sciences more generally in a postcolonial context (Alatas 2006). The colonial division of labor in which sociologists, and all other social scientists apart from anthropologists, study their “own” society and “the West” while anthropologists study “other” societies and “the Rest” appears glaringly anachronistic from the perspective of twenty-first-century social science in Singapore. The trick, it seems to me, is to maintain and draw on the strengths and insights of the past century or more of modern social science without reproducing nonsensical colonial categories of thought – to extricate, as the saying goes, the baby from the bathwater.

Working at the National University of Singapore has also provided tremendous opportunities for doing and teaching Anthropology regionally as well as in Singapore. As an anthropologist from America, working in Singapore and maintaining research interests in Malaysia while also expanding to Thailand and other sites in Southeast Asia has allowed me to build my career and interests in ways that would have been impossible had I ended up in an academic position in the United States after my PhD. It is very common for American anthropologists to spend one or two years of intensive study in a field site overseas, return to

finish their degree, then settle into a job in America where they do further research locally and only occasionally, once every few years, return to the country where they worked for their PhD. I have found that, like most anthropologists, I end up doing research “locally” (even if sometimes unintentionally – as being a trained ethnographer it is something one cannot “turn off”). Having “local” be the fascinating city-state of Singapore is an advantage in that sense. At the same time, the location of Singapore allows for ongoing fieldwork in Malaysia, Thailand, and elsewhere in Southeast Asia that would be logistically impossible if I held an academic position in the United States, or even closer at hand, for instance in Australia or Japan.

On balance, then, the experience I have had as an anthropologist in the Department of Sociology has had its share of irritations but mostly provided a situation in which I have been privileged, both to think through the colonial quirks of the discipline and also to be logistically and intellectually enabled to think and act on possibilities of advancing a new regime of anthropology for the coming century centered outside or at least not wholly within the United States and the West.

#### Discussion: Narratives in Context

The three narratives presented above speak to personal experiences of broader trends in the development of Anthropology at the National University of Singapore. Some of these trends, gleaned from Sinha (2012), may help to contextualize the experiences recounted here. The Department of Sociology was established in 1965, the same year in which Singapore became an independent nation. Prior to 1965 and the founding of the Department, some Anthropology or anthropologically-oriented courses were taught at the university, but it was with the establishment of the Department of Sociology that Anthropology simultaneously became institutionalized and subordinated within the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Despite the first Head of Department, Murray Groves, being a British Social Anthropologist, a variety of factors (many unclear in their detail) led to the Department being established solely under the “Sociology” banner.

The mid- to late 1960s saw the founding of the Department and key appointments such as that of Geoffrey Benjamin in 1967, who remained in the Department until the late 1990s. The

1970s were a period of early development of the Department as well as a period when anthropology and anthropologists sought to make a place (perhaps unsuccessfully) in the national development narrative. Circa 1974/1975, Sociology and Social Anthropology were co-listed as areas of focus and both undergraduate and graduate student training. As Sinha's narrative attests, into the early 1980s, Anthropology was in large part on co-equal footing, such as in the institutionalization of two required introductory courses for freshmen, one in each discipline. At the same time, questions were being raised about the viability and validity of Anthropology and its association with "primitive" and "tribal" people, who had no place in Singapore's aggressively modernist and developmentalist vision.

The 1980s appear to be the period when the gradual weighting of the department toward Sociology and away from Anthropology began to intensify, in the form of faculty hires and later in the scrapping of the co-equal status of the introductory courses in Sociology and Anthropology, among other things. This was also a period when the early shift from a "British" to "America-centric" academy began to take root, particularly in the Department of Sociology. Nearly all, if not all, Singaporeans selected for the "senior tutor scheme" during this period were sent to the United States rather than the United Kingdom to do their PhD. Under the senior tutor scheme, first class honours students from the department were given scholarships to study overseas for their PhD, then "bonded" to serve in the Department for several years after finishing. Yet this was still a very active time for Anthropology in terms of student education. As Sinha relates above, the particular concerns of Anthropology – both theoretically and empirically cross-culturally comparative – attracted certain highly-motivated students despite some undercurrents that devalued the discipline in comparison to statistically-oriented and modernity-focused Sociology.

Around 1990 and through the subsequent decade seems to be the period when anthropology was most significantly marginalized. It was around this period that Waterson joined the Department and her narrative speaks to some of these tensions, which had their roots in a complex set of personal, disciplinary, and political (mainly university politics) biases. Singaporean staff in particular, who had been trained as PhD's in anthropology, were encouraged overtly or implicitly to reorient themselves as "sociologists," for instance through involvement in the

International Sociological Association. As Sinha relates, she (and likely others) found themselves counted as “bi-disciplinary” - half-Sociologist, half-Anthropologist. The 1990s probably saw the height of the narrative of Anthropology’s irrelevance in a modern, globalized world and modern, globalized Singapore. During these years several key anthropological figures, such as Geoffrey Benjamin, left the Department, usually not under the happiest of circumstances. Most of these figures were British-trained and their replacements were almost all American-trained. At the same time, particularly in the late 1990s, anthropologists began to play an increasing role elsewhere in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, especially in the various area or Asian studies departments.

The late 1990s and accelerating into the 2000s, saw a shift toward the research focus of the university and concern about global recognition, rather than primarily national developmentalist concerns. By the early 2000s, the shift to an America-centric model of university, in terms of both teaching and research orientation, had largely been implemented. At the beginning of the decade, the divides between Sociology and Anthropology within the department were still very much in evidence, but they had faded somewhat by mid-decade. Anthropology came to have an established place *within* Sociology, which was formalized to some degree around 2010, when Anthropology was placed as one of four areas of strength or “research clusters” within the Department (others being comparative-historical sociology; family, demography and inequality; and urban, mobility and cultural studies). Anthropology’s development within the department was also affected by trends in anthropology elsewhere, particularly, but not only, in America. One of these was the shift away from anthropology’s (supposed) focus on “primitives” and toward issues such as globalization and neoliberalism. Another was the increasing traction of the “World Anthropologies” literature. The latter dovetailed with critiques of the Western dominance of social sciences already established by various members of the NUS Sociology Department, though whether one saw these as strong or weakly-developed trends was a matter of perspective, as the narratives by Sinha and Thompson suggest. It is at the same time the tremendous strength of the Department of Sociology and NUS generally that the diversity of its staff inherently brings with it an awareness of the diversity of perspectives from which our transitions are seen and evaluated.



## Conclusion

A number of points can be drawn from the narratives and context provided above. All of these relate to the central question of making a place for anthropology, both within the university and within Singapore more broadly. Anthropologists' traditional attention to humanity as a whole (rather than narrowly-defined national groups and concerns), as well as to non-industrial societies, both put the discipline at odds with Singapore's hyper-modern, national, developmentalist ethos from the 1960s into the 2000s. The association of Anthropology with "pre-modern" and Sociology with "modern" concerns was used in various ways to promote the significance of the latter at the expense of the former particularly in the decades before the 2000s. At the same time, anthropology had its champions, in the Department and in Singapore society more generally, and proved itself capable of building substantial and valuable knowledge with particular significance for Singapore (as Waterson's account of Lai Ah Eng's work attests). Anthropology was certainly not alone among academic disciplines in being called to account for its disciplinary relevance, but was perhaps called upon to do so somewhat more stringently than some other Arts and Social Science disciplines.

Through the history of the University in Singapore, the administration has pushed particular practical and pragmatic priorities, calling on the disciplines to fulfil particular educational or national needs. These have shifted and developed as Singapore itself has changed over the decades. The most obvious and significant of these is the shift from a "teaching" to a "research" university – highly evident in reading across the three narratives from the earliest (Waterson) to the most recent (Thompson). One implication of this, implied but not fully articulated above, has been a substantial change in the training of undergraduate students. Not only has there been a shift toward emphasizing the research and publication imperatives of faculty members, the undergraduate curriculum has also shift away from specialization and toward general education (another hallmark of the shift from "British" to "American" style university education). As Sinha and Waterson note, the honours year in the 1980s and 1990s involved year-long thesis projects, very amenable to intensive, ethnographic methods, which at

the same time were one of the strengths of Anthropology, setting it apart from survey-oriented Sociology in Singapore. Such intensive, ethnographic projects find much less room in the curriculum today at the honours year level (now the thesis counts for only 3 credits out of 8 that honours students take in their final year). So, whereas Anthropology has gained more recognition as a discipline since the mid-2000s, some of its strengths, particularly ethnography, have been undermined by the generalizing of student training.

Finally, as all three narratives attest, being at the crossroads of a great deal of intellectual activity and mobility has been a constant advantage of doing Anthropology at NUS. As Waterson points out, since the establishment of the Asia Research Institute and similar research-oriented initiatives in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, the number of anthropologists active at NUS had mushroomed since the early 2000s. At the same time, as Sinha makes clear, Singapore has been a stop for prominent and less prominent anthropologists for many decades, allowing anthropologists based at the University many opportunities to interact with such scholars. Over the past several years, anthropologists in the Sociology Department have sought to network regularly with others throughout the university, and the networks are large – our email list of anthropologists is constantly changing, but generally includes around 30 anthropologists working at NUS and as many or more in other institutions in Singapore. There are now more universities in Singapore than there used to be, and several of them have social science departments whose faculty includes anthropologists. Several some former students of ours are even teaching Anthropology to students within the IB programme at one Singapore high school. Despite its relative “invisibility” there is no question that anthropology has a strong presence in Singapore. The only question remaining is how and in what directions it will develop into the future?

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> In cases where the narrative is not about one of the single authors, "we" is used, although – as in the case here – the information may have been conveyed to one or two or all three of the co-authors.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with Shamsul A.B. (2004), who argues that both the civil service and employers in Malaysia positively valued Anthropology as a discipline that would train students to operate in and manage multicultural work environments.

<sup>3</sup> Anthropologists from the Department of Sociology, such as Professor Tong Chee Kiong (then very early in his career), were instrumental in developing the Southeast Asian Studies Programme (now Department of Southeast Asian Studies).

<sup>4</sup> The first full-time social anthropologist, Geoffrey Benjamin, who was Cambridge-trained, was appointed to the Department in 1967.

<sup>5</sup> There is as yet no association for anthropology or sociology in Singapore. Given the large number of individual anthropologists who are based in Singapore, both in local universities and outside, there have been suggestions that a 'Association of Southeast Asian Anthropologists' be formed.